I Hope I Don't Intrude

Privacy and its Dilemmas in Nineteenth-Century Britain

DAVID VINCENT

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For Esmé, Frida, and Reuben

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Paul Pry has led me into new and unfamiliar fields, and I have been dependent on the advice and support of many colleagues. In particular Louis James, Jim Davis, and Brian Maidment have been exemplary in their combination of generosity of spirit and depth of scholarship. Bob Patten, master of Cruikshank and Dickens, was hugely supportive through the final trek to publication. Deborah Cohen, whose own book on privacy appeared towards the end of my work, showed just what could be achieved in this field through a combination of imaginative research and bold analysis, and was an insightful reader of this enterprise. Patrick Joyce and James Vernon set aside time in their own programme of writing to make constructive readings of the complete text. Assistance and advice on specific issues was supplied by Kirstie Ball, Sara Igo, Judith Mellby, John Naughton, John Plunkett, Michael Read, Clare Rose, Graham Vincent, and Susan Whyman. I thank Graham Tattersall for ambulatory discussions of the ideas in this book, and for advice on the technology of communication. Evie Ekins and Jo Reilly tracked down and photographed a present-day survival of Paul Pry. Gordon Shepherd helped me with the pursuit of Pry through the newspapers of late-Georgian and Victorian Britain.

This acknowledgement is being written on the day that the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post* won a Pulitzer Prize for their reporting of the Edward

Snowden revelations. *'I Hope I Don't Intrude'* was conceived and researched well before the current explosion of media interest in privacy and surveillance, but I must thank Snowden and the journalists with whom he has worked for drawing attention to the complex interactions between governments, communications systems, and the democratic process and also for demonstrating the need for an historical perspective on the specific concepts and processes. In this context, Simon Szreter and the staff of the *History and Policy* site provided me with an opportunity to explore some of the connections between the past and the present.

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Shrawardine, April 2014

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PART ONE

Introduction

I

Enter Pry

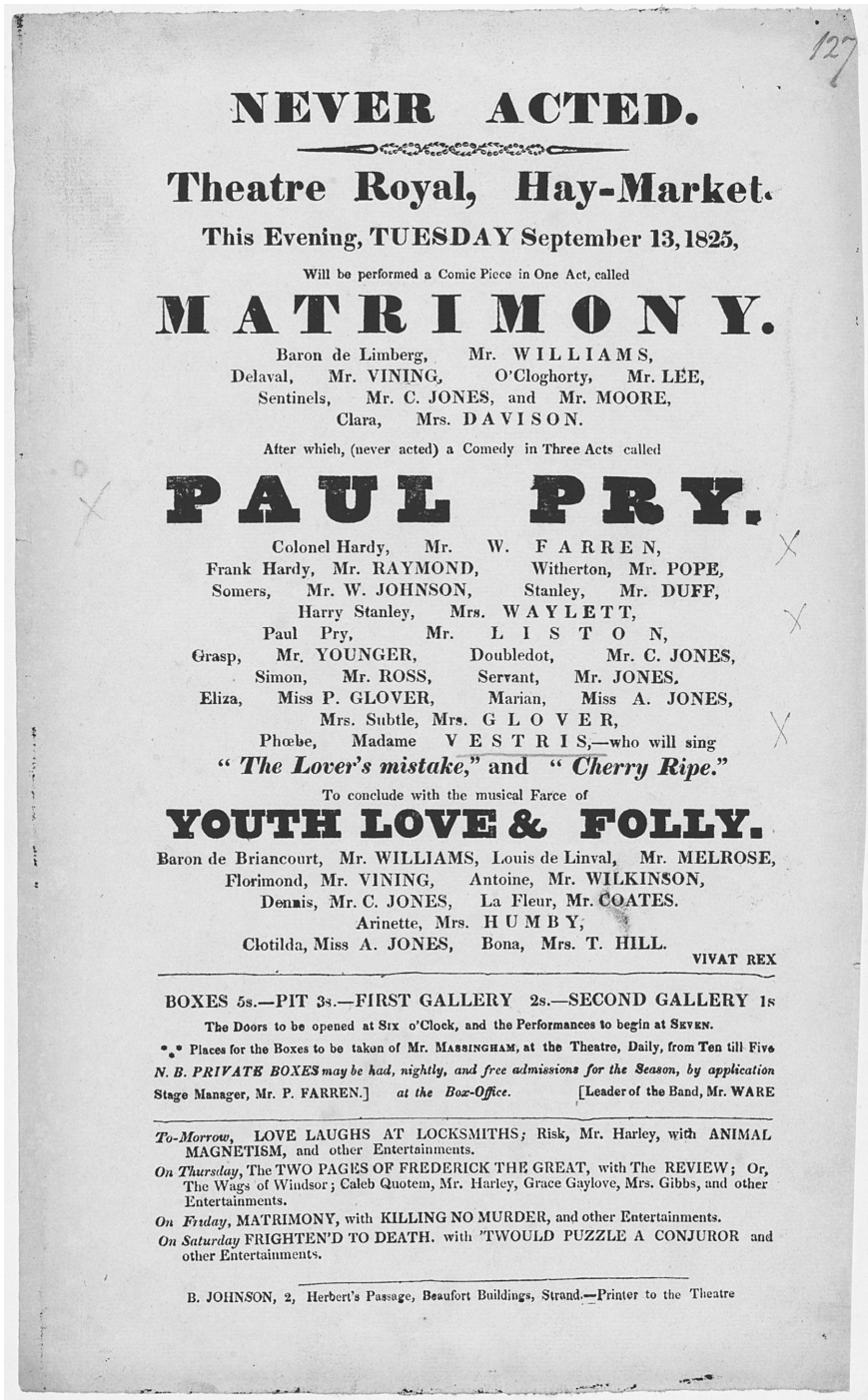
The setting is a village fifty miles from London. The scene is a room in the house of Mr Witherton, a rich, elderly bachelor. He is in discussion with Mrs Subtle his scheming housekeeper, Grasp his steward, and Mr Willis, whom he believes to be a protégé of his neighbour, Colonel Hardy, but is in reality his estranged nephew Somers. Grasp and Mrs Subtle are protesting at Mr Witherton's proposal to make a gift of fifty pounds to his visitor. After an exchange of views, the stage directions prescribe: 'Grasp goes up and gives money to Willis, as they are going off. Enter Pry. Pry. Ha! How do ye do this morning. I hope I don't intrude?'[1]

Paul Pry was the eponymous hero of a new play by John Poole presented at the Haymarket Theatre on 13 September 1825. The Theatre Royal Haymarket was the unofficial third London patent theatre. A 'summer patent' had been granted in 1766 to its manager, Samuel Foote, for the duration of his lifetime. This ran from 14 May to 14 September and enabled it to join Covent Garden and Drury Lane as the theatres legally entitled to perform drama.[2] With the lapse of the patent the theatre was working under an annual licence from the Lord Chamberlain which, according to its manager, gave it 'the power of playing the whole range of the drama'.[3] The theatre's marginal status caused it to be described in a contemporary survey as 'like a young lady on the borders of fashionable life'.[4] Its summer now ran from mid-April to mid-November.[5] *Paul Pry* was the first major success in a new building designed by John Nash and built over the winter and spring of 1820–1 at a cost of £18,000.[6] 'In point of architectural beauty,' wrote a contemporary commentator, 'the Haymarket Theatre is the most elegant in London.'[7] It was more ornate but smaller and more intimate than the two patent establishments.[8] 'The Haymarket always has been a snug and attractive theatre in point of size and accommodation', observed the *Sunday Times*, whereas 'the overgrown size of the winter

theatres has been . . . their greatest detriment'.[9] John Poole was the principal dramatist for comedy at the Haymarket. His first major success was *Hamlet Travestie* in 1810, and in the 1820s he was writing regularly for an established company of players.

The play was part of a standard triple bill, bracketed by a one-act comic piece and a musical farce [Fig. 1].[10] Its timing towards the end of the season suggested that no great hopes were invested in it. John Liston, who played the title role, was widely regarded as the greatest low comedian of the age, the first of his tradition to earn as much as the star tragedians. He had started out at the Haymarket at the end of the previous century and had built a career in the patent theatres in London and in the provinces, at one point playing Ophelia in *Hamlet Travestie*. *Paul Pry* did not seem a particularly promising prospect, and according to his biographer, he was so unenthusiastic about the part that he turned up at the first rehearsal without having learnt his lines properly.[11] His lack of excitement was understandable. Since joining the company on 15 June, he had already played twenty-two parts ranging from the title role in *The Marriage of Figaro* and Tony Lumpkin in *She Stoops to Conquer* to leading characters in minor plays such as Sam Savoury in *Fish Out of Water* and, immediately prior to Poole's new drama, Sir Hilary Heartsease in *Roses and Thorns*.[12] Given the hasty life of the late-Georgian repertory companies there was little time to improve the production before it was presented to the public.[13] The first night reviews were far from overwhelming. 'It is from the pen of Mr Poole'; wrote the *Theatre*, 'but in reality there are only materials for about two acts.' Nonetheless, it continued, '*"Paul Pry"* cannot fail to have a *"run",* if it were only for the sake of Mr Liston's acting in it.'[14] *The Morning Post*, however, sent its reviewer back to the second evening. He found that the play's reception was growing:

> The new Comedy of *Paul Pry*, which met with such decided success at its first representation on Tuesday evening, was repeated last night to a crowded house, with encreased applause. Considerable improvements have been made in some of the scenes, which render the plot less complicated, and the whole effect less heavy. It is to be regretted that more songs are not introduced; those, however, that were sung by Madame VESTRIS, 'The Lover's Mistake', and 'Cherry Ripe', were warmly encored. . . . Mr LISTON kept the audience in roars of laughter until the falling of the curtain, when he stepped forward in character—'*hoped he was not intruding*', but begged that the audience would overlook the many faults of poor *Paul Pry*, and then wished



NEVER ACTED.

Theatre Royal, Hay-Market.

This Evening, TUESDAY September 13, 1825,

Will be performed a Comic Piece in One Act, called

MATRIMONY.

Baron de Limberg, Mr. WILLIAMS,
Delaval, Mr. VINING, O'Cloghorty, Mr. LEE,
Sentinels, Mr. C. JONES, and Mr. MOORE,
Clara, Mrs. DAVISON.

After which, (never acted) a Comedy in Three Acts called

PAUL PRY.

Colonel Hardy, Mr. W. FARREN,
Frank Hardy, Mr. RAYMOND, Witherton, Mr. POPE,
Somers, Mr. W. JOHNSON, Stanley, Mr. DUFF,
Harry Stanley, Mrs. WAYLETT,
Paul Pry, Mr. LISTON,
Grasp, Mr. YOUNGER, Doubledot, Mr. C. JONES,
Simon, Mr. ROSS, Servant, Mr. JONES.
Eliza, Miss P. GLOVER, Marian, Miss A. JONES,
Mrs. Subtle, Mrs. GLOVER,
Phœbe, Madame VESTRIS,—who will sing
"*The Lover's mistake*," and "*Cherry Ripe*."

To conclude with the musical Farce of

YOUTH LOVE & FOLLY.

Baron de Briancourt, Mr. WILLIAMS, Louis de Linval, Mr. MELROSE,
Florimond, Mr. VINING, Antoine, Mr. WILKINSON,
Dennis, Mr. C. JONES, La Fleur, Mr. COATES.
Arinette, Mrs. HUMBY,
Clotilda, Miss A. JONES, Bona, Mrs. T. HILL.

VIVAT REX

BOXES 5s.—PIT 3s.—FIRST GALLERY 2s.—SECOND GALLERY 1s

The Doors to be opened at Six o'Clock, and the Performances to begin at Seven.

*** Places for the Boxes to be taken of Mr. Massingham, at the Theatre, Daily, from Ten till Five

N. B. PRIVATE BOXES may be had, nightly, and free admissions for the Season, by application at the Box-Office.

Stage Manager, Mr. P. FARREN.] [Leader of the Band, Mr. WARE

To-Morrow, LOVE LAUGHS AT LOCKSMITHS; Risk, Mr. Harley, with ANIMAL MAGNETISM, and other Entertainments.

On Thursday, The TWO PAGES OF FREDERICK THE GREAT, with The REVIEW; Or, The Wags of Windsor; Caleb Quotem, Mr. Harley, Grace Gaylove, Mrs. Gibbs, and other Entertainments.

On Friday, MATRIMONY, with KILLING NO MURDER, and other Entertainments.

On Saturday FRIGHTEN'D TO DEATH. with 'TWOULD PUZZLE A CONJUROR and other Entertainments.

B. JOHNSON, 2, Herbert's Passage, Beaufort Buildings, Strand.—Printer to the Theatre

Figure 1. Paul Pry, First Night Playbill. Haymarket Theatre.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

> the Ladies and Gentlemen '*very good night*', which was returned by loud and continued cheering.[15]

The theatre announced that 'the new Comedy called PAUL PRY, Having been received throughout with unanimous Applause by a brilliant and crowded Audience, will be repeated EVERY EVENING TILL FURTHER NOTICE'[16] and unlike identical claims made for four of its earlier new productions in 1825,[17] it became a fixture in the programme, playing continuously until the season ended on 15 November and throughout much of the following 1826 season.[18] Henry Crabb Robinson recorded in his diary trying and failing to get in to see the production on 12 and 13 November 1825 and he had to wait until 27 May of the following year before he could get a ticket.[19] The total of 155 performances constituted a record for the first production of a play, drawing parallels with the seismic impact of *The Beggar's Opera* almost a century earlier.[20]

As the reviewers pointed out, much of the play was a compilation of standard comic characters in familiar situations. 'In the plot, or rather plots', wrote the *Morning Post*, '. . . there is, perhaps, but little novelty.'[21] In the first plot, Witherton is exploited by his unscrupulous housekeeper Mrs Subtle, who conspires with Grasp the steward to alienate him from his nephew and heir in order that she might make a late marriage and gain access to his fortune. In the hope of effecting a reconciliation the nephew takes up residence under an assumed name together with his wife, who pretends to be Mrs Subtle's assistant, and after revealing his identity he is reunited with his uncle, while Mrs Subtle is exiled from the household. In the second plot, the peremptory Colonel Hardy is seeking to manage the marriage of his daughter Eliza to her cousin Frank Hardy, who is due to make a visit after a long absence at sea. Aided by her maidservant Phebe, Eliza has set her heart on the 'very young, and very handsome'[22] Harry Stanley, a shipmate of Frank and also about to appear in the village. There is much business with unexpected arrivals, disguises, chases, and a threatened elopement before true love triumphs.

'Few, in the present day build better with old materials' wrote *The Theatrical Examiner*. 'In this piece, for instance, there is not a single altogether new character, or scarcely a situation; we are reminded of Life in a Village, The Rivals, and The Busybody, from beginning to end, and yet it received and merited considerable applause.'[23] *The Times* detected the

influence of Molière's *The Hypocrite*, and the *Morning Chronicle's* first-night review observed that,

> The writer (who is said to be Mr Poole) seems to have had the Play of *The Rivals* a good deal in his head, when he was arranging the present Comedy, for he has not only copied one of the characters from that fine original, but actually adopted the main incident of two lovers intended for each other by their parents, without knowing it themselves, doing all they can to cross the design which they have the greatest interest in promoting.[24]

Later it found a model for Witherton in Jean François Collin-Harleville's *Le Vieux Célibataire*. Poole was certainly familiar with French theatre as well as the stock of eighteenth-century British drama, and was unconcerned about his borrowings. No originality in his own work or in late-Georgian comedy more generally could be claimed for wealthy old bachelors beset by fortune hunters or ardent young lovers seeking to frustrate the intentions of their fathers or guardians. Poole's 1813 farce *The Hole in the Wall* revolved around the courtship of the ward of 'Old Stubborn', who would lose her inheritance if she married without consent.[25] Paul Pry himself bore a distant resemblance to the character of Marplot from *The Busybody*, but it was his presence in the drama which, by general consent, lifted the play out of the commonplace. For *The Morning Post*, the title role compensated for the familiarity of the story:

> The character of Paul Pry, however, combines in itself a fund of humour. It is drawn to the very life. Every village can produce a *Pry*. A meddling malaprop who investigates every circumstance with which he has nothing to do, and who constantly puts every thing and every body into confusion, by retailing the produce of his impertinent curiosity from one person to another.[26]

Above all it was his embodiment by John Liston which, in the words of the *Theatrical Examiner*, 'produced roars of laughter'.[27] As his obituary recorded, it was 'the climax of Mr Liston's popularity'.[28]

The second play was distinguished from the first by the slightest change of title. *Mr Paul Pry* by Douglas Jerrold was staged at the Royal Coburg Theatre on 10 April 1826 [Fig. 2].[29] In the initial playbills 'Mr' was in a very small typeface and was later dropped altogether. The Coburg was, like the Haymarket, a modern building, constructed in 1818 in a less fashionable area on the south side of the Thames and faced with more intractable legal constraints.[30] It could accommodate up to four thousand spectators arranged in a relatively intimate horseshoe. The theatre operated under

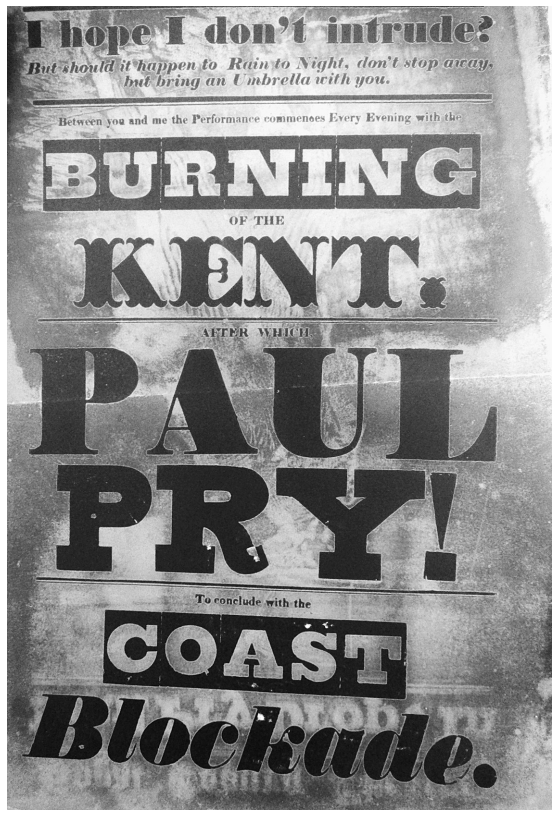


Figure 2. Mr Paul Pry, Royal Coburg Theatre Playbill 1826.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

licence and was in intermittent conflict with the Lord Chamberlain for straying into the territory of spoken drama.[31] In 1825 its manager George Davidge hired the promising but still unknown twenty-two year-old Jerrold as a house dramatist, required to turn his pen to whatever seemed most likely to fill the theatre.[32] Following the success of the Haymarket's first run of *Paul Pry*, he set him the task of producing a version that would exploit its popularity. Jerrold duly delivered a three-act farce that opened just a week before the Haymarket commenced its new summer season.[33] The Coburg's dramatic centre of gravity lay more in spectacle than comedy. The new farce was presented in a bill opening with 'an interesting melodrama, *Coast Blockade; or the Kentish Smuggler*', featuring 'the Burning of Kent', and concluding with 'the highly Popular, New Grand Local

Historical Melo-Drama, and Naval and Military Oriental Spectacle, with Marches, Processions, Pageants, Dances, Combats, extensive and peculiar Military Evolutions, Entitled, The *Massacre of Rajahpoor . . .*'. Plagiarism presented little difficulty. The first playbill deftly sidestepped the issue in a mock dialogue with 'The Public': 'It is no business of mine, but I should like to know, should'nt [*sic*] you? How they got hold of this Piece? Why they do say that the idea is taken from the French Pieces of "*Monsieur Brouillon*" and "*L'Officieux*".'[34] Poole was notoriously ill-humoured about theft of his material. He prefaced the published text of his previous year's play, *Married and Single*, with a ten-page onslaught on Robert Elliston, lessee of the Theatre Royal Covent Garden, for alleged bad faith, but there was nothing he could do about it.[35] Until the Dramatic Copyright Act of 1833 gave playwrights limited control over the use of their material, piracy was a fact of life.[36]

The challenge to Jerrold was not one of ownership but rather of market. He was faced with a dilemma. Working at speed he had to produce a play that was close enough to the original to exploit its fame but sufficiently different to attract an audience that might already have paid to see it at the Haymarket or could look forward to doing so once its season recommenced.[37] His solution was twofold. Firstly he simplified the plot and shortened the length of the play by an hour.[38] Gone are the old bachelor and his mercenary household. The action centres instead on the stock situation of a rich man, Oldbutton, seeking to marry his ward to his own choice of husband, the splendidly named Sir Spangle Rainbow, and her desire to wed another, Captain Haselton, who is Oldbutton's nephew in disguise. In deference to a less fashionable audience, almost all the action takes place in an inn, *The Golden Chariot*, and in a town, Dover. The servants are yet more obviously the only intelligent and clear-thinking members of the cast. The ward's servant Crimp is given a forthright speech on the rights of women:

> But lord, madam, talking about being designed for Sir Spangle—I've no notion of such designing indeed. It's having a wife per order—it's likening us dear little women to so many parcels of grocery in thus packing us up, labelling, and sending us home to one particular customer. Do you take my advice, madam—run away with Captain Haselton, and get married at once.[39]

There is much more physical comedy. In Poole's play, Paul Pry is frequently threatened with violence, in Jerrold's he experiences it, being variously sat

on, stabbed, and blown up in a box of fireworks in which he has unwisely hidden.

Secondly, Jerrold foregrounded the essence of the play's success. In Poole's play, Paul Pry intervenes in a number of scenes, but weight is given to other characters and plot developments. As one less-than-enraptured reviewer put it, 'In *Paul Pry*, Liston is not the marplot but the makeplot of the piece.'[40] In Jerrold's farce, Paul Pry is scarcely off the stage and his catchphrase rarely off his lips. Its full title was *Mr Paul Pry Or I Hope I Don't Intrude* and in little more than thirty pages of text he managed to insert the sentence no less than fifteen times, together with another thirteen close variants such as 'Would not intrude for the world, sir' or 'I wouldn't wish to intrude for a minute.'[41] The line was the first that Paul Pry uttered, and the proceedings were concluded by this valedictory speech:

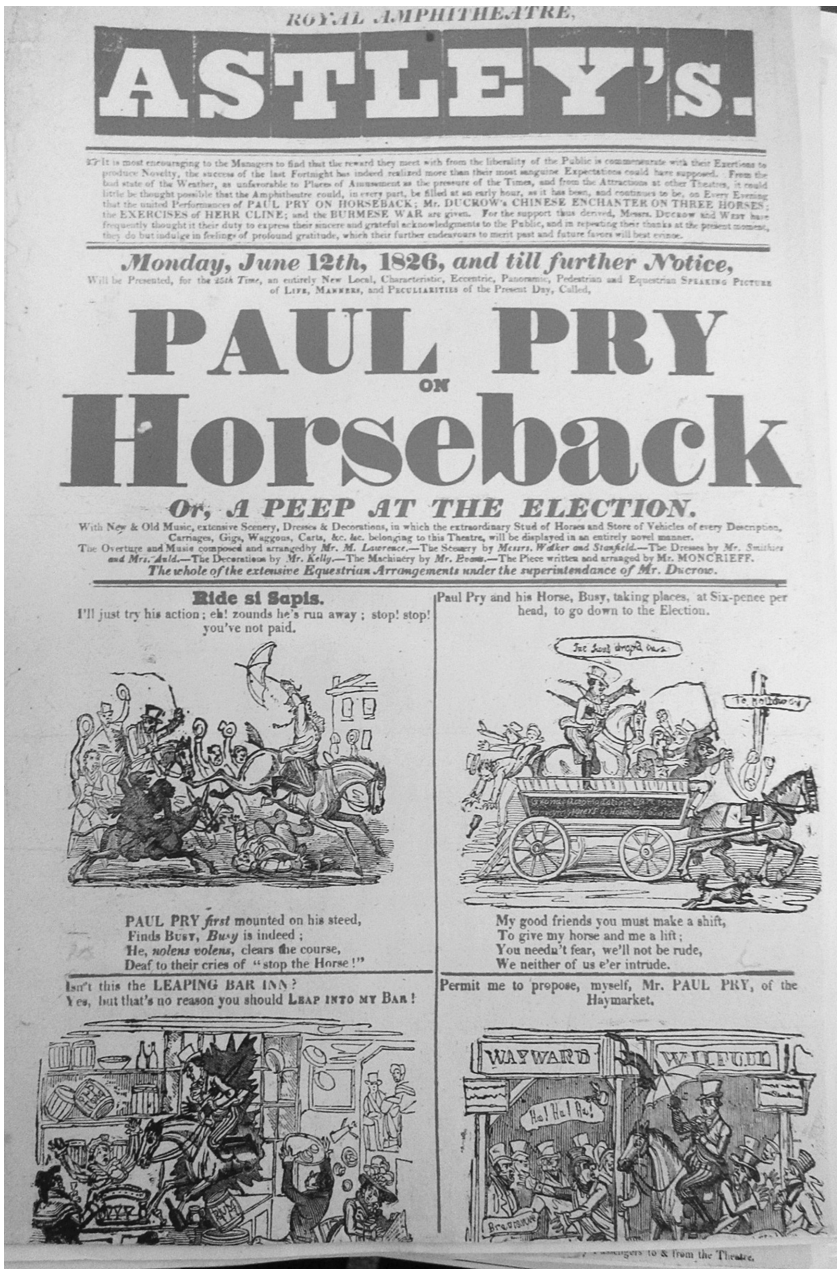
> Well, I never will do another good-natured thing again. I'll not ask another question, I'm determined. I'll take an oath—I'll—ladies and gentlemen, I hope I don't intrude—but I have just one thing to tell you. Perhaps Paul Pry may be here again to-morrow night—now don't let this go any further. I take all this very kind of you—and wish you all a very good evening. [*Curtain falls*][42]

The play was so suffused in the words that Jerrold was able to make comic business out of their inversion. When Paul Pry, who has his head up a chimney and his back to the audience, is accidentally assaulted with a red-hot poker by the servant Billy, he cries out, 'Damme, but you intrude! Oh, Lord!'[43] As with much of the product of the minor theatres, the play was largely ignored by the press.[44] Davidge bought few newspaper advertisements and perhaps as a consequence received little attention. Jerrold's career as a dramatist had to wait three more years until it took off at the Surrey Theatre with the nautical melodrama *Black Ey'd Susan*, which was in turn widely pirated.[45] But *Mr Paul Pry* did its job, playing for thirty-seven performances over six consecutive weeks.[46]

The third play took place on four legs. On 29 May 1826, Astley's Royal Amphitheatre announced that 'Paul Pry having been forced to *run* at other Theatres, Messrs. DUCROW and WEST, possessing the ample Stud they do, have thought it would appear uncharitable in them not to let him have a *ride* at this . . . '[47] Astley's was near the Coburg on the wrong side of the Thames. Since 1770 it had developed a reputation as the leading arena of horseback spectacles, adapting theatrical successes and celebrating military achievements. The Battle of Waterloo was re-fought on its boards for an

entire season.[48] Its large stage was strong enough to carry the weight of galloping horsemen and full-scale mail coaches but sufficiently flexible to be rapidly dismantled and reassembled.[49] The productions combined exiguous dialogue with music, song, dramatic visual effects, and immensely skilled horsemanship. In the words of Tomlins' *Brief View of the English Drama*, 'Astley's Amphitheatre is a name at which the youthful heart bounds, and the olden one revives.'[50] Jackie Bratton describes it as 'a sort of Regency schoolboy's idea of heaven'.[51] Its manager and star rider Andrew Ducrow was evidently playing within himself in this production; his signature performance was riding up to five horses at once in *The Courier of St Petersburg*.[52] The author was William Moncrieff, who at the beginning of the decade had managed Astley's before going on to write the most successful of the stage versions of *Life in London* and, subsequently, adaptations of Dickens' early novels, particularly *Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*.[53]

On the face of it Paul Pry was an unlikely candidate for equestrian translation. He was an entirely pedestrian presence in the original play, overweight, carrying an umbrella, and suffering from both gout and 'the rheumatiz'.[54] Poole made comic business of his immobility: '*Pry*. There is nothing so good for the health as walking.—(*goes up, brings down a chair in the centre, and sits.) Mrs S*. There! Now he is fixed for the day. *Pry*. That is to say, walking in moderation.'[55] Astley's version of *Tom and Jerry* had been much more suitable, its emphasis on movement and horseflesh allowing the management free rein. According to the Amphitheatre's historian, the production was 'remarkable for its scene of Epsom Races, which boasted post-chaises, gigs, tilburys, caravans, hackney coaches, carts, and four-in-hand barouches, all drawn by real horses, besides gambling tables, pick-pockets, sweeps, piemen, beggars, and ballad singers. It ended with a race between seven "Bits of Blood" on extensive platforms across the whole width of the house.'[56] No text of Moncrieff's adaptation of *Paul Pry* has survived, but it is possible to glimpse his treatment from the initial playbill, which was a far more prolix document than the sparse announcements that characterized the Haymarket [Fig. 3]. The audience was promised, 'New & Old Music, extensive Scenery, Dresses and Decorations, in which the extraordinary Stud of Horses and Store of Vehicles of every Description, Carriages, Gigs, Waggons, Carts &c. &c. belonging to this Theatre, will be displayed in an entirely novel manner.'[57] Moncrieff, who was the only one of the three dramatists to be acknowledged in the publicity for the plays,


ROYAL AMPHITHEATRE,

ASTLEY'S.

☞It is most encouraging to the Managers to find that the reward they meet with from the liberality of the Public is commensurate with their Exertions to produce Novelty, the success of the last Fortnight has indeed realized more than their most sanguine Expectations could have supposed. From the bad state of the Weather, as unfavorable to Places of Amusement as the pressure of the Times, and from the Attractions at other Theatres, it could little be thought possible that the Amphitheatre could, in every part, be filled at an early hour, as it has been, and continues to be, on Every Evening that the united Performances of PAUL PRY ON HORSEBACK; Mr. DUCROW's CHINESE ENCHANTER ON THREE HORSES; the EXERCISES of HERR CLINE; and the BURMESE WAR are given. For the support thus derived, Messrs. Ducrow and West have frequently thought it their duty to express their sincere and grateful acknowledgments to the Public, and in repeating their thanks at the present moment, they do but indulge in feelings of profound gratitude, which their further endeavours to merit past and future favors will best evince.

Monday, June 12th, 1826, and till further Notice,

Will be Presented, for the *45th Time*, an entirely New Local, Characteristic, Eccentric, Panoramic, Pedestrian and Equestrian SPEAKING PICTURE of LIFE, MANNERS, and PECULIARITIES of the Present Day, Called,

PAUL PRY ON Horseback

Or, A PEEP AT THE ELECTION.

With New & Old Music, extensive Scenery, Dresses & Decorations, in which the extraordinary Stud of Horses and Store of Vehicles of every Description, Carriages, Gigs, Waggons, Carts, &c. &c. belonging to this Theatre, will be displayed in an entirely novel manner.

The Overture and Music composed and arranged by *Mr. M. Lawrence*.—The Scenery by *Messrs. Walker and Stanfield*.—The Dresses by *Mr. Smithers and Mrs. Auld*.—The Decorations by *Mr. Kelly*.—The Machinery by *Mr. Brown*.—The Piece written and arranged by Mr. MONCRIEFF.

The whole of the extensive Equestrian Arrangements under the superintendance of Mr. Ducrow.

Ride si Sapis.
I'll just try his action; eh! zounds he's run away; stop! stop! you've not paid.

Paul Pry and his Horse, Busy, taking places, at Six-pence per head, to go down to the Election.

PAUL PRY *first* mounted on his steed,
Finds BUSY, *Busy* is indeed;
He, *nolens volens*, clears the course,
Deaf to their cries of "stop the Horse!"

My good friends you must make a shift,
To give my horse and me a lift;
You needn't fear, we'll not be rude,
We neither of us e'er intrude.

Isn't this the LEAPING BAR INN?
Yes, but that's no reason you should LEAP INTO MY BAR!

Permit me to propose, myself, Mr. PAUL PRY, of the Haymarket,

WAYWARD WILFUL

Ha! Ha! Ha!

Brighton

Managers to & from the Theatre.

Figure 3. Paul Pry On Horseback, Astley's Royal Amphitheatre, 12 June 1826.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

yoked the drama to the general election which was due to start a week later.[58] 'Paul Pry and his Horse, the HUSTINGS' proceed through a series of locations, starting with the Haymarket and taking in Smithfield Market and 'the Leaping Bar Inn' (where the horse leapt over the bar) and culminating in a 'GRAND PROCESSION—Bread, Beef and Beer—marrow bones and cleavers—odd fellow—saying grace—shew of hands' at the 'Union Arms Hotel, Committee Rooms'.[59] The direct association with two stage versions was confined to the general mobility of the character, who was capable of connecting disparate scenes, and a vestigial sense of apology. In an elaborate double-length playbill for the 12 June performance at Astley's, illustrations of six scenes are captioned by doggerel verses echoing the key lines of Poole's play. The second, for instance, bears the legend:

> *I've just dropt in*, though I must say,
> In rather *an unusual way*;
> I really hope we don't intrude,
> But BUSY is so full of Blood.[60]

Astley's revived the character thirty years later for 'the grand comic pantomime, entitled "Paul Pry on Horseback; or the Harlequin and the Marvellous Horseshoe"'. This had nothing to do with Moncrieff's electoral version and little with Poole's, which had lately been revived with great success at The Adelphi. Instead the figure was translated into a seasonal theatrical tradition:

> Though full of virtuous indignation at the enormities which prevail, the good people don't know very well how to set about correcting them; but eventually resolve to employ Paul Pry, a spy upon the actions of all the imposters and swindlers, and especially on the conduct of a certain banker who has cheated a poor forlorn damsel named Cherubina out of all the money left to her in her father's will . . . Paul Pry overhears the conversation, and by the aid of the fairies and his magical horse succeeds in snatching Cherry's money from the clutches of the two worthies and restoring it its [sic] rightful owner.[61]

All that was left of the original was the prying, and the capacity to entertain: 'Paul Pry, by his eccentric horsemanship, is in himself a constant source of merriment.'[62] Not only the rider but also his steed embodied the essence of the character: 'Paul Pry, on his prying horse, in everybody's business, from first to last.'[63]

At one point at the end of May 1826, London audiences could choose to see any or all of the *Paul Prys*. Moncrieff's show ran in repertory during the

summer and was performed at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham the following year.[64] These three dramas did not exhaust the theatrical versions of Poole's character. In September 1826, Charles Dibdin the Younger, the manager of the Surrey Theatre, a rival to the Coburg and Astley's on the south side of the Thames, decided to write a burletta of *Paul Pry* for the purpose of his impending benefit and that of his leading actor Mr Buckingham, who was to play the hero.[65] As Dibdin recalled, the venture was not a success: 'Paul Pry certainly drew the *first night*; but did not draw either on my Night or Buckingham's. In short it was a miss altogether.'[66] Elsewhere Pry had guest roles in contemporary theatrical gallimaufries such as the Christmas Harlequinade at Convent Garden. He appeared in drag as *Mrs Paulina Pry* as part of an evening's entertainment performed at the Adelphi by the theatre's manager Frederick Yates in April 1826,[67] and conversely was played by Mrs Glover in her own benefit.[68] On 5 November 1830, it was announced that in Tralee in south-west Ireland, 'Master Joyce . . . The Infant Prodigy. Only Seven Years Old!!' would conclude his evening's performance with 'the Inebriated Gentleman and Paul Pry'.[69] In addition to the nominal thefts, he appeared in thinly disguised appropriations including *Mr Busy* at the Adelphi in 1832.[70]

At the bottom end of the market Paul Pry enjoyed an unrecorded existence. 'Fairs were then in vogue', noted *The Times*, 'and *Paul Pry* became one of the stock figures in the larger booths'.[71] He also fed the growing appetite for middle-class domestic dramatics. The text of Poole's play was published before the end of 1825 by John Duncombe in his *British Theatre* series, and was soon followed by Jerrold's.[72] These versions may have been purchased merely as mementos of watched performances, but their publishers also listed in their catalogues guides to home dramatics and do-it-yourself stage make-up.[73] Behind closed doors any kind of textual corruption was possible, the potential for elision of the plays compounded by the unscrupulous behaviour of the publishers. When Jerrold's version appeared in Duncombe's *British Theatre*, the prefix 'Mr' was quietly dropped from the title page, as was the name of the author. To confuse matters further the edition carried as a frontispiece an engraving of Liston rather than Davidge in the title role.[74] A purchaser who had seen neither play would be unaware of the deception. The German translation of *Paul Pry* in 1854 announced that it was 'von Poole', though the text it printed was in fact von Jerrold.[75]

The three plays and the countless reworkings of the original characters and texts constitute the point of departure for this study and a constant place of return. What follows is in part a contribution to the history of drama and popular entertainment in late Georgian and Victorian England as the interactions between the stage and patterns of consumption and communication are examined through the prism of a protean theatrical figure. If the original plays have long since fallen from view, in their period they were powerful and long-lived engines of amusement and income-generation in Britain and many other parts of the English-speaking world. At the same time, as the next chapter will argue, the themes of the plays, and in particular Paul Pry's emblematic catchphrase, 'I Hope I Don't Intrude', offer an unusual opportunity of tracing the dynamics and dilemmas of privacy in the nineteenth century. The scale of the theatrical success and its market exploitation turned Paul Pry from a character into a discourse which illuminated topics ranging from domestic privacy to matters as diverse as personal and state secrecy, intimacy and face-to-face communication, articulated and segmented markets, satire and political caricature, literacy and the growth of virtual privacy, postal espionage, celebrity culture, gossip and blackmail, and the evolution of the public and private spheres. Framing the discussion is the central question of why intrusion was so much the spirit of the age and why and on what terms it was necessary constantly to apologize for it.

2

The General Truth of the Delineation

As with so much of the literary piracy of the era, what John Poole lost in royalties he gained in public recognition. He was identified in all his subsequent publications, including prose works, as the 'Author of Paul Pry'. Through his plays and his humorous articles for the *Monthly Magazine*, Poole was an influence on the young Charles Dickens, contributing subjects and themes to his first published book, *Sketches by Boz*.[1] Twenty years after the play was written Dickens referred to him in his correspondence simply as 'Paul Pry Poole'.[2] They remained friends and eventually Dickens managed to obtain a Civil List pension of £100 to help him through his long old age.[3] Poole's and Dickens' characters later became theatrical neighbours. In 1872, for instance, the *Observer* reported that, 'The Gaiety afternoon performance yesterday consisted of the Trial Scene from *Pickwick* and "Paul Pry," and naturally in both Mr Toole was at his best, delighting the audience heartily, and causing extravagant laughter.'[4]

The impact of Poole's creation was magnified by Paul Pry's life beyond the stage and the printed texts. In 1866 *The Times* took the opportunity of a revival of the play at the Adelphi to survey its history over the previous four decades:

> When first brought out at the Haymarket in 1825, it at once attained that celebrity which is something altogether distinct from mere theatrical success, and of which we have lately had an instance in the Lord Dundreary of Mr Sothern. Liston's figure, with the strangely-shaped straw hat, the striped trousers crammed into the Hessian boots, and the indispensable umbrella, was sure to be seen everywhere—on the walls of the Royal Academy, on the penny sheets of the theatrical print-seller, and on the image-board of the itinerant Italians . . . likewise ornamenting the signs of gingerbread stalls, and

> the carts belonging to vendors of ginger-pop. Go where you would 40 years ago, you could not by any means avoid *Paul Pry*; the stern Puritan, by some means or other, knew his face and costume as well as the most inveterate play-goer, and his frequently-recurring phrase, 'I hope I don't intrude,' became a constant element in the 'chaff' of the London street-boy.[5]

Over time the figure crossed the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, and between theatrical text and public discourse. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica's* entry on Liston observed that '*Paul Pry*, the most famous of all his impersonations, was first presented on the 13 September 1825, and soon became, thanks to his creative genius, a real personage.'[6] During the remainder of the nineteenth century his name entered the English language in its own right. Discussing the celebrity of Lord Dundreary, the *Observer* noted that 'nothing so effective in its way has caught general attention since forty years ago Mr Liston made Paul Pry almost into a proverb'.[7] In 1886 the *Manchester Guardian* reviewed yet another revival of 'Poole's old fashioned comedy, which has not only amused several generations of playgoers, but has added both familiar words and phrases to our language.'[8] *The Oxford English Dictionary* surveyed the use of 'Paul Pry' by various nineteenth-century authorities and concluded, 'Hence Paul-Pry, verb intransitive. To behave like Paul Pry; to be impertinently inquisitive or prying.'[9]

So real a type did he appear that claims were immediately advanced for the paternity of the figure. 'It is not for me', wrote John Poole, '. . . to say to what causes I attribute the popularity of the play; but one of them unquestionably is that it contains a character of which almost every person who has seen it imagines he knows the prototype.'[10] The most likely model was held to be Poole's friend Thomas Hill, a book collector and bon viveur, who had lost his money speculating in indigo and retired to the Adelphi, where he was known for his 'extensive and distorted knowledge of the gossip of the day'.[11] Some credence was given to this story by the fact that Hill had used the pseudonym 'Peter Pry' for his 'travesty' of Scott's *Marmion* in 1809.[12] Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* reproduced this attribution throughout the nineteenth century, but without the authority of the author.[13] In 1836 Poole himself published some 'Notes for a Memoir' in which he claimed that the character was 'suggested' by an 'anecdote, related to me several years ago, by a beloved friend' concerning a bed-bound elderly lady in a London street who could tell precisely the business of each of her neighbours by the sound of the knocks made on their doors.[14] This story, which was picked up and widely reprinted by the London and provincial

press, was a way of deflecting rather than answering the question.[15] It scarcely explained Pry, who was notorious for misconstruing every fragment of information he so laboriously obtained. With justified immodesty, Poole denied that he had based the character on any single person. 'Let me add,' he wrote,

> that Paul Pry was never intended *as the representative of any one individual*, but of a class. Like the melancholy of Jaques, he is 'compounded of many *Simples*;' and I *could* mention five or six who were unconscious contributors to the character. That it should have been so often, though erroneously, supposed to have been drawn after some particular person, is, perhaps, complimentary to the general truth of the delineation.[16]

'The general truth of the delineation', the figure, in the words of the *Morning Post*, 'drawn to the very life', is the point of departure for this book. What follows is not just a history of a play. Rather it is a biography of a polymorphous fictional character. The term polymorphous was first used in English literature by De Quincy, just before Poole's theatrical success, to refer to a single figure taking many different forms.[17] Paul Pry is nothing if not an exemplar of such a phenomenon. He made his entry on the stage of the Haymarket Theatre in 1825 and exited into a myriad of shapes and discourses down the remainder of the nineteenth century. The following chapters will trace how he became a diverse range of visual, textual, and three-dimensional objects in Great Britain and around the world. He danced quadrilles, sang songs, and told jokes. He won horse races on three continents over two centuries and conveyed passengers on the last of the stage coaches and the first of the steam ships. He buttered toast, buttoned coats, mopped brows, and decorated the walls and mantelshelves of increasingly well-furnished homes. He sailed the seven seas and served drinks to thirsty customers in public houses up and down the country. He was woven into the debate about postal reform and the rise of mass communication and took part in the first telephone conversation with Queen Victoria. He spoke in Parliament and on the hustings and wrote endlessly to the newspapers. He evoked gales of laughter on the London, provincial, American, and colonial stages through to the 1890s, and the same figure was also the last great satirical caricaturist in the tradition of Gillray and Rowlandson. He enquired into abuses and abused his position as an enquirer. He played on at least four occasions before Queen Victoria and other members of the Royal Family but he also invaded Canada and was prosecuted and jailed for libel and blackmail in London.

Even if the focus is confined to the play, nothing is anchored. The actors remade lines in response to their audiences and managers remade plays running in rival theatres. Emblematic characters were detached from their original dramas and performed alongside figures from other long-standing successes, and the impact of individual productions was reshaped by the daily-changing three-decker programmes. Since the era of the antiquarian study of drama which concentrated on recording plays and performances, it has become a commonplace to draw attention to the limitations of the playwright's text. It is the most substantive survival of theatre and the least certain guide to what happened.[18] How the performance was constructed and how the audience engaged with it cannot be read back from the page. Nor are the reviews and occasional memoirs a sufficient account. Despite the growing practice of printing versions of the everyday productions of the London theatres, many short-lived but widely seen dramas, including the Pry pantomimes at Astley's Amphitheatre, remain accessible only through theatre bills. Astley's generally operated beneath the gaze of newspaper reviewers, as did the Coburg. Where publication did take place, enough is known of the mode of production and consumption of plays to doubt the status of what has survived by this route. In the absence of an authoritative writer or producer, there was little control over what the theatre manager did with the original text as the evening's entertainment was shaped, or where the actors took it when let loose upon the stage.[19]

The longer a play remained in repertory, the more vulnerable it was to revision. J. L. Toole, the final owner of the role, became accustomed to freely adjusting the text to his own comfort and that of his audience. In 1872 he performed 'Four Scenes from Poole's Comedy of Paul Pry!' as part of the evening's entertainment at the 'East London Theatre of Varieties' at the Pavilion Theatre.[20] A few years later the *Standard* reported his return to the stage after illness:

> Poole's old comedy, *Paul Pry*, or rather a compressed version of the comedy, was selected for the occasion, and when the familiar figure was seen a roar of welcome broke out from every part of the house . . . Many hundreds of performances have enabled the actor to elaborate the most telling points of 'business' and dialogue, and to fill in what this reading of the character seemed to require.[21]

Only the prompter, a defining instance of responsibility without power, disciplined the text from night to night, and the printed versions were often

taken from his version rather than that of the named playwright. The edition of Poole's *Pry* used for this study is the 'Correct copy from the Prompt-Book'.[22] The greater the status of the actor and the lower the form, the larger the difficulty. John Liston, the creator of Paul Pry, presented a double problem. He interpolated comments to the audience and added closing addresses, and his skill as an actor by common consent transcended whatever words he was caused to utter.[23] Henry Barton Baker's Victorian survey of the leading players of the age cited the verdict of Liston's contemporary James Boaden: 'he must be seen to be comprehended'.[24] The reverse was equally the case.

If the plays were constantly shape-changing, so also were the boundaries between the theatre and contemporary cultural forms. Categories that were sufficiently recognizable in the 1820s and 1830s to attract the attention of separate historical and literary disciplines were themselves in transition, with their emergence as wholly distinct forms still taking place. 'During these discursive contests,' Elaine Hadley notes in her study of melodrama, 'the distinctions between melodrama and Literature, between Literature and other types of texts, between texts and historical events, and between melodrama and political practice, distinctions that still seem relatively timeless and essential in the late twentieth century, were unstable, engaged in the negotiations that would only later result in the categories we recognize today.'[25] It was not so much a matter of an unfinished journey of particular forms, as the forms gaining identity from their constant interaction with other categories of expression. As cultural events the plays were deeply embedded in a hugely diverse and fiercely energetic marketplace. There was no fixed frame for the intermittent explosions of communication and consumption. The point of departure was often politics. From John Wilkes in the 1760s to the Westminster election of 1784, the Queen Caroline affair of 1820 and the 'War of the Unstamped' in the early 1830s, popular engagement found outlet in prints, pamphlets, broadsides, ballads, and theatre. As well as a massive outpouring of print, 500 cartoons were published on the Queen Caroline affair and dozens of domestic melodramas were hastily written for the stage.[26] Iain McCalman has traced connections between radical politics and a wide range of cultural forms from the 1790s through to the figure of John Duncombe, who gave Douglas Jerrold his initial break before he was employed by Davidge, published the early editions of both Pry plays, and was the first character associated with the Pry event to be prosecuted in the courts.[27] Even where the core of

the controversy was inside the theatre it spilled out into every available category of expression. Marc Baer found that the Old Price riots of 1809 generated 'at least fifty broadsides and as many pamphlets, nearly forty surviving prints, dozens of songs, and thousands of letters to editors of London newspapers'.[28]

In the case of Pry it was first a play and then within weeks virtually every other category of cultural practice. The nearest equivalent earlier in the 1820s was Pierce Egan's illustrated serial, *Life in London*, with entrepreneurs in adjacent markets capitalizing on the success of the novel well before it had run its course, a sequence to be repeated by the works of the frustrated dramatist Charles Dickens from 1837 onwards.[29] No one mode of communication was intrinsically subservient to another either in time or impact, nor was any one level of the market wholly confined to one form of consumption. At the same time there were no fixed boundaries between the forms. The market in mass communication was not entirely fluid. By the early nineteenth century prints, plays, broadsides, periodicals, and novels each had their own established genres with specialist producers, distributors, and performers working in complex sub-divisions. It was a matter of lasting regret to John Liston that he was confined to the ranks of low comedians and never allowed to act in tragedy, where he had started his career and always thought his real talents lay.[30] But equally there were significant overlaps between the categories. However much, for instance, the authorities tried to distinguish between subversive and improving publications, most booksellers would sell anything that would find a market. Entrepreneurs might have a centre of activity but in pursuit of profit would dabble in other products which fed on it. When Robert Elliston, lessee of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, sued for bankruptcy in 1826, he was listed in the proceedings as 'bookseller, dealer and chapman' on the basis of the texts on sale inside his theatre.[31] And the separate forms did not merely work alongside each other. As Robert Patten has demonstrated in his definitive study of George Cruikshank, who was involved in the visual afterlife of Pry, the process of illustrating texts generally involved a two-way conversation between writer and artist, and the artist's work was in turn informed by a range of influences from other genres.[32]

A further engine of disorder was Pry's life as a celebrity. Following his theatrical triumph in the autumn of 1825 and the summer of 1826 he entered the national culture as a character famous for being famous. As Part Two will argue, it is in the nature of celebrity to dislocate context. Pry

was swiftly elevated to a travelling pantheon of fictional and historical figures each with their own shorthand visual and verbal signifiers. Within a few months he was appropriated for the intensifying political debate over Church and Parliamentary Reform, and beyond 1832 he became a resource for the nascent democratic conversation. Whether in Parliament, on the hustings, in newspaper reports or correspondence columns, in pamphlets and other ephemera, he provided a readily accessible and negotiable point of reference for those seeking to reach a widening public community. The new franchise and the modernizing state which emerged after the Great Reform Act required a common language of debate. The ludic trope of Paul Pry filled such a need. His familiarity transcended space, income, and education. However the boundary of the political nation was drawn, he was a presence on both the inside and the outside. Any reference to his figure could connect a communicator with an audience. At one level his value to the emergent public sphere was his capacity to mean different things to all people. Beyond everything, he was, as the concluding chapter will explore, a source of humour. If a politician on the stump wanted to stress his populist credentials, there was no easier way of doing so than to assume the mantle of John Liston causing laughter on the stage of the Haymarket. It was the nineteenth-century equivalent of quoting a line from a film or television show of the moment (in this regard it is tempting to draw a parallel between Paul Pry and Arnold Schwarzenegger, another iconic character given to a strong visual identity and a limited stock of transferable dialogue). Given a basic recall of the catchphrases, a minimal capacity to imitate, and a vestigial sense of timing, just for a moment a benign unity between speaker and audience was achieved. Equally those who sought to communicate through what was an intensely visual culture had at their disposal a resource of instantly recognizable imagery that was abstracted from any specific scene in the play. In such circumstances, philosophical, political, or linguistic coherence was not the point. The function was to give at least the illusion of a shared public discourse.

The sheer plasticity of Paul Pry is an essential characteristic of his life in late-Georgian and Victorian Britain. He cannot be tidied away into a neat interpretative box. At the same time there are features of the process and the content of the Pry phenomenon which permit an exploration of critical aspects of privacy in the nineteenth century. To attempt such an account through the prism of a single dramatic character is at once an innovative and an appropriate form of social history. It is exploiting the synchronic

and diachronic nature of any theatrical activity. A successful production reflected a spectrum of forces in the contemporary recreational marketplace and a range of cultural meanings shared and reshaped by the actors and the audience at the moment of performance. Equally, it drew on a heritage of theatrical conventions and practices stretching back in this case to at least the early eighteenth century, and through the resonance of its initial popularity and frequent revivals it cast its light forward over the Victorian era to come. This distinction is reflected in the organization of this study, with Part Two largely concerned with the 'Pry event' of the second half of the 1820s, and Part Three with the afterlife of its principal character and the raft of issues which he illuminated in the succeeding decades.

It might be argued that it is perverse to use one of the noisiest forms of popular entertainment, a late-Georgian theatre in full flood, to examine what could be the quietest modes of human intercourse, the often unspoken transactions of intimacy. But there is a particular affinity between the stage and privacy in this era. As a number of recent accounts have stressed, blocked communication was increasingly the hallmark of family life. 'For the Victorians, then,' concludes Deborah Cohen in her important new book, 'privacy meant keeping people out of your business; the domestic fortress was privacy's stronghold . . . Secrecy was privacy's indispensable handmaiden.'[33] The more prosperous the family, the thicker the walls of its residence, the greater the distance from its neighbours, and the less the need to perform outside the home. If the ambition of domestic seclusion was not born in this century, the material history of the period made its attainment possible for an ever-increasing proportion of the population. There was a critical dependency between transgression and concealment. William Reddy describes how in contemporary France, 'the new democratized code of honor provided heads of families great freedom to make private arrangements that violated public norms, on condition that they maintain a distinct secrecy about them'.[34] The problem for the historian is how to gain entry to these fortresses so long after the event. If front doors resisted contemporaries they even more firmly obstruct twenty-first-century visitors to this hidden world. At its heart, privacy was an unwritten condition, and as will be argued later in this chapter, face-to face communication did not even require words for its effect. One highly productive answer, pursued in Deborah Cohen's study and others, is to focus on the points of breakdown where domestic behaviour was exposed in documented legal processes such as divorce courts or adoption proceedings.

There is much to be learned from these events, but the law itself played a much smaller role in the conduct of privacy than it does in our own litigious times. It is not possible to replicate for nineteenth-century Britain Daniel Solove's attempt to capture the breadth of privacy values, aspirations, and practices of modern America solely by describing legislation and court action.[35]

A study of one distinctly non-canonical fictional character does not supply a full response to this problem of evidence. This book is a contribution to the history of privacy in the nineteenth century, not a comprehensive account. It draws its strength from the particular association between the source material and the topic. As a number of scholars have stressed, domestic privacy in this period was itself inherently theatrical.[36] In her chapter on 'The Family Triumphant', Michelle Perrot describes its essential character:

> Honor required keeping the family's deepest secrets, secrecy being the mortar that held the family together and created a fortress against the outside world. But that very mortar had been known to create cracks and crevices in its structure. Cries and whispers, creaking doors, locked drawers, purloined letters, glimpsed gestures, confidences and mysteries, sidelong and intercepted glances, words spoken and unspoken—all those created a university of internal communications, and the more varied the interest, loves, hatreds, and shameful feelings of individual family members, the more subtle those communications were. The family was an endless source of drama.[37]

If John Liston addressed his role as Paul Pry with a minimum of rehearsal so also the actors in the newly furnished homes were performing new identities with inadequate preparation. It can be argued that the corpus of late-Georgian and Victorian popular theatre contains a particularly rich if indirect archive of the pleasures and dilemmas of the private lives of those who paid to watch it. The versions and revivals of *Paul Pry* were but a fraction of the torrent of plays addressing the tensions describe by Perrot in what was the most popular form of entertainment in the expanding towns and cities. Unlike fiction, which in many ways performed a similar role, the most enclosed and concealed of practices were consumed collectively and in public, supplying some kind of social release from the stressed arenas to which the playgoers would return at the end of the evening.

In some specific respects therefore, the candles and gaslights that illuminated the stage performances made visible the opaque narratives of privacy in the nineteenth century. Pursuing the 'general truth of the delineation' of