

« Performing Leigh Hunt's 1840 Play "A Legend of Florence" »

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dans *Transnational England: Home and Abroad, 1780-1860*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. 92-110.

Pour citer ce chapitre :

SINATRA, Michael E., « Performing Leigh Hunt's 1840 Play "A Legend of Florence" », dans Monica Class et Terry F. Robinson (dir.), *Transnational England: Home and Abroad, 1780-1860*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. 92-110.

PERFORMING LEIGH HUNT'S 1840 PLAY
A LEGEND OF FLORENCE

MICHAEL EBERLE-SINATRA

In his 1831 novel entitled *A Playwright's Adventures*, the famous dramatist Frederick Reynolds writes of the many obstacles faced by a writer for the stage:

... his *first* difficulty consist[s] in pleasing *Himself*—his *second* difficulty in pleasing the *Manager*—his *third*, in pleasing the *Actors*—his *fourth*, in pleasing the *Licenser*—his *fifth*, in pleasing the *Audience*—his *sixth*, in pleasing the *Newspapers*: and, in addition to all these, the actors must *please* not to be taken ill, the weather must *please* not to be unfavourable, the opposing theatre must *please* not to put up strong bills; and then!—what then?—why then—“*Please* to pay the bearer the small sum of * * *,” and, N.B. which sum is sometimes, *par accident*, not paid at all.¹

All of these difficulties—authorial, dramaturgical, environmental, and financial, which Reynolds and many other contemporary playwrights had confronted during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, were still extant when Leigh Hunt decided to write *The Legend of Florence* in the late 1830s after an earlier, unsuccessful attempt at dramatic composition in 1819.² After facing such trials and tribulations, Hunt would see *The Legend of Florence* successfully staged in London in 1840. Though he does not address the matter in great detail in his 1850 *Autobiography*, even when he reflects on his life as a drama critic, the process of writing and producing *The Legend of Florence* brought about a

¹ Frederick Reynolds, *A Playwright's Adventures* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, & Green, 1831) 2.

² Leigh Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, ed. J.E. Morpurgo (London: The Cresset P, 1949) 150. Hunt had had his play, *The Cid*, first turned down by Edmund Kean and the manager at Drury Lane in July 1819 and then, once submitted to Drury Lane under the management of Robert William Elliston the following month, accepted with some revisions. Hunt, however, decided in the end that the play was “unfit for the stage” and therefore withheld it.

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major change in his career. Indeed, Hunt's literary pursuit marks an intriguing shift from theatre commentator to dramatist, as he negotiated the demands of the critic and playwright.

I.

Written in blank verse with an appropriate language level for the “well-bred” characters, *A Legend of Florence* illustrates the way in which Hunt's commendation of the successful integration of performance and tragedy in his many theatrical reviews takes on a new form in his dramatic writing. The play is a five-act drama based on a popular tale of an obedient wife who is buried while in a trance brought about by her husband's harsh and tyrannical treatment. She awakens in the tomb and returns to her husband's house only to be rejected. She then seeks shelter at her lover's house. The action begins with a discussion between Fulvio da Riva, a poet, and Caesare Colonna, an officer of the Pope Leo X (played by George Vandenhoff), who meet on the road from Florence to Rome. Through their dialogue, the audience learns about Agolanti, a noble Florentine who has been married to Ginevra for four years. Da Riva describes Agolanti to Colonna, who interjects a couple of remarks, in terms that clearly set up Agolanti as the evil character in the play:

Riva. That fellow,
As you call him, is one of the most respectable men
In Florence. ‘Men,’ do I say? One of the richest
And proudest nobles; of strict fame withal,
Yet courteous; bows to every one, pays every one—

Col. Oh villain!

Riva. Flatters every one; in short,
Is as celestial out of his own house,
As he is devil within it. (*Whispering in his ear.*) Ginevra's husband.

Col. The devil it is! (*Looking after him.*) Methinks he casts a blackness
Around him as he walks, and blights the vineyards.³

Da Riva and Colonna discuss Agolanti's hesitation for bringing Ginevra to town to participate in the festivities to welcome the Pope. The play soon reveals that Agolanti's mistreatment of his wife has no specific cause except for his jealousy over the well-known love of Antonio for his wife. (Antonio was in love with Ginevra before her husband had met her but she never returned his affection.) Caught between her lover's insistence upon

³ Leigh Hunt, *A Legend of Florence*, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), li:39-50, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, U of Iowa Libraries, 812.1 T144li.

wooing her and her husband's jealousy, Ginevra meets Antonio's desire with frustration and anger and endures a decline in health due to her husband's constant suspicions and tyrannical nature. Ginevra (played by Ellen Tree who latter married Charles Kean) announces to her friend Olimpia in the second scene:

Remember, Lady Olimpia, I have been ill; —
I am but getting better, and such draughts
Of pleasure and amazement, poured unceasing,
Might drown the little faculties of poor me.⁴

And then again, to her husband in the second act of a scene much praised by reviewers for Ellen Tree's dramatic talent and the beauty of Hunt's play, Ginevra laments,

What can I say,
Or what, alas! not say, and not be chided?
You should not use me thus. I have not strength for it,
So great as you may think. My late sharp illness
Has left me weak.⁵

In the third act, Antonio (played by John Anderson) invites Agolanti (played by Walter Moore) to meet him near the woods of his house. After a brief and unpleasant exchange, the two men are about to draw their swords against each other when they are informed of Ginevra's death in a scene that underscores Antonio's true love for Ginevra and Agolanti's despicable character:

Ang. (drawing his sword.) Death in this own throat!
Ron. Tempt me not.
Ang. Coward!
Ron. (drawing his sword.) All you saints bear witness!
[*Cries of 'Agolanti! Signor Agolanti!*]
Enter Servants in disorder.
First Serv. My lady, sir.
Ago. What of her?
Serv. Sir, she is dead.
Ago. Thou say'st what cannot be. A hundred times
I've seen her worse than she is now.
Ron. Oh horror!
To hear such words, knowing the end! — Oh dreadful!

⁴ Hunt, *Legend* I.ii.13-16.

⁵ Hunt, *Legend* II.ii.57-60.

But is it true, good fellow? Thou are a man,
And hast moist eyes. Say that they served thee dimly.
Serv. Hark, sir.

[*The passing-bell is heard. They all take off their caps, except AGOLANTI.*]

Ron. She's gone; and I am alone. Earth's blank;
Misery certain.—The cause, alas! the cause!

[*Passionately to AGOLANTI.*]

Uncover thee, irreverent infamy!

Ago. (uncovering.) Infamy thou, to treat thus ruffianly
A mute -struck sorrow.

Ron. Oh God! to hear him talk!

To hear him talk, and know that he has slain her!⁶

Following her entombment in the family vault on an open bier, as Italian tradition dictates, Ginevra wakes from her death-like trance and makes her way back to her husband's house. Agolanti reacts to Ginevra's appearance in the second scene of the fourth act with horror and disgust and shuts her out, believing her to be a monstrous ghost in another scene in which Hunt explores the dramatic tension in Agolanti's character:

[*Going towards the window, he stops and listens.*]

Ang. What was it? a step? a voice?

Gin. (is heard outside.) Angolati!

Francesco Agolanti! husband!

Ago. (crossing himself, and moving towards the window.) It draws me,
In horror, to look on it.—Oh God!—I see it!

There is—something there—standing in the moonlight.

Gin. Come forth, and help me in—Oh help me in!

Ago. It speaks! (*very loudly.*) I cannot bear the dreadfulness!

The horror's in my throat, my hair, my brain!

Detestable thing! witch! mockery of the blessed!

Hide thee! Be nothing! Come heaven and earth betwixt us!

[*He closes the shutters in a frenzy, and then rushes apart.*]

Rejected thus by her husband, Ginevra visits the house of her lover who welcomes her as a heavenly angel. Ginevra stays with Antonio and his mother for five days until her husband discovers her whereabouts through a servant. Once Agolanti becomes aware that she is truly alive, Ginevra must ignore her love for Antonio and, instead, fulfill her duty by returning to her husband. Her doing so, however, causes her great emotional pain, as

⁶ Hunt, *Legend* III.ii.163-76.

⁷ Hunt, *Legend* IV.iii.34-42.

this extract from another scene in the fifth act, showcasing Ellen Tree's talent as the leading actress her days, attests:

Gin. Antonio! —may your noble heart be happy.
[*She clasps her hands, and speaks with constant vehemence, looking towards the audience.*

Alas! Alas! Why was that one uttered
To bear down the last patience of my soul,
And make me cry aloud to Heaven and misery?
I am most miserable. I am a creature
That now, for fifteen years, from childhood upwards,
Till this hard moment, when the heavens forbids it,
Have known not what it was to shed a tear,
Which others met with theirs. Therefore mine eyes
Did learn to hush themselves, and young, grow dry;
For my poor father knows not how I loved him.
Nor mother neither; and my severe husband
Demanded love, not knowing lovingness.
And now I cry out, wishing to be right,
And being wrong; and by the side of me
Weeps the best heart, which ought not so to weep,
And duty's self seems to turn round upon me,
And mock me; by whose law, nevertheless,
Do I abide, and will I; so pray Heaven
To keep me in my wits, and teach me better.
Turn me aside, sweet saints, and let me go.⁸

In the last scene of the play, Agolanti attempts violently to reclaim his wife from Antonio in front of Colonna. His rage, jealousy, and disgust towards Ginevra are evident, and his aggressive treatment of the weakened woman directly contrasts the gentle nature of Antonio. Colonna defends Antonio who has caught the fainting Ginevra, against Agolanti's sword and he strikes the fatal blow that kills Agolanti:

Col. Die thou. [*He pierces him.*

⁸ Hunt, *Legend* V.ii.100-20. This speech also reflects Hunt's view on marriage, which he considers a "very odd & most on-all-hands-profaned 'sacrament,'" as he puts it in a letter to Carlyle dated 28 May 1833. He writes further of marriage being "an experiment which I should hardly think can be said to have succeeded in the world, even in this chaste & hypocritical & Mammon-sacrificing country of England"; see Leigh Hunt, MS Letter to Thomas Carlyle, 28 May 1833, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, U of Iowa Libraries, FMsLC280 No. 5, n.pag.

Riva. He's slain! What hast thou done?

Col. The deed

Of his own will. One must have perished, sir (*to office*);

One, my dear friend (*to Da RIVA*). Which was the corse to be?

Riva (*looking at it*). There's not a heart here, but will say, 'Twas he.
[*Curtain falls.*⁹

This ending, which abruptly dispatches Agolanti and allows the lovers to reunite, was, overall, well received by the public.

Hunt acknowledges two sources behind his play in the preface: the first is *L'osservatore Fiorentino*, published in a third edition in 1821 shortly before Hunt arrived in Italy. The second source is the popular story of Ginevra, which Hunt heard about while residing in Florence:

I was in the habit of going through a street in that city called the "Street of Death," (*Via della Morte*),—a name given it from the circumstance of a lady's having passed through it at night-time in her grave-clothes, who had been buried during a trance. The story, which in its mortal particulars resembles several of the like sort that are popular in other countries, and which indeed are no less probably than romantic, has been variously told by Italian authors, and I have taken my own liberties with it accordingly.¹⁰

Florence had been one of Hunt's favorite cities during his three-a-half-year stay; he admired the city not only for its architecture, but also because, as he puts it in his *Autobiography*, "there were more conveniences for us, more books, more fine arts, more illustrious memories, and a greater concourse of Englishmen; so that we might possess, as it were, Italy and England together."¹¹ The politics of the city also appealed to him since, as Roderick Cavaliero observes in his book *Italia Romantica: English Romantics and Italian Freedom*, "Under her benevolent grand dukes, Florence seemed like an oasis of reasonable government, an Italianised Austria rather than an Austrianised *Italia*."¹² It was also fitting for Hunt to base his play in Italy when England was becoming more and more

⁹ Hunt, *Legend* V.iii.58-61.

¹⁰ Hunt, *Legend* iv.

¹¹ Hunt, *Autobiography of Leigh Hunt* 154.

¹² Roderick Cavaliero, *Italia Romantica: English Romantics and Italian Freedom* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 188. As Maura O'Connor indicates, "English allegiance was increasingly given to another of Italy's celebrated historical cities, Florence. Although the Victorians adopted and claimed Florence as their own, English travelers in the early 1820s began to pay much more attention to it"; see O'Connor, *The Romance of Italy and the English Political Imagination* (London: Macmillan, 1998) 51.

obsessed with Italy's liberation, especially after the arrival of Giuseppe Mazzini in 1837. Hunt's interest in that issue remained constant into the following decade when he became one of the founding members of the Society of the Friends of Italy, inaugurated in 1851 largely at Mazzini's instigation.¹³

Having written the entire play in six weeks in 1838,¹⁴ Hunt read it many times in front of friends over a period of more than a year,¹⁵ not always to good result since Bryan Waller Procter once fell asleep during a reading, and Jane Carlyle describes one early version of the play in letter to her husband dated 18 September 1838 thus: "As for the play it is plain as a pike staff why Macready would not play it—it is something far worse than 'immoral'—'anticonventional'—it is a mortal dull."¹⁶ Even so, Hunt remained dedicated to his task, if at times anxious about the final outcome, as a letter to John Bell dated 1 March 1839 indicates: "I am *again* making alterations in my play—I believe to its advantage—but these repeated delays of its appearance keep me in a state of great anxiety, and will after all, I fear, defer it till next season."¹⁷ Hunt clearly saw an opportunity to make a significant sum of money in the theatre. His expectations proved to be true when he received two hundred pounds for his play, a rather large amount at a time when established playwrights like Reynolds would be paid six hundred pounds and when the production of Hunt's drama coincided with the beginning of what John Russell Stephens calls, "The most depressed period of authorial remuneration . . . with the low point of the theatre in the 1840s and early 1850s."¹⁸ Hunt's substantial payment testifies, then, to the quality of his play in the eyes of experienced stage-managers.

Hunt continued to improve his work over the following months, and he gave a reading of his play for the Covent Garden Theatre's management

¹³ The founding members of this new group were taken seriously enough as a potential threat by the Italian government that, "[i]n case they should ever try to visit Italy, the names of [the members] were sent by the Rome police to all guards at the papal frontier"; see Dennis Mack Smith, *Mazzini* (Yale: Yale UP, 1996) 95.

¹⁴ Hunt, *Autobiography of Leigh Hunt* 144.

¹⁵ For an overview of this creative phase, see Charles Robinson, "Leigh Hunt's Dramatic Success: *A Legend of Florence*," *The Life and Times of Leigh Hunt*, ed. Robert A. McCown (Iowa City: Friends of the U of Iowa Libraries, 1984).

¹⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*. Vol. 10, 1838, ed. Charles Richard Sanders (Durham: Duke UP, 1985) 183.

¹⁷ Leigh Hunt, *The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt*, ed. Thornton Hunt, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1862). II: 329.

¹⁸ John Russell Stephens, *The Profession of the Playwright: British Theatre 1800-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) xii.

on 17 October 1839, one that was described by James Robinson Planché as powerful and highly successful: "the magic of [Hunt's] voice, the marvellous intonation and variety of expression in his delivery, would probably enchain and enchant a general audience as it did us."¹⁹ The following day, Hunt wrote to Richard H. Horne:

The deed is done! and the play accepted!! I received your letter the evening before last, & should have written yesterday morning, but was whirled off in an unusual hurry to read my play at 12 o'clock, having had notice to that effect on Monday last from Mrs. Orger . . . [.] The reading, I must say ('burning blushes' apart!) was received with acclamation, & all sorts of the kindest expressions; (by Mr. & Mrs. C. Mathews, Mrs. Orger, H. Robertson (treasurer, an old friend) Bartley, stage-manager, & Planché (I believe, reader)) & the performance is to follow Knowles's,—in the thick of the season.²⁰

In the following two months, Hunt would revise the play further, including rewriting the fifth act. The play thus improved significantly when Hunt cut a long, unstageable monologue by a religious figure and a divorce between Ginevra and Agolanti. On 21 December 1839, Hunt read his play to the Covent Garden company of actors. Not only were the actors allowed to choose their roles, they also suggested some further minor revisions. As Hunt mentions in a letter to Sarah Flower dated 7 February 1840:

You will find great alterations to the fifth act. They feared the *divorce*. But I think it is now more dramatic & full of action, & I have put a speech into Ellen Tree's charming mouth, which I think you will like—a burst forth of the long suppressed anguish of life. I had the pleasure of seeing her face bathed in tears when I read it.—²¹

In the end, the suggestions that Hunt gathered from his critics and the changes that he made to his play would result in a sensational plot.

¹⁹ Qtd. in Edmund Blunden, *Leigh Hunt: A Biography* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1930) 279-80.

²⁰ Leigh Hunt, MS Letter to Richard H. Horne, 18 October 1838, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, U of Iowa Libraries, inserted in 812.1-H94il-Cop.6.

²¹ Leigh Hunt, *Leigh Hunt: A Life in Letters, Together with Some Correspondence of William Hazlitt (422 Hunt Letters, 14 Hazlitt Letters)*, ed. E.M. Gates (Essex, Connecticut: Falls River Publications, 1999) 360.

II.

Leigh Hunt was one of the best-known theatre critics of his day, beginning his journalistic career in 1805 with the reviews he published in *The News* and continuing into the 1830s with several of his periodicals. As such, he wielded a great deal of dramatic influence. Later on in his life, however, when he began writing for the stage, actor-managers like William Charles Macready would prove to have significant power over Hunt in his role as playwright. "It is curious to mark the revolutions in human affairs," Macready writes in a diary entry dated 14 June 1838, "I remember when Leigh Hunt, as the editor of *The Examiner*, seemed to hold my destinies in his grasp; as the person on whom, in respect to this play, he now depends, I appear to have his in my keeping."²² Depending on which side of the proscenium Hunt was on—as either critic or author of a play—his views about engaging with the theatre transformed accordingly.

As I have argued elsewhere, any discussion of Hunt's theatrical criticism should begin with an examination of the compositions included in his 1807 volume, *Critical Essays on the Performers of the London Theatres*, a volume of reprints from his theatrical criticism in *The News* between 1805 and 1807.²³ These pieces, along with other reviews written in *The Examiner* in the 1810s and in *The Chat of the Week* and *The Tatler* in the 1830s, reveal that Hunt devoted much attention to the question of reading versus performing plays—a concern that would preoccupy other Romantics during the following two decades. As an active theatre critic, Hunt insisted on the importance of the imagination. He introduced the role of the "readerly imagination" as a critical tool in order 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. He believed that the

²² William Charles Macready, *Macready's Reminiscences, and Selections from his Diaries and Letters*, ed. Frederick Pollock, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1875) I: 464. Hunt had not been particularly nice to Macready at the outset of his theatrical career in the reviews published in *The Examiner*, though it should be noted that he was quite severe with most contemporary actors. (For more information on Hunt's views of contemporary actors, see Michael Eberle-Sinatra, *Leigh Hunt and the London Literary Scene: A Reception History of his Major Works, 1805-1828* [London: Routledge, 2005] 19-23.) His opinion of Macready, however, slightly improved in the reviews published in *The Tatler* in 1830.

²³ Parts of the discussion of Hunt's early theatrical criticism comes from the first chapter of my book where I elaborate in detail upon the contemporary reception of *Critical Essays* and its importance for Romantic dramatic criticism in general and Hunt's career in particular, with regard to its formative contribution to Hunt's independent critical stance; see Eberle-Sinatra 19-30.

readerly imagination could generate a mental performance of the play. Hunt exhibits in his theatrical criticism 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. Ideally, the mental performance of the reader and the actual scenes on stage coalesce. By asserting that actors must also have the creative imagination to do justice to the plays they perform and by including references to actors whenever he discusses dramatic theory, Hunt differs significantly from William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Hunt had democratic ends in mind with his notion of the readerly imagination. In his view, attending a play entailed one's involvement in an election process and attributed to the critic an active role in theatrical performance. In this way, he is more "independent" than the writers mentioned above because he envisioned the critic's role as constituting not the endorsement of established authority but the actions of "voting," so to speak, for or against particular performances and giving sound reasons for his opinion. By encouraging his readers to reflect upon 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 in giving or withholding applause. As one who empowers his readers by informing them of the principles that guide his own judgment, Hunt feels that the critic's role fundamentally ensures 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 theatre revenues, Hunt wants to see to it that drama criticism remains impartial, free of economic biases. The role of the critic becomes especially significant in light of the greatly expanded audience, which gives theatres more economic importance and thus economic power *vis-à-vis* the critics and newspaper owners.

Hunt's advocacy of impartiality suggests his agreement with Hazlitt's view to maintain a distance from the actor. The latter stated in his 1822 essay "Whether Actors ought to sit in the boxes?" that actors should not mingle with the audience or critics. Indeed, Hunt would, throughout his life, maintain his critical call to keep the business of play-reviewing and the pleasure of associating with performers separate. During the production of *The Legend of Florence*, however, he necessarily rubbed elbows with talented thespians. He recalls in his *Autobiography* that he "became acquainted, for the first time, with a green-room, and surrounded

with a congratulating and cordial press of actors and actresses."²⁴ Hunt had already been introduced to several actors in the years preceding the writing of *Legend of Florence*, including William Charles Macready and Charles Mathews, both of whom were eventually involved with Hunt's play, the former turning down *The Legend of Florence* for production and the latter staging it to great effect with his wife Madame Vestris.²⁵ In a journal entry dated 29 July 1833, Macready writes, "In the evening Leigh Hunt came in, whom I was curious to see and gratified in meeting. Our conversation was chiefly theatrical: we seemed to part mutually good friends."²⁶ On top of sharing several friends, including John Forster and Charles Dickens, Macready and Hunt also shared a common interest in old-fashioned literary plays. Macready produced several of them first during his tenure as manager of Covent Garden in 1837-1839, and then at Drury Lane in 1841-1843; these included the extremely popular *Richelieu* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839 and the disastrous *Plighted Troth* by the Reverend Charles F. Darley in 1842.²⁷ Macready's time as manager, even though it was short compared to others during Victoria's reign, was significant for Victorian theatre since, as Michael Booth comments, "it set high standards in production and artistic integrity that all later managements of quality followed, influencing them particularly in the staging of Shakespeare, the use of stage crowds, the conduct of rehearsals, the illustrative value of scenery and spectacle and, in the largest sense, the sheer dedication to

²⁴ Hunt, *Autobiography of Leigh Hunt* 123.

²⁵ Since they were not yet married, Charles Mathews and Madame Vestris were listed independently amongst the subscribers to Hunt's 1832 *Poetical Works*, alongside other literary and theatrical figures, which included Edward Bulwer Lytton, Thomas Carlyle, John Bannister, John Forster, J.H. Reynolds, and Douglas Jerrold.

²⁶ Macready, *Reminiscences* I: 379.

²⁷ Macready had had great hope for Darley's play, which, however, was so badly received by the public that it only lasted one night. In a diary entry for 20 April 1842, Macready declares: "Went to the theatre, trying to keep my thoughts on the acting of my part. Rehearsed the play of *Plighted Troth*. Became confident in hope about it. Looked at the chance of a brilliant success. Serle spoke to me. Rested. Acted nervously; but *the play was unsuccessful*. Long consultation afterwards on what should be done. Anderson, C. Jones, Serle, Willmott, and Forster. I wished to do justice to the author, and we agreed to give it another trial. Chance, I fear, there is none. *Eloi!* A most unhappy failure; I have felt it deeply, deeply" (William Charles Macready, *The Journal of William Charles Macready 1832-1851*, ed. J.C. Trewin [London: Longmans, 1967] 181).

what was best in theatre."²⁸ In this way, Macready's critical standards for the theatre were similar to Hunt's.

Hunt's high expectations for dramatic production led him, during his three decades of theatrical reviewing, to be more often critical of new plays in favor of 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. Indeed, playwrights wrote plays tailored specifically to satisfy the demands of both audience and actor. An author himself, Richard Cumberland acknowledges the sway actors had over playwrights as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century: "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."²⁹

The full development of the star system reconfigured the theatrical scene of the early nineteenth century and had an impact on British playwrights until the end of the century. For instance, as famous actors, John Phillip Kemble and Edmund Kean were involved personally in the choice and the adaptation of the plays staged at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Later, the star system still remained very much in place, with "Audiences [going] to the theatre to see Charles Kean or Macready rather than the play itself. The actor, besides, was becoming a man of social importance. He was losing the stigma of being a rogue and a vagabond. He entered into management of his own theatre where, supreme ruler, he was in a position to dictate his demands to such inferior beings as dramatic authors."³⁰ When stars became theatre managers, they gained even more influence. As Stanley Jones observes: "When the theatres were managed by men of business who were not actors, their object was, first, to get as good a play as they could, and then to find the best possible actors for the part. With the actor-manager it is different. The first thing is to find a play in which he shall have a good part, and the second is to look to it that nobody else shall have so good a part as himself."³¹ As it turned out,

²⁸ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 44.

²⁹ Richard Cumberland, *Supplement to the Memoirs of Richard Cumberland* (London: Lackington, Allen, & Co., 1807) 63.

³⁰ Ernest Reynolds, *Early Victorian Drama (1830-1870)* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965) 50.

³¹ Stanley Jones, *The Actor and his Art: Some Considerations of the Present Condition of the Stage* (London: Downey & Co. Ltd., 1999) 20-21.

despite Hunt's critical reservations about favoring actors concerns over those of the playwright, his play did not escape the influence of such an actor-manager.

III.

Hunt started reading *A Legend of Florence* in 1838 and 1839, as mentioned above, to various friends and critics and even ventured a reading in the green-room of Covent Garden. Dealing with actors' and managers' responses to his work was a first for him. Though he had dissociated himself from the influence of stage professionals before, in his work as a reviewer, he was now willing to entertain their suggestions for alteration. As he writes to George Bartley, the stage-manager at Covent Garden and the actor who played the poet Fulvio da Riva in the original performance of *A Legend of Florence*: "My first wish, ever since I set foot behind your scenes, was to do all I could to shew my sense of the kindness met with; & most literally do I wish to be understood when I say, that what pleases you all best, will best please myself."³² The most important change Hunt's play underwent was a different ending to its fifth act. Hunt, in fact, states in a letter to the American playwright and actress Anna Cora Mowatt dated 9 February 1841: "They cut down the *Legend of Florence* a good deal at Covent Garden, & I disputed not a syllable. Nor did I suffer the printed copy to vary from the acted one: though I would fain not have altered the fifth act from its final intention. For I do not like altering, though I highly approve compression—."³³ When it came to the performance of his own piece, Hunt did not seem to mind deviations between the written and read play.

Under the management of Lucia Vestris and her second husband, Charles Mathews, *A Legend of Florence* was first performed on 7 February 1840, only three days before the marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and the premiere was attended by most of the major literary figures of the day, with the exception of Dickens who was celebrating his birthday elsewhere and William Wordsworth who regretted not being there to applaud Hunt's success.³⁴ "At the finale many in the audience were in tears, and when Hunt with his grizzled head and slight figure appeared on stage, his face pale, calm and resolute, the audience went

³² Hunt, 15 January 1840, in Hunt, *Leigh Hunt: A Life in Letters*, 357-58.

³³ Leigh Hunt, MS Letter to Anna Cora Mowatt, 9 February 1841, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, U of Iowa Libraries, MsL H94r, n.pag.

³⁴ Edmund Blunden, *Leigh Hunt: A Biography* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1930) 280.

wild. Their shouts of 'Hunt' rang through the walls of the theatre."³⁵ As was customary in the second half of the nineteenth century, the author was summoned to appear in front of the curtain at the end of a *première*.³⁶ Charles Cowden Clarke recalls this night in his *Recollections of Writers*:

Leigh Hunt was called on the stage at its conclusion to receive the homage of a public who had long known him through his delightful writings, and now caught at this opportunity to let him feel and see and hear their admiration of those past works as well as his present poetical play. A touching sight was it to see that honoured head, grown grey in the cause of letters and in the ceaseless promotion of all that is tasteful and graceful, good and noble. . . . As he withdrew from the ovation it was evident that the man of retired habits was both glad and sorry, both relieved and regretting, to leave this shouting, welcoming, hurraing crowd.³⁷

The opening night of *A Legend of Florence* and Hunt's success and public recognition were due, as Clarke indicates, not only to the play itself but also to Hunt's life and place within the history of British literature and politics. John Forster also mentioned in his *Examiner* review dated 9 February 1840, to Hunt's somewhat displeasure,³⁸ that the opening-success of the play was due to Hunt's reputation, the quality of the acting, and the setting rather than the play itself.³⁹ Forty years later, G.H. Lewes would comment in the *Modern British Dramatists*,

It was really an exciting scene, that first night! So many of us were intensely anxious for the success of the poet; so many were delighted to see the political drama once more triumphing; and the tears and the plaudits of that night, genuine though they were, had something feverish and exaggerated in them. Had it not been so, the play would have

³⁵ Ann Blainey, *Immortal Boy: A Portrait of Leigh Hunt* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985) 172-73.

³⁶ Stephens 144.

³⁷ Charles Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers*, by Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, with *Letters of Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, Douglas Jerrold, and Charles Dickens; and a Preface by Mary Cowden Clarke*, 2nd ed. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1878) 86-87.

³⁸ In a diary entry dated 16 February 1840, Macready writes, "Forster told me of Leigh Hunt's ingratitude to him," referring to Hunt's response to the review. Forster published a more enthusiastic piece the following week, probably to assuage Hunt. See William Charles Macready, *The Diaries of William Charles Macready 1833-1851*, ed. William Toynbee, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1912) II: 45.

³⁹ [John Forster], "The New Play, by Leigh Hunt," *The Examiner* (9 February 1840): 92.

continued to excite this enthusiasm; instead of which, it was only performed some fifteen or twenty nights, and is now only at rare intervals revived for a night or two in the provinces.⁴⁰

The play was a triumph. It was not only well received by the audience during its run of thirteen nights, which was noticeably more than the usual three performances for other plays during the 1839-1840 season,⁴¹ but also by periodicals. The reviews praised Hunt's writing and the performance of Ellen Tree in particular. *The Spectator* announced, "The character of Ginevra is exquisitely drawn, and its fine lineaments were most touchingly brought out by Ellen Tree: the purity of the woman, and a high sense not only of her honour but of the honour of her churlish husband."⁴² In accordance with Hunt's own principles as a theatre critic, the newspaper praised the actor's ability to do justice to Hunt's play. *The Athenaeum* asserts that Hunt "produced a drama of romantic interest and beauty, in which the incidents of the Legend are presented on the stage with picturesque elegance; leaving an impression like the recital of the story by an Italian improvisatore: in short, it is dramatic romance with a mixture of poetical comedy."⁴³ As for the review published in *The Times*, it draws attention to Hunt's "good-natured," "familiar" style found in his literary essays: "With so much gentleness and with such good-nature were the characters treated by the author, that it was to be seen he regarded them all as familiar friends, and would not use one unkindly."⁴⁴ The following month, John Wilson reviewed the print version of the play for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and, at long last, commended Hunt effusively: "LEIGH HUNT is now a successful dramatist, and we rejoice in his success as cordially as his best friends can do—for he deserves it. We are about to praise but not flatter him."⁴⁵

Though brief, the success of *A Legend of Florence* may also have gone to Hunt's head, as Thomas Carlyle, at whose house Hunt was a regular visitor while living in Chelsea, implied in various letters at the time.⁴⁶ T.N. Talfourd, himself the author of the successful 1836 play *Ion*, which Hunt had described in a presentation copy given to Mary Shelley as "a

⁴⁰ Blunden 282.

⁴¹ Robinson 41.

⁴² Robinson 129.

⁴³ Robinson 138.

⁴⁴ Robinson 6.

⁴⁵ [John Wilson], "Leigh Hunt's Legend of Florence," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 47 (Mar. 1840): 303. For a discussion of Wilson's earlier attacks on Hunt, see Eberle-Sinatra 120-23.

⁴⁶ Carlyle *passim*.

production worthy of her heart,"⁴⁷ wrote Hunt on 12 February 1840: "I need not tell you how heartily I rejoice in the new and splendid, and happy career which is opening before you on the success of 'A Legend of Florence.' Having experienced—(how less worthy of it!) the intoxication of dramatic success, I can feel and understand all your happiness."⁴⁸ To contribute further to Hunt's alleged illusion of grandeur, Charles Mathews and his wife were sufficiently impressed by Hunt's play to direct their treasurer, Henry Robertson, to pay him one hundred pounds to secure the rights to his next dramatic production, a rather large sum for a first-time playwright who was not a known fiction writer, like Edward Bulwer-Lytton, for instance. On top of this appraisal, Queen Victoria's own preference for the play may have also contributed to Hunt's feeling of success. As he puts it in a letter to a Miss Crossfield dated 27 April 1841: "I therefore, as you have mentioned the Queen, take the liberty of begging you to accept a copy of the play which her Majesty, in the kind & genial impulse of her heart, did me the honour of twice going to see."⁴⁹ Twelve years later, and following a private performance of *A Legend of Florence* at Windsor Castle in 1852,⁵⁰ Hunt would still recall fondly the Queen's comment about his play in a letter to Alexander Ireland dated 27 October 1853: "Perhaps you are not aware that after she had first witnessed the performance of the play at Covent Garden, the Queen, on her way out of the theatre, said to the stage manager, 'This is a beautiful play you have given us to-night, Mr. Bartly.'"⁵¹

⁴⁷ Hunt, *Legend* n.pag.

⁴⁸ T.N. Talfourd, MS letter to Leigh Hunt, 12 February 1840, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, U of Iowa Libraries, MsLT14h.

⁴⁹ Leigh Hunt, MS Letter to Miss Crossfield, 27 April 1841, New York U Library.

⁵⁰ Hunt was not only proud about the Queen's request for a private performance but also surprisingly pragmatic about it. As a new edition of his poems was being planned around that time, Hunt writes to Moxon on 28 January 1852: "I don't know whether you would think it advisable to advertise the poems just now, adding that 'this edition contains the Legend of Florence lately performed before her Majesty at Windsor Castle': but I thought I might as well mention it. The Queen has been very gracious in her acknowledgment of my thanks; and Colonel Phipps good-naturedly adds, that the play was 'beautifully performed and' very much admired.' This being a private communication cannot, of course, be told to the public,—setting aside its being out of the question in advertisements; but the fact of the performance itself might possibly, I thought, be desirable to mention. But I submit this to your better judgment" (MS Letter to Edward Moxon, 28 January 1852, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, U of Iowa Libraries, MsL-H94mox2-No.4).

⁵¹ Hunt, *Correspondence* II: 304.

Whatever praises and encouragement Hunt received, they certainly reaffirmed his aspirations as a playwright. He announced to his actress-heroine Ellen Tree in a letter dated 24 December 1840 what appears as a wish to throw his claims of critical objectivity overboard: "Oh! If I had but a *hero* as well as a heroine to stand by me . . . how I would chuck all essay-writing and reviews &c. &c. &c. fifty thousand miles into the region of nothingness, and do nothing but write plays for them, and endeavour to go merrily with all our three names together down to posterity."⁵² Ultimately, though, Hunt's joy at being a successful playwright was not meant to be repeated for nearly two decades, but it did inspire him, as Lewes remarks, "with the hope that he had at last found his real vocation, and a profitable mine. For some years he devoted himself to the composition of plays, and had to endure the tortures of an unacted dramatist, for not one of these plays could he get produced."⁵³ And sadly, once again in Hunt's life, a critical success did not mean a financial one, even though the play went into a second edition with a new preface praising the actors involved in the original production only a few weeks after its original publication on 7 February by Edward Moxon. Instead, as Anthony Holden comments, "a disappointed Hunt had to fall back on editing the plays of others. Old rivalries from the Regency era were forgotten with a preface, albeit lukewarm, to the comedies of Sheridan . . . followed by an edition of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar for Moxon's 'Dramatic Library' series."⁵⁴ Hunt did have the pleasure of having another of his plays performed in a London theatre, although it took considerable time and effort, when *Lovers' Amazements*, first published in *Leigh Hunt's Journal* in 1850-1851, was finally produced by Charles Dillon at the Lyceum Theatre on 20 January 1858, only eighteen months before Hunt died at the age of seventy-five. By then, his life had certainly seen its own share of dramatic events.

⁵² Leigh Hunt, *My Leigh Hunt Library: The Holograph Letters*, ed. L.A. Brewer (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1938) 268.

⁵³ Edmund Blunden, *Leigh Hunt: A Biography* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1930) 283.

⁵⁴ Anthony Holden, *Wit in the Dungeon: A Life of Leigh Hunt* (London: Little, Brown, 2005) 267.

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PART II.

RELIGIOUS AND PROPHETIC INTERPRETATIONS ACROSS BORDERS