

An Ethnographic Approach to Dramatic Censorship in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Freedom of Expression and the Protection of Religious Sensibilities

Kristan Tetens, School of English ❖ Supervisor: Professor Richard Foulkes

MR. IRVING AS "MAHOMET."
NEW SCHEMES AT THE LYCEUM.

Case study: Hall Caine's *Mahomet*

In 1890, the most famous actor in England, Henry Irving, asked the most famous novelist in England, Hall Caine, to write him a play.

The result was a four-act historical drama based on the life of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. The mere rumour that this play would be performed in London led to unrest in Britain's Muslim communities, prompted protests throughout India, and strained relations with the Ottoman Empire.

Although *Mahomet* treats Muhammad sympathetically and Islam with respect, it was quickly banned by the Lord Chamberlain, the official in charge of licensing stage plays. To this day it has never been performed.

A more nuanced understanding of dramatic censorship in Britain during the nineteenth century is an essential starting point to resolving contemporary conflicts between freedom of expression and the protection of religious sensibilities.



THE "MAHOMET" CONTROVERSY.

An "ethnographic approach"

My thesis extends a methodological framework developed by the cultural historian Robert Darnton to the study of dramatic censorship.

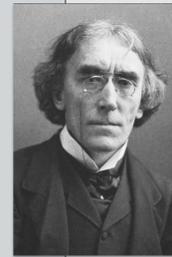
By assembling a wide range of archival material, I have discovered not only what the participants in the *Mahomet* controversy thought, but also how they constructed their public and private roles as author, actor, imam, and censor.

The controversy was used by those involved to advance freedom of expression, to build capacity within a minority religious community, and to assert specific national political and cultural values: the same dynamics at work in such conflicts today.



The Author: Hall Caine

"To pay court to all religious feeling is either to narrow all art by the exclusion of the highest themes, or to reduce it to child's play."



The Actor: Henry Irving

"Censorship is a very wise and necessary thing; most reasonable, I think. I am entirely content with the Lord Chamberlain's control."



The Imam: Abdullah Quilliam

"We will not sit calmly down and allow without protest a play to be placed upon the English stage in which our prophet is represented."



The Censor: Earl Lathom

"Britain with her seventy millions of Mahometan subjects cannot afford to offend their sensibilities for the sake of a stage play."