

CHAPTER I

*Foreshadowing the War*  
*Future War and Invasion Plays, 1900–1914*

*Ailise Bulfin*

The enemy's army ... may be here at any moment!<sup>1</sup>

In some senses, British theatre of the First World War can be viewed as beginning not in 1914 with the onset of hostilities, but beforehand in a number of politically aware pre-war plays which imagined mass conflict breaking out in Europe in the near future. In the decades before the war, mounting geopolitical tensions between Britain and the other European imperial nations led many to believe that large-scale, even global war was imminent. This, coupled with corollary fears that Britain might be invaded by hostile European armies, prompted calls for ramping up the nation's defence capabilities. This chapter examines the ways in which plays written between 1900 and 1914 engaged with these growing fears of international conflict, and it explores their relationship with a burgeoning genre of similarly themed popular fiction, revealing the shared cautionary political impulses underlying both literary forms. The plays include Major Guy du Maurier's phenomenally successful *An Englishman's Home* (1909), which stages the violent invasion of a middle-class English family home by foreign soldiers, and Israel Zangwill's *The War God* (1911), which depicts a war-mongering foreign Chancellor's schemes to invade Britain. Outside of individual treatments of *An Englishman's Home*, these invasion and future war plays are almost entirely overlooked in theatre scholarship, and in wider literary and historical scholarship in general, and have not previously been approached as a distinct body of work responding to the geopolitics of the pre-war period. This chapter illuminates the significant contribution they made to expressing and circulating socially detrimental paranoia about invasion and war before the conflict began, and to shaping the themes and propagandistic tactics of the war plays which proliferated after 1914.

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## Invasion Culture: Geopolitics, Literature and Plays

From the late nineteenth century onwards, competition over influence in Europe and lucrative overseas territories had caused increasingly hostile relations between European imperial nations like Britain, France, Germany and Russia, and also Japan and the United States. This rivalry, combined with resistance and rebellion by colonised peoples, triggered numerous potentially explosive localised conflicts internationally and ultimately fuelled the breakdown in diplomatic relations that caused the First World War. In this charged atmosphere, each international dispute was fearfully viewed in Britain as the ‘small spark’ that might cause ‘the great conflagration’ of large-scale war, with the concomitant threat of invasion.<sup>2</sup> This embattled mentality is neatly encapsulated in the title of L. Cope Cornford’s 1906 polemical treatise, *The Defenceless Islands*, written to ‘bring home to Englishmen the extreme danger in which the country might stand in time of a maritime war’ with the European ‘great powers’.<sup>3</sup> A foundational event in the generation of this mentality was the Franco–Prussian war of 1870–1, in which a newly militarised and technologically advanced Germany invaded and defeated imperial France with surprising ease, sparking fears that Britain could be similarly overwhelmed. This prompted an anxious army-officer, Lieutenant-Colonel George Chesney, to write a short novel, *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), to warn Britain of its vulnerability by depicting a successful German invasion. Chesney’s text became an instant bestseller and helped to bolster a public campaign for military defence ‘preparedness’, as well as inspiring a number of follow-on tales.

From this beginning, ‘the fiction of invasion’, as cultural commentators dubbed it, became a very popular literary genre, and this genre is discussed here to provide a framework for approaching the future war and invasion plays which it inspired and, in turn, which it was influenced by as the plays’ popularity grew.<sup>4</sup> Following on from the Franco-Prussian war, international diplomatic incidents frequently prompted waves of public trepidation about invasion and corresponding fictional tales imagining invasion scenarios. A key localised conflict in the post-1900 period was the hard-won South African War (1899–1902) against the Dutch ‘Boer’ settlers, which saw unprecedented early losses for Britain, national concern about the fitness of its armed forces, and fears that overseas distraction left the home front vulnerable to European attack. Typical of the fictional response to this war was Louis Tracy’s *The Invaders* (1901), in which an opportunistic coalition ‘of England’s continental enemies ...

seiz[ed] the opportunity' of its South-African entanglement to invade using an advance guard of sleeper agents disguised as British soldiers.<sup>5</sup> By 1906 worsening relations with Germany and the beginnings of the Anglo-German arms race inspired one of the most successful invasion novels of the pre-war period, William Le Queux's bestselling *The Invasion of 1910* (1906), which depicted the march of a massive German invasion force through a disastrously unprepared Britain weakened by a network of German spies. Le Queux's politically-engaged novel was intended as an explicit intervention in the long-running national security debate on the organisation of Britain's armed forces, and specifically condemned government proposals to cut defence spending. Those on the pro-defence side, like Le Queux and the National Service League advocacy group, hyped the threat of invasion both to discredit the proposed cuts and to promote transforming Britain's volunteer-based army into one based on compulsory military training for all young men.<sup>6</sup> Le Queux was not the only novelist to engage in such polemical tactics – the invasion genre overall was highly propagandistic.

Given the tendency for drama to act, as Rebecca D'Monté puts it, as a 'mirror of [its] time', it is not surprising that a strand of invasion plays developed in response to these circumstances.<sup>7</sup> John MacKenzie observes that martial plays, featuring spectacular dramatisations of imperial conflicts like the South African War, were a staple of nineteenth-century theatre.<sup>8</sup> And Maggie B. Gale argues that performance cultures profited from 'an intensification of cultural anxiety about invasion' in the pre-war period, including the invasion plays like du Maurier's which extended the nineteenth-century tradition to dramatise conflicts yet to come.<sup>9</sup> The pre-war period, as D'Monté outlines, was a rich and varied time for theatre, with large commercial theatres producing comedy, spectacle, melodrama and middlebrow realism for wide audiences and smaller artistic theatres providing space for experimental plays and challenging socio-political dramas. The invasion plays considered here traverse this spectrum of contemporary forms – from du Maurier's conventional, if polemical, realism to Zangwill's high-brow political tragedy to less well-known sensation melodramas and music hall satires. Thematically, however, they are united by their strong engagement with contemporary anxieties about war and invasion and the related security debate on reorganising Britain's armed forces. Like the fiction authors, many of the playwrights wrote to make a deliberate intervention in this debate – some, like du Maurier, aiming to encourage patriotic sentiment and recruitment into the army; while Zangwill, from the opposite perspective, wrote to champion the pacifist

cause. L. J. Collins argues that theatre, due to the collective experience of emotion, 'was an ideal vehicle for the transmission' of 'patriotic fervour' during the war, and observes a move away from Edwardian aestheticism towards the instrumentalization of drama for propaganda purposes after 1914.<sup>10</sup> However, as we will see, these tendencies were already present in many of the polemical pre-war plays, which adapted the tropes of the inflammatory popular stories to the dramatic form and established influential propagandistic theatrical strategies.

### Early Invasion Plays

Although *An Englishman's Home* was the most famous of the invasion plays, it was certainly not the first. *The Invasion of Britain*, a topical play by sensation playwright William Bourne, toured Britain successfully from April 1900 to June 1901.<sup>11</sup> While there is no known playscript, lengthy reviews describe *The Invasion of Britain* as dramatising the heroic struggles of 'a fine manly representative' of the British Volunteer defence forces to safeguard his city and fiancée from the machinations of an 'objectionable ... foreign spy'. This interpersonal intrigue plot was set against the backdrop of an allied European offensive against Britain and eventual victory by the doughty British Volunteers. Like much invasion fiction, *The Invasion of Britain* was deliberately written in response to an international event that increased public invasion anxiety, the 'dark days' of the South-African War, and participated in the defence debate, as Bourne explained, 'to help forward the Volunteering spirit'. It also utilised two key invasion genre tropes – the joint European attack and the foreign spy – the latter prompted by mounting contemporary panic about covert foreign spy networks in Britain. Despite critical condemnation of the play's romantic aspect – derided as distracting from 'the grandeur of the national catastrophe' – the play's 'patriotism' was widely praised and critics noted its popularity with audiences. This popularity was doubtless bolstered by its highly commended stage effects, involving burning city skylines, artillery duels and exploding enemy warships. Another crowd-pleasing tactic was that of localising the action to the city in which *The Invasion of Britain* was playing (emulating the master Victorian melodramatist Dion Boucicault). Accordingly the play's subtitle changed from, for example, 'The Siege of Glasgow' to 'The Siege of London', and bespoke local backdrops were created for each production. Judging from the numerous reviews, *The Invasion of Britain* displays many of the hallmarks of the traditional mid-Victorian melodrama, from socio-political topicality to sensation scenes of spectacular destruction to an

unnuanced moral opposition of good and evil characters. Theatrically conservative in form and content, *The Invasion of Britain* likely functioned as a feel-good vehicle for marshalling fleeting patriotic sentiment, not to mention box-office revenue.

Another early dramatic manifestation of the invasion theme came five years later in the satiric response to Le Queux's *The Invasion of 1910*. One of the most influential invasion novels of the pre-war period, *The Invasion of 1910* was heavily promoted by the influential *Daily Mail* publicity machine and provoked a huge public reaction both in support and condemnation of its scaremongering premises, not to mention in outright mockery.<sup>12</sup> In this last vein, the well-known comic actor Will Evans created a popular sketch bearing the novel's title, which traversed the London variety theatre circuit from April to September 1906.<sup>13</sup> In mock-tragic mode, Evans, in 'grotesque make-up', played a 'burlesque military officer' whose 'woebegone' troops, though 'prepared to repel the invasion of 1910', were attacked 'four years before the due time' and utterly routed. Reviews consistently describe the hilarity this doomsday scenario provoked, with audiences 'rock[ing] in their seats' throughout. This reception illustrates comic theatre's capacity to subvert cherished ideals like the sanctity of home soil, contrasting with the typically more patriotic stance of invasion fiction, and it shows that public responses to the invasion theme could include mirth as well as fear or patriotism. In contrast to Evans's skit, a more serious contemporary variety 'playlet', Wal Pink's *Beacon Bell*, depicted a hard-pressed soldier hero who thwarts the Cornish coastal landing schemes of the typically villainous foreign spy and 'combined Continental army'.<sup>14</sup> This successful, if clichéd, short play saw numerous performances between September 1907 and July 1909, its very genericness indicating the acceptability of the invasion premise.

### *An Englishman's Home and Recruitment Tactics*

By far the best known and most influential of the invasion and future war plays is du Maurier's *An Englishman's Home* (See Figure 2). Although it has been seriously overlooked outside a few notable scholarly engagements (referred to later in this section), the play was an outright theatrical sensation in 1909, and provoked a storm of invasion-related media controversy. Usually considered as an isolated theatrical phenomenon, this play can now be productively placed within the tradition of pre-war invasion theatre and the related genre of fiction. The play portrays the military invasion of Britain by 'Nearland' (a thinly veiled stand-in for Germany required by



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“CURSE THEM! OH, CURSE THEM ALL!”

Figure 2 Scene from *An Englishman's Home*, Wyndham's Theatre, 1909. Frontispiece to Guy du Maurier, *An Englishman's Home* (New York and London: Harper, 1909). Image from Library of Congress digital collections, [www.loc.gov/item/09010962/](http://www.loc.gov/item/09010962/)

the censor) through the experience of a single household, ‘the quintessential icon of the nation’ as Jon Hegglund puts it.<sup>15</sup> Within a twenty-four-hour timeframe, and against a soundscape of increasing gun and artillery fire, it shows the dramatic transformation of a suburban London home into a charred ruin, and the resulting death or displacement of its occupants. In this it echoes the stress on the violability of British domestic space established as a key invasion fiction premise in Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking*, which concludes with the invaders ensconced in an English family home in which a young child has just been killed by shrapnel. As its name implies, *An Englishman's Home* was a similarly emotive assault on domestic sanctity, written as an indictment of British public disinterest in military preparedness by du Maurier, then a serving officer of the Royal Fusiliers in South Africa. Richard Scully observes that du Maurier's ‘chief aim’ was ‘to show the absolute importance of fostering, through regular armed service, [the] innate fighting spirit of the nation’, and hence to support advocates of compulsory military service.<sup>16</sup> As the leader of the National Service League, Field Marshall Lord Roberts, put it: ‘Nothing

short of some form of universal [military] service can provide the trained men required for home defence [from invasion] ... and so avert a national disaster'.<sup>17</sup> The play's timing was particularly fortuitous for its message, as fears spiked in late-1908 that German ship-building efforts were about to overtake those of the British navy, which was widely considered the nation's first line of defence against invasion.

Given *An Englishman's Home's* propagandistic nature, its principal message – that the British public's distraction by leisure pursuits from its patriotic duty leaves individuals and the nation alike in peril – is unsurprisingly conveyed in a heavy-handed manner. Patriotic duty is narrowly equated to defence readiness, and is shown to consist of military instruction for men and first-aid training for women. Indeed, the play could be summarised as dramatizing the prevalent contemporary defence anxiety that 'a nation in arms is coming [Germany], and a nation at play [Britain] is to meet them'.<sup>18</sup> The entire play is therefore pointedly set in a suburban 'play-room', and it opens with the adults of the household engrossed in the various hobbies that dominate their lives. These habituated pleasure-seekers have been oblivious to the advance guard of 'Nearland' spies that has already infiltrated their world posing as their hairdressers and waiters, and, even after the invaders initially occupy the house, they are shown to be incapable of realising the situation's gravity. As a hard-pressed British Volunteer rebukes them:

Are you all mad? Don't any of you understand? ... You can all talk, and say it's nothing to do with us, that it's not our business, and that you can just stay here and amuse yourselves... in the same old way... [but] the whole damned country is coming down like a house of cards... And others are just the same, shouting and singing rotten music-hall songs, and thinking they're just going to see some fun! Fun – oh, my God!<sup>19</sup>

In his typology of persuasive devices used in the invasion genre, Michael Matin highlights the prominence of 'appeals to the reader's senses of patriotism and shame', and these certainly form the central plank of du Maurier's approach.<sup>20</sup> Overall the play proceeds as a series of cautionary illustrations for the audience of the purportedly horrific consequences of their leisure-time distractions. In a standard propaganda tactic, the characters operate purely as types through which lessons can be imparted – a contemporary commentator observing, 'the personages are used merely as instruments of the author in his attack on our unpreparedness for national defence'.<sup>21</sup> The dangers of passive spectatorship are illustrated via avid football supporter Geoffrey Smith, who meets the invaders not with appropriate resistance but with strenuous assertions that he is merely



'a harmless ... looker-on' (56). 'Short, thin, narrow-chested, [and] knock-kneed' (1–2), this embodiment of South-African war concerns about physical degeneration in the British populace is later shot dead while seeking 'a good view' so he can enjoy the fighting outside (90). The moral of taking up arms too late is expounded through Brown, the householder, who belatedly 'becomes from instinct a fighting man' and defends his ruined home in the final scene (128). However, he is overcome and then executed by the 'Nearland' commander because un-enlisted men are not legitimate combatants, and he has thus breached international war conventions. This moral is made explicit when a Volunteer captain rebukes Brown: 'You may consider yourself a perfect mass of patriotism, but [you should be] cursing yourself for not having earned the right to defend your own country' (120). For female audience members, the preparedness lesson is embodied in Brown's daughter Maggie, who, tormented by her inability to nurse the wounded Volunteers, confesses to the army doctor: 'I've never learned ... I'm no use' (105).

In its treatment of Brown's twelve-year-old son Sydney, the play draws on the key invasion genre trope of the threatened child, in which suggested or actual harm to society's most vulnerable demographic is used to hammer home the lesson. On closer inspection, the play suggests that the real threat to Sydney is not the physical violence of war, but that posed by leisure society to his proper development. Lacking in good role models, and with his willingness to learn incorrectly channelled into aiding his father's hobbies, this 'crying, hysterical' boy (126) cannot become the future manly defender of home, country and empire that is needed – thus perpetuating the cycle of British vulnerability to foreign attack. Nor are suitable role models provided even by the Volunteers, who are depicted as wildly disorganised despite their willingness, especially in comparison with the disciplined regular British troops (and the efficient invaders). In analyses of war propaganda, within which category du Maurier's pre-war pro-defence play may be placed, Randal Marlin argues that it functions 'by turning the enemy into a non-human creature ... [o]r ... appeal[ing] to the fear of the consequence of inaction' and Mike Conway et al. argue that it typically polarizes the 'role-players' within the narrative into 'good and evil' types as demonstrated by their interaction with victims.<sup>22</sup> As du Maurier resists the temptation to demonise the 'Nearlanders', who stick rigorously to the international conventions on warfare, the negative role-players are in fact the English victims who are shown to have effected their own downfall through their inaction. This serves as a salutary lesson for their real-world analogues in the audience, and stands in marked



opposition to the conventional British heroes and foreign villains of the earlier melodramatic invasion plays.

The force of du Maurier's message was perhaps diminished before the play opened when his producers revised his bleak ending to show British regular troops poised to liberate the Brown's house at curtain close, thus suggesting a comforting British victory was imminent. The producers' imposition of melodramatic conventions upon the largely realist play produced hilarity in many audience members, some of whom appear to have received it as satire. This, as well as its patriotism, may have contributed to the play's sell-out popularity, which fuelled a six-month run at Wyndham's Theatre from January to June 1909 and several touring productions. In their analyses of the plentiful press response to the play, Harry Wood and Howard Moon have shown that it was widely acclaimed for its affective power and pro-defence moral, and merited discussion beyond the theatre columns.<sup>23</sup> Owing to these qualities, it was quickly co-opted as recruitment propaganda by the influential defence expert Lord Esher in support of the recently formed volunteer-based Territorial Force (TF; later the Territorial Army) – a move which was somewhat ironic given that the play indicted volunteerism. A TF recruiting booth was set up in Wyndham's foyer, as Esher used the play to launch a recruitment drive that saw 30,000 volunteers enlist in the first two months of 1909. Further indicating *An Englishman's Home's* significance was the fact that the National Service League sponsored a rival invasion play of its own to counteract the success of TF volunteer recruiting and push the compulsory military service message. Entitled *A Nation in Arms*, it premiered in September 1909, but, as Wood shows, despite the similarity of its plot to du Maurier's, it was not nearly as successful. Other theatrical responses to *An Englishman's Home* included music hall skits which sent up its alarmism, and a massive open-air spectacular at the Crystal Palace football ground, *Invasion; or, A Battle of the Future*, featuring airships, espionage, pyrotechnics and an upbeat ending depicting a well-organised British defence.<sup>24</sup> Du Maurier's play also coloured the reception of a subsequent invasion play, Fabian Ware and Norman MacOwan's arch-patriotic *The Chalk Line*, which played in March to May 1912 and was condemned, for its 'crude' rehash of all the invasion tropes, as 'a piece of Chauvinistic stage pamphleteering compared with which *An Englishman's Home* was a perfect masterpiece'.<sup>25</sup> Beyond the theatre, the play also spawned souvenir memorabilia, advertising memes, popular songs, and a spoof 1909 novella *The Swoop!* by P. G. Wodehouse (featuring a troop of well-drilled Boy Scouts who foil the would-be invaders). The play also jumped medium

to the 'bioscope', in the form of a short patriotic picture filmed with real troops on the vulnerable Sussex Downs which played throughout 1909, while a longer version began filming in September 1914 as a wartime recruitment tool.<sup>26</sup> This extensive range of responses testifies to the play's extraordinary social impact, making it a landmark of pre-war theatre in terms of cultural prominence, if not theatrical merit.

### *The War God: A Pacifist Riposte*

Far more sophisticated than du Maurier's univocal pro-compulsory service vehicle is Zangwill's philosophical tragedy *The War God*. It is set not in England, but in the militaristic fictional nation of 'Gothia' (another thinly veiled version of Germany) after Gothia has conquered its culturally-similar neighbour 'Hunland' (probably intended to signify Austria). Zangwill was a well-known advocate of progressive causes, successful author of social realist novels, and one of a notable group of novelists who turned to play-writing to address socio-political issues in the early 1900s. Described by Heinz Kosok as the 'most ambitious attempt to dramatize the threat of a future war', *The War God* was inspired by Zangwill's dismay at the worsening geopolitical situation in the 1910s.<sup>27</sup> Like du Maurier's play, *The War God* intervenes in the continuing defence debate, but on the opposite side: reflecting Zangwill's support for the contemporary peace movement. In this 'drama of ideas', Zangwill uses the tragic form to stage a moral battle between conservative militarism and socialistic pacifism (and also revolutionary anarchism), which comes down overwhelmingly on the pacifist side. Discussing this dialectical technique, Zangwill wrote that 'only drama, giving through its personages even opposite answers, can give the full reply to any human question'.<sup>28</sup> Just as du Maurier's characters embody moral lessons, Zangwill created a belligerent Gothian Chancellor, Count Torgrim, who strongly resembled Germany's famous former 'Iron Chancellor' Bismarck, and used this character to critique two contemporary versions of European militarism – British defence-mindedness and German expansionism. Like du Maurier, the National Service League and the other British war-preparedness advocates, Torgrim preaches the paradoxical doctrine of maintaining geopolitical stability through increased defence spending – 'To safeguard peace we must prepare for war' – and thus he stockpiles arms, battleships and airships.<sup>29</sup> But this '[a]ccursed' 'war-fiend' (31) also privately advocates violent imperial expansion, aiming to 'change this ... continent into a greater Gothia' (132) and 'expunge Perfidious Alba [England] from the map of Europe' (13). To expose

Torgrim's 'loathsome fallac[ies]', Zangwill employs a Christlike pacifist character Count Frithiof, who argues that stockpiling often 'makes the very war it guards against' (78) and denounces the exploitative capitalist 'social order' underpinning Torgrim's expansionism (80). In Frithiof, who was interpreted by contemporary reviewers as a fictional version of the influential pacifist Leo Tolstoy, Zangwill was able to encode his message of support for collective resistance to militarism through depiction of non-violent means.<sup>30</sup>

Despite its German setting and pacifist message, *The War God* still replicates some key invasion genre tropes, especially in its representation of Germany as a hyper-nationalist enemy scheming to invade England and depiction of Germany's leader as a megalomaniac war-monger. This accords with a key element of Matin's invasion-scare typology – the portrayal of the enemy as underhanded and nefarious, which is also evident in *The War God's* scaremongering hints that Torgrim's spies already pervade England. It notably shares many of these invasion genre characteristics with H. G. Wells's anti-imperialist novel *The War in the Air* (1908), in which a highly aggressive Germany, led by a fanatically expansionist Prince, initiates a devastating, unwinnable global war, in an overblown scenario extrapolated from real-world geopolitical tensions. Just as Wells's alarming, exaggerated Germany likely undermined his non-belligerent position in *The War in the Air*, so the similar portrayal in *The War God* might have served to intensify audiences' invasion fears and defence-mindedness rather than bolstering pacifism.

Written in blank verse in archaic language, *The War God* was never likely to captivate a wide audience, was performed only three times at His Majesty's Theatre, and failed to make a theatrical impact. Meri-Jane Rochelson observes that most of Zangwill's political plays in this period were criticised for being didactic, overly ambitious, and falling short of the successful Shavian social problem tradition they worked within.<sup>31</sup> The *Saturday Review* and the *Athenaeum*, for example, praised *The War God's* idealism but denounced its 'extravagant' rhetoric and 'tortuous plot'.<sup>32</sup> Others, however, received *The War God* as an unequivocally thought-provoking work far 'above the inanities of musical comedy', and, despite its limited run, the play reached beyond theatrical circles to receive the adulation of pacifist advocates who proclaimed: 'Mr. Zangwill has given to the literature of the peace movement a really great play.'<sup>33</sup> Indicative of *The War God's* international reach and influence within the peace movement was the admonitory quotation of Torgrim's warmongering preparedness maxim in a rousing anti-militarisation speech by the Southern democrat and anti-war advocate Thomas Sisson in the US House of Representatives on the eve of war in 1914.<sup>34</sup>

### From Pre-war to Wartime

Despite their diametrically opposed positions, Zangwill and du Maurier wrote their plays to promote what each believed was the public good, and in doing so left a notable impact on their cultural landscape. In the competitive pre-war theatrical marketplace, their plays, and the others of the genre, gave dramatic physical embodiment to the inflammatory tropes of invasion fiction, creating vivid scenes for the public of terrifying futures to be avoided, in order to make their cases and to sell tickets. Just as penning invasion fiction acted as a kind of dry run for the novelists who later contributed to the wartime propaganda effort, so the pre-war plays established the playbook for propagandistic wartime drama as theatre began to mobilise for the war effort. The spy theme prominent in the pre-war plays informed the alarmist wartime spy play, which, according to Collins, was the earliest, largest and most persistent genre of war plays and indicative of widespread wartime unease that a covert invasion of Britain had already begun.<sup>35</sup> While Gale argues that ‘dramaturgical formulae adapted from sensational melodrama formed the basis of popular [wartime] spy dramas’, this overlooks the bridging role played by pre-war invasion and spy plays, especially melodramas such as *The Invasion of Britain* and *The Chalk Line*.<sup>36</sup> This link is clearly illustrated by one of the most successful wartime plays, J. E. Harold Terry and Lechmere Worrall’s *The Man Who Stayed at Home* (1914), which premiered in December 1914, but was written just before the war and heavily foregrounded the threats of espionage and invasion. Running for an impressive total of 587 performances, the play turned on the revelation that its seemingly ‘weak-kneed’ protagonist is in fact a dogged British counter-agent who foils a German spy-ring’s plans for an East Anglian invasion landing.<sup>37</sup> Showing the clear influence of *An Englishman’s Home*, E. Temple Thurston’s *The Cost* (Sept–Oct 1914) was an ambivalently patriotic play which illustrated the ‘cost’ of war through demonstrating its deleterious effect on ‘a conventional middle-class home’.<sup>38</sup> In doing so it deployed du Maurier’s chief didactic device of domestic space turned upside-down, which Gale observes became a stock device of the wartime plays.<sup>39</sup> Like du Maurier’s play, but with far greater urgency, many of the early wartime plays were deliberately written to boost recruitment. These include Edward Knoblauch and Seymour Hicks’s *England Expects* (1914) and Bertrand Davis’s *A Call to Arms* (1914), which each featured dutiful Volunteer and cowardly shirker characters much akin to du Maurier’s types and followed Esher’s ‘blueprint’ of placing military recruiters in the theatre.<sup>40</sup> On a smaller scale, *The War*

*God's* resonance may be evident in the duplicitous, belligerent German Chancellor depicted in J. M. Barrie's unsuccessful *Der Tag* (1914), while the villainous enemies of the melodramatic pre-war invasion plays anticipate the brutal Germans whom Helen E. M. Brooks observes were a key trope of the wartime recruitment plays.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, Zangwill's pacifism anticipates the strand of wartime plays that sufficiently evaded the censor to protest the conflict's brutality, such as John Drinkwater's *X = 0: A Night of the Trojan War* (1917). Several scholars note in passing the foreshadowing effect of *An Englishman's Home*, but this analysis of the pre-war plays as a body of works shows that the connections are more than incidental and that the wartime playwrights had a lucrative established theatrical tradition to draw on. Indeed, the very reutilization of by-then hackneyed invasion-genre dramatic conventions in the wartime plays may provide one explanation, overlooked until now, for why the wartime plays were often charged with failing to adequately capture the realities of the war experience.

### Conclusion

As this chapter elucidates, the theme of future war and invasion was much more prevalent in pre-war theatre than the few plays generally countenanced by theatre scholarship suggests, which is not surprising given how much attention the threat of invasion received in public discourse. Furthermore, the plays focused on here – *An Englishman's Home* and *The War God* – were produced in some of the era's most prominent theatres – Wyndham's and His Majesty's – and championed by some of its best-known theatrical figures: matinee idol and brother of Guy, Gerald du Maurier; and famous actor-manager of His Majesty's, Herbert Beerbohm Tree. While invasion plays have subsequently fallen into obscurity for their dubious quality and fleeting topicality, they were nonetheless an important part of the cultural landscape of the pre-war period as a whole and its theatre more specifically. As the still-dominant visual form of entertainment in this period, theatre played a vital role in the social transmission of ideas, meaning that the pre-war invasion plays cumulatively contributed to disseminating the fear of invasion and framing the defence debate for the public.

However, as the range of forms discussed here demonstrates, the theatrical representation of invasion was not univocal. Though the issue of invasion was prominent in public discourse, this may have been driven by a vocal minority of pro-defence advocates, and the success of the numerous theatrical skits on invasion may indicate that the public did not take

the threat quite as seriously as these scaremongers might have hoped. Similarly the prominence of special effects and pyrotechnics in the plays, even in the more serious-minded *An Englishman's Home*, indicates a less-than-patriotic public glee at witnessing the nation in ruins and a theatre industry willing to indulge it. As Christian Melby, who focuses on the potential positives of the invasion fiction reading experience, argues, 'the popularity of the stories does not automatically indicate that the politics of the narratives were accepted by their readers'.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, the deep and lasting social impact of *An Englishman's Home* is evident in contemporary accounts describing how it framed people's initial responses to the war. For volunteer officer Stanley Casson, the experience of receiving his orders to leave for France was 'as dramatic as *The Englishman's Home* [sic]'.<sup>43</sup> And Vera Brittain recalled thinking differently in August 1914 of the play she had deemed 'crude and ridiculous' in 1909, coming to view the head mistress who had obliged her to attend *An Englishman's Home* as 'possessing the foresight of the vigilant'.<sup>44</sup> While it is increasingly argued that wartime theatre played an effective role in promulgating militarism and encouraging young men to enlist, the precedent for this was clearly set in the pre-war period when the scare-mongering tactics of the pro-defence lobby took theatrical form.

### Notes

- 1 Guy du Maurier, *An Englishman's Home* (New York: Harper, 1909), 89.
- 2 'National Defence Meeting at Mayfield', *Courier* (Kent and Sussex), 12 February 1909, 10.
- 3 'Books in Brief', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 24 Aug 1906, p. 4.
- 4 'Veteran', 'Military Notes', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 20 March 1906, 1.
- 5 Louis Tracy, *The Invaders: A Story of Britain's Peril* (London: Pearson, 1901), 13, 9.
- 6 David Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics and British War Planning, 1880–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 164.
- 7 Rebecca D'Monté, *British Theatre and Performance 1900–1950* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 34.
- 8 John MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester: MUP, 1984), 46.
- 9 Maggie B. Gale, *A Social History of British Performance Cultures 1900–1939: Citizenship, Surveillance and the Body* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 162.
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