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Introducing *Critical Essays*: Leigh Hunt and Theatrical Criticism in the Early Nineteenth Century

MICHAEL EBERLE-SINATRA

[F]orty or fifty years ago people of all times of life were much greater playgoers than they are now. . . . Nobility, gentry, citizens, princes,—all were frequenters of theatres, and even more or less acquainted personally with the performers.

Leigh Hunt, *Autobiography* (1850)¹

THE years 1801 to 1808 saw the emergence of Leigh Hunt as a public figure on the London literary scene, first with the publication of his collection of poetry, *Juvenilia*, and then with his work as theater critic for *The News* between 1805 and 1807. Although rarely mentioned by modern critics, Hunt's early theatrical reviews, which provided the basis for his volume *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres*, deserve to be re-evaluated and placed in his corpus of theatrical writings, which are typically taken to consist chiefly of his articles in *The Examiner* and *The Tatler*.² In his introduction to *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, Tom Paulin describes Hazlitt as "the first major art critic in English."³ I argue in what follows that Hunt was the first major Romantic theater critic. Hunt changed the way plays were reviewed in periodicals at the beginning of the nineteenth century by writing longer reviews than

1. Leigh Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, ed. J. E. Morpurgo (London: The Cresset Press, 1949), p. 136, hereafter cited in the text as *Autobiography*.

2. The only modern selection of Hunt's dramatic criticism comprises articles solely from *The Examiner* (published between 1808 and 1820) and from *The Tatler* (published between 1830 and 1831); see *Leigh Hunt's Dramatic Criticism, 1808–1831*, ed. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949).

3. Tom Paulin, "General Introduction," in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), 1, xii.

was the practice at the time. He also focused in greater detail than was common at the time on the performances of actors, as well as on the scenery, costumes, and music of specific stagings.

At the same time, Hunt is arguably the first Romantic critic to develop the concept of a “mental theatre.” An examination of the pieces included in his *Critical Essays* reveals that Hunt devotes as much attention to the actors as to the debate on the question of reading versus performing plays—a question that would preoccupy other Romantics during the following two decades. Alan Richardson argues that “[i]f the process of reading is emphasized, it is because the Romantics found their own response to Shakespearean tragedy strongest in reading.”⁴ As an active theater critic, Hunt addresses this issue by insisting on the importance of the imagination. He introduces the role of the readerly imagination as a critical tool, a way to re-examine not only the way one approaches the texts of Shakespeare’s plays, but also how performances of these plays should be judged. Although other major Romantic critics (Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Lamb) would later write extensively about the importance of the imagination in drama and about the superiority of reading Shakespeare over seeing his plays performed, Hunt’s criticism (dating from 1805 to 1807) anticipates these three critics by several years. Even if there are valid questions about the absolute primacy of these ideas, it is certainly reasonable to argue for Hunt’s relative originality in terms of their publication history.⁵

The value of Hunt’s dramatic criticism has of course been recog-

4. Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), p. 19.

5. Although Hunt wrote theatrical criticism earlier than Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt did, I do not claim that he was more experienced with the theatrical world than they were when they started publishing reviews. Lamb and Coleridge had both written plays, and, as P. P. Howe points out, “[u]nlike the generality of dramatic critics, Hazlitt attended the theatre for twenty years before he began to write about it” (*The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. [London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1930–34], v, 399). Similarly, Lamb went to his first play in 1781 and started going to the theater regularly in 1789, although his first extensive discussion of drama, “Theatralia. No. I.—On Garrick, and Acting; and the Plays of Shakespeare, considered with references to their fitness for Stage Representation,” appeared in Hunt’s *Reflector* in 1811. (Lamb’s review of George Crooke’s performance as Richard III in the *Morning Post* for 8 January 1802 cannot be considered as a theoretically informed, critical review.) Although Coleridge started lecturing on Shakespeare in 1811, he never published his lectures. He would discuss Shakespeare at greater length in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) and, as an exemplar of what he called “method,” in the 1818 edition of *The Friend*. I am grateful to Nicholas Halmi for drawing my attention to this reference in *The Friend*.

nized by scholars, although this recognition is primarily based on his reviews for *The Examiner*. Discussing these review articles in their edition of Hunt's dramatic criticism, Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens observed that "one interesting feature of Hunt's criticism . . . is the fact that he gave impetus to the English Romantic movement by his adoption of romantic criteria in certain reviews for the *Examiner*, an influential London newspaper which disseminated his ideas widely."⁶ Without diminishing the importance of Hunt's articles in *The Examiner*, I would argue that the theatrical criticism published in *The News* laid the foundation for many of his later views on drama and acting. Hunt's writings on the actors of his time in *Critical Essays*, like the reviews and extended articles on theatrical subjects in *The News*, marked a distinct change in direction at the outset of his literary career. In many ways the essays make an original contribution to dramatic criticism and literary journalism of the period. They also provide the opportunity for Hunt to declare his "independence" as a writer, a stance he struggled all his life to maintain.

I. Theatrical Criticism and *The News*

When in 1805 Hunt came to write theatrical criticism for *The News*, a weekly published by his brother John, most other periodicals of the time did not pay much attention to drama. Though the tradition of periodicals devoted to the theater began in 1720 with Richard Steele's *The Theatre* and continued in the nineteenth century with publications such as Thomas Dutton's *Dramatic Censor; or, Weekly Theatrical Report*⁷ and Thomas Holcroft's *Theatrical Recorder*,⁸ most of these pub-

6. Leigh Hunt's *Dramatic Criticism, 1808-1831*, p. viii.

7. The first issue of Dutton's *Dramatic Censor; or, Weekly Theatrical Report* was published 4 January 1800. The journal changed its format after six months, and, from July 1800 until September 1801, it became *The Dramatic Censor; or, Monthly Epitome of Taste, Fashion, and Manners*. It finally reverted to a weekly publication as *The Dramatic and Literary Censor*, from 9 October to 18 December 1801. Throughout its two years of existence, Dutton's *Dramatic Censor* contained the germs of independent journalism that the Hunts put in practice in *The News*. Although it offered occasionally lengthy reviews of performances, short notices remained its principal form.

8. Thomas Holcroft's *The Theatrical Recorder* ran from December 1804 to May 1806. It contained mainly short notices of performances, typically reproduced from other newspapers. Holcroft also included new dramas and biographies in his monthly publication, as well as essays on the art of acting, which often dealt with the character of Hamlet and the intrinsic difficulty of performing it properly. It is worth pointing out that Holcroft was also a playwright, who was personally acquainted with actors;

lications included short and medium-length articles rather than detailed reviews. In this respect they were similar to the major “generalist” daily newspapers, such as *The Times*, the *Morning Post*, or the *Morning Herald*, which included only short notices about drama and representations of new plays, usually brief descriptive pieces. Evening newspapers such as the *Sun*, the *Star*, the *Courier*, or the *Lloyd Evening Post* did not discuss drama at all. Weekly papers such as William Cobbett’s *Weekly Political Register* also did not contain dramatic reviews. Monthly publications of the early nineteenth century did tend to include brief summaries of new plays appearing in the London theaters. To mention only two, the *European Magazine and Review* and the *Monthly Mirror* presented some general comments on new plays, more extensive in length than those included in the dailies but still without serious critical commentary. The important exception is *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, which devoted an unusual amount of attention to actors and the general atmosphere of the plays, including the audiences’ reactions. Louis Landré suggests that these articles might have inspired Hunt, who knew John Bell personally and certainly read his weekly; Landré notes, however, that Hunt’s criticism is more detailed and extensive.⁹ I would add that Hunt’s distinctive strength lies in his close reading of the actors’ performances and in his emphasis on acting as a dramatic art in its own right.

Although, like his contemporaries, Hunt focuses his attention on famous actors and their favorite roles, he self-consciously avoids the habits of name-dropping and flattery that were becoming customary at the time. John Taylor evokes this culture of theater criticism in his autobiography *Records of my Life*, where he discusses numerous actors and playwrights with whom he was regularly in contact, including Kemble, Hull, Siddons, O’Keefe, and Sheridan.¹⁰ Taylor records the various favors that theater managers asked of newspaper editors, the

see *Memoirs of the Late Thomas Holcroft, Written by himself, and Continued to the Time of his Death, from his Diary, Notes, and other Papers*, ed. W. Hazlitt, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816).

9. Louis Landré, *Leigh Hunt (1784–1859): Contributions à l’histoire du romantisme anglais*, 2 vols. (Paris: Edition “Les Belles-Lettres,” 1936), II, 101–102.

10. John Taylor’s *Records of my Life*, 2 vols. (London: Edward Bull, 1832), provides some fascinating insights on the theatrical scene in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially with regard to the small world of journalism.

practice of praising friends, and the general trend of biased journalism at the turn of the century.¹¹ Hunt also discusses the practice of “puffing” in his *Autobiography*:

Puffing and plenty of tickets were . . . the system of the day. It was an interchange of amenities over the dinner-table; a flattery of power on the one side, and puns on the other; and what the public took for a criticism on a play was a draft upon the box-office, or reminiscence of last Thursday’s salmon and lobster-sauce. The custom was, to write as short and as favourable a paragraph on the new piece as could be; and to say that Bannister was “excellent” and Mrs. Jordan “charming”; to notice the “crowded house” or invent it, if necessary; and to conclude by observing that “the whole went off with *éclat*.” (*Autobiography*, p. 155)¹²

Forty years previous to this comment in the *Autobiography*, Hunt had already emphasized the link between a good meal and a good review when he wrote about “those amiable journalists, who will abuse one performer merely to please another, who after getting drunk at an actor’s table will come and tell us what power he possesses over their senses, and what a want of solidity there is in that man who never invites them to eat his roast beef” (*Critical Essays*, p. 181).¹³ Although Theodore Fenner rightly remarks that Hunt was not the first to voice a complaint against the practice of puffing,¹⁴ Hunt’s independent stance in theatrical criticism is worth underscoring because it had a direct impact on his political writings in *The Examiner*.

Between 19 May 1805 and 13 December 1807, Hunt reviewed plays performed in London for *The News*. These essays were unusual for their length and for their serious attention to what were, after all,

11. Taylor, *Records of my Life*, II, 138; 271–72. Hazlitt also acknowledged the practice of praising friends in his essay “On Patronage and Puffing,” *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, VIII, 292. See also Hazlitt’s essay “Whether Actors ought to sit in the boxes?” in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, VIII, 279.

12. Hunt gives a sarcastic definition of “a crowded house” as “a theatre on the night of a performance, when all the back seats and upper boxes are empty” (*Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres, including general observations on the practice and genius of the Stage* [London: John Hunt, 1807], “Appendix,” p. 19; hereafter cited in the text as *Critical Essays*).

13. Hunt also indicates in his appendix that “[a] good actor” generally meant “the general term for an actor who gives good dinner” (*Critical Essays*, “Appendix,” p. 20). Hunt’s own career began partly because of his involvement in literary circles when he became a regular visitor at John Bell’s house, and then at Rowland Hunter’s.

14. Fenner discusses this practice of puffing in some detail in *Opera in London: Views of the Press, 1785–1830* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), pp. 7–11.

ephemeral events. In his articles Hunt not only describes each play from a very critical perspective—he never refrains from criticizing actors and playwrights, unlike many other journalists—but he also pays close attention to costumes, stage direction, and musical accompaniment. What is new and distinctive in the criticism Hunt published in *The News* is his dedicated attention to acting and its socio-educational aspect. Hunt is interested in performances that bring something to the audience, whether an emotional experience or an education—or an improvement in their manners. The relevance of the performance to the audience is thus, for Hunt, the basis for an intelligent appraisal of acting.

Hunt did not have a strong interest in the abstract theory of drama that Joanna Baillie had discussed several years before in the “Introductory Discourse” to her *Series of Plays* (1798) and that Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt also debated in the 1810s and 1820s, although he does consider certain generic categories of drama, such as comedy and tragedy. His serious critical attention was devoted to major actors of the time, and these essays analyze at length specific performances as well as more general qualities and defects of the actor under consideration, especially in relation to the new style of acting then being adopted by many. The expanded stages of London theaters at the end of the eighteenth century reduced the sense of intimacy between audience and actors, and as a result any subtle acting skill was lost in barely audible performances for those audience members sitting furthest away from the stage. As Jeffrey N. Cox notes, “[i]t was now impossible for an actor or actress to rely upon small effects of voice or movement in such cavernous halls.”¹⁵ Actors were to perform in a style very different from that of the mid-eighteenth century, which was suited to smaller, more intimate stages. This physical change in the theaters encouraged an exaggerated style tending toward the grand effect, a style repeatedly criticized by Romantic writers, including Hunt.

Hunt is generally more critical of new plays and favors more classical works, particularly those of Shakespeare. He deplored the excessive adulation given to certain popular actors and the consequent treatment of plays as mere vehicles for stars or future stars. Play-

15. Jeffrey N. Cox, “Introduction,” *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789–1825*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), p. 9.

wrights wrote plays tailored to satisfy the demands of both actors and audience. The playwright Richard Cumberland acknowledges the influence actors had on playwrights:

Perhaps it is to be lamented, that their influence is such, as to induce an author to make greater sacrifices, and pay more attention, to the particular persons, whom he has in view to represent the characters of his play, than to the general interests of the play itself.¹⁶

The full development of the star system indeed reconfigured the theatrical scene of the early nineteenth century. For instance, the famous actors Kean and Kemble were personally involved in the choice and the adaptation of the plays put on stage at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. However little appreciated by members of the theatrical world for the frankness of his criticism,¹⁷ Hunt quickly established himself as a major theater critic in London during the three years he wrote for *The News*. Early in 1808,¹⁸ a number of his essays based on his pieces in *The News* appeared under the title *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres, including general observations on the practice and genius of the Stage* in a volume printed by, and dedicated to, John Hunt. As Fenner remarks,

[Hunt's] skill as an experienced critic is clearly evident in *Critical Essays*, with which he culminated his work for [*The News*]. Its very appearance is testimony to that skill, for theatrical essays were not considered the kind of matter to be distinguished by placing them between hard covers.¹⁹

When Hunt publishes *Critical Essays*, he is by that very gesture arguing that theater reviews as a literary form (or at least his own theatre

16. Richard Cumberland, *Supplement to the Memoirs of Richard Cumberland* (London: Lackington, Allen, & Co., 1807), p. 63.

17. In his *Autobiography*, Hunt humorously recalls that the playwright Thomas Dibdin sent him a hostile letter, that Charles Incledon, a leading tenor of the time, called him the "d—d boy," and that George Colman the younger attacked him indirectly in the prologue to one of his plays (*Autobiography*, p. 160). Colman's lines are: "If we give trash, as some few pertlings say, / Why flocks an audience nightly to our play?" (quoted in George Dumas Stout, "Studies toward a Biography of Leigh Hunt," dissertation [Harvard, 1928], p. 26).

18. Although the date 1807 appears on the title page of *Critical Essays*, the volume was published in January 1808, as shown by the advertisement in *The Times* (19 January 1808) and the prospectus for *The Examiner* included in *Critical Essays*, which indicates that "[t]he first number of this Paper appeared on the 3rd January, 1808."

19. Theodore Fenner, *Leigh Hunt and Opera Criticism: The 'Examiner' Years, 1808–1821* (Lawrence, Manhattan, and Wichita: The University Press of Kansas, 1972), p. 47.

reviews) are deserving of serious attention, are in fact serious drama criticism. That he chooses to put out such a volume also attests to his popularity as theatrical reviewer at the beginning of 1808, and the publication of *Critical Essays* marks the next step in establishing him as a major theatrical critic.

II. *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres*

As the title indicates, Hunt's principal focus in *Critical Essays* is on actors, virtually to the exclusion of all other aspects of dramatic performance. But Hunt also refers throughout the essays to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century playwrights, the politics of the London theaters, and even the political aspects of drama as suggested by the xenophobic dimensions of some characters.²⁰ In addition, he includes two theoretical introductions to the sections on tragedy and comedy. Numerous details serve to lend the volume an air of literary authority, from the quote from Horace on the cover,²¹ to the detailed index (organized both thematically and by the names of individuals cited), and in the references to established, respected authors such as Congreve, Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson, Racine, Milton, Addison, and Voltaire.

Contemporary reviews such as the *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* and the *Critical Review* praised the depth and sharpness of Hunt's criticism; the latter also declared, "[u]pon the whole, these essays are sensible, ingenious, and amusing; and the instructions which they contain, the merits which they extol, and the defects which they censure, constitute a dramatic monitor, whose wholesome counsels we earnestly recommend to the male and female performers of the English stage."²² This is an indication of the contemporary appreciation of Hunt's prose style, but also of his objective and critical stance

20. On one occasion in the *Critical Essays*, Hunt comments on the presence of French characters in some plays and their political use to assert the superiority of England and reinforce English nationalism; see Hunt's essay "Mr. Blanchard" in *Critical Essays*, p. 122.

21. The quotation, from *De Arte Poetica*, is: "Respicere exemplar vitae morumque jubebo / Doctum imitatore, et veras [for vivas] hinc ducere voces." The meaning is clearly relevant to the potential reader of *Critical Essays*: "I would advise one who has learned the imitative life to look to life and manners for a model, and draw from thence living words" (*Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica*, ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, second edition, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929], pp. 476–77).

22. [Anon.], "Review of *Critical Essays*," *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, 33 (June 1809), 191; [Anon.], "Article IV—*Critical Essays*—The Performers of the London Theatres," *Critical Review*, 14 (August 1808), 379.

vis-à-vis the London stage. Hunt's monitoring attitude also earned him praise from the anonymous reviewer of *The Cabinet*, who commends Hunt for introducing impartiality and objectivity to theatrical criticism, qualities that the reviewer says are absent from most such criticism at the time.²³ Hunt had stated in his first article for *The News* that impartiality was to be the keyword of his criticism:

One novelty at least, it is trusted, will always gratify our readers in their perusal of *The News*: an *impartiality of Theatrical Criticism*. On this entertaining subject we shall usually bestow a considerable proportion of our time and of Paper, and shall embrace in our strictures not only the merits of the Actors and Dramatic Writers, but the management also of the Stage itself, and all those little local proprieties, so requisite to a finished Actor, which go under the general denomination of the business of the Stage. By these means we presume that while we are entertaining our Readers, we may offer some useful hints to those who so often entertained us, and who form one of the most delightful enjoyments of a great city.²⁴

Here Hunt emphasizes once again the lack of impartiality of the contemporary press in his essay on the actor Alexander Pope: "As to the newspapers, and their praise of this gentleman, I do not wish to repeat all the prevailing stories. Who does not know their corruption?" (*Critical Essays*, p. 23). Hunt judiciously inserts an asterisk after "As to the newspapers" which refers the reader to the appendix for a longer attack on the art of theatrical criticism as currently found in other newspapers; Hunt also echoes here Dr. Johnson's negative comment on the importance of actors in comparison with the freedom of critics.²⁵

Critical Essays makes clear how different Hunt's style is from the standard criticism published in contemporary newspapers. Whereas the typical review is superficial in its treatment of performances, Hunt

23. [Anon.], "Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres," *The Cabinet*, 6 (February 1809), 142.

24. Leigh Hunt, "Theatricals," *The News* (19 May 1805), 6.

25. See Samuel Johnson's "New Actors on the Theatre," *The Idler*, 25 (7 October 1758), rpt. in *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, L. F. Powell, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 77–80. As late as 1831, Hunt would still have to defend his personal style of direct criticism of actors, and he felt the need to justify himself thus: "We do not attack players, dead or alive; we only criticise, and express an opinion" ("The Play-Goer," *The Tatler*, 172 [25 July 1831], rpt. in *The Tatler. A Daily Paper of Literature, Fine Arts, Music, and the Stage*, ed. Leigh Hunt, 4 vols. [London: R. Seton, 1830–32], III, 83).

reveals a finely tuned attention to the details of an actor's performance and stage direction. Performances were more commonly described in terms of the actors' relationship with the critics than with what happened onstage, but Hunt pays scrupulous attention to the actors and the quality of their acting. In fact, as Joseph Donohue remarks, Hunt can be said to excel at describing the power of an actor's performance.²⁶ The choice of the actors under discussion is also innovative. Hunt declares in the preface to the *Critical Essays*:

The second and third sections [of the *Critical Essays*] are confined to those performers, whom I regarded as the possessors of some exclusive originality. Somebody perhaps will still miss his favourite king or his favourite footman; but I have endeavoured to criticise those only who deserve applause, not those who merely obtain it. (*Critical Essays*, pp. viii–ix)

Earlier on in the preface, Hunt comments:

If any man, not very fond of music, will reflect a little between the acts of one of the modern comedies, he will find that his chief entertainment has arisen from the actors totally abstracted from the author. . . . It was this strange superiority of the mimetic over the literary part of the stage, of the organ in fact over its inspirer, that determined me to criticise the actors. (*Critical Essays*, pp. vi–viii)

The distinction between the mimetic and the literary aspects of the stage is a crucial element in Romantic re-assessment of contemporary drama. It is in this context that Hunt remains consistently interested in the actors in a play (as Lamb does in several of his theatrical essays).²⁷ In his discussion of actors, Hunt puts into practice his stated critical principles, as in this extract from his essay on the actor Pope:

If we have just had an example of almost perfect tragedy [in the preceding essay on Siddons], we have now an instance of every fault that can

26. Joseph Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), p. 146. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens also assert: "In a day when much dramatic criticism was mere foggy generalization, Hunt was specific. Actors, authors, and stage managers alike found his criticism something tangibly useful that might be adopted in the next day's rehearsal" (*Leigh Hunt's Dramatic Criticism*, p. vii).

27. See, for instance, Lamb's essays "On Some of the Old Actors" and "On the Acting of Munden." For an enriching account of Lamb's dramatic theory, see John I. Ades, "Lamb, Shakespeare, and Early Nineteenth-Century Theater," *PMLA*, 85 (1970), 514–26.

make it not only imperfect but disgusting. Mr. POPE has not one requisite to an actor, but a good voice, and this he uses so unmercifully on all occasions, that it's value is lost, and he contrives to turn it into a defect. His face is as hard, as immovable, and as void of meaning as an oak wainscot, his eyes which should endeavour to throw some meaning into his vociferous declamation he generally contrives to keep almost shut, and what would make another actor merely serious is enough to put him into a passion. (*Critical Essays*, p. 22)

Hunt's style is sharp and straightforward, his description of Pope's defects simultaneously witty and imaginative—and ruinous for Pope. The suggestive image of the oak wainscot, coupled with his colorful choices of words and turns of phrase, vividly recreate for his readers an experience of the performance.

Recalling this part of his career in his *Autobiography*, Hunt regrets some of the comments he made about actors in *Critical Essays*, with the striking exception of the frequent criticisms he made of John Philip Kemble: “I think I was . . . right about Kemble; but I have no regret upon that score. He flourished long enough after my attacks on his majestic dryness and deliberate nothings” (*Autobiography*, p. 157). Kemble's first major theatrical work, *Macbeth Reconsidered; An Essay: Intended as an Answer to Part of the Remarks on Some of the Characters of Shakespeare*, was published anonymously in 1786 in response to Thomas Whately's *Remarks on Some of the Characters of Shakespeare* (1785). *Macbeth Reconsidered* presents a detailed counter-argument to Whately, principally attacking Whately's characterization of Macbeth as a coward, and attempting to counter this characterization with one of Macbeth as a complex, intrepid character in the vein of Richard III.²⁸ The main interest of the book lies in Kemble's reading of *Macbeth* from an actor's point of view. When the book was published, Kemble was a rising star at Drury Lane, having made his debut as Hamlet two years before. He would then replace David Garrick as the leading actor of his time, before being replaced himself by Edmund Kean several years later.²⁹ Because of Kemble's

28. Kemble's *Macbeth Reconsidered* was reissued in 1817 in an extended version so as to include a study of Richard III.

29. Hunt asserts that it was “a critical religion in those times to admire Mr. Kemble” (*Autobiography*, p. 155). Similarly, Hazlitt writes: “We wish we had never seen Mr. KEAN. He has destroyed the KEM-

fame at the beginning of the nineteenth century, rivaled only by that of his sister Sarah Siddons, it comes as no surprise to find him as the subject of Hunt's first essay in *Critical Essays*. For Hunt, Kemble is an actor whose personal faults at times intrude in his performances, yet at other times are advantageous. Referring to Kemble's playing Penruddock in Richard Cumberland's *The Wheel of Fortune*, Hunt describes it as "his greatest performance, and I believe it to be a perfect one" (*Critical Essays*, p. 8). Significantly, however, it is only a great performance because of Kemble's tendency to overact and to impose an overbearing seriousness on the character he performs: "[T]he very defect which hurts his general style of acting, that studious and important preciseness . . . contributes to the strength, to the nature of *Penruddock*" (*Critical Essays*, p. 8). The essay then continues:

Wherever this air of self-importance or abstraction is required, Mr. KEMBLE is excellent. It is no small praise to say of an actor that he excels in soliloquies: these solitary discourses require great judgment because the speaker has no assistance from others, and because the audience, always awake to action, is inclined during a soliloquy to seek repose in inattention. Indeed to gain the attention of an audience is always in some degree to gain their applause, and this applause must cheerfully be given to Mr. KEMBLE, who by his busy air and impressive manner always attaches importance to a speech of whatever interest or length. (*Critical Essays*, p. 9)

The subtlety of Hunt's criticism is evident as he cleverly disguises a negative comment on Kemble's attitude on stage as an apparent compliment. Hunt then asserts that Kemble's exaggerated attention to minute details is "the great fault of his acting" (*Critical Essays*, p. 10), and ends the essay with a discussion of Kemble's very personal delivery, a topic that Hunt and others would tackle again in later articles.³⁰ Although Hunt praises Kemble for an understanding of the author's

BLE religion; and it is the religion in which we were brought up" ("Theatrical Examiner No. 262," *The Examiner*, 467 [8 December 1816], 775; *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, v, 345). This comment should not hide the fact that Hazlitt was a great admirer of Kean, as his numerous theatrical reviews printed in *The Examiner* and other newspapers show.

30. John Ambrose Williams remarks in his *Memoirs of John Philip Kemble* that "Mr. Kemble's pronunciation has been the subject of much controversy and ridicule. His orthöepy has frequently been different from the established rule; as in the well-known instance of the word *aches*, which he pronounces as two syllables" (*Memoirs of John Philip Kemble, Esq. with an Original Critique of his Performance* [London: John Bowley Wood, 1817], p. 75).

text, he also reproaches him for his self-indulgent effort to pronounce the words in his own manner. For the sake of novelty, and under the pretext of linguistic improvement, Kemble alters the pronunciation of certain words and the consequent result, in Hunt's view, is an amusing but pointless exercise. Furthermore, by using an apparently learned and careful system of pronunciation—what Hunt describes as a “studious and important preciseness”—Kemble disassociates himself from the more common, popular form of expression. This, for Hunt, is a grave mistake, since it alienates a large part of the audience.

Hunt's style in these essays often anticipates Hazlitt (though it does not quite rise to the level of Hazlitt's brilliant prose) and the resemblance in style hints at Hunt as a possible influence on Hazlitt, who we know was familiar with Hunt's criticism. We may hear such resemblances in the following extract on critics, one of the most effective passages in the *Critical Essays*:

CRITICS are without doubt the most unpolite beings upon earth; they have no more tenderness for the faults of ladies than of gentlemen, arguing very singularly that if ladies chuse to become public characters they must endure public examination and sometimes public reproof; they say curiously enough, that their peace is not to be disturbed merely because a writer is called Mistress instead of Mister, and that they cannot be delighted even though it is an actress that plays badly and not an actor. All this is very shocking and ungallant, but then it would be more shocking if these ladies were to lose their wits for want of a little rational advice. (*Critical Essays*, p. 44)

Hunt is both playful and direct, here. He pretends to attack “unpolite” critics only to reassert that theatrical criticism should always be free of any gender bias. He cleverly demonstrates that male and female actors are to be treated on the same level because they share a public status. Hunt also wittily defends his own position as an independent writer, free from the influence of the actors' popularity or personal acquaintance,³¹ as well as from the gender deference com-

31. Hazlitt also argues virulently against a critic's acquaintance with actors in his 1822 essay “Whether Actors ought to sit in the boxes?”: “Spare me this insight into secrets I am not bound to know. The stage is not a mistress that we are sworn to undress. Why should we look behind the glass of fashion? Why should we prick the bubble that reflects the world, and turn it to a little soap and water?” (*The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, viii, p. 279).

monly found in other critics' works. Hunt's "Rules for the Theatrical Critic of a Newspaper," which he includes in the appendix to the *Critical Essays*, is another instance of his sarcastic style, sharply critical. The rules consist of five sections describing what a theatrical critic "should" do.

In the first place—Never take any notice whatever of the author of a play or of the play itself, unless it be a new one: if the author be living, it is most probable you will have no reason to speak of him more than once, and if he be not living, you have no reason to speak of him at all, for dead men cannot give dinners. (*Critical Essays*, "Appendix," p. 18)

In this rule, as in the other, Hunt's ironic tone obviously undermines any serious reading of these rules as something other than what they are: a strong criticism of the current practices of puffing and bribery. The rules underscore the defects of theatrical critics that Hunt attacks throughout his writings on theater.

Behind this criticism lies a positive view of the role of the theater critic in influencing the popular reception of drama. Hunt has considerable confidence in the power of responsible journalism to educate a public that has not had the benefit of the kind of education afforded to the privileged classes. If the journalist can either be a conduit for popular opinion or attempt to shape that opinion, Hunt advocates the latter role, attempting to make himself something of a public educator. His style reflects this engagement; he aims principally to enrich the public's critical opinions about acting, in a style that is learned but with a diction that is not elevated, so as to prove accessible to any audience. In addition, he repeatedly provides the reader with entertaining prose and humorous comments, evoking familiar scenes and events from various plays performed on the London stage with which contemporary theater audiences would have been familiar. It is worth remembering that the actors under consideration in *Critical Essays* were all well known and popular. So Hunt would have found a sympathetic audience for this opening of an essay on Bannister:

WHEN I write the name of BANNISTER, a host of whimsical forms and humourous characters seems to rise before me, and I had much

rather lay down my pen and indulge myself in laughter. But there is a time for all things; laughter is a social pleasure, and as I have got nobody to laugh with me, I had better be composed. (*Critical Essays*, p. 60)

The last part of this passage also underscores the social element of theater-going, a popular activity that drew hundreds of people together under one roof to share the ephemeral experience of a performance.

The organization of the *Critical Essays* into chapters focused on individual actors suggests how seriously Hunt treats acting as a dramatic art. In his essay on comedy, he asserts, "I am writing not upon authors, but actors" (*Critical Essays*, p. 48), and he declares in the preface, "I have endeavoured to criticise those [actors] only who deserve applause, not those who merely obtain it" (*Critical Essays*, p. ix). Hunt's main goal throughout *Critical Essays* is a detailed analysis of the qualities and defects of the actors under consideration, classified by genre to illustrate how their strengths and weaknesses play in certain roles. Hunt considers it his duty to point out failings in actors who lack one or more of the qualities necessary to the art. Thus, he describes Henry Johnston as "invariably too lofty, his mien becomes haughty when it should merely be steadfast, and as he possesses a very expressive countenance and a commanding figure this haughtiness has an effect peculiarly observable" (*Critical Essays*, p. 36). Hunt acknowledges the fact that a great character may be proud and affected and performed as such, but points out that an actor should not emphasize this character trait too much, for this excess can easily diminish the actor's performance.

Hunt's essay on Elliston is one of the best instances of the critics' independent stance. Elliston is, in Hunt's view, the greatest actor discussed in the collection, in itself a sign of Hunt's critical independence, since Elliston primarily excelled at comedy at a time when tragedy was considered the highest dramatic art, and Kemble, a tragic actor, was universally praised as exemplary. Hunt goes so far as to assert that Ellison is "the only genius that has approached [Garrick] in universality of imitation" (*Critical Essays*, pp. 180–81), one who "in the true inspiration of his art . . . excels [Kemble]" (*Critical Essays*, p. 182). He particularly praises Elliston's original acting style, his ability to express a feeling with his body-language which at the same time is perfectly attuned to his speech, and yet also to move from one

emotion to another easily. Elliston's versatility and enthusiasm differentiates him from other actors, although his choice of comic roles diminishes his standing amongst other actors in the eye of the public: "[I]f Mr. ELLISTON performed in tragedy only, he would be thought a much better tragedian, not only because the critics would more willingly allow him his single claim, but because his comic powers would no longer present their superior contrast" (*Critical Essays*, p. 203).

The effective rhetoric displayed throughout *Critical Essays* is part of a prose style which was to prove characteristic of Leigh Hunt for the rest of his career. A good example of his talent as a writer in full control of his style can be found in the third introductory essay, in which Hunt discusses *Hamlet*.

The character of *Hamlet* however seems beyond the genius of the present stage, and I do not see that it's personification will be easily attained by future stages; for it's actor must unite the most contrary as well as the most assimilating powers of comedy and tragedy, and to unite these powers in their highest degree belongs to the highest genius only. With all the real respect I have for a true actor, I must rank him in an inferior class both to the great painter and great musician; and neither of these inspired ones has united comic and tragic excellence. It is the pen alone, which has drawn a magic circle round the two powers, and rendered them equally obedient to the master's hand. (*Critical Essays*, pp. 183–84)

Here Hunt sums up the inherent difficulty of performing a complex character such as Hamlet when he notes that the actor "must unite the most contrary as well as the most assimilating powers of comedy and tragedy." The musician and the painter are viewed as superior in their creative powers to the actor; but Hunt argues masterfully for the supreme creativity of the writer. That Hunt, who considered himself a poet above all else, advocates literature over drama, painting, and music is not really a surprise.

According to most Romantics, to perform some of Shakespeare's plays, particularly *Hamlet*, in a way that did the text justice was an impossible task.³² Hazlitt declares that "[t]here is no play that suffers

32. In Hunt's view, *Hamlet* was to remain the most difficult of Shakespeare's plays to perform. In 1830 Hunt would comment in *The Tatler* that he had never seen a representation of *Hamlet* that did justice to the play, nor was he expecting to see one. He felt that "[Hamlet] is a character, though quite in nature, made up of too many qualities than are likely to be represented by any but a *Hamlet* himself" ("The

so much in being transferred to the stage.”³³ Similarly, Lamb famously asserts, “It may seem a paradox, but I cannot help being of the opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on a stage, than those of almost any other dramatist whatever.”³⁴ Lamb also states that he is “not arguing that Hamlet should not be acted, but how much Hamlet is made another thing by being acted.”³⁵ As Alan Richardson notes, “Charles Lamb’s paradoxical and deliberately perverse argument that Shakespeare’s tragedies are better read than performed helps clarify his contemporaries’ turn from the stage.”³⁶ Because of the common practice in the early nineteenth century of adapting plays for performance, one must take into consideration the extent to which the Shakespeare performed and viewed by the Romantics was in fact not the Shakespeare they knew as printed texts.³⁷ Indeed, actors themselves often edited texts of plays so as to promote their interpretations of the characters, a common theatrical practice that seems to have become more common during the Romantic period. Kemble is certainly the best example of this practice since he arranged no less than forty plays, including all the Shakespearean plays he performed, making him the leading arranger of his time, with more than twice as many arrangements as Kean would make.³⁸

Play-Goer,” *The Tatler*, 32 [22 October 1830], rpt. in *The Tatler. A Daily Paper of Literature, Fine Arts, Music, and the Stage*, 1, 167).

33. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, iv, 237.

34. *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 7 vols. (London: Methuen, 1903–1905), 1, 99. Terence Allan Hoagwood suggests that the contemporary censorship of passages in certain Shakespeare plays (such as *King Lear*) under political pressure might be another reason for Lamb’s preference for reading the plays as opposed to seeing them performed (“Romantic Drama and Historical Hermeneutics,” in *British Romantic Drama: Historical and Critical Essays*, ed. Terence Allan Hoagwood and Daniel P. Watkins [London: Associated University Press, 1998], pp. 27, 52 n20).

35. *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 1, 101.

36. Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theater*, p. 2.

37. Greg Kucich shrewdly notes that Keats “seemed most invigorated by Shakespeare when ‘Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again’ not when jostling into the theater to watch compromised versions of the play” (“‘A Haunted Ruin’: Romantic Drama, Renaissance Tradition, and the Critical Establishment,” *The Wordsworth Circle*, 23.2 [1992], 65).

38. For a list of Kemble’s adaptations, see *English Drama of the Nineteenth Century: An Index and Finding Guide*, ed. James Ellis (New Cannan, Connecticut: Readex Books, 1985), p. 145. For a detailed analysis of Kemble’s adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, see Harold Child, *The Shakespearean Productions of John Philip Kemble* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1935). See also Charles Mahoney’s “Upstaging the Fall: Coriolanus and the Spectacle of Romantic Apostasy,” on Kemble’s 1817 adaptation of *Coriolanus* (*Studies in Romanticism*, 38.1 [1999], 29–50). Hazlitt was very much against the adaptations, and he asserts in his

Lamb's and Hazlitt's comments express a prejudice in favor of the printed text of Shakespeare's plays over their performances, a view shaped by Hunt and Coleridge. In fact, all four writers questioned whether the stage ever could do justice to Shakespeare's greatest plays, an argument principally based on the supreme importance of the imagination.³⁹ In Hunt's case, imagination is to be interpreted not in the Coleridgean epistemological sense, nor in Shelley's moral sense, but in a more general sense. For Hunt, imagination constitutes both a creative and interpretive process, as he points out in *Critical Essays*:

Imagination then is the great test of genius; that which is done by imagination is more difficult than that which is performed by discernment or experience. It is for this reason, that the actor is to be estimated, like the painter and the poet, not for his representation of the common occurrences of the world, not for his discernment of the familiarities of life, but for his idea of images never submitted to the observation of the senses. (*Critical Essays*, p. 51)

Here we see the explicit articulation of Hunt's emphases upon the need to look beyond the actor's physical appearance in terms of his gestural style, his costume and his make-up. In this sense, Hunt's treatment of the actor is more concerned with a positive sense of the capacity of the audience for creative response than with the actor's mimetic ability. Furthermore, the need for the actor to internalize his role leads to an exploration of the role of imagination in performance, on the part of the actor as well as the audience. Hunt explains the role of the imaginative audience in his criticism of the actor Alexander Pope. Commenting on Pope's very limited range of facial expression, Hunt writes:

[W]hen an actor's face is not exactly seen, an audience is content to supply by its own imagination the want of expression, just as in reading a book we figure to ourselves the countenance of the persons interested. But when we are presented with the real countenance, we are disap-

essay on *Richard III*: "The manner in which Shakespear's plays have been generally altered or rather mangled by modern mechanists, is a disgrace to the English stage" (*Characters of Shakespear's Plays; The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, iv, 300).

39. Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730–1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 134.

pointed if our imagination is not assisted in its turn; the picture presented to our eyes should animate the picture presented to our mind; if either of them differ, or if the former is less lively than the latter, a sensation of discord is produced, and destroys the effect of nature which is always harmonious. (*Critical Essays*, p. 25)

Hunt exhibits a dialogic understanding of how the imagination of audience and performer interact. The parallel between imagining the actor's expression on stage and imagining "the countenance of the persons interested" when reading clearly underscores the pre-eminence of imagination in his dramatic theory.

In asserting that actors must have the creative imagination to do justice to the plays they perform, and in including references to actors whenever he discusses dramatic theory, Hunt differs significantly from Hazlitt, Lamb, and Coleridge. In fact, Coleridge's own emphasis on reading and theorizing about Shakespeare's plays led him to focus on Shakespeare's texts rather than the performances. Coleridge's sustained interest in dramatic theory, as opposed to performance, in his lectures and in the *Biographia Literaria* is matched by the virtual absence of references to actual contemporary actors in his writings.⁴⁰ Similarly, Lamb's strong criticism of the decision to perform a Shakespeare play versus reading it is most forceful in his comment on *Lear*, first published in Hunt's *Reflector* in 1811.⁴¹ Hazlitt's view is that actors cannot properly perform Shakespeare's words.⁴² Hunt, however, offers a new approach to the question of perfor-

40. In the chapter on *Bertram* in *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge chooses not to reproduce the section of his letter to the *Courier* where he discusses Kean's performance in the role. In the letter, Coleridge acknowledges Kean's interpretation of the leading role as in accordance with the part as written (and therefore worthy of praise), but also asserts that the same excess in style in a performance of *Othello* or *Richard III* he would condemn as "extravagance and debasement" ("To the Editor of the Courier," *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987], 1, 261).

41. Lamb writes: "But the Lear of Shakspeare cannot be acted. . . . On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage: while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear,—we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms[.]" ("Theatralia. No. 1," in *The Reflector, A Collection of Essays, on Miscellanies Subjects of Literature and Politics*, ed. Leigh Hunt, 2 vols. [London: J. Hunt, 1812], II, 308).

42. For instance, in his review of Kean's performance as Richard II, Hazlitt writes: "the reader of the plays of Shakspeare is almost always disappointed in seeing them acted; and, for our own parts, we should never go to see them acted, if we were not found as critic to do so" ("Theatrical Examiner No. 193, Mr Kean's Richard II," *The Examiner*, 377 [19 March 1815], 191; *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, v, 222).

mance versus reading by associating the actors with the audience in realizing the imaginative potential of the plays. In other words, Hunt anticipates the debate on reading versus performing in his theatrical essays by stressing the importance both of active involvement on the part of the audience and of appropriate performance by the actors.

However, as Jonathan Bate observes, once imagination is considered as pre-eminent for a proper understanding of the plays, one can argue that the plays are best rendered in the imagination of the individual reader and not on stage.⁴³ To a certain extent, this was to be the opinion held by most Romantic writers. The beginning of the nineteenth century witnesses a shift from a tradition of acting *and* reading, as illustrated in David Garrick's and John Philip Kemble's comments, to a new tradition of scepticism about the capacity of contemporary theater troupes to perform Shakespeare's plays properly, a scepticism evident in Coleridge's, Hunt's, Lamb's, and Hazlitt's comments. The recourse to new technologies of stage illusion for many plays emphasizes the crucial distinction between the visual impact of a play and its imaginative impact. Stage illusion employs various props, such as lighting effects and scenery changes, that are meant to influence the audience's physical perception of the play and the corresponding sense of illusion. The actors contribute to this stage illusion by playing with these elements and integrating them into their acting—for instance, by moving into the shadows before reciting their lines to add a touch of Gothicism.⁴⁴

However, stage illusion differs significantly from the dramatic illusion of most Romantic writers. For Coleridge, the aesthetic experience taking place during a performance is dependent, to a certain extent, on the willing and active audience awareness of illusion as illusion.⁴⁵ Hazlitt and Lamb might be said to agree with Coleridge's view here, but not Hunt. Frederick Burwick declares that the inter-

43. Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions*, p. 129.

44. For a detailed discussion of the various techniques of stage illusion at the turn of the nineteenth century, see Frederick Burwick, "Romantic Drama: From Optics to Illusion," in *Literature and Science: Theory & Practice*, ed. Stuart Peterfreund (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), pp. 167–208.

45. Frederick Burwick, *Illusion and the Drama: Critical Theory of the Enlightenment and Romantic Era* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), p. 222. For an extensive discussion of Coleridge's ideas on dramatic illusion and Schlegel's influence on his theories, see Frederick Burwick, *Illusion and the Drama*, pp. 191–229. Burwick also discusses, more briefly, Lamb's ideas on dramatic illusion, pp. 74–79.

est of the Romantics in dramatic illusion has to do with the fact that “[t]he phenomena of illusion offer insight into the ambiguities of knowledge and the frail and fallible access we have to self, others, and the world.”⁴⁶ Although I agree with Burwick, I would suggest that Hunt stands apart from the other Romantics, and from Coleridge in particular, in at least one key respect: he does not share Coleridge’s philosophical interest in dramatic illusion. As Janet Ruth Heller notes, Coleridge thought that,

[l]ike many popular novels and waxworks, the theatre merely appeals to the senses when it tries to copy reality. In contrast, by reading good plays, one can use the imagination actively to transcend the senses and the ego, to become spellbound by ennobling concepts, and to sympathize with the sufferings of other people.⁴⁷

The Coleridgean use of imagination as a way to “transcend the senses and the ego” is, however, not a concept that appeals to Hunt. Hunt’s decision to base his dramatic criticism on his own principled response to specific dramatic performances is part of what he takes as critical “independence.” Unlike Coleridge, Hunt does not look to the authority of philosophy as a necessary foundation for his criticism. In fact, one of the characteristics of Hunt’s theatrical criticism can be illustrated in his continuing engagement with dramatic performances. Hunt shares Coleridge’s, Lamb’s, and Hazlitt’s doubt about the possibility of properly performing Shakespeare’s plays, but he remains interested in the actual physical performances of these plays, primarily because he saw this as part of his role as a dramatic journalist.

Hunt’s essays in *The News* and *Critical Essays* clearly convey his views on the role of the dramatic critic. He is more “independent” than Coleridge in conceiving the critic’s role as not to endorse an established authority but, so to speak, to “vote” for or against particular performances and to give sound reasons for his opinion. By encouraging his readers to reflect on their reasons for admiring a given actor’s performance, Hunt aims to make them informed and responsible members of the theatrical audience, aware of their power

46. Burwick, *Illusion and the Drama*, p. 303.

47. Janet Ruth Heller, *Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and the Reader of Drama* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p. 91.

in giving or withholding applause. As one who empowers his readers by informing them of the principles that guide his judgment, Hunt feels that the critic's role is fundamental to ensuring the quality of contemporary theatrical performances. In the face of the new focus of popular attention on the figure of the actor, and of the power of the actor as a drawing card for theater revenues, Hunt wants to ensure that drama criticism remains impartial, free of economic biases. The role of the critic becomes especially important in light of the greatly expanded audience, which gives theaters more economic importance and thus economic power *vis-à-vis* the critics and newspaper owners.

Criticizing the absence of standardized critical rules of judgment for this new kind of theater, Hunt regularly reasserts his wish for an independent criticism. The following is taken from an article published in *The News*, and was reproduced in the appendix to the *Critical Essays*:

It is the boast of the writer of this article that his opinions have been guided by nothing but a regard for truth, for the real pleasure of the town, and for the literary reputation of Englishmen; and it is his happiness that these opinions have been approved by the public. . . . It is time to rescue the critical character of the public prints from the charge of carelessness, of ignorance, and of corruption; they are the directors of the public taste and the correctors of its depravation, and they should study to deserve the confidence of those whom they would instruct. (*Critical Essays*, "Appendix," pp. 16–17)

Hunt is extremely direct in his attacks on the press; his own criticism certainly exemplifies his wish to improve "the critical character of the public prints." A few years later in *The Examiner*, Hunt writes,

The effect of the drama upon real life appears to us to be of a very general cast, not a particular one; and to keep alive a certain softness and sociality of spirit, without which, among other helps, a nation might relapse into brutality.⁴⁸

Hunt views drama as one of the major social influences on the citizens of a country. Many years later, he will again acknowledge the

48. Leigh Hunt, "The Late Mr. Sheridan," *The Examiner*, 446 (14 July 1816), 435.

importance of the role of the theatrical critic, and its attendant responsibilities:

Never, after I had taken critical pen in hand, did I pass the thoroughly delightful evenings at the playhouse which I had done when I went only to laugh or be moved. I had the pleasure, it is true, of praising those whom I admired; but the retributive uneasiness of the very pleasure of blaming attended it; the consciousness of self, which on all occasions except loving ones contains a bitter in its sweet, put its sorry obstacle in the way of an unembarrassed delight[.] (*Autobiography*, p. 136)

As Louis Landré observes, Hunt believes in the importance of his task: since the theater is a forum that can serve to educate the public's taste and inspire its further reflections, the task of the responsible theatrical critic is to assert the value of a performance with these criteria in mind.⁴⁹

Hunt concludes *Critical Essays* with "An essay on the Appearance, Causes, and Consequences of the Decline of British Comedy." Having repeatedly attacked contemporary dramatists throughout the previous essays, he now presents, in greater detail, what he considers to be their faults, beginning with a disclaimer:

The vanity of these writers, who cannot imagine that any critic should unceasingly object to their manoeuvres without personal hostility, has rendered it necessary on our part to disclaim such a feeling entirely, and we repeat, that we know nothing of these men but their dramatic attempts: we hope and believe that they are good private characters; but they are doing all they can to ruin the British Drama, and they must be treated as the public violators of literature. (*Critical Essays*, "Appendix," p. 48)

Having pre-empted any possible attack on the charge of personal hostility, Hunt then proceeds to establish the various failings of these writers, especially their use of puns instead of wit to win applause. He also reproaches them for writing prologues and epilogues that flatter the audience and thus assure a generous response in return. To explain the current popularity of what he considers bad comedy,

49. Louis Landré, *Leigh Hunt*, II, 104.

Hunt brings into the discussion the lack of a sufficient critical presence in the newspapers. "The great *existing* reason," he says, "is the mere want of critical opposition. If the newspapers were unanimous, they might overthrow the farci-comic writers in a few months" (*Critical Essays*, "Appendix," p. 55). Hunt suggests that the current absence of serious theatrical criticism is due in part to the relegation of drama criticism to mere short notices in most newspapers, in order to make way for extended articles on politics, and in part to the tendency of critics themselves to write short, positive reviews reflecting too great a sensitivity to the internal politics among playwrights, theater managers, and journalists.

Later, in his *Autobiography*, Hunt would comment on his youthful inexperience as a theatrical critic, but this modesty does not do justice to the pieces collected in *Critical Essays*. Despite this slight self-deprecation, Hunt acknowledges the fact that these early essays reveal his acquaintance with the styles of Voltaire and Johnson, two important influences on him, and that they are written with more care and attention than was customary for newspaper writing at that time (*Autobiography*, p. 160). Hunt's concern about and writing of theatrical criticism was to last for close to thirty years, both in periodicals he edited himself, such as *The Examiner*, the *Chat of the Week*, or *The Tatler*, and in others, such as *The Times* or *True Sun*. Hunt's early theatrical criticism arguably marks the creation of a new kind of writing about theater, a broadening of drama criticism to include a closer attention to acting and a more serious interest in comedy. It also empowered members of the theatrical audience to think about what they saw and heard, to reserve their praise and applause for good acting, and not to hesitate to criticize what insulted their intelligence or taste. Ultimately, Hunt strongly encourages the public to follow his example and to exercise a truly critical, independent judgement.

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