It has been suggested that, during the most active years of his career, from 1773 until his death in 1814, Philip Astley was ‘perhaps the most familiar theatrical figure in the three kingdoms’ of England, Scotland and Ireland. Astley achieved this status not as a conventional actor or dancer but as an equestrian performer and impresario, and it is for this reason that his reputation has remained prominent since his death: in both the popular imagination and in scholarly literature Astley is remembered as the central figure responsible for the development of what today we call the circus. Despite his reputation, the surviving iconographical record for Astley is sparse. Most notably no major oil portrait survives, either of Astley as performer or impresario. The likenesses which have been preserved use more ephemeral media – print portrait, satirical print, watercolour – and are few in number. This stands in contrast to the surviving archive of images of many of Astley’s theatrical contemporaries whose celebrity was broadly comparable, not least the dancers sensu stricto discussed in the other chapters in this volume. This chapter explores the relationship between the overall paucity of images of Astley and the nature of the likenesses we do have, and what was distinctive and novel about Astley’s career as an equestrian and a theatrical businessman.

**Equestrian and Impresario**

Astley’s career forms an attractive narrative, entertaining to recount, full of incident and reverse. He was born in 1742 in Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire, in the

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1 *BDA, I: 148.*
northern part of the English Midlands, son of a veneer cutter and cabinet-maker.² In the early-modern period, this combination of geographical and social circumstances did not regularly combine to produce lives that leave material traces for historians today to investigate. But the outbreak of war between the European powers, first in the north American colonies in 1754, and in Europe in 1756 – the conflicts eventually known and the French and Indian War and the Seven Years’ War – came to transform Astley’s prospects. In 1759 he left home, at the age of seventeen, to enlist at Coventry in the newly formed 15th Dragoons, a unit of light horse, and came to distinguish himself in action. He captured a French regimental standard at Emsdorf in July 1760, and later that month at Warburg successfully led an operation to rescue the Duke of Brunswick from behind enemy lines. This second incident is memorably described by Charles Dibdin the younger, later one of Astley’s colleagues, who writes of Astley that he was ‘sav[ing] the life of one of the imperial Princes, whose horse was shot under him, by bringing him off, on his own Horse, when surrounded by a score of frenchmen, through whom he cut his way with the most heroic resolution’.³ These successes won him the rank of sergeant-major and the honour of presenting the captured standard to the King in a military review in Hyde Park. Another of Astley’s later colleagues, Jacob Decastro, records that, when Astley was discharged at Derby in 1766, the regiment’s general, George Eliott (later created Lord Heathfield following his famous victorious command of defending the garrison at Gibraltar from 1779 to 1783), made Astley a present of a ‘fine charger’.⁴

By 1767 at the latest Astley was in London, working as a groom in an Islington riding school, and by the following year he had opened his own establishment at Halfpenny Hatch, a field on Lambeth marsh between the southern ends of Blackfriars and Westminster bridges, providing demonstrations of trick riding for 6d. admission. Astley was joined in these early performances by his wife Patty, who performed similar equestrian feats – vaulting, straddling two horses, handstands and headstands in the saddle – and by musical accompaniment, and, soon, by acrobats, clowns and jugglers. That autumn Astley and his followers embarked on a tour of provincial England – clearly successfully enough, along with the Surrey season, to acquire a more permanent base of operations. In 1769 Astley acquired an old timber-yard at the southern end of Westminster bridge which became ‘Astley’s Riding School’. The site went through a variety of official names during Astley’s lifetime – among them the Royal Grove and the Amphitheatre of the Arts – but was best known then and now as ‘Astley’s Amphitheatre’. The design of the Amphitheatre is often singled out as Astley’s most significant contribution to the genesis of the circus tradition. Exhibitions of trick riding were by no means unique to Astley during these years: Decastro records a host of such entertainments in London in the years immediately preceding Astley’s arrival on the scene, among them ‘Price, Johnson, and Old Sampson, who had been exhibiting at the Three Hats, Islington, and other places round and quite contiguous to the heart of the Metropolis’.5

Along with acrobatics and clowning, trick riding was a mainstay of fairgrounds, inn courtyards, and the fringes of horse racing meetings throughout the early-modern period, and their combination in commercial entertainments in

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London was not unique to, or first arrived at by, Astley. But Astley provides the most obvious first example, both at Halfpenny Hatch and more fully at the Amphitheatre, of the circus’s distinctive theatrical geography. The fenced-off circular arena had the effect both of creating the centrifugal force required for riders to perform various types of equestrian stunts and, unlike the informal trick riding shows which predominated in contemporary London and fairgrounds throughout the country, of providing controlled access to the event. Rather than allowing spectators to approach and to leave at will, leaving payment if the display merited it, Astley’s Amphitheatre, like existing theatres, ‘exclude[d] the gaze of non-payers’. Ticketed entry became the only means of accessing the entertainment, which added the essential theatrical seasoning of heightened audience expectation deriving from the play of concealment and display. The Amphitheatre evolved physically with successive seasons as cash flow varied, acquiring, eventually, a stage, a roof and an elegant auditorium (Figure 1 shows the Amphitheatre’s 1808 incarnation). The nature of the entertainment changed, too, becoming larger – with more performers employed – and more elaborate, with representational dramatic elements increasing in prominence along with a particular focus on military themes. Dramatic representations (‘rememorations’, as Daniel O’Quinn has termed such entertainments) of battles from the Seven Years War, of which Astley was a veteran, and, later, the Revolutionary War in the American colonies began to appear. By the opening decade of the nineteenth century these had developed into elaborate equestrian dramas or ‘hippodramas’ on more fanciful historical subjects.

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8 Daniel O’Quinn, Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 313.
The commercial appeal of these offerings was enhanced by Astley’s own reputation as a veteran cavalryman, a reputation he shrewdly continued to enhance both by publications on his military exploits and military comportment more generally, and by his ostentatious resumption of active military service in his old regiment, at the age of fifty, when war was declared on France in 1793. Astley distinguished himself again in action at Ribecourt near Cambrai and at the siege of Valenciennes, writing up his exploits for an eager audience at home. Astley himself spoke of aiming at the Amphitheatre to ‘catch John Bull’. Some of the most exciting recent scholarly work on Astley has explored how these kinds of representation of warfare contributed to the ongoing formation of a national character, both individual and collective, during this period of conflict. In this work, the specifically equestrian nature of the entertainments at Astley’s is key. War with France presented a stumbling block for Astley’s success on the continent, which he began to tour during the winter months each year, establishing the Amphithéâtre Astley in Paris in 1783. He also established a permanent base in Dublin, the Equestrian Theatre Royal, in 1788, and continued his off-season touring in the English provinces and Scotland, performing either at existing seasonal fairs, assizes and race meetings.

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10 Philip Astley, Remarks on the Profession and Duty of a Soldier; with Other Observations Relative to the Army, at This Time in Actual Service on the Continent (London, 1794).

11 Philip Astley, A Description and Historical Account, of the Places Now the Theatre of War in the Low Countries […] Embellished with a Frontispiece, and Plans of Those Places the Most Remarkable for their Fortifications (London, 1794).

12 ‘John Bull, Sir,’ he remarked to Charles Dibdin the Younger, ‘never thinks for himself, as you and I may do: therefore if we want to catch him, we must think for him’: Speaight (ed.), Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger, 99.

or setting up temporary amphitheatres of his own. The kind of excitement generated by these progresses can be sensed in the striking incident of the death of two boys who fell from a tree trying to get a glimpse, over the assembled crowds, of Astley’s performance in a field outside the city of Oxford in 1784.14

Astley’s celebrity was such that he attracted the patronage of both the French and English courts: a royal ordinance of 1782 permitted Astley to wear the arms of the French monarchy (which he often did while performing), and in the same year George III responded by granting Astley a patent for his method of inuring cavalry horses to the sound of gunfire.15 Perhaps the best index of Astley’s success, however, is the number of competitors the Amphi-theatre spawned in its image, most notably the Royal Circus at St George’s Fields, Lambeth of Charles Hughes, formerly one of Astley’s star trick riders, and former Covent Garden writer Charles Dibdin, which opened in 1782.16 It is from this building that the modern circus takes its name.17 After his discharge from the dragoons in 1794 Astley assumed the role of impresario, with the role of star performer at the Amphitheatre taken by his son John (1768-1821) who shared his father’s talents. Astley père, operating in these years from the idiosyncratically named mansion off Westminster Bridge Road he had built for himself in 1788, Hercules Hall – named after ‘La Force d’Hercule’, one of his equestrian feats18 – sought in these final years to expand his reach into Westminster itself. He built the Olympic Pavilion off the Strand in 1806, and his company, led by John, began performing in the old patent theatres, as in Matthew Lewis’s Timour the Tartar at Covent Garden in 1811.

16 Hughes, without Dibdin, had earlier set up an establishment in competition with Astley in 1772, the British Horse Academy, at Blackfriars Bridge. See George Palliser Tuttle, ‘The History of the Royal Circus, Equestrian and Philharmonic Academy, 1762-1816, St. George’s Fields, Surrey, England’, Ph.D. thesis, Tufts University (1972).
17 Helen Stoddart, Circus History and Representation (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 14.
**Theatrical Portraiture**

Astley’s remarkable career, moving from the fringes of London’s theatrical scene towards its centre, and consequently from provincial obscurity to international celebrity, coincided with a period of sudden growth of interest in actors and other theatrical personalities as celebrities, which worked in part through a rapid expansion in the production of images of these men and women. Shearer West has memorably characterised the years during which Astley was active as a performer and impresario as ‘not the age of the dramatist, but of the actor’. The experience and pleasure of theatre-going began increasingly to centre on connoisseurship of actors and acting, and on a novel desire for apparent closeness with actors themselves: a process Joseph Roach has brilliantly termed ‘public intimacy’. Just as we recognise from our experience of the way more recent celebrity culture has worked, this process took place through the buying and selling of material goods: actors like Garrick, Kemble and Siddons ‘participate[d] in a culture of the commerce of celebrity, the wish to buy up and buy into the star’s life, through the images and memorabilia that the market creates but also through something beyond the artefacts: the experience or illusion of connection’. The economics of the art trade in London changed in response to this phenomenon: at the beginning of the eighteenth century London had only two print shops and a handful of engravers producing

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noteworthy quantities of material, but by the century’s end lively competition existed between a host of Fleet Street printers producing theatrical images.\textsuperscript{22} The emergence of public art exhibitions in London – such a crucial feature of the art market today – in 1760 under the auspices of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce also accompanied the surge in demand for theatrical images, particularly following the foundation of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768.\textsuperscript{23}

The transformation of portrait-making under the influence of market forces – moving from commission-based production to a model based on the artist’s own commercial initiative – can already be sensed in the choice of subjects for the first SEAMC exhibition in 1760, in which most artists chose to exhibit ‘a picture of a respectable public figure, though one easily recognizable to people of all ranks’, the most emblematic of which was Francis Hayman’s \textit{Garrick as Richard III}.\textsuperscript{24} As West has shrewdly observed, the entrepreneurial instincts of artists and actors worked together in encouraging the growth of the market in theatrical portraiture. For actors, the public exhibition of portraits increased their prominence and allowed them to manipulate their image. For artists, depicting a ‘popular subject […]could bring [their] work to public attention’ and could attract ‘additional patronage on that basis.’\textsuperscript{25} The biggest stars of the London stage during this period were deeply conscious of the ways this dynamic could work in their favour: it is not unreasonable to speak of a directed ‘publicity campaign’.\textsuperscript{26} The trade also served to legitimate a

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{22} West, \textit{The Image of the Actor}, 2.
\bibitem{24} Hargraves, \textit{Candidates for Fame}, 24.
\bibitem{25} West, \textit{The Image of the Actor}, 28.
\bibitem{26} Judith Pascoe, \textit{Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry and Spectatorship} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 28. See, for example, Robyn Asleson (ed.), \textit{A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and Her Portraitists} (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999); Gill Perry, ‘Musing on Muses: Representing the Actress as “Artist” in British Art of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries’, in Joan Bellamy, Anne Laurence, and Gill Perry (eds.), \textit{Women, Scholarship and Criticism: Gender and Knowledge}
potentially disreputable yet popular pastime of those with the disposable income to acquire theatrical portraits. Some of the exclusive quality of the grand manner portrait lingered even as its subjects changed, and the theatre came to seem a more respectable entertainment for existing and potential patrons: one more step along London theatre’s long and winding road from infamy to propriety.

Prints, too, had a part to play in these processes, with a pool of potential consumers larger still than buyers at public portrait exhibitions: participation in the cult of the actor was not limited to those with such buying power but encompassed a broader section of theatrical audiences. Prints sometimes reproduced pre-existing painted portraits, but just as often offered fresh images. The low cost of printing – it was even possible to hire theatrical prints rather than purchase outright – and the possibility of rapid execution and reproduction that the process offered meant that London’s burgeoning print market could respond to theatrical events and audience demands with more agility than painters. Garrick’s retirement in 1776 and Siddons’s return to the capital in 1782 both provoked a rash of print shop activity. Bad performances, too, could provoke print responses that were impossible in painting, and London’s rich tradition of satirical print making was, from Hogarth onwards, intimately linked with representations of the theatre and its people.

**Images of Astley**


27 A good overview of eighteenth-century Anglophone anti-theatrical discourse can be found in Jonas Barish, _The Anti-theatrical Prejudice_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 221-255.
28 For a detailed discussion see West, _The Image of the Actor_, 7-25.
29 Ibid., 46.
30 Ibid., 48.
The surviving contemporary images of Astley do not fit neatly into this story of a boom in theatrical image-making during his career. The level of Astley’s celebrity, the striking shape of his biography, and most of all, the nature of the performances for which he was famous – perhaps the most inherently visual of all eighteenth-century theatrical spectacles – would naturally encourage us to expect a rich pictorial record. But what we have, though in some ways intriguing, is frustrating. West has noted the disappointment often felt by theatre historians about what is not shown in eighteenth-century theatrical paintings – never much of the stage, never the audience – and with Astley the observation is especially pertinent. Principally, and most dispiritingly, there is no surviving image of Astley on horseback. We therefore have nothing to compare with the evocative descriptions of Astley’s trick riding, his military exploits, or simply his charismatic presence on horseback, which writers noted even into his later years: in 1807 one newspaper noted ‘when mounted on his beautiful grey, the veteran Astley, apparently in the flower of his age, still conserves the extraordinary management of the horse […] What a noble example to the heads of families, civil and military, and to the rising generation in general, is to be witnessed every evening!’ The closest we have is the widely reproduced image of Astley seated in a conveyance, one hand holding the reins of an invisible horse drawing the vehicle. There are multiple versions of this image. The best-known is probably an anonymous line etching now in the National Portrait Gallery and Harvard Theatre Collection (Figure 2); a version was published in the 1808 volume of William Granger’s Wonderful Museum and Magazine Extraordinary; and a watercolour version is now in the John Johnson Collection in the Bodleian

32 West, The Image of the Actor, 4.
33 Morning Post (1807), quoted in Kwint, ‘The Legitimization of the Circus’, 90.
Library, Oxford (Figure 3). The National Portrait Gallery image is undated, but obviously derives from the same plate as the 1808 Wonderful Museum and Magazine Extraordinary likeness: the difference is that in the 1808 publication, Astley’s image forms one quarter of a single larger image, with portraits of three more of the publication’s biographical subjects - John Courtoy, George Packwood, and Lord Rokeby. It is plausible to suggest that the individual prints of the images from this plate, such as the National Portrait Gallery’s, either postdate the Wonderful Museum version or are simply cut from it: the four likenesses are consistent in style, and, tellingly, the hatching that forms the background of the four figures, and which is identical in the individual versions, is unbroken between Astley and Courtoy – separate pre-existing plates have not been combined here. The watercolour, too – also undated – seems to be worked up from the Wonderful Museum etching, rather than providing a model for it. Here Astley is indoors, sitting in a chair rather than driving, and the legs that are hidden inside the conveyance are visible: their awkward proportions suggest that these are (ineptly) imagined rather than taken from life.

From slightly earlier in this same period comes our only other realistic likeness of Astley (Figure 4), an engraved frontispiece to Astley’s 1801 manual A System of Equestrian Education. Images taken from the same plate also appear independently without a date, as in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Harry Beard Collection. This is a silhouette portrait, probably an early work of John Thomas Smith (1766-1833), former pupil of Joseph Nollekens. The Astley that these images depict is far removed from the man who was ‘accustomed to vaulting on and off’ his mount, ‘sweeping the ground with his elbows, lying down back to back with his

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35 Astley’s Biographical Dictionary entry suggests the frontispiece only appears in editions from 1802 onwards, but it is present in the first edition. Astley’s System of Equestrian Education, Exhibition the Beauties and Defects of the Horse; with Serious and Important Advice, on its General Excellence, Preserving it in Health, Grooming, &c. (London, 1801).
horse, standing on one, two or three horses at once while galloping or jumping over obstacles, and standing on his head while firing a pistol’ in his performing heyday.\(^{36}\) In these images Astley exudes prosperity and comfort: fashionably attired in the tall hat that was coming into vogue during these years and obviously well fed. Astley’s tummy strains at the buttons of his waistcoat in both images, protruding magnificently between the folds of his coat; several chins emerge from beneath a smartly tied neckcloth. This is Astley the successful impresario, who signed his letters from ‘Philip Astley Esq.’ of ‘Hercules Hall, Hercules Buildings’, as he did to the Earl of Dartmouth in 1804.\(^{37}\)

The third surviving likeness of Astley brings us closer to Astley’s performing years yet still does not quite depict them. This is a satirical engraving of 1784, *The Downfall of Taste & Genius, or The World as it Goes*, by Samuel Collings (Figure 5). Astley’s Amphitheatre in Collings’s image is used as a synecdochic illustration of changes in the London theatre scene during these years. A group of figures charge from right to left. Astley himself is the bewigged running figure on the right, holding a riding crop in his left hand and his hat aloft in his right. The figure standing on horseback is his son John Astley, who had already begun to take a starring role in Amphitheatre performances by this date. The Astleys are surrounded by a number of Amphitheatre performers, both animal and human. Vincent Lunardi announces his nationality by the flag he brandishes from his hot air balloon. General Jacko, the performing monkey, rides a dog, while other dogs are dressed in bonnets, hats and periwigs. Harlequins and other clowns cavort. Before them flee anthropomorphic representations of the arts - music with the lyre, painting with her palette, and sculpture with her mallet, all trampled underfoot, along with books of Shakespeare and Pope – and the personifications of Truth and Nature. Truth’s mirror is cracked


\(^{37}\) See ‘Westminster Bridge Road’, 69-74.
by the figure of Discord, who holds a serpent. Nature’s hair is being powdered by a clown. On plinths above the disarray are classical sculptures of classical virtues, now debilitated and debased. Fame’s trumpet is sheared in two; headless Wisdom holds a cracked spear; Justice’s sword is broken at the hilt; and Virtue hobbles on a crutch, missing a leg, begging for alms. As Heather McPherson has noted, what is satirised here are ‘widespread concerns about the decline of culture and the emergence of a debased popular taste for spectacle, which threatened traditional aesthetic and cultural hierarchies’. The changes which provoked these anxieties have been summarised by Jane Moody as ‘the emergence of an illegitimate theatrical culture’ where ‘physical peril, visual spectacle and ideological confrontation challenged both the generic premises and the cultural dominance of legitimate drama’.

**Astley’s as Illegitimate Theatre**

Just as Astley’s stands in for this broader process in Collings’s print, the institutional history of Astley’s Amphitheatre exemplifies many of the key features of the emergence of the illegitimate theatrical tradition in London. As the kind of entertainments offered at Astley’s began to move from the informal settings of seasonal fairs, the fringes of race meetings and inn courtyards into London’s theatrical marketplace, they existed in an uneasy, ill-defined and often fractious relationship with legislation designed to regulate theatre. As Marius Kwint sets out, none of the Theatre Licensing Act (1737), the Vagrancy Act (1744) or the Disorderly Houses Act (1752) quite applied properly to a venture like Astley’s, but as it and its imitators like the Royal Circus increased in prominence and profitability, the authorities came under pressure from the patent theatres to act. In July 1773 both

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Astley and Hughes were arrested – though quickly bailed – and the following decade consisted of an uneasy legal battle, where pressure on the courts from the patent theatres was counteracted by favourable press coverage for Astley from titles which relied on his advertising fees.\textsuperscript{40} A settlement of sorts was reached in 1783, with the Amphitheatre and the Royal Circus granted licenses under the Disorderly Houses Act, though they were both thereby restricted to summer seasons to appease the patent theatres (to whose position Collings’s print offers striking testimony). As Kwint puts it, ‘having failed to suppress the infant circuses, the magistrates preferred to bend the rules and achieve some degree of regulation, rather than to leave two potential troublemakers outside the law’.\textsuperscript{41} An uneasy truce had been reached, with the Amphitheatre’s journey from irregularity to respectability still incomplete. Institutions like Astley’s played a significant role in breaking open the monopoly of the patent theatres that had dominated London in the early years of the eighteenth century, but as it entered the nineteenth, how the transformed theatrical scene would settle down was as yet unclear.

As well as its delicately poised relationship to regulatory legislation, Astley’s also existed at the boundaries of social respectability. Throughout Astley’s career the Amphitheatre strove to maintain a judicious balance between the display of propriety and refinement necessary at least to offer its wealthy patrons an excuse for their attendance, and the spice of disreputability that was always one of its principle attractions. Ostentatious charitable and philanthropic activity, and the kind of solidly loyal, militaristic politics that Mattfield described were ways of signalling the Amphitheatre’s moral integrity.\textsuperscript{42} Its self-consciously classicising self-presentation – from the word \textit{amphitheatre} itself to Astley’s attempts in print to characterise trick-

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Kwint, ‘The Legitimisation of the Circus’, 81-84.
\item Ibid., 86.
\item Mattfield, \textit{Becoming Centaur}, 140-149.
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riding as an art with a Homeric pedigree\textsuperscript{43} – sought to create an air of prestige: this, in part, is what Collings’s decrepit statues and vanquished muses are mocking. Yet at the same time, the area of Lambeth where the circuses congregated was also well known as a place to drink, whore, rob or be robbed. In 1776 the attempt to prosecute Astley under the Disorderly Houses Act spoke of ‘the very great Mischief arising to Society in general from such exhibitions’ as Astley’s,

by the debauching of Servants and Apprentices, the encouraging of Vice and Prophaneness, by the unlawfully assembling of Persons of both Sexes together, and the very great Danger arising to Persons travelling either on Horseback or otherwise by the said Place, immediately before or during the Performance, by the blowing of Trumpets, beating of Drums, and the Mob of idle, dissolute Persons generally surrounding the Doors.\textsuperscript{44}

As Helen Stoddart writes, charitable performances and stunts attracted well-known local worthies whose patronage could be used to confer distinction and legitimacy on the circus and its impresario. But as a result ‘the circus was caught in a double-bind which produced a tension between simultaneous reliance on both high-minded charitable promotion and almost unavoidably illicit activity because a portion of the audience would be reassured by the former whilst some would always be excited by the latter.’\textsuperscript{45} Continued material and financial instability typified the Amphitheatre throughout Astley’s career, which seemed constantly to teeter on the brink of collapse or ruin. Profits were continually reinvested in buildings and animals in order for the business to remain competitive, with performers earning principally on the basis of benefits rather than salaries; but prioritising looks over substance

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\item \textsuperscript{43} See ibid., 128-129.
\item \textsuperscript{44} ‘Order to Suppress the Various Exhibitions at Astley’s Riding School Westminster Bridge’ (1776), quoted in Kwint, ‘Legitimisation of the Circus’, 82-83.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Stoddart, Rings of Desire, 49.
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architecturally, and persistent and breath-taking under-insurance meant that when Astley’s burned (as it did twice during his lifetime, in 1794 and 1803), the losses were catastrophic: in 1803 Astley lost £28,000.46

Geographical, legal, social, financial, material instability and liminality characterise the illegitimate theatre in general and Astley’s in particular, and it is in this context that the patchiness of the surviving image record for Astley can be understood. While Astley’s career brought him enough prominence to warrant the production of portraits, even the two late likenesses of Astley, from the period when he was most well-known and closest to the theatrical mainstream, position him on the edge of the booming culture of theatrical portraiture with which his career coincided. Even though these images clearly depict an Astley who had achieved prosperity and recognition on his own terms, they are still far from the grand manner portraits of conventional actors like Garrick, Kemble and Siddons; these images do not even sit comfortably within the theatrical print culture that such examples of painted portraiture spawned. While versions of these images may have circulated in the print shops of the Strand or Fleet Street, they were initially produced as book illustrations. The forms these images took – on the one hand, a silhouette portrait, the cheapest and quickest available method in these years of producing a likeness, on the other an illustration in a sensationalist periodical dedicated to ‘very eccentric Characters famous for long Life, Courage, Cowardice, extraordinary Strength, Avarice, astonishing Fortitude, as well as genuine Narrations of Giants, Dwarfs, Misers, Impostors’ and so on47 – positioned them on the bottom end of a hierarchy of print quality that was topped by the fine theatrical mezzotints of the likes of John Finlayson. It is wholly appropriate that the images which bring us closest to Astley’s performing career – though still not quite showing

46 Ibid., 30.
47 The New (Original and Complete) Wonderful Museum and Magazine Extraordinary, title page.
it – are also the forms of image that are most characteristic of Astley’s as an illegitimate theatre. The Amphitheatre as a whole, and Astley himself, were infamous during these years for the onslaught of advertising and publicity to which they subjected Londoners. Some of this took the form of stunts: for example, the ‘Prize Wherry’, the annual boat race on the Thames run by Astley, his hot air balloon launches (beginning in 1784),48 or the charmingly ridiculous nautical-equestrian firework display for the King’s birthday Astley directed in 1788.49 But Astley also used a combination of aggressive newspaper advertisements and handbill distribution.

The combination of both methods exemplifies the liminal position of the Amphitheatre. Astley’s newspaper advertisements appeared in high-quality publications like the Public Advertiser and Morning Post and aimed to attract respectable patrons as much as confer respectability on the Amphitheatre. Handbills, however, seemed to have almost the opposite effect. The Astleys, père et fils, were well known for distributing them while riding around London, an entertainment in itself. A 1792 open letter makes clear the consternation this caused genteel theatregoers, advising that newspaper advertisements alone would suit ‘the present respectability of your theatre’ better than riding through the streets ‘every Lord’s Day’ distributing material whose intended consumers the writer clearly despises.50 The handbills were rich with images to accompany their colourful language, and the vast majority of these took the form of woodcuts: this kind of handbill represents almost the last large-scale use of this technique until the romantic medievalism of the later nineteenth century revived it. Figure 6 shows a collage of typical images cut from Astley’s handbills from the years around 1800, though due to the medium they strike the modern eye as far older. The images do not offer likenesses of individual

48 See Stoddart, Rings of Desire, 51.
49 Mattfield, Becoming Centaur, 121-124.
trick-riders – the medium would render this difficult in any case– but they do offer an evocative representation of the kinds of act for which Astley in his prime was famous.

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These striking, crude, exciting images bring us as close as any surviving image can to Astley the performer, but still leave something wanting. Astley’s performances were, fundamentally impossible to capture with image or text: more than perhaps any other eighteenth century theatrical experience, they relied for their effect on *seeing* – speech and music were incidental to their impact. One really had to be there. The kinds of technique that historians typically use to access and assess the performances of the past are, in this case, radically inadequate to the task. There is not only a lack of the standard material substitutes which stand in for past performances – play scripts, musical scores, choreographic notation – and which would be inappropriate in this instance, but also an absence of images of the performing Astley, the material trace that would have the best chance of capturing for us what captured his contemporaries. Yet even these would not bring one much closer, since live, embodied motion is what counts here. Attempting to freeze this with an image brings to mind the effect of the innovative design at Astley’s of the ring and its centrifugal force at work on a galloping trick rider: once the rider stops moving, the show is over. In Astley’s performances, one can see something of the ontology of theatre itself. Charles Dickens, who wrote in the 1830s about his boyhood experiences at Astley’s, seemed to sense something of this. The Amphitheatre was for him bound up with the ultimately doomed attempt fully to recapture the past: warm summer nights, the smell of horse – ‘no place […] recalls so
strongly our recollections of childhood as Astley’s’. It might then be argued that the poverty of the image record relating to Astley the performer is therefore rather apt. It gestures towards something important about the practice of writing theatre history. As Emma Smith reminds us, theatre history is always, necessarily, ‘conducted through substitutes for the performance itself – the textual traces of the evanescent theatrical event’. The event itself has gone: ‘Over. Finished. Irretrievable.’ By proceeding in this manner, in ‘this ontological shift from event to text’, theatre history ‘tries to fix the evanescence it purports to value about theatre’. It is, of course, an ultimately impossible task. When it comes to images of Astley, whatever there was, it would not be enough.

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