The Censorship of British Theatre, 1737-1843

Reporting

Project Information

THEATRE CENSORSHIP

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Closed project

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Coordinated by
THE PROVOST, FELLOWS, FOUNDATION SCHOLARS & THE OTHER MEMBERS OF BOARD OF THE COLLEGE OF THE HOLY & UNDIVIDED TRINITY OF QUEEN ELIZABETH NEAR DUBLIN

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Final Report Summary - THEATRE CENSORSHIP (The Censorship of British Theatre, 1737-1843)

This project mapped the development of a culture of censorship during the long eighteenth century. Censorship is figured as operating both formally and informally during this period. Formal censorship may be understood as the state regulation of stage performances as described above. Informal censorship may be understood as the degree to which playwrights, theatre managers, and audiences themselves internalized a regime of self-regulation in the wake of the Stage Licensing Act. In other words, it is arguably the case that the instigation of state surveillance of theatrical production resulted in self-policing cultural production: why write or submit a play that would only provoke the ire of the Examiner? One might understand this conceptually as a panopticon effect – theatrical agents effectively regulated themselves to a significant degree. This helps explain why so very few plays were banned outright: only seven were refused a licence in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. This secondary tier of cultural regulation has received inadequate attention and the project’s hypothesis was that it was to prove equally if not more important to British theatre as the century progressed.

The project is the first study to offer an integrated history of theatrical censorship in the long eighteenth century by uniting two key manuscript sources: the Larpent Collection held at the Huntington Library, Pasadena, and the Lord Chamberlain’s Plays Collection held at the British Library, London. Studies to date have failed to unite the two and have been limited by period: the archive collections have created an artificial divide that is now bridged in order to provide a richer understanding of the period.

The manuscripts were selected after a careful examination of the archives in the Huntington and the British Library. Selection criteria were driven by two major principles: that the full range of the historical spectrum would be covered and that the wide variety of reasons that a play would be censored would be on display. Other selection criteria included the extent of the censorship; scholarly interest in play/author; the author’s gender; legibility of manuscript; and, whether the manuscript was previously published. Plays which contained illuminating correspondence between the Examiner of Plays and the theatre manager (the person tasked with submitting the manuscript for approval) were also of high interest.

The initial short-list for inclusion was considered by the project’s international steering group (Professor Julie Carlson, University of California, Santa Barbara; Professor Diego Saglia, University of Parma; and Dr David Taylor, University of Warwick) and their input helped revise and refine the final list of manuscripts.
Considerable support for the project was also offered by Adam Matthew Digital and Gale Cengage.

Results
The project’s website will offer a selection of 40 theatre manuscripts from the period 1737-1843. Each manuscript will be accompanied by extensive editorial commentary which will offer some basic overview information on the author, plot, performance and reception history of the piece, and some suggestions for further reading as well as a detailed commentary on the censorship emendations that appear on the manuscript.

The selected manuscripts show that the culture of censorship was quite consistent over the period: satire or criticism of real-life individuals; religious profanity; suggestions of sexual impropriety, particularly related to the upper-classes; sexual violence; references to war/famine; references to military weakness/effeminacy; and, references to political chicanery were always of interest to the Examiner of Plays, from the 1730s through to the 1840s. However, the manuscripts also show that the application of the censorial regime was not entirely consistent – quite often, elements could get through, perhaps through inattention on the Examiner’s part. Censorship was always tightened in periods of conflict, notably the French Revolutionary and the Napoleonic Wars. Newspaper reviews and their reports of audience reactions to plays often reveal that the audience felt that the play had been insufficiently policed by the Examiner of Plays thus leaving open the intriguing possibility that the individual occupying the office of the Examiner of Plays might, in fact, function as a liberalizing force within society by letting through sentiments and ideas which others might have expected him to stop (even if inadvertantly). The selection of manuscripts also shows that censorship was often associated with comedies but that all genres might be open to the Examiner’s attention. The selection of manuscripts also confirms that in most cases it is very difficult to ascertain which marks/corrections/deletions were made by the Examiner and which might be made by an authorial/managerial hand.

This project has created a virtual archive that unites the two most important collections for the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatre in the world and made them available to scholars everywhere. It reaffirms the recent recognition of theatre’s importance for the study of the eighteenth century. Finally, it has contributed to the dismantling of traditional artificial chronological boundaries between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as the divide between the Romantic and the Victorian period by using the dates of theatre legislation as the parameters of the project and a means of thinking about the long eighteenth century. The free-to-access availability of a selection of theatre manuscripts will enable literary scholars unprecedented opportunity to examine the minutiae of theatre censorship over the period and offer a new perspective on the claims of theatre to contribute to Enlightenment discourse.

The project’s website will be completed and launched in September 2017.

Career development and reintegration:
The PI has completed his probation period and has been confirmed in a contract of permanent employment. He was also assessed and interviewed by a university committee and deemed to have passed the ‘merit bar’ with accelerated advancement in 2016. The PI was also awarded a further accelerated promotion award in April 2017 by the university council. In July 2017 he was short-listed for promotion to associate professor (interview pending October 2017).