

**Comic Acting and Portraiture in Late-Georgian and Regency England.** By Jim Davis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; pp. xvi + 274, 68 illustrations. \$99.99 cloth, \$80 e-book.

doi:10.1017/S0040557416000764

Reviewed by Edward Ziter, *New York University*

In this well-researched book, Jim Davis demonstrates a consistent body of practices in comic acting and painting in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and he argues that criticism of painting and acting developed a shared aesthetic vocabulary. Given how prominently the actors Joseph Munden, John Liston, Charles Mathews, and John Emery figure in the writings of major romantic critics, it is striking that Davis is the first scholar to give these actors sustained analysis. Davis completes his studies of these low comedians alongside examining the theatrical portraits, paintings, and caricatures of several major artists, the short list including Johan Zoffany, Samuel De Wilde, George Cruikshank, and George Clint. With its diverse and insightful readings, Davis's book offers a strong theatre history narrative, expanding our understanding of conceptions and receptions of comedic performance at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The book's organization follows a broad-to-specific pattern, ending with a case study of a particular player. Part I offers an extensive overview of the role and definition of the low comedian, theories of comic acting in the period, genres of painting and print, and an introduction of the principal artists discussed in the subsequent pages. At the core of the book, Davis identifies two schools of comic acting: one he associates with the comic painting of William Hogarth and the other with the genre paintings of David Wilkie. These two schools constitute Parts II and III of the book. The fourth and final part is a detailed analysis of Charles Mathews, as actor, art collector, and the subject of numerous paintings.

Davis identifies a series of "contestation[s]" that shaped perceptions of the actor; the primary contestation was between "distortion, exaggeration and caricature" on the one hand and "observation, detail and nature" on the other (47). In the chapters of Part II, Davis identifies Joseph Munden, Isabella Mattocks, and John Liston as actors associated with the former, which explains, according to Davis, why they were so often compared to the art of William Hogarth. Drawing on the criticism of Leigh Hunt, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt, Davis describes Munden as an actor who raised the grimace to an art form and demonstrated the subtlety and variety that can inform caricature. While we might think of caricature as a superficial art, Munden's contemporaries saw his work as accessing worlds of abstraction. As Lamb explained, Munden could "'impress upon an audience an *idea*'" albeit "'the low one perhaps of a leg of mutton and turnips'" (51). John Liston—principally known for his performances as a religious fanatic, Maw-worm from Isaac Bickerstaffe's *The Hypocrite*, a host of cockney characters, and, most famously, the country busybody Paul Pry—provided satires of contemporary forms of excess and familiar types, all the while combining Liston's recognizable personal style with carefully developed details. Consequently, the *Examiner* described his Maw-worm as both "'the caricature of a caricature'"

and not unnatural to those familiar with the type (66). Such a use of the idea of caricature, as Davis makes clear, focuses on the excessive qualities of the character represented at the same time that these qualities are accessed through the physical quirks of the actor. An additional chapter takes up Liston's caricatures' further circulation as the subject of porcelain statues, door knockers, jugs, snuffboxes and other commodities before a final chapter in this part takes up paintings of Munden and Liston by George Clint.

Part III examines actors that, like the artist David Wilkie, discovered a tremendous variety in the quotidian and rendered it inoffensively and theatrically. John Emery, the "Wilkie of actors," according to the *Drama and Theatre, Dramatic and Literary Mirror* (125), dominates these chapters. Particularly interesting is Davis's reading of William Hazlitt's analysis of Emery's Yorkshire rustic, Robert Tyke—a performance the critic applauded as "the sublime of tragedy in low life" (168). As Davis explains, Hazlitt and other critics of the day lauded Emery's ability to imbue a powerful remorse and passion into rude and vulgar characters without affectation or stage tricks. The part concludes with two more chapters, the final one detailing three actors who were themselves artists: William Parsons, John Bannister, and Emery.

The book comes full circle in a fourth part devoted to Charles Mathews, who George Coleman the Younger once described as "humorous as a sketch by Hogarth, chaste as a picture by Wilkie" (125). In highlighting this quote, Davis implicitly presents Mathew's acting style and his genre of solo performance, the "At Homes," as combining both a capacity for caricature and comic transformation of the self with detailed analysis of manners and behavior. In this context, Davis ably explores the attention of romantic-era critics to distinctions between imitation and mimicry. Davis explains that discussions of Mathews's imitations of contemporaries like Coleridge focused on the actor's "ability to evoke their minds as well as their outer appearance" (241), suggesting that the actor grasps and reproduces abstractions and patterns of thought. The chapters in Part IV demonstrate Davis's skill at moving between textual and iconographic analysis. His analysis of Harlow's portrait of Mathews reveals how Mathews used a (arguably) commissioned portrait to spotlight not just the actor and his roles but "the complex mimetic process by which he created them" (231).

As this last example makes clear, *Comic Acting and Portraiture in Late-Georgian and Regency England* engages central debates in romantic-era aesthetics from the unlikely vantage of the low comic actor and the painters and print-makers who reproduced their images. Depending on one's perspective, it is either a mark of Davis's rigor or timidity that he refrains from making an argument about the intersection of popular performance and visual culture in the evolution of the romantic ethos. Davis seems quite content to write from the vantage of a theatre historian, and given the wealth of valuable information and sharp analysis that he crams into this book, one can hardly fault him.

• • •