

Julie Carlson

reads

*Romantic Actors, Romantic Dramas:
British Tragedy on the Regency Stage*

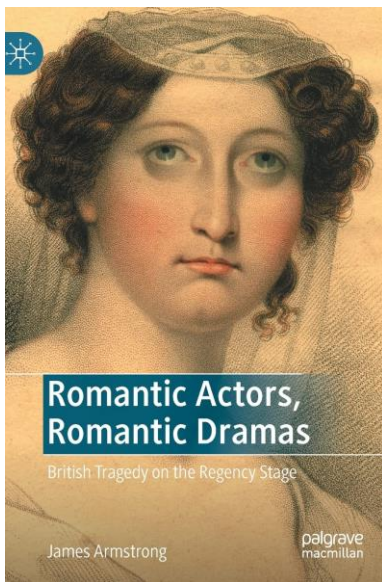
by James Armstrong¹

THOSE OF US PARTIAL TO THE THEATRICAL aspects of S. T. Coleridge's literary life have fresh material to explore thanks to James Armstrong's *Romantic Actors, Romantic Dramas*. Chapter 4 allows us to revisit the popular and financial highpoint of Coleridge's career, the tragedy *Remorse* that ran for twenty nights at the newly reopened Theatre Royal Drury Lane in late January and February 1813. To existing accounts of what this success reveals about Coleridge's imagination, revolutionary proclivities, gender politics, and domestic entanglements, Armstrong offers a bold corrective. The success of *Remorse* is indebted to the acting of one Julia Betterton Glover, whose impressive performance in the role of Alhadra not only captivated audiences

then but also solidifies Coleridge's standing as a *practical* playwright now, something that most theater historians and many Romanticists resist acknowledging.

Emphasizing Glover's key role is of a piece with Armstrong's overarching claim that star actors are central to the composition, not simply performance, of the plays best deemed Romantic drama, whose chief features are 'poetic ambition, moral complexity, and a focus on character rather than plot' (7). Four chapter-length case studies substantiate the point by each pairing a Romantic playwright and the actor most responsible for the success of his or her best-known tragedy: Sarah Siddons and Joanna Baillie (*De Monfort*), Julia Glover and Coleridge (*Remorse*), Edmund

Kean and Lord Byron (*Manfred* and 'Byron'), and Eliza O'Neill and Percy Shelley (*The Cenci*). Detailing these collaborations exposes what equating 'Romantic drama' with 'closet drama' effaces: the vividness of specific actors in these writers' minds when they composed their lead characters, and the staying power of Romantic drama. Although temporarily overshadowed by the rise of melodrama, Romantic drama acquires 'new life' at the dawn of the twentieth century, the vitality of which Armstrong wishes to bestow on 'our polarized age' (51, 18). Then again, (don't) forget melodrama. Armstrong pins 'The Murder of Romantic Drama' (a section heading in Chapter 2) on actor-



¹ James Armstrong, *Romantic Actors, Romantic Dramas: British Tragedy on the Regency Stage* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

manager William Charles Macready, whose 'own ego' prevented Robert Browning's *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* from achieving the fame that it deserved and that would have helped perpetuate a taste for staging serious verse tragedy (41, 49). Of the four case studies presented, the O'Neill-Shelley pairing is the most dramatic illustration of Armstrong's main thesis. After 'Shelley the poet' twice witnessed O'Neill playing Bianca in Henry Hart Milman's *Fazio*, 'he became Shelley the dramatist' (175). The 'experience' of detailing Beatrice's tortured mind with O'Neill's presence firmly in mind 'changed his writing forever' (176). Post-*Cenci*, Shelley's poems begin to chart the evolving mental states of their speakers, a 'major shift' the motivation for which has 'remained obscure' over 'the past 200 years' (195). Even more encompassing, according to Chapter 5, is Kean's influence on Byron, given that Kean informs not just his male characters but his own persona.

This broader context reveals anomalies about the Glover-Coleridge partnership that make for interesting reading. Glover is hardly on a par with Siddons, Kean, and O'Neill in terms of name recognition or avowed artistry. Nor does she avail herself of the burgeoning market in performer-based memorabilia that the others, especially Siddons, pursue. The material object that Armstrong selects to embody Glover's popular reception includes the entire cast. Still, he argues that J. H. Jameson's toy theater version of *Remorse* singles her out because it depicts Glover's Alhadra in a 'dramatic gesture' that captures her defiant closing speech and thus is visibly present anytime an amateur thespian brings her onto a toy stage (124). Nor are Baillie, Byron, and Shelley on a par with Coleridge when it comes to mounting a successful play. Only three of Baillie's twenty-seven plays were staged in her lifetime, the longest for eight nights (*De Monfort* in April-May 1800 at Drury Lane). Only *Marino Faliero* was staged during Byron's lifetime and against his vehement objections, and *The Cenci* had to wait until the twentieth century for it to receive a full staging. It is true that the pre-existence of *Remorse* in *Osorio*, completed and rejected at Drury Lane by Richard Sheridan in 1797, suggests that the presence of Siddons in Alhadra co-created the play's eventual success. But envisioning this superimposition complicates what Armstrong deems most significant about Siddons-Glover-Alhadra's effect on Coleridge's playwriting career.

Armstrong is frank about the 'motley group of actors' that Coleridge had to work with once Siddons retired in June of 1812. But he calls this a 'blessing in disguise', since dealing with 'less than stellar leads' (Alexander Rae and Sarah Smith) forced Coleridge to pare lines and clarify motivation, producing a 'sleeker' and 'more streamlined' drama, the stage-worthiness of which is now history (108). Alternately, the serendipitous fact that Smith declined the role of Alhadra in order to play the ingénue Teresa gave Glover, up until then primarily billed as a comic actor, the opportunity to prove her mettle as a sword-wielding one. Armstrong's careful tracking of Alhadra's speeches pre-performance, post-opening night, and post-performance in print substantiates but also qualifies his assessment of her impact. 'Knowing' (thanks to several

enthusiastic reviews) ‘that Glover had been able to capitalize on the character of Alhadra’, Coleridge ‘gave new lines to her’ (121). Apparently, they included the rousing fifteen-line speech with which *Osorio* closed and that Jameson immortalized in his toy theater Alhadra but that did not appear in either the earliest print edition of *Remorse* or the rehearsal script given to the censor. It is only after opening night that Coleridge reinserts the speech into a less prominent position and after making one important revision. He substitutes the pronoun ‘her’ for the original ‘him’ who goes forth, ‘Conquering and still to conquer!’ (122). This striking change occasions two startling assertions. The shift from ‘him’ to ‘her’ makes *Remorse* ‘more heterodox, radical, and complex’ than *Osorio*, until now always accorded those laurels (125). It demonstrates Coleridge’s new receptiveness to the revolutionary power of women and the strength of their influence ‘on all stages, whether theatrical or political’ (127).

That’s a lot to put on Glover and her opening performance, burdened as they already were by the death of Glover’s eldest child just days prior and by having to play the loyal wife to the actor she had jilted in 1797 and who just recently had fought a ‘bloodless duel’ with the actor playing Alvar (Vincent De Camp played Isidore and Robert William Elliston played Alvar [116]). Talk about drama. Still the shift to ‘her’ is a remarkable provocation that many readers of this book will enjoy interpreting. On balance, I’m inclined to view it as another instance of Coleridge’s willingness to profit off female strength and blur the line between opportunity and opportunism. Also, the appearance of this ‘her’ is at once highly contextual and radically decontextualized in harbining a more radical and heterodox phase of Coleridge’s career. This penchant for overstatement weakens what is otherwise a clear value in having us imagine these playwrights inhabiting these actors when composing their plays. No doubt some of it stems from Armstrong’s desire to convince theater historians of the worth and stage worthiness of these plays, a project visible in his own plays that re-animate scenes from nineteenth-century theater or in his mounting contemporary adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*, *Moby-Dick*, and Marx’s *Capital*. Calling attention to the zaniness in the seriousness of these plays is perhaps how they best speak to our polarized age. What *is* Glover’s mental state when a former lover stands before her as a twice-doomed husband-warrior of a denigrated people? What is Coleridge’s when viewing the female fortitude on which the success of *Remorse* relies? These are the challenging pleasures that *Romantic Actors, Romantic Dramas* invites Coleridgeans to share.