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CLOSING THE CURTAIN: M E BRADDON'S LAST PERFORMANCE AS MARY SEYTON

AS Jennifer Carnell's research has shown, at seventeen Braddon moved to Bath where she started acting under Mrs Macready's management. Braddon's acting career lasted for eight years, beginning in 1852 and ending in 1860. During these eight years, Braddon toured the entire country; from Scotland to Southampton, from the provinces to the capital. This demanding schedule meant she travelled constantly, never settling in one place for a long period of time. After her London debut failed, Braddon returned to the provinces, performing in Hull and Beverley in 1856-7 with Messrs Wolfendon and Melbourne's company, subsequently returning to Hull for six nights in June 1859 under the management of Henry Nye Chart. It is with Chart's company that Carnell notes Braddon ended her acting career, on Tuesday 28 February 1860 in Brighton.¹ However, on 25 June 1860, Braddon returned to Hull for one final performance under her stage name, Mary Seyton: she acted in a benefit

¹ Jennifer Carnell, *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon: A Study of her Life and Work*, (Hastings, 2000), 375.

night with Messrs Wolfendon and Melbourne's company to raise money for Pearson Park.² This final performance has never been acknowledged or interrogated, though it poses some significant alterations to Braddon studies with regard to her links to Hull and the East Riding, her transformation from Mary Seyton to M E Braddon and for the reputation of Messrs Wolfendon and Melbourne's theatrical company.

The need for a theatrical benefit arose when Hull's Mayor, Zachariah Pearson, bought 27 acres of land for £7400 to create the park in 1859.³ The same year, Braddon had returned to perform in Hull with Chart's theatrical company so there seems a strong possibility she would have heard of the venture when it was reported in the local press. With the rise of Hull's population, living conditions became cramped and the need for open spaces was paramount. The park was to be used freely by the public, and was the first of its kind in Hull as other parks charged for admittance. It became known as the 'People's Park' and it opened in 1860.

After the Board of Health were given the land, they had to raise money for its construction. These public endeavours relied heavily on donations from wealthy benefactors, one of which was Wolfendon and Melbourne's theatrical company. They performed in Hull's Queen's Theatre on Paragon Street, which was particularly note-worthy because its auditorium could seat 3,000 people, its stage was ninety feet deep and it was reputed to be the largest theatre outside of London.⁴ Messrs Wolfendon and Melbourne were renowned theatre

² 'Advertisements & Notices', *Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, (22 June 1860), 3936, 5.

³ Hull History Centre Website, http://www.hullhistorycentre.org.uk/discover/hull_history_centre/our_collections/sports_and_leisure/parks_and_gardens.aspx [Last Accessed 9/1/15].

⁴ Donald Roy, 'Theatre Royal Hull; or, The Vanishing Circuit', *Essays on Nineteenth-Century British Theatre*, (eds.) Kenneth Richards and Peter Thomson, (London, 1971), 29.

directors and they offered to host a theatrical benefit evening to raise money for the construction of the People's Park where all gross proceeds from the entertainment went straight into the Park's fund - they would not deduct any expenses.

Their offer caused controversy and a dispute arose within the Board of Health as to whether or not they could accept the money raised by a theatrical benefit. The debate was recorded in the minutes of the meeting and published in the *Hull Packet and East Riding Times* for all to read. Mr H J Atkinson, a member of the board, considered the theatre a disreputable occupation and thought it best to refuse the money as it would be tainted. It was noted he thought that:

On the face of it, it was a liberal offer on the part of Messrs Wolfenden and Melbourne, but he considered the Queen's Theatre was almost a curse to the town. He would only point to all that existed round it, and to the dram-shops that suddenly opened out ... indeed every corner was a gin palace.⁵

Ald. Blundell, another member of the board, took the opposite stance to Atkinson by championing the entertainment. The minutes state that he 'considered that an unwarranted and unnecessary attack had been made ... There was not a theatre to be met with in the county of York or any where that was better conducted, and with a more due regard to morality'. Blundell was supported by Ald. Geesham, who noted that Atkinson's

observation[s] ... might have applied to the previous, but not the present management.

A better conducted place of amusement did not exist, and its complexion could not be

⁵ 'Entertainment at the Queen's Theatre in aid of the funds of the Pearson Park', *Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, (8 June 1860), 3934, 8.

impeached. He considered the place was so completely changed and altered, that he looked upon the offer of the managers as a compliment to the committee.⁶

Overall, Blundell argued the council should be honoured to receive the funds raised from this theatrical entertainment. The issues surrounding this theatrical benefit extended beyond simply fundraising for the new park, as the reputation and respectability of the theatrical profession and their patrons were being measured, and would decide their future standing within the city of Hull.

The outcome of this debate was that Wolfendon and Melbourne's generous offer was accepted, and the benefit night took place on Monday 25 June 1860, and it was advertised accordingly in the local papers. The evening's entertainment consisted of a musical score, a comedy, an operatic song, a poetic address, a comedic interlude and a farce. The opening comedy was Charles Dance's *The Wonderful Woman* in which Braddon played the young niece Cecile, a piece she had performed in before with this company, but in the role of the rich widow Hortense.⁷ As well as performing in the drama, Braddon also wrote the poetic address that was delivered by Wolfendon, and which was published in the *Hull Packet* after the event. In this monologue she compares Pearson's offering of the park to Hull's shipping industry, writing that he had 'never launched a better, braver barque/Than when he charter'd this the People's Park'. Not only did the benefit night raise over £70 for the People's Park,⁸ which went to fund the entrance gates, lake and bandstand, but it also left a lasting monument to the Mayor, it established the theatre's respectable reputation in the city and, as an extension, it was a fitting final curtain call that celebrated Braddon's time as an actress.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Carnell, *Literary Lives*, 319.

⁸ 'The Theatrical Entertainment in aid of the funds of the Pearson Park', *Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, (29 June 1860), 3937, 6.

Furthermore, while moving the final date of Braddon's acting career from 28 February to 25 June 1860 is a small alteration to Braddon studies, it is significant when considering her other ties to the East Riding. On two separate occasions Braddon moved to the county with her mother and set up home in different areas. In 1856-7 she moved to Beverley where she lived with a family on Smeaton Street, she then set up her own home in Adelaide Street before moving to Grimstone Street in Hull. When she returned in 1859, Braddon briefly became a governess in Black House, Beverley Parks, for six months. Braddon's thoughts on the county are detailed in a letter she sent to Hull journalist, David Oliver, and quoted in *The Times*: 'Kingston-Upon-Hull is now indeed a splendid city, and I greatly admire the wide streets and fine buildings'.⁹ Moving around the county developed Braddon's appreciation for its beauty and her love for the people, their habits, hobbies and food, which she drew on for the rest of her life in her writing career, a career that began in Beverley.

While in the East Riding Braddon published her first poetry in the *Beverley Recorder and General Advertiser* under the watchful eye of her Beverley patron, John Gilby, she wrote her first two short stories 'Captain Thomas' and 'The Cold Embrace', which were both published in the London journal *The Welcome Guest* in 1860, and she also wrote her first novel, *Three Times Dead* (1860), under commission for the Beverley printer, Charles Empson of Toll-Gavel.¹⁰ Even after she moved from the county, Braddon did not forget her time in Yorkshire; she claimed she had spent the 'happiest half-year of my life' there.¹¹ As Ruth Morris has shown, Yorkshire looms large in Braddon's vast oeuvre, with over fifty of her

⁹ See Beverley letters and envelopes in 'Mary Braddon Family Archive', Augustine Library, Canterbury Christ Church University; 'Musical and Dramatic Notes', *Hull Daily Mail*, (13 April 1886), 2; Carnell, *Literary Lives*, 118; and 'Words of Gold Flowed from Her Pen', *The Times*, (1 March 1941), 4.

¹⁰ Carnell, *Literary Lives*, 87-141.

¹¹ 'My First Novel', *The Idler*, (July 1893), III, 27.

ninety novels containing some reference to the county.¹² This demonstrates that Yorkshire inspired her throughout the whole of her career, eventually becoming a character in its own right within her fiction.

By returning to Hull for one last professional acting performance in the Pearson Park benefit night,¹³ Braddon not only begins her writing career in the East Riding, but also closes her acting career within the county's borders, casting off her guise as Mary Seyton to create her novelist identity as M E Braddon. This theatrical benefit indicates an acknowledgement of her high regard for Messrs Wolfendon and Melbourne's theatrical company because she returned specifically for one night to aid their venture. It strengthened the fond memories she had of the area and the gratitude she felt for it because it gave her the time, space, means and creative freedom to develop her writing skills and change careers. Even after this change from acting to writing, her return further signifies her need to continually champion the acting profession as a reputable career during a time when it was considered tainted with associations of 'gin palaces' and other sins. Finally, it paradoxically demonstrates her need to conceal her acting past from her writing future, so that the taint would not colour her literary reputation. It has long been acknowledged that Braddon's acting and writing careers overlapped, but her return to Hull solidifies the connections between her two paths while marking out the divide between them.

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¹² Ruth Morris, *Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Yorkshire: Dialect, Place and Setting in Victorian Sensation Literature*, (Academica, 2013), 5.

¹³ Braddon performed in a few other theatrical events later on in her life, such as a play in Jersey in 1876 for the Beverley born actor, Wybert Rousby, whom she had met during her time touring Yorkshire with Messrs Wolfendon and Melbourne. See Carnell, *Literary Lives*, 11.