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Laboratory, Library, Database:
London's Avant-Garde Drama Societies and Ephemeral Repertoire

[draft]

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In November 1901, a London play-producing organization known as the Stage Society sent circulars to its 523 members announcing one Sunday evening and one Monday matinée performance of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. The Lord Chamberlain had banned George Bernard Shaw's play three years earlier, and although the Stage Society's members-only performances technically were exempt from both the pre-performance licensing requirement and the longstanding prohibition on Sunday theatrics, managers feared the loss of their operating licenses. By the time the play premiered at the New Lyric Club in January, the Stage Society had been forced to change venues three times, after approaching at least twelve theaters, two music halls, three hotels, and two galleries. The society also had postponed the production once due to an actress's last-minute scheduling conflict. With each change, the society printed new sets of circulars, programs, and tickets—sometimes, only a day apart.

Dedicated to the discovery of new or sometimes very old drama, subscription societies were experimental coterie clubs composed of members whose annual fees financed, and secured tickets to, a season of private productions. In 1891, J. T. Grein founded the first such group in Britain, the Independent Theatre Society, in order to stage a performance of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, which the Lord Chamberlain had banned from the public stage. Over 140 subscription societies followed; the Stage Society (1899–1939) ran longest and most

successfully.¹ Though extreme, the case of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* demonstrates the extent to which subscription societies lacked actors and theaters of their own, and relied on printed ephemera to constitute, as much as to communicate, their performances. Compared to bound books, ephemera—from the Greek for things lasting no more than a day—better approximated the transience of live performance. But ephemera also could virtually assemble repertoires and audiences beyond a single theater or performer. The Stage Society's annual report meticulously recounted the *Mrs. Warren* saga and boasted of the speedy production of ephemera: "Tickets and programmes and a circular to Members were printed and ready within twenty-four hours." The curtain would go up after the letterpress had come down: when the theater changed five days before another performance, members "[suffered] no further inconvenience than a late receipt of programmes and tickets consequent on the delay due to reprinting."² Subscription societies produced more ephemera than plays, such that Shaw received a prospectus from the fictitious "Pornographic Play Society (Limited)," which stated that the success of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* "encourages the Committee of the P. P. Society to follow it up by a series of performances suitable to the taste of supersensuous audiences."³ The prospectus satirized the tastes of subscription society members and the plays promised to them by committees. It also mocked the "limited" nature of such societies, conflating legal registration with limits on influence.

How did these avant-garde societies shape the performance repertoire? In this article, I quantitatively analyze a database of over 23,000 London productions from 1890 to 1959 in order to determine the extent to which subscription societies introduced a modern dramatic repertoire to the public stage, otherwise known as the commercial theater.⁴ I further argue that subscription societies virtually assembled the very *idea* of a modern dramatic repertoire using ephemera such as prospectuses, programs, annual reports, and tickets. My methodological aims with respect to the study of repertoire are twofold: to demonstrate the

potentials and limitations of digital databases and to make a case for integrating them with book history. As Debra Caplan has observed, databases “tackle a recurring and significant challenge in [theater and performance studies]—the ephemerality of our medium and the dispersal of theatrical ephemera that may shed light on a performance event.”⁵ In this article, I follow through on Caplan’s pun by tracking the relationship between theatrical ephemera and performance databases in the era of modernity, when Britain’s professional not-for-profit theater sector first emerged, and with it, a quantifiable avant-garde.⁶

By combining book-historical and digital-quantitative methods, I propose a new model for integrating modernist studies with theater and performance research. While artist-centered analyses by Lawrence Switzky and Toril Moi have evaluated Shaw’s and Ibsen’s modernist credentials on aesthetic grounds, theater-historical accounts by Tracy Davis and Claire Cochrane have readily used the adjectives “modernist” and “avant-garde” to describe the societies that premiered these dramatists’ plays.⁷ From a historical perspective, the term “avant-garde” could not be more appropriate, since it was introduced into French dramatic criticism to describe the repertoire of André Antoine’s Théâtre Libre, the Parisian subscription society that inspired Grein’s Independent Theatre; in their own heyday, British subscription societies were considered “advanced.”⁸ Nevertheless, modernism’s contentious relationship with the stage exceeds historical definitions. Olga Taxidou has written of “the impasse created by a critical tradition that views textuality (literary or otherwise) and materiality (stage, bodily or otherwise) as mutually exclusive discourses”—a bifurcation that further maps onto Anglophone literary modernism and Continental theatrical avant-gardism.⁹ The tension between textual page and material stage has been especially generative for William Worthen, Martin Puchner, and Jennifer Buckley, who have argued for the importance of the published play, the closet drama, and the performance text to the formation of modern drama, modernism, and the avant-garde, respectively.¹⁰ I am less concerned here

with parsing those categories in terms of individual artists' aesthetics, since subscription societies mounted naturalist, symbolist, and expressionist plays alike, and playgoers saw each style as new and experimental; rather, I pivot away from the textual page and toward material ephemera—an under-theorized print genre, but one essential to structuring collectivity for any institution, particularly theater.¹¹

Scholars of modernist little magazines and private presses have long recognized that print, if not strictly ephemera, conditions collectivity.¹² In addition to convening coteries, subscription societies were similar to subscription publishers in that both assembled stables of writers like fantasy baseball teams. Often, overlapping teams: one of the Stage Society's less-remembered plays was a one-act called *One Day More* (1905) by Joseph Conrad, adapted from his short story "To-morrow"; the society later was responsible for the London premieres of James Joyce's *Exiles* and D. H. Lawrence's *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* (both 1926). In 1914, art critic Huntly Carter observed that subscription societies "strongly resembled the new so-called advanced journals which are springing up to-day, and which serve as a dust-hole for literary and moral outpouring." More recently, Elizabeth Miller has compared societies to the "slow print dynamic of the radical press"; she dubs them the theatrical counterpart to socialist magazines like *To-Day*, which published Ibsen's plays before societies staged them.¹³ Yet if little magazines—along with literary archives, museums, art collections, and even encyclopedias—have been characterized as institutions of modernist collectivity, theater archives have more often been juxtaposed to a theatrical collectivity predicated on liveness.¹⁴ Performance studies has habituated us to recognizing theatrical ephemera like playbills, posters, press clippings, and picture postcards as mere traces of irreproducible happenings, like breadcrumbs leading to people and places we'll never reach.¹⁵ When such documents contradict each other, upending W. B. Yeats's account of the riotous *Ubu Roi* (1896) premiere (to choose a performance event that has become

crucial to the story we tell about modernism), the archive only further “performs the institution of disappearance,” to borrow Rebecca Schneider’s haunting formulation.¹⁶ Sarah Bay-Cheng recently has proposed situating theater and performance history within a new and old media ecology, thereby transforming personal and institutional archives alike into “networks” in which “Performance Does Not Disappear.”¹⁷ In this article, I acknowledge the validity of both perspectives: our encounters with media, whether in theaters or rare books libraries, are as embodied as any performance; ephemera can be discarded (or deleted) as well as saved.¹⁸ What remains, so to speak, is to imagine ephemera in the hands of playgoers before, during, and after the performance event.

Ephemera’s affordances were clear to turn-of-the-century theater reformers. In 1904, one theater manager observed that a subsidized play-going public existed, “but it wants organising and circularising, and that is the work for [subscription] societies to take in hand.”¹⁹ Other observers compared societies to legal bodies like corporations and syndicates. In the 1902 inaugural issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, critic Arthur Bingham Walkley declared:

Like nearly everything else in the modern world the new theatrical demand has of late years been worked by corporations and syndicates, with the usual apparatus of prospectuses, pamphleteering, and, above all, subscription lists. In this kind the Independent Theatre Society begat the New Century Theatre Society, and the New Century Theatre Society begat the Stage Society, and by-and-by—say, at the coming of the Cocqigrues—the Stage Society may beget that new theatrical supply which ought to meet the new theatrical demand, but, somehow, never does.²⁰

As Walkley anticipated, the Stage Society became a limited company two years later, changing its name to the Incorporated Stage Society to suggest a wider membership and influence. With incorporation, the society halved the annual fee to one guinea, and membership doubled from 617 to 1,082. But that a vital list of modern drama seemed as likely as a mythical monster to appear throws into relief the astounding accomplishments of the next decade, during which the Stage Society launched the playwriting careers of Shaw, Harley Granville-Barker, St. John Hankin, and John Masefield—and, over a longer period, the less-successful bids of Conrad, Lawrence, and Joyce. The Stage Society continued the work of earlier societies by further popularizing Ibsen, as well as introducing Maeterlinck, Chekhov, Strindberg, Pirandello, and Cocteau to the English stage. In other words, the society's playlists knitted together modern dramatists, literary modernists, and theatrical avant-gardists.

And, perhaps more surprisingly, box-office successes: new media analysis reveals that after passing the subscription test, many of these playwrights successfully crossed over into the (retrospectively-constructed) commercial repertoire, subtending the gap that Penny Farfan has identified between “hegemonic modernism and mainstream theatre practice.”²¹ Rather than evaluate subscription plays in a vacuum, this approach takes stock of the entire professional London stage, placing *Man and Superman* and *Hedda Gabler* alongside *Peter Pan* and *Charley's Aunt*. What's more, *old* media analysis suggests that theatrical ephemera like prospectuses, pamphlets, and subscription lists played an important role in self-consciously fashioning the concept of a modern dramatic repertoire in the first place. Prospectuses, by looking forward to an imagined series of future performances, and annual reports, by looking backward to take stock of successes and failures, trained audiences to think of plays not as individual works, but as parts of a repertoire that could be compiled, catalogued, and chosen from at will. Even as their ephemera communicated practical

administrative information, assembling this repertoire was subscription societies' *raison d'être*. Repertoire even took the place of a permanent theater building; as the journal *The New Age* reported in 1908: "In London the only permanent home the drama we want possesses is in those pioneer dramatic societies which are financed by the subscriptions of members."²² The Stage Society's membership never exceeded 1,600 and only a fraction of theatergoing audiences attended subscription performances, but the society's productions were reviewed in newspapers and revived in commercial theaters throughout Britain. Subscription lists and reports of Stage Society audiences in the public press gendered playgoing as female and playwriting as male; both were thought to influence the repertoire. Even as print brought subscription societies into existence, ephemera orbited around the live performance event, with the distance of the prospectus and the annual report, and the proximity of the ticket and program. Ephemera virtualized repertoire nearly a century before the advent of digital databases.

Database; repertoire; list—as Kenneth Price asks, "What's in a Name?" Price distinguishes between the technical term "database" and a looser metaphorical collective.²³ Although I make use here of a modern-day database for quantitative analysis and locate the emergence of the technical term "repertoire" in the nineteenth century, I recognize that the more telling moments in both time periods emerge from metaphor: when a repertoire is compared to a library or a storehouse, say, or when a database is compared to a cloud or an internment camp (as when Donald Trump recently suggested a database for American Muslims).²⁴ Moreover, I argue, as Neil Postman once did, that the material form of information shapes our metaphorical perception of it.²⁵ Material and metaphor meet in virtuality, which has gained new currency in the digital age. But as David Saltz reminds us, Artaud claimed the term "virtual reality" for the theater over fifty years before Jaron Lanier did for the computer.²⁶ Taking an even longer view, Sue Ellen-Case proposes that we

conceptualize the literal theater as a space of virtual representation akin to the medieval cathedral, which “purported to provide an architecture of the virtual space of heaven.”²⁷ Yet from the new media end of the timeline, Steve Dixon comes to a seemingly opposite conclusion, identifying “the inherent tensions at play between the live ontology of performance arts and the mediatized, non-live, and simulacral nature of virtual technologies.”²⁸ The difference between these approaches to virtuality inheres in whether we take performance as our subject or our object: does performance imagine something else, as in the former; or are we asked to imagine performance itself, as in the latter? Or are we asked to imagine a performance repertoire, like the lists of plays embedded in subscription ephemera? Whether celestial, cybernetic, or canonical, each approach accesses virtuality from the point of a representational platform, be it stage, screen, or page. All, in the words of N. Katherine Hayles, “[play] off the duality at the heart of the condition of virtuality—materiality on the one hand, information on the other.”²⁹ In this article, the concept of the “virtual” serves as a bridge between media that are still too frequently considered in binary terms: live/non-live, unmediated/mediated, ephemeral/permanent.

From Laboratory to Library

Turn-of-the-century theater reformers compared subscription societies to different storage facilities: laboratories, museums, storehouses, libraries. Each analogy had something to say about the nature of the repertoire, be it experimental, esoteric, explosive, or classical. These analogies conceptualized plays as discrete objects that could be arranged on a shelf, in a mental shift hastened by the late-Victorian renaissance in dramatic publishing, which helped to literalize the metaphor.³⁰ Ephemera’s institutional associations further inspired such

comparisons. I begin by weighing the various trade-offs of these comparisons before moving into a quantitative analysis that evaluates their accuracy. To what extent did subscription societies discover drama for the commercial repertoire?

The majority of subscription productions were performed only once or twice; in this respect, societies resembled laboratories. William Archer imagined a “test performance society” which would operate as a “safety-valve” for plays that might upset the censor.³¹ In 1886, the Shelley Society (generally not considered a play-producing society) staged a subscription performance of Shelley’s unlicensed play *The Cenci* (1819). This established a precedent for future play-producing societies as far as censorship was concerned. Theater historians have long observed that dramatic publishing returned to being integral to a play’s literary value at the end of the nineteenth century. As Henry Arthur Jones proclaimed after the passage of the 1891 American Copyright Act, which ostensibly protected English playwrights from unauthorized trans-Atlantic performances: “[If] a playwright does not publish within a reasonable time after the theatrical production of his piece, it will be an open confession that his work was a thing of the theatre merely, needing its garish artificial light and surroundings, and not daring to face the calm air and cold daylight of print.”³²

Apparently, play-going was for the evening and reading, the daytime. Copyright law newly defined performance through print: in order to secure copyright before publication, the play had to be “publicly performed,” which meant that a playbill had to be exhibited outside the venue and the performance advertised in two newspapers.³³ (Subscription performances did not count.) Reading editions of Shaw and other “advanced” dramatists followed, spurred by publisher involvement in societies. This included William Heinemann, who asked John Lane to publish Heinemann’s banned play *The First Step* (1895) after the Independent Theatre Society decided not to stage it; Gerald Duckworth, who was secretary of the New Century Theatre Society and later published all of Galsworthy’s plays; and Grant Richards, who

published Shaw's *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898) and was listed as a signatory on the Stage Society's invitational circular. By Edward's reign, critics had inverted the print/performance paradigm. One lamented that the Stage Society had gone the way of "other experimental dramatic societies" by performing *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, "which one could have been content to read."³⁴ With less ambivalence, the Stage Society's secretary Allan Wade recalled that Richards's Shaw volumes "were very amusing . . . to read. The thought that they might be acted did not seem to occur to anybody" (*Memories of the London Theatre*, 3). Societies devoted themselves to testing the so-called "great unacted," the iceberg of which Shaw was assumed to be only the tip. They may have wanted for quality plays, but they were never short of submissions. The Stage Society's Reading and Advising Committee received an average of three plays a week (most of which had never been published), and the society's ten-year jubilee celebrations included a special midnight burlesque that depicted a strike of great unacted dramatists who compel the "Ultra-Drama Society" to stage a gloomy play.³⁵

Laboratory-like, societies engineered the rise of modern drama by creating a controlled environment where theater would not be subject to the blunt forces of commercialism. Although Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero penned a number of popular yet high-quality society plays, George Sims, Sydney Grundy, and F. C. Burnand hacked out melodramas, comedies, farces, and musical comedies that enjoyed long runs but rare revivals.³⁶ Of the advanced drama printed in the 1890s, Wade recalled: "I must have taken it for granted that one could not expect to see these tender plants exposed to the ordeal of performance at a West End theatre" (*Memories of the London Theatre*, 2). This anathema toward the commercial West End earned societies a reputation for producing seedy plays. Closely related to the analogy of the laboratory was that of the museum. As one critic observed:

There is a medical museum in London—from which the frivolous are excluded by the fact that admission can only be obtained by a card from a doctor—where, ranged on shelves, are exhibited all the various disease to which the interior of Man—and, for aught we know, his exterior also—is liable. . . . The Stage Society performs somewhat the same salutary and scientific function.³⁷

This critic underscored the self-seriousness of Stage Society members and emphasized the subscription card by likening it to the institutional medical card. (With all these tender plants and medical cards, one can't help but compare societies to today's cannabis clubs: like cannabis clubs, subscription societies provided a loophole for accessing illicit and supposedly dangerous wares.) The use of the word "liable" also connected this intrapersonal conflict to the shared, or limited, liability of the Stage Society's members. The salutary and scientific function came not only from a shared investment in humankind's private pathologies, such as venereal disease or drug addiction (presented in plays such as Ibsen's *Ghosts* [1881] and W. L. Courtney's *On the Side of the Angels* [1908]), but also from arrangement and exhibition.³⁸

As time went on, arrangement and exhibition came to include the dramatic experiments of Anglophone literary modernists like Conrad, Lawrence, and Joyce. David Kurnick has described theatrical failure as a driving engine behind the modernist novel; that Conrad and Lawrence both adapted their short stories into plays suggests further cross-genre exchanges.³⁹ By extension, reviews of these productions tended to affirm that sterling novelists made poor dramatists. *The Observer's* critic noted that *Exiles* "left me with the impression that I had strayed into the consulting-room of a psycho-pathologist."⁴⁰ The Stage Society mounted literary modernists rather like hunting trophies: Lawrence's and Joyce's plays were accepted only after the authors had bolstered their reputations with *Women in*

Love and *Ulysses*, each play having been rejected approximately a decade before.⁴¹ Yet societies by no means shunned commercial success. In 1920, J. T. Grein both repeated and refuted the museum analogy:

In our Theatre the Stage Society, in spite of its not having a fixed abode, has cemented its own place; and it is, perhaps, not presumptuous to express the hope that henceforth it will be looked upon by the regular managers not merely as a kind of freakish museum, an intellectual refuge of the destitute, but as a splendid auxiliary channel to increase the répertoire of the Commercial Theatre.⁴²

The lack of a physical theater turned repertoire itself into both medium and destination. Grein hoped that societies ultimately would contribute to the mainstream.

Indeed, quantitative analysis of over 23,000 London productions from 1890 to 1959 demonstrates that many of the Stage Society's plays crossed over into the commercial repertoire. Shaw's *Man and Superman*, which the society premiered in 1905, was revived seventeen times on the public stage between 1905 and 1960.⁴³ To put this in perspective: when we remove operas, ballets, musicals, pantomimes, and the data-skewing Shakespeare, the most-produced play from 1890 to 1959 was J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904, revived 53 times); any play revived more than seven times, including subscription and non-subscription performances as well as charity matinée and touring productions, numbers among the top hundred (around 1 percent) of the corpus (fig. 1). *Man and Superman* ties with James Bernard Fagan's adaptation of *Treasure Island* for the eleventh most-produced play. The Stage Society's first production was the premiere of Shaw's *You Never Can Tell* (1899, revived fourteen times), and other frequently revived plays include Stanley Houghton's *Hindle Wakes* (1912, revived seven times on the public stage) and R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's*

End (1928, revived five times on the public stage).⁴⁴ This list suggests that domestic commercial crossovers were primarily Shavian. As Grein recalled: “Practically from the beginning ‘G.B.S.’ lent his storehouse for the Society, and whenever Shaw was on the programme up went membership, interest, and prestige” (Grein, *The World of the Theatre*, 52). This formulation figured Shaw’s plays as a hoard of weapons that might explode the theater—rather than arcane specimens that would put it to sleep—and metonymically substituted the program for the live performance event.⁴⁵ Shaw’s crossover appeal also stabilized the famous Court Theatre seasons (1904–7) organized by J. E. Vedrenne and Harley Granville-Barker, who sought commercially viable ways to stage plays on the repertory, or short run, model.⁴⁶ The Stage Society premiered first plays by Granville-Barker, Hankin, and Maugham; none was much revived, but each dramatist went on to write plays that were among the Edwardian theater’s most popular. No other society produced English-language playwrights with such broad appeal.

The society record for introducing new translations of foreign plays to the commercial repertoire was even more substantial. Between 1890 and 1959, ninety-six of 204 new translations (or 47 percent) were subscription productions. What’s most striking about these plays is the way that they move from the avant-garde to the commercial theater. Ibsen’s controversial *Ghosts* was revived sixteen times after the Independent Theatre Society production—of the next productions, the first two were by other societies, but the play was revived thirteen times on the public stage after the Lord Chamberlain removed the ban in 1914, and ties with Sheridan’s *The Rivals* as the thirteenth most-revived play in the corpus. *A Doll’s House* and *Hedda Gabler* also top the list. Although Chekhov’s plays never ran afoul of the censor, the Stage Society premiered *The Cherry Orchard* (1911) and *Uncle Vanya* (1914), which were revived on the public stage nine and eight times, respectively, including internationally touring productions. Societies premiered a number of banned works that have

been foundational to modern dramatic criticism but that exerted much less influence on the commercial repertoire of the time, including Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1912), Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922), and Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine* (1935); because the database does not extend beyond the abolishment of theater censorship in 1968, we are less able to determine whether these plays subsequently figured in the commercial repertoire. But although censorship electrified the society movement, of the 1,652 subscription productions to be staged in theaters, only twenty-four (less than 2 percent) were of banned plays. This number is somewhat lower than the total because the database does not include productions in non-theater venues such as galleries and clubs. Still, it reflects the reality that the Lord Chamberlain historically banned only a minority of plays. Between 1895 and 1909 the censor banned thirty out of 7,000 plays, though he wielded his blue-pencil to strike lines from a great many more.⁴⁷

Certain societies did not concern themselves with new or banned plays, focusing instead on unearthing older dramas that subsequently were reintroduced to the commercial repertoire. William Poel's Elizabethan Stage Society (1902–12) produced *Everyman* in 1903 after Poel's own revival a year before; the play was produced fourteen more times on the public stage before 1960, and ties with Leopold Lewis's sensational *The Bells* as the fifteenth most-produced play in the corpus.⁴⁸ An outgrowth of the Stage Society, the aptly-named Phoenix Society (1919–35) specialized in Elizabethan and Restoration plays, the most popular of which was Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675); after the society revived it in 1924, it was produced five times on the public stage before 1960. Other societies attempted to revive classical Greek tragedy in the style becoming popular at Oxford, including the very short-lived Greek Play Society (1924). The most important discovery was Euripides's *Hippolytus*, which the New Century Theatre (1897–99) briefly resuscitated in 1904; the Vedrenne-Barker Court Theatre produced the tragedy later that year, and it was produced

three more times before 1960. (Even if that doesn't sound like a large number of revivals, it's still among the top 2 percent.) A handful of societies specialized in the performance of Shakespeare, including the Elizabethan Stage Society, the British Empire Shakespeare Society (1906–30), and the Fellowship of Players (1923–27), but they tended to produce oft-revived plays such as *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Though they sometimes revived lesser-produced history plays, none of these plays subsequently re-entered the commercial repertoire. The influence of societies on Shakespeare staging was significant, particularly Poel's vigorous attempts to recreate the boards of Elizabethan England. Granville-Barker, who began directing with the Stage Society, went on to direct a handful of symbolist Shakespeare productions in the years before the war.

This assessment of London societies' influence on the commercial repertoire has a number of shortcomings. An obvious one is location: many subscription plays subsequently were revived in the allied repertory theaters of Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool, and Birmingham, and reducing British repertoire to the London stage underplays the provinces as well as the numerical success of these plays. From the opposite direction, the Stage Society's world-premiere of Houghton's *Hindle Wakes* was performed by Annie Horniman's Manchester Repertory Theatre Company; in general, though, new plays from the provinces did not figure into London's commercial repertoire to anywhere near the extent that subscription plays did.⁴⁹ The data further exclude the activities of amateur groups, which were important for spreading the new theatrical movement beyond the metropolis (Nicoll, *English Drama*, 80). Another limit is periodization: 1890–1959 covers a little more than Shaw's lifetime of theatergoing, and we do not yet have data for how plays by him, Ibsen, and Chekhov fared once Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, and Harold Pinter began to influence the British stage. However, in 1946 Britain granted a Royal Charter to the Arts Council, thus ending the era when subscription was the only collective, not-for-profit method

for counteracting commercialism. (And from which point it becomes necessary to define what I have called the “commercial repertoire” as the open-to-the-public repertoire.) Government-subsidized theaters such as the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre took up the laboratory role that had been filled by societies, and the abolishment of theatrical censorship in 1968 further diminished the need for subscription performances.

It’s also worth bearing in mind that there are other ways of determining a play’s significance to repertoire than the number of times it has been revived. If measured by number of performances rather than productions, far fewer subscription plays would top the list, though with over 800 performances, *Man and Superman* would come closest as among the top fifty most-performed plays in the corpus. What’s most interesting from this vantage is how infrequently the most-performed plays get revived: though 1,000 or more total performances signal that a play numbers among the top twenty, the only such plays that also appear on the most-produced list are *Peter Pan*, *Charley’s Aunt*, and *When Knights Were Bold*; in other words, a high number of total performances often indicates that a play was revived infrequently if at all.⁵⁰ So although audiences flocked to see 1,178 performances of Edward Sheldon’s opera-prima-donna play *Romance* (1915) as opposed to 221 performances of *Everyman* over the same half century, it matters that *Everyman* was revived fourteen times after its 1902 subscription performance, and *Romance* only once, in 1926.⁵¹ That interested theatergoers were *able* to see a particular play is at least as significant as whether crowds actually did; this was the very paradigm shift advocated by subscription societies. Short runs also conform to the repertory ideal, which trades momentary popularity for a chance at posterity. In any case, the data do not take into account theater capacity or audience size, only revivals and performances.

What this analysis *does* offer is a means of evaluating the societies’ successes in discovering or testing plays that might then get placed on the shelf not of a laboratory but of a

library. This mission informed Granville-Barker's analogy of a repertory playhouse that would keep plays "on the shelf of a theatre, so that, as from time to time a reasonable number of people is likely to want to see it, it can be taken down without overwhelming trouble and expense."⁵² The government-subsidized Royal National Theatre that Granville-Barker envisioned ultimately found its feet in 1963, and it has since revived a great many subscription plays. Moreover, the influence of subscription can be counted throughout the database: of all the non-Shakespearean plays produced more than once between 1890 and 1959, almost one in five were produced by subscription. Subscription plays had a 25 percent chance of being revived; plays produced only in the commercial theater had a 15 percent chance. Acting in subscription productions, which required memorizing many lines for only one or two performances with little to no pay, could have an even greater effect on one's career: although 30 percent of the actors who performed in societies never performed on the public stage and might be called "amateurs," actors who performed in societies averaged twelve productions on the public stage from 1890 to 1959; actors who never performed in societies averaged three.⁵³ In these respects, societies did, in fact, serve as a splendid auxiliary channel to increase the commercial theater repertoire, slotting modern drama in among a list of frequently-revived popular plays like *Mrs. Hilary Regrets*, *David Garrick*, and *Treasure Island*, and integrating a consciously-created avant-garde repertoire into a broader commercial repertoire that we only now are able to construct retrospectively.

Reporting the Repertoire

Just as important as the data of play premieres and revivals is the very idea of repertoire. After all, few if any playgoers actually went to see all eighteen productions of *Man and*

Superman between 1905 and 1959. The *OED* dates “repertoire” to the early nineteenth century, when it emerged as an alternative to “stock” as a way to describe the list of “dramatic or musical pieces which a company or performer has prepared or is accustomed to play.” This best applied to the stock companies that toured the provinces of Victorian England, as articulated by the actor Jerome K. Jerome in 1885: “I got hold of the *répertoire* and studied up all the parts I knew I should have to play.”⁵⁴ For Jerome, repertoire meant a collection of sides or pages containing a character’s lines preceded by cue words. How did the idea of a modern dramatic repertoire emerge?

The concept of a theatrical canon that was independent of a company or performer originated with other stage genres: the most frequently revived works are not plays, but operas and ballets. In London, the number of ballet productions was miniscule before the visits of the Ballets Russes in the years leading up to World War I, and it was not until the 1930s when Marie Rambert formed the Ballet Club (later the Ballet Rambert) and Ninette de Valois started the Vic-Wells Ballet (later The Royal Ballet Company) that the number of ballets rapidly escalated to match other stage genres.⁵⁵ Opera, however, emerged as a major performance genre in the late eighteenth century. As Jennifer Hall-Witt observes, a local operatic repertoire developed at King’s Theatre in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Hall-Witt credits the value increasingly attributed to original (though not necessarily new) works and the romantic cult of the artistic genius for audiences’ willingness to pay to see revivals of operas by popular composers. Mid-century copyright laws encouraged managers to stage older operas, as well as to perform the same few works by a particular composer (*Fashionable Acts*, 249–50). That the *OED* dates “repertoire opera” to 1864 and “repertoire plays and operas” to 1874 further suggests this teleology. In practice, operatic repertoire exerted (and still exerts) far greater control than does dramatic repertoire. While the

percentage of one-off operas per decade decreases from 1890 to 1959, the percentage of one-off non-musical plays increases (fig. 2).

The idea of a modern dramatic repertoire first circulated in subscription ephemera. Grein's 1891 prospectus for the Independent Theatre Society proclaimed the object "to give special performances of plays which have a LITERARY and ARTISTIC, rather than commercial value. . . . The following Plays will form the Repertoire."⁵⁷ Grein believed he would reform the commercial theater by nurturing plays that opposed its values; even if much of his repertoire never made it onto the public stage, he would later boast that the best work of mainstream dramatists like Pinero and Jones dated from the society. Indeed, much of Grein's proposed repertoire never even made it onto the *subscription* stage, but his mixed list of English and foreign plays, both original and classical, influenced all subsequent attempts to define the modern dramatic repertoire in Britain. Circulars further contributed to the repertoire ideal, but they (like the productions they marked) lacked regularity. As Grein's widow recalled: "Announcements of future productions were made and then altered. Dates were given out, later to be postponed" (*J. T. Grein*, 148, 90). The 1899 invitational circular announcing the formation of the Stage Society suggested that the group "should meet regularly once a month, and should give at least six performances during the year."⁵⁸ This introduced periodicity to the subscription theater, which the society reinforced through routine prospectuses, annual reports, and, for a time, a bimonthly newsletter edited by St. John Hankin. The society also settled on Sunday evening performances, which had not taken place since Charles I (*Grein, J. T. Grein*, 180).⁵⁹ Sunday performances were both practical, since this was the day theater managers could afford to let their theaters, and "just a little naughty," in the words of the playwright Herbert Swears (though a Sunday matinée would have been naughtier still).⁶⁰ After the first season, the society also offered Monday matinée performances, to which the press was expressly invited.

The Stage Society continued the self-conscious construction of a modern dramatic repertoire through its prospectuses and programs.⁶¹ Sent to members at the beginning of each season, prospectuses listed the Managing Committee, the productions of all previous seasons, and the first several plays of the coming season. Performance dates and venues were not listed for past or future productions, with the proviso that arrangements for the coming season would be announced by circular. Though this probably was due to the difficulty of securing venues and actors in advance, it implied that the thoughtful selection of plays was more important than performance details, which were liable to change at a moment's notice. Subscribers would know which plays were coming long before they knew where to and when, and often these details were stripped from subsequent lists. Programs for individual performances, called "Meetings," replicated this forward-and-backward-looking structure by reserving the back page of the folio for a list of the season's "*previous meetings*" and "*further arrangements*," as appropriate (fig. 3). Here, we see that programs further divided the plays from their performance details by listing only the venue, date, time of performance, and sequence in season on the front cover, with the title, genre, and author inside. Although this might suggest a desire to hide the name of a controversial work from prying eyes, the back cover listed plays liberally; the perhaps unintentional effect was to separate performance details from repertoire. Playgoers would have been fully aware that they were attending one play (or occasionally two or three shorter plays on a single bill, as with the one-acts by Maeterlinck and "Fiona Macleod" [William Sharp]) from a growing library. Simple typefaces and a conspicuous lack of the advertisements with which programs were traditionally crowded further separated the avant-garde from the commercial theater.⁶²

The society cemented the idea of a modern dramatic repertoire through its annual reports.⁶³ These reports included lists of all previously produced plays, along with extracts from the society's rules, an account of the year's activities, and membership statistics

reflecting the society's finances.⁶⁴ Starting with the second annual report, the society adopted the practice of publishing complete membership lists. The annual reports further listed the repertoires of other London societies (such as the Pioneer Players, who took up the Stage Society's practice of publishing annual reports and membership lists), provincial repertory theaters (such as those in Manchester, Liverpool, and Birmingham), and London repertory seasons (such as Lillah McCarthy and Granville-Barker's season at the St. James), later publishing a complete list—or database—of “Plays for Repertory Theatres” (fig. 4).⁶⁵ Here, we see the importance of compiling figures such as number of performances (Shaw already dominates) and act structures (as does the one-act). Although Stage Society membership topped out at 1,571 in 1911, newspapers throughout Britain had long reviewed the society's annual reports; in the year of incorporation, the annual report was reviewed in at least the *Referee*, *Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Era*, *Clarion*, *Stage*, *Derby Telegraph*, *Bristol Mercury*, and *Nottingham Guardian*. Reviewers fetishized the report's materiality: the *Pall Mall Gazette* ironically praised the report as “a lordly document of twenty-six pages, beautifully printed, and enclosed in a stiff cover.”⁶⁶ The press took care to report the repertoire, including the names and numbers of English and foreign plays since 1899. As annual reports recounted, in 1911 the society established a small Library of Theatrical Literature for its members, meaning that members had access to a permanent library but not a theater. In addition to plays by English and foreign dramatists, the library included books and magazines (among them Edward Gordon Craig's *The Mask*) dealing with both contemporary theater and theater history.

One could argue that the forward-and-backward-looking dynamic created by prospectuses and annual reports rendered the ideal of an annual season as much as of a modern dramatic repertoire. But by listing all past productions, rather than just those of the past season, the ephemera were used to evoke marble rather than ice sculpture—a dramatic

repertoire based at least in part on plays that would stand the test of time, even if they were not staged in artistically unified seasons. The critical consensus was, however, that as much as the Stage Society managed to produce an important cumulative list of plays, the society's democratic organization actually *prevented* cohesive seasons. Reviewing the 1914 season, critic Ashley Dukes declared:

The Stage Society, with a large membership, has the defect of being ruled by a council, a committee, and a democratic constitution. This results, of course, in confusion and compromise. . . . It was a typical season, creditable enough as regards each individual performance, but lacking in direction and continuity. A hotch-potch, in brief . . . The Stage Society would perform a great service by converting itself into a literary theatre, under a dictatorship.⁶⁷

Yet Dukes's assessment indicates that by 1914, the Stage Society had succeeded in changing "repertoire" from Jerome's handful of stock sides to a modern dramatic library from which a hodge-podge selection would no longer be adequate.

Dukes's assessment was also sexist: the Stage Society's membership had an increasingly female majority, whose efforts he implicitly judged as incompetent. Subscription lists and reports of the Stage Society's membership in the public press diagramed a division of labor, where women were the majority of the playgoers, and men were the majority of the playwrights; both were thought to sculpt the repertoire. The notion that both playgoers and playwrights shaped the theater was not new, but the sense of a specific, intellectual coterie was. When the Stage Society publicly campaigned for funds to establish a permanent repertory theater in 1905, Archer published a letter in the *Morning Leader* advising against it: "A popular playhouse is the last thing [members] ask for or care about. They love the coterie

sensation. They want to have their own ideas, and no others, mirrored for them by the stage.”⁶⁸ Far from merely connoting feminine vanity, Archer’s use of the word “mirror” imputed to the Stage Society’s subscribers a considerable amount of control over the works that appeared on stage. In a manner typical of the public press, Archer’s hyperbolic concerns both reflected and distorted the Stage Society’s own virtual assembly of audience. This virtual assembly was perhaps best exemplified by the society’s subscription cards: subscribers wishing to be balloted together for the purpose of securing adjoining seats were requested to send in their cards securely pinned together, suggesting the extent to which the society’s collectivity was conditioned by print.⁶⁹ A shared sense of collectivity also emerged from, or was reinforced by, the society’s subscription lists, in which the number of last names followed by “Miss” and “Mrs.” increasingly outnumbered those without. These lists were alphabetized by last name and included the year that members had been elected, and whether they were regular, honorary, or associate members, or part of the managing committee. The society soon abandoned the honorary and associate schemes, but began to include the numerical order in which members had joined; under this scheme, all levels of membership were equal, save for any prestige accorded to having joined the society earlier. The lists did not distinguish between playwrights, actors, production staff, and patrons, suggesting that the so-called “Earnest Students” of the drama were as important as the theatrical personnel who were listed alongside them. Though such lists might have radiated exclusivity, the society was open to anyone who could afford the one guinea annual subscription fee. Guineas were the traditional fee of doctors and lawyers, and the new theater intended to be a similarly professional service.⁷⁰ The fee also echoed that at Mudie’s Circulating Library; like most readers of fiction, most subscription theatergoers were middle-class women, many of them unmarried—ironically, the demographic the Lord Chamberlain most sought to protect.⁷¹ The invitational circular’s proposed membership limit of 300 was abandoned quickly, and

although the society raised the limit to 600 and, with incorporation, 1,600, both of these limits were provisional (and, given the precedent, extremely optimistic); the legal articles of association declared the number of members to be unlimited.⁷²

The Stage Society constructed its coterie status both privately and publicly by sending materials to both members and the press. In the first season, a later annual report recounted, consent from skittish theater managers “could only be secured by placing special stress on the character of the Society as a Club producing Plays exclusively for its Members and their guests. To establish this principle a Circular was issued to the dramatic critics (many of whom were Members of the Society), and all forms of advertisement were carefully avoided” (“Third Annual Report,” 2). This special stress was relaxed in the second season, when Monday matinée performances were added to which the press was now officially invited. From the beginning, however, the implication was that the Stage Society could be both selective and open to all interested theatergoers. Although subscription forms required two nominations from members, this was little different from the referral system at institutions such as the British Library, which to this day requires a letter of reference for entry. But to say that the Stage Society was open to anyone in London would be a stretch. Recounting his years as an aspiring actor, Allan Wade illustrated the tension between public and insider knowledge: “It was doubtless because I had read some press notices of these performances that I became fired with a desire to become a member of the Stage Society, and happening to meet one day at a friendly house a brother of Frederick Whelen, the originator of the Society, I asked him to propose me for membership” (*Memories of the London Theatre*, 5). The Stage Society could have its coterie and eat it, too. The lists were circulated privately in the society’s annual reports, but their contents were reviewed in the public press. In 1908, one critic observed: “I was afraid the Stage Society had done for itself when I heard not long ago that it had saved a lot of money, and when I saw by the latest membership list what a number

of ‘influential’ people had joined it. To become rich and respectable is as fatal to a Society as it is to an individual.”⁷³ This critic recognized the power subscribers wielded over the society’s artistic product: the repertoire.

Critics inevitably characterized the membership as either too fashionable, or not fashionable enough. Ladies’ journals commented on the habiliments of the baronesses and captains’ wives with the breathlessness of red carpet reporters. Some columnists remarked on an overabundance of green, apparently due to the natural vegetable dyes favored by socialist dress reformers (Cockin, *Women and Theatre*, 39). (Though the Stage Society chairman and several dramatists served on the Fabian Executive Committee, a comparison of lists from 1904 suggests that only around 5 percent of members were registered Fabians.)⁷⁴ In 1902, the society created a minor fashion scandal by instituting a policy that asked ladies to remove their matinée hats because they disrupted audience sightlines. More importantly, fashion was seen both to reflect and dictate the repertoire. In a 1908 review, the *Scots Pictorial* wondered:

why the faculty . . . of seeing beauty only in the hideous and the unclean side of writing and acting, should also have taken away all nice taste in the matter of clothes. The majority of the playgoers were women, but there were not a dozen well-dressed women in the theatre. The remainder were drab and dingy, and every second woman among them seemed to be wearing spectacles.⁷⁵

Women playgoers had become *dramatis personae*. Although members were allowed to bring a guest (subject to availability), the popular press amplified the collectivizing gesture of the subscription lists, and reported on subscribers as a unified coterie, whether fashionable or unfashionable, serious or unserious. One such guest included the impressionable, if fictional, heroine of H. G. Wells’s 1909 novel *Ann Veronica*, who attends the Stage Society’s Monday

afternoon performance of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* as the companion of her “advanced” friend Hetty Widdget, and disastrously decides to model her behavior on Vivie Warren. The Stage Society’s mostly-female subscribers dictated and reflected a repertoire that the society’s mostly-male dramatists wrote: of 188 plays, only fourteen were by women. When we remember the frequency with which subscription plays migrated onto the public stage, where the ratio of female to male playwrights was no less dismal, we are better able to appreciate the role played by women subscribers in shaping the commercial theater repertoire. Subscription ephemera structured critics’ awareness of this role, which meant that the newspaper-reading public knew of it, too.

Coda: Performative Codes

The two approaches to repertoire spotlighted in this article—what literally gets performed, and how we imagine or represent what gets performed—are stuck in a perpetual feedback loop. So, too, are old and new media. Tara McPherson’s legitimate concerns about converting archives into “post-archival” databases might be even further contextualized by recognizing that the former already contain the latter; any database whose subject is more than a decade or so old once was paper-based.⁷⁶ Today, databases sometimes promote an anti-materialist tendency precisely opposite to that which led turn-of-the-century theater reformers to compare repertoires to laboratories, museums, and storehouses. It’s worth remembering that scholars have been using reference books—databases *avant la lettre*, as Lev Manovich has pointed out—for millennia; like calculators, the digital kinds enable us to count much more quickly.⁷⁷ Just as a reference book is not yet an argument, neither is a database; both are starting points for posing provocative questions whose answers require the

rigorous connecting of dots. Like fashion magazines or Twitter feeds, databases announce trends easily but have trouble explaining them (figs. 5, 6, 7). Why, for example, does the one-act replace the three-act as the dominant play structure just before World War I? Though they correspond at the end of the nineteenth century, why over the next sixty years does the number of works that self-describe as “drama” plummet while “play” skyrockets? Why are original works at best one-third and at worst one-fifth or less of all works produced on the London stage each year from 1890 to 1959? In short, tracing the influence of subscription societies through the database is merely one of many lines of inquiry, all of which need to be balanced with archival research.

To put it another way: quantitative methods yield relative, some might say obvious, observations. They confirm that operas and ballets are revived much more frequently than plays; that musicals and pantomimes run longest; that Shakespeare dominates the dramatic repertoire. Rather than sketch a history parallel to the rise of so-called “literary” and “artistic” plays based on an alternate performance canon—welcome and necessary though such a history would be—the findings presented here dramatize how quickly avant-garde turned old-guard and how frequently artistic risk returned commercial reward. Perhaps repertoire isn’t a representative way of discussing theater history at large: of approximately 13,000 unique stage works, nearly 10,500 (or 80 percent) were never revived; of those, around 2,600 (or 25 percent) were performed just one time. In this way, Franco Moretti’s “slaughterhouse” of eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels equally applies to the modern theater.⁷⁸ But while databases might seem to privilege the long-running or the most-revived, they also make it easier to find needles in the play-stack: the handful of plays that feature a pregnant woman, or the thousand more that feature a domestic servant.⁷⁹ Lists of familiar plays encompass lists of unfamiliar players: databases cast their net beyond 23,000 production titles to the over 40,000 persons who brought them to life—none more promiscuous than William Clarkson,

for example, who provided the wigs for more than 2,500 productions. And then there are the playgoers: this article has tried to suggest that any discussion of repertoire ultimately leads to a discussion of audience, whose names might not figure in a London stage database, but whose imprint can't help getting counted. For modernist studies more generally, quantitative methods could help to further expand the relatively small canon of artists who have traditionally anchored the field by shifting from discourses of autonomous production to those of collective reception. That the most-performed plays are rarely the most revived suggests trade-offs inherent to competing kinds of ephemerality determined by the audience: long runs over a relatively short period of time, or short runs over a relatively long period of time.

My approach to repertoire, focalized through plays that were introduced by a self-consciously literary avant-garde and that also are most likely to show up in twenty-first-century drama anthologies, might seem antithetical to Diana Taylor's widely-recognized definition. She distinguishes "between the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)."⁸⁰ Taylor's approach would remind us rightly, for instance, that *Man and Superman's* first performance did not include the third act, *Don Juan in Hell*, which received four stand-alone productions between 1907 and 1952; the play was not performed with all four acts until 1925, and after that only occasionally, so it is not quite accurate to say that the play was produced eighteen times before 1960. Even so, here I also invest in ephemeral repertoire: the repertoire performatively assembled by material ephemera. Though theater researchers have long mined archives for textual nuggets—the proper nouns of the event; the pearled strings of a future digital database—we have thought much less about how theatergoers interacted with such fugitive print matter. This kind of approach would mean dusting off ephemera in order to process

what book historians call bibliographic and what we might well call performative codes, asking how layout, typography, ink color, and paper weight, along with distribution and circulation, condition the sociability of theatergoing. It might include studying theater tickets that were embossed to resemble wedding invitations or playbills that were printed with blank spaces for the “name of play, the friend or friends you were with, and where you dined after the performance”; it could also include studying the scraps of paper that circulated in the theater dialogue which had been censored by the Lord Chamberlain or programs that listed the times of the last trains in order to help provincial playgoers return home.⁸¹ Such an approach would recognize the extent to which the performance event, and the process by which we virtually store that event in our mental repertoire, has been and continues to be conditioned by interactive media. Research like this should be made easier by the cutting-edge efforts of the Abbey Theatre Dublin and BAM to digitize their ephemera; fortunately for scholars, uploading is only the beginning of analyzing. If we’re now ready to count live-tweeting, blogging, and digital images under the umbrella of performance, as Sarah Bay-Cheng has suggested, then why not count old media, too?⁸²

play title	playwright	first perf.	prod.
1. Peter Pan	J. M. Barrie	1904	54
2. Charley's Aunt	Brandon Thomas	1892	37
3. A Doll's House*	Henrik Ibsen	1879	28
4. She Stoops to Conquer*	Oliver Goldsmith	1773	27
4. The School for Scandal	Richard Brinsley Sheridan	1777	27
6. La Dame aux Camélias	Alexandre Dumas, fils	1852	25
7. When Knights Were Bold	'Charles Marlowe' (Harriett Jay)	1906	24
8. Mrs. Hilary Regrets	S. Theyre Smith	1892	21
9. The Ballad Monger	Walter Besant, W. H. Pollock	1887	20
10. David Garrick	T. W. Robertson	1864	19
11. Man and Superman*	Bernard Shaw	1905	18
11. Treasure Island	James Bernard Fagan	1922	18
13. The Rivals	Richard Brinsley Sheridan	1775	17
13. Ghosts*	Henrik Ibsen	1882	17
15. Everyman*	Anon	1495	16
15. The Bells	Leopold Lewis	1871	16
17. You Never Can Tell*	Bernard Shaw	1899	15
17. Pygmalion	Bernard Shaw	1914	15
19. Hedda Gabler*	Henrik Ibsen	1891	14
19. Arms and the Man	Bernard Shaw	1894	14
19. The Importance of Being Earnest	Oscar Wilde	1895	14
19. Candida*	Bernard Shaw	1900	14
19. The Playboy of the Western World	J. M. Synge	1907	14

Figure 1. The 23 most-produced plays (excluding Shakespeare, musical, pantomime) in London, 1890–1959. Asterisk (*) indicates play was performed by a subscription society.

Data source: Wearing, 2014.

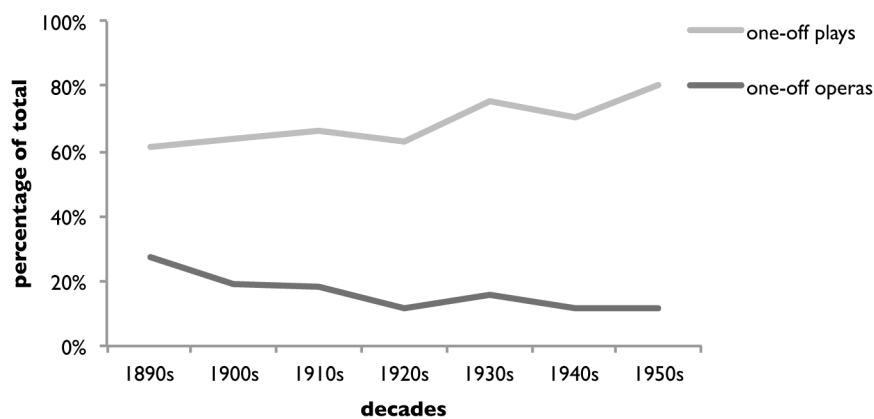


Figure 2. While the percentage of one-off operas per decade decreases from 1890–1959, the percentage of one-off non-musical plays increases. Data source: Wearing, 2014.

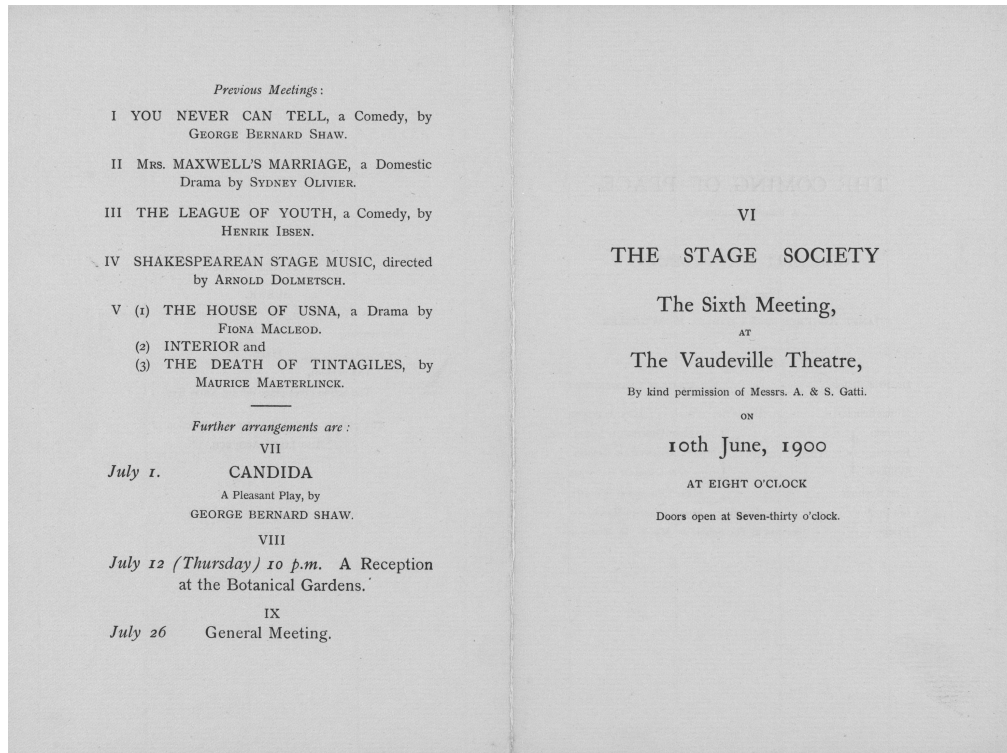


Figure 3. The back and front of a Stage Society program with previous and future productions listed, 1900. Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University.

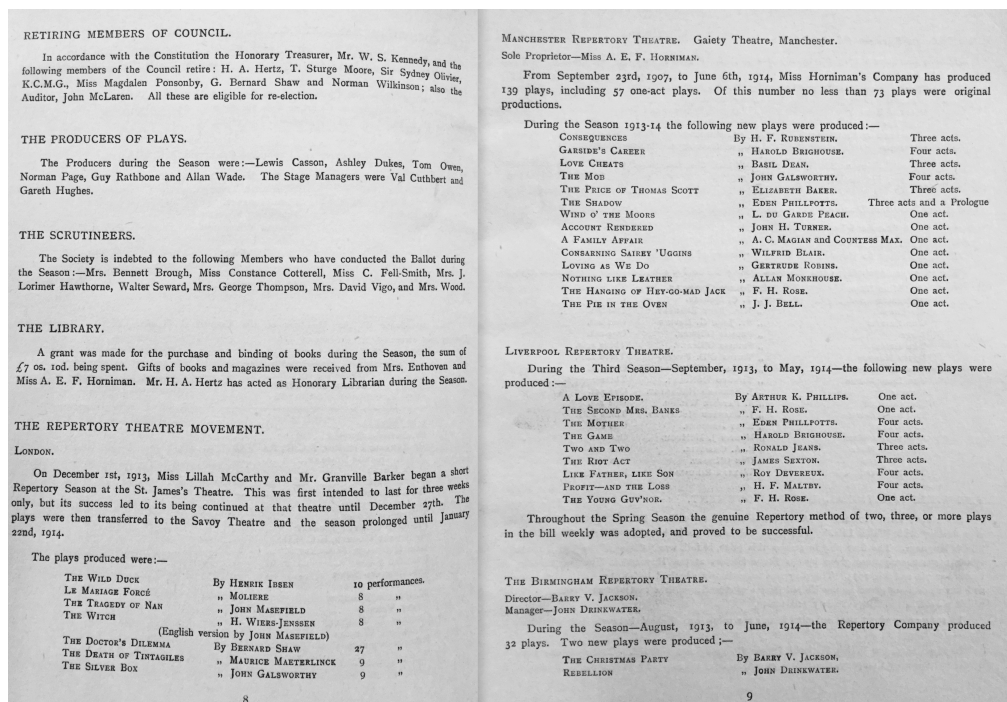


Figure 4. Two pages detailing repertoire from the Incorporated Stage Society annual report, 1913-14. Courtesy of Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University.

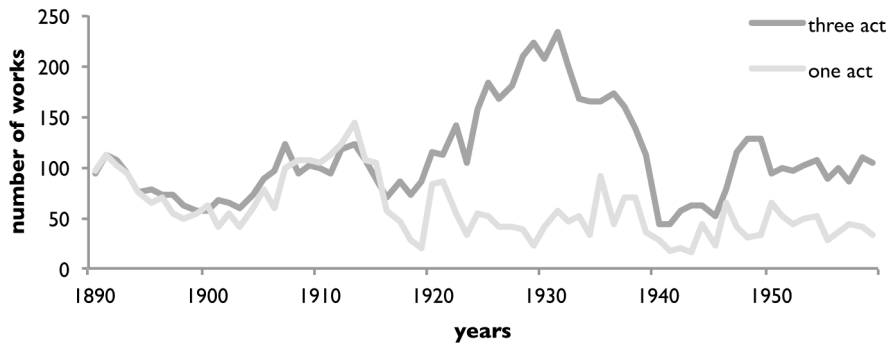


Figure 5. Why does the one-act replace the three-act as the dominant work structure just before World War I? Data source: Wearing, 2014.

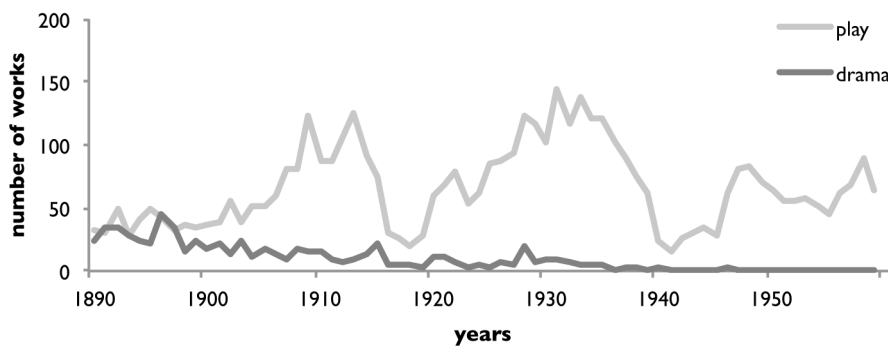


Figure 6. Though they correspond at the end of the nineteenth century, why over the next sixty years does the number of works that self-describe as “drama” plummet while “play” skyrockets? Data source: Wearing, 2014.

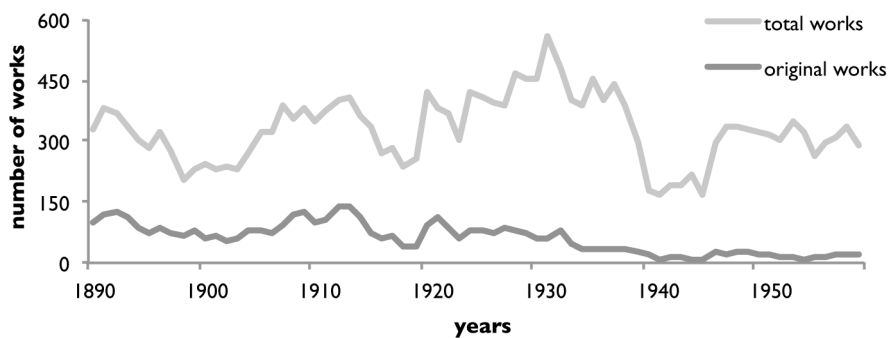


Figure 7. Why are original works at best one-third and at worst one-fifth or less of all works produced on the London stage each year from 1890–1959? Data source: Wearing, 2014.

Notes

¹ Using Python and MySQL, Michael Fountaine and I converted J. P. Wearing's multi-volume reference series *The London Stage* into a relational database that can be queried and graphed. Wearing lists 144 "play-producing societies"; many self-describe as "association," "league," "club," "guild," "group," and "circle." Wearing published the first volume of his reference series in 1976; an eight-volume second edition was published in 2014. See J. P. Wearing, *The London Stage 1890–1959: Accumulated Indexes* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 1063–64.

² Stage Society, "Third Annual Report, 1901–1902," 2, Incorporated Stage Society Archive, GB 71 THM/136/5, Victoria and Albert Museum Department of Theatre and Performance, London.

³ Quoted in L. W. Conolly, "Mrs Warren's Profession and the Lord Chamberlain," *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 24, no. 1 (2004): 46–95, 57.

⁴ Following Allardyce Nicoll, I use the term "commercial" to encompass all performances open to the paying public. This includes productions at West End establishments such as Drury Lane and the Haymarket, as well as at more self-consciously experimental theaters such as the Court, the Hampstead Everyman, and the Lyric in Hammersmith. As Nicoll writes: "all of [these playhouses] were, in their own ways, commercial" (*English Drama, 1900–1930: The Beginnings of the Modern Period* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973], 324–25).

⁵ Debra Caplan, "Notes from the Frontier: Digital Scholarship and the Future of Theatre Studies," *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 2 (2015): 347–59, 357.

⁶ Tracy Davis considers societies to be "not-for-profit schemes" that were, "with one exception [a subscription theater from 1811] limited to the latter part of the Victorian period

and the Edwardian era” (*The Economics of the British Stage, 1800–1914* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 231).

⁷ Lawrence Switzky, “Shaw Among the Modernists,” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 31, no. 1 (2011): 133–48; Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage*, 139, 235–36; Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6–7, 67, 114.

⁸ Jean Chothia, *André Antoine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xv.

⁹ Olga Taxidou, *Modernism and Performance: Jarry to Brecht* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3. See also Claire Warden, *British Avant-Garde Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹⁰ W. B. Worthen, *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Jennifer Buckley, “The Bühnenkunstwerk and the Book: Lothar Schreyer’s Theater Notation,” *Modernism/modernity* 21, no. 2 (2014): 407–28. For a longer history of the page-stage conflict, see Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book: 1480–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 407–28.

¹¹ To the extent that this article focuses on institutions, I am indebted to Lawrence Rainey’s pioneering work in *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹² Any study of avant-garde reception owes a debt to Mark Morrisson, who in an extended footnote ethnographically assesses *The Egoist’s* “solidly middle class” subscription lists (*The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905–1920* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001], 236–37).

¹³ Huntly Carter, *The Theatre of Max Reinhardt* (London: Palmer, 1914), 307; Elizabeth Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 130.

¹⁴ See Ruth Hoberman, *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Christopher Balme has called for performance scholars to reevaluate ephemera on the grounds “that theatre is dependent on forms of communication beyond the exchange of libidinal energies between performers and spectators” (*The Theatrical Public Sphere* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014], 48). Jacky Bratton has remarked that theatrical ephemera such as playbills are “a very unimaginatively used resource” (*New Readings in Theatre History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 39). Tiffany Stern has argued for the importance of theatrical ephemera within an early modern context in *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011), 104. For a case study of *Ubu*, see Thomas Postlewait, “Cultural Histories: The Case of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*,” in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 60–86.

¹⁷ Sarah Bay-Cheng, “Theater Is Media: Some Principles for a Digital Historiography of Performance,” *Theater* 42, no. 2 (2012): 27–41, 35.

¹⁸ See Sharon Marcus, “The Theatrical Scrapbook,” *Theatre Survey* 54, no. 2 (2013): 283–307.

¹⁹ C. G. Compton, “A Subsidised Theatre,” *This Week’s Survey*, April 16, 1904, 243.

²⁰ “Cocqigrues” are mythical French monsters; the expression “the coming of the Cocqigrues” is akin to “when pigs fly.” See Arthur Bingham Walkley, “New Theatrical Demands,” *Times Literary Supplement*, January 17, 1902, 6.

²¹ Penny Farfan, *Women, Modernism, and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

²² L. Haden Guest, “Towards a Dramatic Renaissance II,” *The New Age* 3, no. 13 (1908): 256–57, 256.

²³ Kenneth M. Price, “Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What’s in a Name?,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (2009): np, digitalhumanities.org.

²⁴ Maggie Haberman and Richard Pérez-peña, “Donald Trump Sets Off a Furor With Call to Register Muslims in the U.S.,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2015, nytimes.com/2015/11/21/us/politics/donald-trump-sets-off-a-furor-with-call-to-register-muslims-in-the-us.html. On the materiality of new media, see Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 9–11.

²⁵ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

²⁶ David Z. Saltz, “Performing Arts,” in *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 121–32, 121.

²⁷ Sue-Ellen Case, *Performing Science and the Virtual* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 9.

²⁸ Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 23.

²⁹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 14.

³⁰ Although most new English plays staged after 1660 were published, the rise of cheap acting editions in the Victorian era decoupled literary value from dramatic publishing. See John Russell Stephens, *The Profession of the Playwright: British Theatre 1800–1900* (1992; rpt., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 116–17.

³¹ William Archer, “About the Theatre. The Censorship: Rejected Remedies,” *Tribune*, November 16, 1907.

³² Henry Arthur Jones, “Preface to Saints and Sinners,” in *The Renaissance of the English Drama* (London: Macmillan, 1895), 310.

³³ This comes from Allan Wade, who was repeating one of many purported requirements for a public performance, none of which courts ever explicitly stated. See *Memories of the London Theatre, 1900–1914*, ed. Alan Andrews (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1983), 19–22. For more on copyright performances, see Derek Miller, “Performative Performances: A History and Theory of the ‘Copyright Performance,’” *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 2 (2012): 161–77.

³⁴ “The Stage Society,” *Court Circular*, October 18, 1902.

³⁵ A full summary of the burlesque (*Dull Monotony* by Gilbert Canaan), which took for its structure the plot of John Galsworthy’s miners’ strike drama *Strife* (1909), can be found in “A Midnight Play,” *Evening Standard*, May 21, 1909.

³⁶ J. P. Wearing observes that “the percentage of contemporary dramas produced in 1776–1800 is greatly inflated by largely ephemeral, short pieces produced for special occasions,

whereas that percentage in the 1890s is derived from plays (both short and full-length) which ran for a substantial number of performances. What we see in the 1890s is the firm establishment of the modern practice of staging a long run of a new play” (“The London West End Theatre in the 1890s,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 29, no. 3 [1977]: 320–32, 327).

³⁷ “The Stage Society,” *Era*, September 16, 1905.

³⁸ The Independent Theatre Society produced *Ghosts* in 1891; the Pioneers produced *On the Side of Angels* in 1906.

³⁹ David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁴⁰ “‘Exiles’ by James Joyce,” *Observer*, February 21, 1926, 11.

⁴¹ *Exiles* was rejected in 1916 and *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd* in 1914. For a thorough discussion of the theatrical output of Conrad, see Richard J. Hand, *The Theatre of Joseph Conrad: Reconstructed Fictions* (New York: Palgrave, 2005). For Lawrence, see James Moran, *The Theatre of D. H. Lawrence: Dramatic Modernist and Theatrical Innovator* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015). And for Joyce, see John MacNicholas, “The Stage History of ‘Exiles,’” *James Joyce Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1981): 9–26.

⁴² J. T. Grein, *The World of the Theatre: Impressions and Memoirs, March 1920–1921* (London: William Heinemann, 1921), 53.

⁴³ The Stage Society premiere ultimately was extended to the public by Barker-Vedrenne as part of their matinée series. Eight of these *Man and Superman* revivals were by the Macdona Players, who specialized in Shaw.

⁴⁴ Plays like *Hindle Wakes* and *Journey’s End* were also revived in private theater clubs. Like play-producing societies, private theater clubs were not subject to pre-performance

censorship; unlike subscription societies, private theater clubs had permanent venues. Private theater clubs emerged in the 1920s and included the Gate Theatre Studio, the Arts Theatre Club, the New Lindsey Theatre Club, the Watergate Club, the Torch, and the New Lyric Club. Of these clubs, Wearing's main calendar includes only the Arts Theatre Club. For more on private theater clubs, see David Thomas, David Carlton, and Anne Etienne, *Theatre Censorship: From Walpole to Wilson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 112–15.

⁴⁵ The use of the term “programme” to mean a plan of proceedings that may or may not have been printed dates to the middle of the nineteenth century (*OED Online*, March 2015, s.v., “programme, n.,” 3).

⁴⁶ The famous Barker-Vedrenne Court seasons owed their existence to the Stage Society. As Ashley Dukes observed: “The Stage Society, now in its eleventh year, has a finer record than any other society of its kind in Europe. By giving new dramatists a hearing it made the Court Theatre under the Vedrenne-Barker management possible” (“Drama,” *The New Age* 6, no. 22 [1910]): 523–24). For more, see Desmond MacCarthy, *The Court Theatre, 1904–1907* (London: A. H. Bullen, 1907).

⁴⁷ James Woodfield, *English Theatre in Transition, 1881–1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 101.

⁴⁸ Eleven of these *Everyman* revivals were at the Old Vic.

⁴⁹ As a case in point, the Glasgow Repertory Theatre is better remembered for the first British production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1913) than for J. A. Ferguson's *Campbell of Kilmohr* (1914); the company also synchronized with London to premiere John Galsworthy's *Strife* (1909), coming just under the wire, over the wire—as founder Alfred Wareing claimed: “At the end of every act I telegraphed to Mr. Galsworthy in London the reception the play received in Glasgow, so that he knew it was a big success in Scotland before the prolonged

cheering which greeted it in London confirmed the judgment” (“State Of The Drama,” *The Globe*, July 29, 1913).

⁵⁰ Some of this is attributable to a postwar lengthening of successful runs for new plays.

⁵¹ Even more extreme, we would not want to characterize the repertoire of today’s London stage as dominated by Agatha Christie’s *Mousetrap* (1952), with over 26,000 performances since 1952.

⁵² Quoted in George Rowell and Tony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 31.

⁵³ Stage Society actors were paid one to three guineas for one to three weeks of rehearsal and two performances (Woodfield, *English Theatre in Transition*, 61).

⁵⁴ Jerome Klapka Jerome, *On the Stage—and Off: The Brief Career of a Would-Be Actor* (London: Field and Tuer, 1885), 124. Tracy Davis has argued for an “associational, polytextual, intertheatrically citational” conception of repertoire in the nineteenth-century theater, and she observes that this “transmitted least well on the page” (“Introduction: Repertoire,” in *The Broadview Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Performance*, ed. Tracy C. Davis [Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012], 13–26, 14).

⁵⁵ Ballet had been a regular feature of the opera in England since the eighteenth century, but does not appear as a stand-alone genre in the database until the 1906 production of *Les deux pigeons* with music by André Messager and choreography by F. Ambrosiny.

⁵⁶ Though there was an eighteenth-century opera canon in England due to the importation of Italian opera, according to Emanuele Senici “[w]hereas during the decade 1760–70 three-quarters of the operas were performed for one season only, forty years later (1800–1810) the number was down to about half” (quoted in Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts: Opera and*

Elite Culture in London, 1780–1880 [Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007], 51–52).

⁵⁷ Grein modeled his repertoire on André Antoine’s Théâtre Libre (1887–96) and Otto Brahm’s Freie Bühne (1889–1901); essentially, he sought to introduce new English plays into the Continental repertoire. Grein even included “(Théâtre Libre)” in small type beneath the prospectus title. Prospectus reproduced in Alice Grein [Michael Orme], *J. T. Grein: The Story of a Pioneer, 1862–1935* (London: J. Murray, 1936), 76.

⁵⁸ “Stage Society Invitational Circular,” July 8, 1899, Incorporated Stage Society Archive, GB 71 THM/136/5, Victoria and Albert Museum Department of Theatre and Performance, London.

⁵⁹ Early productions were carried out without costumes or scenery.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Katharine Cockin, *Women and Theatre in the Age of Suffrage: The Pioneer Players, 1911–1925* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 39.

⁶¹ A prospectus is a document that advertises or describes an enterprise in order to attract investors. The prospectus first emerged among publishers marketing books, since John Minsheu’s *Ductor in Lingua* (1617). See Maurice Rickards and Michael Twyman, “Prospectus,” in *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 257.

⁶² Dennis Kennedy has remarked on the programs’ “seriousness of purpose,” which contrasted with cluttered commercial-theater programs (“The New Drama and the New Audience,” in *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage*, ed. Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 130–47, 142).

⁶³ The printed annual account first appeared in the late eighteenth century with the rise of organized charities, followed shortly by local authority institutions such as poor-law

“unions,” schools, workhouses, lunatic asylums, prisons, and hospitals. In the middle of the nineteenth century in Britain and the United States, it became legally binding on all public companies to publish formally edited accounts; see Rickards and Twyman, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*, s.v. “Accounts, institutional, n.” (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

⁶⁴ With an accountant as treasurer, only in 1911–12 did the society show a deficit, when the income was £1,694.13.9 and the expenditure £1,779.16.7.

⁶⁵ For more on the Pioneer Players, see Cockin, *Suffrage*, 13.

⁶⁶ “Theatrical Notes,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, September 11, 1905, 1.

⁶⁷ Ashley Dukes, “The Repertory Theatres,” *Poetry and Drama* 2 (1914): 420.

⁶⁸ William Archer, “Study and Stage,” *Morning Leader*, January 28, 1905.

⁶⁹ “The Ballot For Seats,” *The Stage Society News* 24 (1906): 95.

⁷⁰ A guinea was £1,1s; £1 was approximately a quarter of a lower clerk or shopkeeper’s weekly income. See Helen C. Long, *The Edwardian House: The Middle-Class Home in Britain 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 9.

⁷¹ For example, during the 1909 Joint Select Committee hearings on theater censorship, the Liberal MP Lord Ribblesdale remarked: “My point is that because [the public] know that there is a censorship they know that plays will be of a kind that they can take their young ladies to see” (*Report from the Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and the House of Commons on the Stage Plays [Censorship]* [London: Wyman and Sons, 1909], 238).

⁷² Incorporated Stage Society Articles of Association, July 1904, Board of Trade: Companies Registration Office: Files of Dissolved Companies, BT 31/34768/81604, The National Archives, Kew.

⁷³ H. Hamilton Fyfe, “The Stage Society’s Decline—‘Hannele’ by the play actors,” *The World*, April 15, 1908.

⁷⁴ Stage Society Sixth Annual Report, 1905, Incorporated Stage Society Archive, GB 71 THM/136/5, Victoria and Albert Museum Department of Theatre and Performance, London; Private List of Members of the Fabian Society, September 1904, Fabian Society Archive, GB 097 FABIAN SOCIETY/C/55/2, item 13, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics, London.

⁷⁵ “The Stage Society: An Impression,” *Scots Pictorial*, March 14, 1908.

⁷⁶ Tara McPherson, “Post-Archive: The Humanities, The Archive, and the Database,” in *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 483–502.

⁷⁷ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 233.

⁷⁸ Franco Moretti, “The Slaughterhouse of Literature,” *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 207–27.

⁷⁹ To describe two participant-generated queries when I demoed the database at the 2015 Modernist Studies Association Conference.

⁸⁰ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

⁸¹ André Antoine printed the invitational tickets to his Théâtre Libre as wedding invitations (Chothia, *André Antoine*, 28). William Archer printed the censored passages of his translation of Edvard Brandes *A Visit* (1892) and distributed them in the theater. See J. P. Wearing, *The London Stage 1890–1899: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 110. The Abbey Theatre programs included the schedule of the last trains and trams. See Irish National Theatre Society, “Programme,” December 27, 1904–January 3, 1905, George Roberts Papers Concerning the Abbey Theatre

and the Irish National Theatre Society, 1901–1942, MS Thr 24, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁸² Sarah Bay-Cheng, “Pixelated Memories: Theatre History and Digital Historiography,” [academia.edu/2131876/Pixelated_Memories_Theatre_History_and_Digital_Historiography/](https://www.academia.edu/2131876/Pixelated_Memories_Theatre_History_and_Digital_Historiography/).