

Ira Aldridge in the North of England: Provincial Theatre and the Politics of Abolition

African American actor Ira Aldridge, was the first black performer that we know played Othello on English stages.¹ From 1825 to his death in 1867, Aldridge performed throughout England, Scotland and Ireland and travelled across Europe, touring widely in Russia and Poland. Over the course of his forty-year theatre career, Aldridge succeeded in negotiating a series of complex political landscapes that circulated around his personal and professional life, significant because his performances as a black actor and as an actor playing black characters, were directly entangled with the coterminous history of racialized debates about slavery and abolition in the Caribbean and United States of America. Such debates were particularly relevant to three towns in England's North West region – Manchester, Liverpool, and Lancaster – all directly connected to the material wealth of and ideological campaigning around slavery and abolition. Additionally, and pertinent to this essay, all three towns were also part of a cultural movement in provincial theatre, as regional centres determined to acquire rights of royal patent privilege to produce spoken drama, a privilege that had been granted only in London and only to the Theatres Royal of Drury Lane and Covent Garden. I argue, therefore, that Aldridge's performances in Manchester, Liverpool and Lancaster, and the responses to them, speak to the confluence of abolitionist politics and theatre.

I focus on Manchester, Liverpool and Lancaster, as locations overtly and specifically associated with the economic and cultural materiality of, as well political dispute about, the transatlantic slave trade, slavery and abolition. I explore, also, the influence of religious ideologies as well as cultural attitudes on regional politics and theatrical aesthetics. This is

particularly relevant to investigations of theatre and race, given the anti-theatre stance espoused by Evangelical abolitionists, notably William Wilberforce. Such enquires into the role of theatre in regional politics and culture reveals splits and schisms over Britain's involvement in the slave trade and enslavement, illuminating the crosscurrents of a significant national debate, articulating a fuller and richer understanding of the history and legacy of Ira Aldridge.

Bernth Lindfors' encyclopaedic four-volume biography of Ira Aldridge provides chronology and theatrical geography, extending the seminal work undertaken by Mildred Stock and Herbert Marshall in their 1958 book *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*. Building on this body of largely biographical work, this article explores regional accounts of Aldridge, examining the relationship between politics and theatre in the early decades of the nineteenth century. I focus here on the period that begins with Aldridge's arrival in England and his early performances of 1825, to the time of his performance at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden in London on 10 April 1833, as these dates are crucial to discussions shaped in Britain, culturally and politically, about the ending of enslavement in the Caribbean colonies. As Paul Gilroy has argued in his analysis of black activists in Britain, Robert Wedderburn, Olaudah Equiano, William Davidson and William Cuffay, "the discourse and imagery of race appears at the core rather than at the fringes of British Political life".² The theatre work of Ira Aldridge, not mentioned by Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*, was likewise at the core of Britain political atmosphere in the nineteenth century.

Despite Aldridge's appearance as Othello on 10 April, 1833 at the Covent Garden Theatre (one of the two theatres operating under royal patent, and therefore, at that time, permitted to stage spoken drama in London), attracting vituperative press reaction and the pulling of the play, he established himself as a professional with commercial and artistic viability in regional theatres of Britain, some of which also held those royal patents crucial to

the staging spoken drama. This circuit of regional patent theatres included Manchester, Liverpool and Lancaster, all deeply entangled in national debates about the slave trade, slavery and abolition throughout Aldridge's performance career in Britain. But, apart from Ruth Cowhig's important account of Aldridge in Manchester, little work has been undertaken to examine the specificities of reaction in areas closely associated with the complex economic, political, cultural and moral landscape of enslavement and abolition.³

Reports of Aldridge's career in the provinces are important, illuminating regional attitudes towards racial identities and racializing structures in the context of this period of national and transatlantic debate about enslavement. In this way, regional responses about Aldridge's performances act as what Robin Bernstein describes as 'scriptive things', which 'like a play-script, broadly structures a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable'.⁴ Bernstein developed her theory of 'scriptive things' from engagement with unidentified newspaper clippings held in an archive at Yale. Press reviews operate as, Bernstein argues, 'heuristic tool(s) for dealing with incomplete evidence'.⁵ The range of press reports and commentaries on Aldridge's performances, also act as an archive of 'scriptive things'. With these tools, we are equipped to make 'responsible, limited inferences about the past', by focusing on the 'how' rather than the 'why' of the 'scriptive thing'.⁶ Bernstein points out that moving debate in this way helpfully locates critics within an analytical scenario where we are concerned with an enriched exploration of 'how did this text produce historically located meanings?'.⁷ Such analyses should not, as Bernstein asserts, deny agency for the subject but recognise the politicising agendas of 'how' subjectivity emerges/is produced/is reified. In the case of Ira Aldridge, I explore how his subjectivity came to be constructed through repeated rescriptions in performances reviews within particular set of conflicting racial meanings.⁸

Theatre's role in the political machinery of Britain should not be overlooked, particularly its dramatization and collocation of arguments over the slave trade and abolition of slavery in the Caribbean colonies. Theatre was one of the three rods, alongside the church and the press, that acted as a conduit for what General Gascoyne, Liverpool representative to parliament, described as the 'public clamour', gathering together groups that were vocal in favour of abolition.⁹ However, the church and the theatre were frequently at odds with each other. Moreover, abolitionism as a movement was directly associated with the anti-theatre convert to evangelism, William Wilberforce. Nevertheless, though there is no space to discuss it here, Wilberforce, like Thomas Clarkson, would incorporate the performative power of theatre in his talks on the subject of abolition.

Ira Aldridge's arrival in Britain in the 1820s was coterminous with a revival of debates about enslavement and abolition within the British Colonies. The abolition of the Slave Trade itself, which passed into law in 1807, had not subsequently made significant movement towards the enfranchisement of those already enslaved on British plantations. By 1825, however, a reinvigoration of abolition societies had developed into overt political advocacy. Significantly in 1823, a rebellion in Demerara had led to the execution of several hundred enslaved people and in the same year, the Society for Mitigating and Gradually Abolishing Slavery throughout the British Dominions was established to provide a framework for local anti-slavery movements. Throughout the 1820s members of this organisation repeatedly petitioned parliament for an Abolition Bill and their endeavours would eventually lead to the 1833 Abolition Act. This was, of course, the same year as Aldridge's fateful performance at the Covent Garden theatre.

The Covent Garden performances, which have been central to many discussions of Aldridge, feature as the main subject matter of Lolita Chakrabarti's Aldridge-inspired play, *Red Velvet*, first performed in 2012. The play begins in 1867 with Aldridge being interviewed

by a young journalist, and talking of his reputation as ‘the highest paid actor in Russia’. The journalist, however, is more interested in probing his long-past experiences at the Covent Garden theatre. Despite Aldridge’s claim that he looks to the ‘future’ and not to the past, the play shifts action back to April 1833, to the time that Aldridge was invited to perform as Othello at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden.

By the end of *Red Velvet*, we have revisited the racist commentary that greeted Aldridge’s two nights in the role. Starkly, in the penultimate scene, Pierre Laporte, the Theatre Royal manager who had requested Aldridge’s services explains that his final performance had been cancelled, leaving Aldridge speechless on stage, silenced figuratively and literally by the racist attitudes of the London press. The historical events that feature in Chakrabarti’s drama have been often recounted. At Aldridge’s opening night in the Covent Garden, the theatre was rather thinly attended, and the second, all-but empty. Aldridge had been scheduled to appear for a third performance, though not in *Othello*, but that show was pulled. Bernth Lindfors has extensively explored the reporting of Aldridge’s performances here, summarizing: ‘most commentators were of the opinion that Aldridge had not been wholly successful in portraying Othello but that he had given evidence of a surprising and very promising talent that could be developed further’.¹⁰ Without comment or critique, Lindfors cites the *Age*’s account as a concordance of attitudes generally expressed in these reviews, that, ‘for a man of colour it was a very clever piece of acting’.¹¹

Lindfors documents several, even more vicious accounts of Aldridge’s performances, notably one in *The Times*, which complained ‘we could not perceive any fitness which Mr. Aldridge possessed for the assumption of one of the finest parts that was ever imagined by Shakespeare, except, indeed, that he could play it in his own native hue’¹². The article drew on incipient racial slurs to claim that Aldridge’s accent was ‘unpleasantly, and we would say, vulgarly, foreign: his manner, generally, drawling and unimpressive.’¹³ But Lindfors also

highlights a lengthy account in *National Omnibus; and General Advertiser*, whose critic challenged the racist reviews of other London papers and particularly challenges *The Times*. The *National Omnibus* was one of the ‘staunchest defenders’ of Aldridge, according to Lindfors, and the reviewer of his appearances at Covent Garden requested that the ‘leading journal (i.e. *The Times*)’, would “remove the stain from the national character”, by supporting “Mr. Aldridge in the performance of the limited numbers of characters to which the colour of his skin restricts him”.¹⁴ Whether the *National Omnibus* reviewer concurred with ideological premises that imposed ‘colour of skin’ as necessarily restrictive, or was decrying the fact that such ideological, externally-imposed restrictions, materially impeded Aldridge, is not clear. But it is evident that this ‘staunchest defender’ of Aldridge, tabulated his performances in a register of race.

The unstable critical reception we see here symbolises a dilemma that Aldridge would repeatedly face in his theatrical career. He was repeatedly situated within a series of interpretations by critics whose envisioning of identities reproduced the constructedness of white British narratives and pseudoscientific interpretations of race, which were, throughout the nineteenth century, conflicted and contradictory. Whether critics positioned his performances as awful or astonishing, whether they defended or despised, they were assembled from a matrix of racial particularisms.

Reviews from Aldridge’s first appearances in London were likewise caught up in the rhetoric of racialization. Aldridge had, on his arrival in England from America, headed directly to London. By October 1825, he had found engagements at the Royalty theatre, appearing for two nights in *Othello*, then in an adaptation of Thomas Southerne’s *Oroonoko*, titled *The Slave*, followed by smaller roles in a variety of melodramas featuring characters of colour. Then, Aldridge took up employment with the Royal Coburg theatre, his initial appearance as *Oroonoko* being lined up for particular attention in the press, as a result of an

early review titled: 'A Negro Roscius!' by *The Times* which was the most repellent and also the most reprinted account of his time in the capital. This reviewer averred that: 'At the Coburg Theatre last night, a native of Africa enacted the part of Oroonoko so much to the satisfaction of the audience that he kept them in a continual roar of laughter, which was increased ten-fold when he stabbed his wife and twenty-fold when he stabbed himself'.¹⁵

Significantly, Aldridge was employed in London theatres specifically to play in a variety of melodramas and farces that included characters of race, who were almost always enslaved. These characters were either noble heroes, saving their white master/mistress from evil, directly taken from the stock of what Hazel Waters has described as an 'archetype of the noble black [...] drawn straight from the literature of the abolitionist movement', or emblematic of 'black villainy'.¹⁶ Therefore the roles allocated to Aldridge operated somewhere amongst well-established types; he would subsequently add comic characters to his repertoire. Firstly, noble slaves whose actions resulted in the sanctity of white, middle-class Christian values, such as African princes sold into slavery, like Thomas Southerne's dramatic version of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, whose suffering was tragic because he was socially elite. Or secondly, predetermined emblems of slave rebels, associated in the public imaginary with the reported brutality enacted by black leaders of revolutions in Barbados, Haiti and Demerara.

To what extent Aldridge was actively involved in discussions about the parts that he played at the Coburg and Royalty theatres is unclear. Aldridge, as a company player, would not have had been in a position to make significant choices about which roles he played at this time – but what he did with those roles was within his purview to influence within his performance techniques. Evidence from later performances suggests he may have been, at this early stage of his career, developing a particular set of performative signifiers that would become a feature of his theatrical repertoire. Notably, one early report of one of his

performances as Othello suggested that Aldridge should pay ‘stricter attention to the text of the author and to the general substance of the scene’, which Lindfors has interpreted as meaning that Aldridge did not know the lines. But, we know from later reporting that Aldridge frequently changed the ‘text of the author’ and the ‘substance of the scene’ to suit his own, mostly unacknowledged, purposes. It is as likely that Aldridge’s lack of adherence to the ‘text’ of *Othello* here was an early instance of his assertion of agency on stage.¹⁷

I am not suggesting here that Aldridge would have had prior knowledge of all the roles he played during his residences at the Royalty and Coburg theatres. But, it is likely that he would have had familiarity with *Othello*, at the very least. Though stage managers frequently would change the text of Shakespeare’s plays (the concept of an authentic Shakespeare text is vexed anyway), the ‘substance of the scene’ would not have been alien. Aldridge had been educated at one of the African Free Schools in New York, and his classmates included, as Lindfors notes, the very successful James McCune Smith, first African American doctor with a medical degree, and Episcopalian minister Alexander Crummell, first black graduate of Cambridge University.¹⁸

Moreover, in New York, as has been well-established, he was involved with William Alexander Brown’s African Grove and African Theatre seasons which ran sporadically, from June 1821. It was subjected to repeated attacks from white theatre managers and press, surviving a major riot in 1822, finally shutting down in January 1824. So, Aldridge had experienced an apprenticeship with a theatre group which had not only performed Shakespearean drama, but had been subjected to abuse for doing so. That Aldridge arrived in Britain with a good working knowledge of *Othello* thus seems very likely. It cannot be assumed that if Aldridge deviated from an ‘author’s text’ or interpreted a scene differently it was because he was unfamiliar with the words.

Aldridge's early appearances in London, though lasting till the end of November, came to an end on 26 November 1825 and the actor joined the ranks of peripatetic players who toured the country. Immediately prior to embarking on regional tours, a significant change was made to Aldridge's publicity material. Rather than being billed as an 'American Tragedian' or the 'African Tragedian,' or a 'Gentleman of Color,' he became the 'African Roscius' across his regional tours. Several actors and actresses in this period publicised themselves as 'Roscius.' At the time of Aldridge's early shows, young Master Grossmith was billed as the 'infant Roscius' and Master Betty was the 'Young Roscius.' The original of the title was, however, Roman performer Quintus Roscius (1BC), who was enslaved when he first was put to work on stage. One of the racist reviews from *The Times* in London, cited earlier in this article, had used the title 'African Roscius' as an insult and Lindfors speculates that in adopting the moniker, Aldridge was displaying a "playful sense of irony", also possibly marketizing his own act on the back of comedian Charles Mathew's famous show, *A Trip to America*.¹⁹ This show featured an African American tragedian reciting (badly) from Shakespeare's plays and singing 'Opossum Up a Gum Tree', a song associated in the popular imagination with slaves from American plantations. This grotesque burlesque was performed regularly in Britain between 1822 and 1835 and press reviewers frequently made a link between Mathews' racist skit and Aldridge's performances.

However, in assuming the title 'African Roscius', Aldridge also demonstrated his awareness that the press would respond to his race as a primary consideration and his origins would likewise would come under scrutiny. Recognising that his performances had been co-opted for a variety of political aims, appropriated to serve the claims of conflicted forces of pro and anti-slavery, he took steps to secure a degree of autonomy and frame a position for himself as a performer. Thus when Aldridge actually began to perform 'Opossum up a Gum

Tree' himself, a main feature of his repertoire in regional touring, he was reappropriating, in ironic formation, the image of the black tragedian.²⁰

On tour, now billed as the African Roscius, Aldridge could witness for himself the disparate range of responses to debates about slavery across regional centres in England, particularly in those centres that had worked towards the establishment of a royal patent theatre house. In the late eighteenth century, a circuit of regional, licensed patent theatres had emerged in Britain, spanning from Edinburgh (the first outside London to be granted the status of Theatre Royal, in 1767, the theatre being erected the following year), to Norwich in the east, Liverpool, Manchester, Hull, and Newcastle in the north of England, to Bath and Brighton in the south.

The granting of royal patents and temporary rights of patent permission to provincial theatres to enable spoken production was, as Joan Baker contends, a product of the same ideological campaign that resulted in William Wilberforce's Proclamation Society (established in 1787), dedicated to the control of perceived 'immorality' in Britain. Nevertheless, William Wilberforce's political drive in his work for the Proclamation Society, however so related to the establishment of provincial theatre, most certainly was not set out to achieve that goal. Wilberforce's Evangelism was specifically anti-theatre, and he decried theatre for his own class as one of a set of dissipations that would lead to 'shapeless idleness'.²¹ The Proclamation Society was shaped to control class boundaries, to police middle-class as well as working-class behaviours, to ensure that his middle-class evangelicals maintained hegemony in matters local, national and international. The Society was invested in controlling and curtailing any rights for working-class groups and support for the abolition of enslavement certainly did not extend to a wider programme of reform within Britain.

But, in industrial cities of Britain, notably Manchester, abolition was embraced alongside a movement towards political reform in the 1820s, running exactly counter to the

Proclamation Society's belief in controlling working-class agitation through laws to curtail their enfranchisement. Manchester's anti-slavery committee was the first to petition for a bill to abolish the slave trade in 1787. Seymour Drescher calculates that the petition, signed by nearly eleven thousand Mancunians, represented twenty percent of the town's population and almost two thirds of its adult men.²² Drescher also points out that Manchester abolitionists bought adverts in other northern provincial papers to garner support for the cause, and was thus formative in establishing the national campaign in the 1820s.

In 1827, Ira Aldridge arrived in Manchester at a time that its citizens were deeply receptive to abolition of slavery in the Caribbean and also in the United States of America as well as to class reform on the domestic front. Additionally, Manchester was one of the first cities in Britain to apply for and be granted a royal patent to perform Shakespeare and other dramas authorised by the office of the Lord Chamberlain. The officially licenced Royal Theatre in Manchester staged its first performance in 1775; the building moved location on several occasions, but Royal patent was very much in place when Aldridge arrived in 1827.²³

Manchester's Theatre Royal was, therefore, the first royal patent theatre in Britain to open its doors to Aldridge. He opened on Saturday 17 February 1827 as Gambia in *The Slave*. Then, on his second night, he appeared as *Othello*. *Wheeler's Manchester Chronicle* noted that 'this evening the African Roscius makes his second appearance in the very difficult character to personate Othello. His reception on Saturday last was favourable (as Gambia), and he obtained considerable applause in the declamatory scenes'.²⁴ This review is especially useful as it completely contradicts *The Times* earlier account of Aldridge at the Coburg Theatre, London, claimed that 'owing to the shape of his lips, it is utterly impossible for him to pronounce English in such a manner as to satisfy even the unfastidious ears of the gallery'.²⁵ In Manchester, Aldridge's skill in the declamatory arts was recognised and highlighted.

Aldridge performed regularly over a two-week period in Manchester. On his final night at Manchester's Theatre Royal, the *Manchester Gazette* summarised the significance of Aldridge's work so far for this theatre: 'He performed in a manner which practically contradicts the argument of the advocates of slavery, that the sable race are deficient in intellect'.²⁶ Significantly, the critic here directly challenged the pseudoscientific ideology of racial superiority/inferiority, which was one of the main arguments in support of enslavement. Whereas, in London, the body of the black performer was arrogated in the service of pro-slavery racist rhetoric, in Manchester, Aldridge was discussed a performer of skill and intellect, and thus a body of evidence to prove all that was wrong with slavery.

Though Aldridge was not exposed to pro-slavery press in Manchester as he had been in London, he was, nevertheless, subjected to the racist ideology of abolitionist rhetoric. Prior to Aldridge's arrival, the *Manchester Courier* had written an appeal to audiences to 'show their liberality to this descendant of the suffering sons of Africa'.²⁷ That Aldridge was located as a 'suffering son of Africa' chimes with the rhetoric of abolitionism, exemplified in the marketing of the image of the suffering slave, most notoriously in the much earlier Josiah Wedgwood mass-produced medallion bearing the caption, 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?'.²⁸ Demonstrations of support for enslaved figures visually swathed in suffering had remained paramount for abolitionist propaganda and some of the characters that Aldridge performed, such as Oroonoko and Gambia, written as sufferers by white playwrights, chimed with such images. In America, Aldridge had not been enslaved, though he had encountered the violence of racism. Yet the *Courier's* abolitionist stance in this review relied on reifying Aldridge as the embodiment of the enslaved figure as passive sufferer.

This *Courier* commentary in support of Aldridge also reproduced abolition's essentializing racial identities, stating that the actor, in playing 'those characters for which his complexion and accent are peculiarly adapted, approaches nearer to nature than any European

actor that we ever saw'.²⁹ Othello and Gambia were appropriate roles for a black actor, because both characters were scripted as black, even though the playwrights staging such configurations of blackness were white British. The *Courier's* support for Aldridge, therefore, illuminates Manchester's ties with abolitionism and also the problems with abolitionist rhetorical strategies.

Unlike Manchester, Liverpool's association with the slave trade is well-established and had a direct impact on its theatre culture. In 1808, dramatist Elizabeth Inchbald, noted that Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*, one of Aldridge's most frequently performed roles, 'is never acted in Liverpool, for the very reason why it ought to be acted there oftener than at any other place – The merchants of that great city acquire their riches by the slave trade'.³⁰ Nearly twenty years later, Aldridge appeared in at the Theatre Royal in Liverpool in October 1827 and the notice in *Gore's Liverpool General Advertiser* stated that he would play *The Slave* for two nights.³¹ There is no announcement for the second night and no reports on either show. Liverpool is not unusual in this; throughout Aldridge's career there were performances that attracted little or no media attention. But it is significant that the play advertised, *The Slave*, which covered subject matter very similar to *Oroonoko* might have been too provocative to be reported in a region so closely associated with slavery.

Moreover, despite the fact that so many plays were dramatizing romanticized versions of racial hierarchies in slavery and the slave trade were in general circulation across Britain at this time, and were regularly performed in larger theatre centres, Liverpool's theatre seem to have closed itself down to such shows, apart from an announcement, in 1817, for a performance of *The Slave* at the Liverpool Concert Hall.³² But, as with the performances scheduled in Liverpool for Aldridge, no reviews of this performance can be found. Interestingly, this was not seen in Lancaster or Bristol, centres also associated with the slave

trade. From these locations, as was the case in Manchester, come quite detailed reviews of Ira Aldridge's performances in this early part of his career.

By the time of Aldridge's 1827 performance in Liverpool an active abolitionist group existed, set up in 1822. The year 1827 was also the year the Ladies Society of Liverpool was formed. Nevertheless, as Sanderson points out, Liverpool's commitment to abolition was marginal, even though it had elected the abolitionist William Roscoe in 1807:

Liverpool spearheaded the parliamentary resistance to abolition, sending at least 64 petitions to the Commons or the Lords (as compared to 14 from the London merchants and 12 from Bristol Corporation and merchants). Her representatives in parliament were the most persistent advocates of the trade.³³

Liverpool in 1827 was a difficult place to stage dramas about enslaved Africans, and the absence of commentary on Aldridge in *The Slave*, speaks significantly to the cultural atmosphere and political economy of the region. Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that Liverpool remained peripheral as a performance venue of choice for Ira Aldridge throughout his career.

Aldridge's 1827 performances were reported in the *Lancaster Gazette* which noted that the 'spirited manager' of the Lancaster Theatre Royal had engaged Aldridge for the 'ensuing week'.³⁴ This review of Aldridge was short but enthusiastic, describing the actor as 'this complete master of the histrionic arts'.³⁵ On his return to Lancaster in 1832, Aldridge's performances were reviewed in far more detail and in very specific terms-in the *Lancaster Herald*:

In again expressing the delight we have experienced from the performances of the African Roscius, we do it sincerely. At first, we rather fancied that the novelty might have given rise to a great portion of the feeling which we experienced; indeed, we have more than once been asked if such were not the case; but we now say, as we have invariably answered, that we admire him for

his acting, and his conception of the characters which he has filled, when we were present. Yet, we must allow that, identified as he is, by birth, with the beings he personates, he perhaps makes a deeper impression than another performer would. The latter might arouse our sympathies for the while he was before us, but the African Roscius makes an impression of a much longer and more powerful continuance. We feel as though he were the advocate, the representative of a nation, pleading its cause from the heart, and we think of him and that nation, when the dazzling light [...] of theatrical machinery, have passed away, - when we are alone to think, to reflect.³⁶

This review is worth citing at length, as it sheds some light on Lancaster's own role in history of the slave trade.

Lancaster's active participation in the slave trade has been foregrounded in recent years, with Melinda Elder's 1992 publication, *The Slave Trade and the Economic Development of Eighteenth-Century Lancaster* providing the primary resources for subsequent studies, notably a chapter in Alan Rice's 2010 book, *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic*. Much earlier, however, Lancaster's association with the slave trade had haunted Charles Dickens' short tale 'The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices,' first published in 1857, which dramatized Lancaster's slave-trade troubled conscience in gothic terms:

The stones of Lancaster do sometimes whisper, even yet, of rich men passed away—upon whose great prosperity some of these old doorways frowned sullen in the brightest weather—that their slave-gain turned to curses, as the Arabian Wizard's money turned to leaves, and that no good ever came of it, even unto the third and fourth generations, until it was wasted and gone.³⁷

With this ‘cursed’ wealth dispersed across the generations of lucrative inheritance and economic stability, there was also a concerted effort in Lancaster to silence its history of culpability. As Rice argues, Lancaster has relied on recounting tales of its slave merchants as ‘mere gentleman amateurs’ in the trade.³⁸

Although there were some Quaker movements agitating for abolition in Lancaster, their voices were almost unheard in the political wrangling over slavery. The *Herald’s* review of Aldridge’s two weeks of performances in Lancaster, therefore, at the Theatre Royal, subtly exposes the town’s own haunted guilt, directing audiences in the region to ‘think, to reflect’. In Lancaster, atonement for culpability in the slave trade was (and is) required.

The very public debate over slavery and abolition complicated Aldridge’s assertion of agency as a performer but also brought visibility for his work, and he directly engaged in the debate in his performances. By January 1833, Aldridge had developed a farewell address for his performances, cited in full by Lindfors and printed in several press publications. The address is a significant and direct criticism of slavery, featuring, tellingly, the lines: ‘soon the white man comes, allured by gain/o’er his (the African) free limbs fling slavery’s galling chain’.³⁹

In August 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act was granted royal assent and declared the gradual abolition of slavery in British colonies. But throughout the years of Aldridge’s performances in the lead up to this most crucial of political milestones for the Abolition societies, there seems to have been no direct association between Aldridge and key abolitionists. Even in Manchester, whose middle-class elite were dominantly abolitionist, no evidence has been uncovered, yet, to suggest a collaboration with this black performer in their midst.

William Wilberforce, as has been pointed out, was theologically antithetical to theatre. Nevertheless, Lolita Chakrabarti in *Red Velvet* speculated on relations between him,

his main ally Thomas Clarkson and Aldridge. Scene 4 imagines Aldridge and his wife Margaret discussing seeing abolitionist Thomas Clarkson in the audience for Aldridge's Covent Garden performance.

Margaret: First time I've seen him smile.

Ira: It's a tense time for him.

Margaret: ... we met him with the Wilberforces didn't we? He did say William's not well at all. We should send him something.⁴⁰

In the twenty-first century, it was hard to resist an imaginary meeting between the black actor and the famous abolitionist. Evidence of collaboration may be available and further research in this field could reveal additional archival resources, further 'scriptive things,' to help us with this enquiry.⁴¹

One intriguing mention of support for Aldridge from an abolitionist appears in an essay by his former schoolmate and long-time friend, James McCune Smith, who had studied medicine in Glasgow and was very much a part of the abolition movements in that region. McCune Smith recounted, 'the good people of Glasgow were "down upon" two institutions – Popery and the theatre'.⁴² The 'anti-slavery men of Glasgow, Smith continued, 'were for the most part rigid dissenters, entertained this prejudice in the highest degree'.⁴³ But, according to Smith, the power of Aldridge's performances won the admiration of John Murray, then the Secretary of the Glasgow Emancipation society, whose anti-theatre views were profound and deep-rooted. Murray's attendance at the Glasgow Royal to see Aldridge was his 'one and only visit to a theatre'.⁴⁴ McCune Smith's tale indicates the power of Aldridge's performances to support the abolition cause.

Tellingly, in all the years of its publication, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, which was the mouthpiece of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society and regularly employed theatrical metaphor within their depictions of the colonial horrors made no mention of

Aldridge. Perhaps Aldridge's performance career, which was rich in interpretations of black characters with agency who challenged the racial preconceptions of his audience and critics, made him too independent of their work in promoting the image of the 'suffering slave'.

Ultimately, Aldridge took on the battle against enslavement himself, by offering a different perspective to the abolition movement, performing in unregulated theatres as well as patent houses, speaking openly to a wide, diverse audience, not all of whom would be sympathetic to his presence on a public stage let alone to his presence as a black performer of cultural and political substance.

¹ Research has been conducted into the possibility that Ignatius Sancho may have performed the role of Othello in 1760 (notably Errol Hill in *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors*, (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). However, no supporting evidence has as yet been uncovered and recent publications have argued that it is unlikely that performances took place of *Othello* featuring Sancho. See Brycchan Carey, 'The extraordinary Negro': Ignatius Sancho, Joseph Jekyll, and the Problem of Biography', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 26 (2003), pp. 1-14, also Felicity A. Nussbaum, 'The Theatre of Empire: Racial Counterfeit, Racial Realism', *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 71-90.

² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 7.

³ Ruth M. Cowhig, 'Ira Aldridge in Manchester', in *Theatre Research International*, 11: 3 (1986), pp. 239-246.

⁴ Robin Bernstein, 'Dances with things: Material culture and the performance of race', in *Social Text*, 27: 4 (2009), pp. 67-94 (68-69).

⁵ Bernstein, p. 76.

⁶ Bernstein, p. 76.

⁷ Bernstein, p. 77.

⁸ Bernstein, p. 76.

⁹ Hansard, 1st ser., viii (15 Dec. 1806 - 4 Mar. 1807), cols. 718-1) cited in Seymour Drescher, 'Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade', in *Past & Present*, 143 (May, 1994), pp. 136-166 (143).

¹⁰ Bernth Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Early Years, 1807-1833* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011), p. 266.

¹¹ *Nottingham and Newark Mercury*, (10 November, 1827), p.3, cited in Lindfors, p. 263.

¹² *The Times*, (11 April, 1833), p. 3.

¹³ *The Times*, (11 April, 1833), p. 3.

¹⁴ *National Omnibus; and General Advertiser*, (26 April, 1833), np, cited in Lindfors, p. 2.

¹⁵ *The Times*, (11 October 1825), p. 2.

¹⁶ Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representations of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 82.

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- ¹⁷ Early nineteenth century acting styles on patent stages were generally expected to be stylised and declamatory.
- ¹⁸ Lindfors, p. 24.
- ¹⁹ Lindfors, p. 85.
- ²⁰ Similarly, after T.D. Rice came to Britain and his performance of ‘Jump Jim Crow’ in 1836, Aldridge began to include a version of the song in his own repertoire.
- ²¹ William Wilberforce, *A practical view of the prevailing religious system of professed Christians: in the higher and middle classes in this country, contrasted with real Christianity* (London, T. Cadell, 1829), p. 134.
- ²² Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 70.
- ²³ *Manchester Mercury*, (3 October 1775), p. 4, announced: ‘we are authorised to acquaint the public that the Manchester Theatre Royal will open its doors on 9 October 1775’.
- ²⁴ *Wheeler’s Manchester Chronicle*, (17 February 1827), p. 4.
- ²⁵ *The Times*, (October 11, 1825), p. 2.
- ²⁶ *Manchester Gazette*, (24 February 1827), p. 3.
- ²⁷ *Manchester Courier* (24 February 1827), p. 3.
- ²⁸ Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 300.
- ²⁹ *Manchester Courier*, (24 February 1827), p. 2.
- ³⁰ Mrs Elizabeth Inchbald. *The British Theatre, Or, A Collection of Plays, Which Are Acted At the Theatres Royal, Drury Lane, Covent Garden, And Haymarket*, Volume 7 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808), p. 4.
- ³¹ *Gore’s Liverpool General Advertiser* (11 October 1827), p. 1.
- ³² *The Liverpool Mercury*, (31 January 1817), np.
- ³³ F. E. Sanderson, ‘The Liverpool Abolitionists’, in *Liverpool, the African Slave Trade, and Abolition*, eds. R. T. Anstey and P. E. H. Hair, (Bristol, 1976), pp. 196-238 (196).
- ³⁴ *Lancaster Gazette*, (29 September 1827), p. 2.
- ³⁵ *Lancaster Gazette*, (29 September 1827), p. 2.
- ³⁶ *Lancaster Herald*, (15 September 1832), p. 285, cited in Lindfors, p. 228.
- ³⁷ Charles Dickens, ‘The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’, in *Household Words*. Vol. XVI. No. LVIII. December, 1857, pp. 313 – 432 (320).
- ³⁸ Alan J. Rice, *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 33.
- ³⁹ Cited in Lindfors, p. 231.
- ⁴⁰ Lolita Chakrabarti, *Red Velvet* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2012), p. 61.
- ⁴¹ I am currently undertaking research into Ira Aldridge in the context of other African American travellers in the transatlantic, particularly Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown.
- ⁴² James McCune Smith, ‘Ira Aldridge’, (1860), in *Ira Aldridge: The African Roscius*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007), pp. 39-47 (42).
- ⁴³ McCune Smith, p. 42.
- ⁴⁴ McCune Smith, p. 42.