



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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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 increased 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,

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MATRIMONY.

Baron de Limberg, Mr. W I L L I A M S,
 Delaval, Mr. V I N I N G, O'Clougherty, Mr. L E E,
 Sentinels, Mr. C. JONES, and Mr. M O O R E,
 Clara, Mrs. D A V I S O N.

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

PAUL PRY.

Colonel Hardy, Mr. W. F A R R E N,
 Frank Hardy, Mr. RAYMOND, Witherton, Mr. P O P E,
 Somers, Mr. W. J O H N S O N, Stanley, Mr. D U F F,
 Harry Stanley, Mrs. W A Y L E T T,
 Paul Pry, Mr. L I S T O N,
 Grasp, Mr. Y O U N G E R, Doubledot, Mr. C. JONES,
 Simon, Mr. R O S S, Servant, Mr. JONES,
 Eliza, Miss P. G L O V E R, Marian, Miss A. JONES,
 Mrs. Subtle, Mrs. G L O V E R,
 Phœbe, Madame V E S T R I S,—who will sing
 “*The Lover's mistake*,” and “*Cherry Ripe*.”

To conclude with the musical Farce of

YOUTH LOVE & FOLLY.

Baron de Briancourt, Mr. W I L L I A M S, Louis de Linval, Mr. M E L R O S E,
 Florimond, Mr. V I N I N G, Antoine, Mr. W I L K I N S O N,
 Dennis, Mr. C. JONES, La Fleur, Mr. C O A T E S,
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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

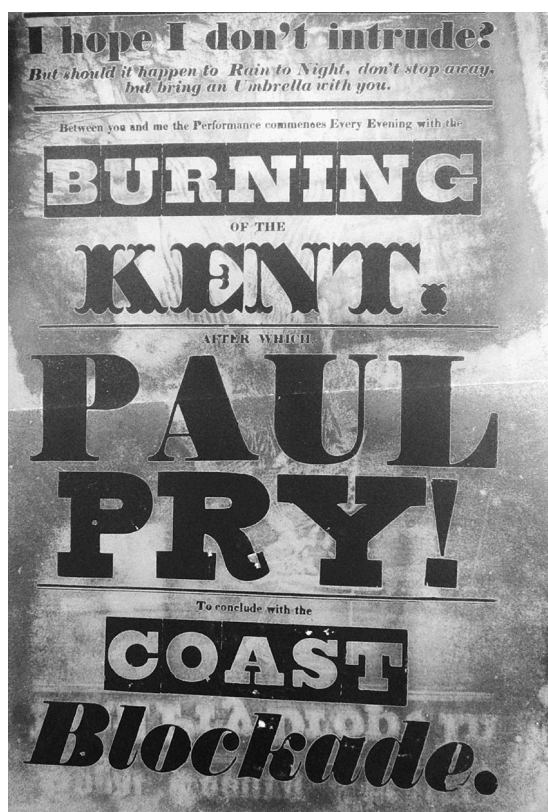


Figure 2. Mr Paul Pry, Royal Coburg Theatre Playbill 1826.

© 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 Rajahpooor...*. 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,

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