



# The Drama's Patrons: A Study of the Eighteenth-Century London Audience

*Leo Hughes*

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The drama's laws,  
the drama's patrons give,  
For we that live to please,  
must please to live.  
—Samuel Johnson, 1747

Democratic ferment, responsible for political explosions in the seventeenth century and expanded power in the eighteenth, affected all phases of English life. The theatre reflected these forces in the content of the plays of the period and in an increased awareness among playgoers that the theatre "must please to live."

Drawing from a wealth of amusing and informative contemporary accounts, Leo Hughes presents abundant evidence that the theatre-going public proved zealous, and sometimes even unruly, in asserting its role and rights. He describes numerous species of individual pest—the box-lobby saunterers, the vizard masks (ladies of uncertain virtue), the catcallers, and the weeping sentimentalists. Protest demonstrations of various interest groups, such as footmen asserting their rights to sit in the upper gallery, reflect the behavior of the audience as a whole—an audience that Alexander Pope described as "the manyheaded monster of the pit."

Hughes analyzes the changes in the audience's taste through the long span from Dryden's day to Sheridan's. He illustrates the decline in taste from the sophisticated, if bawdy, comedy of the Restoration Period to the sentimentalism and empty show of later decades. He attributes the increased emphasis on sentiment and spectacle to audience influence and describes the effects of audience demands on managers, playwrights, and players. He describes in detail the mixed assembly that frequented the theatre during this period and the greatly enlarged theatres that were built to accommodate it.

Hughes concludes that it was the English people's basic love of liberty that allowed them to accept audience disruptions considered intolerable by foreign visitors and that the drama's patrons greatly influenced the quality of theatrical production during this long period.

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