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## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

**Relations between mid-Victorian stage productions and the social and cultural background, with particular reference to Charles Kean's work at the Princess's Theatre, London, 1850-1859**

Morrison, Margaret McKinnon

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Margaret McKinnon Morrison

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RELATIONS BETWEEN MID-VICTORIAN STAGE PRODUCTIONS AND THE  
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE  
TO CHARLES KEAN'S WORK AT THE PRINCESS'S THEATRE, LONDON,  
1850-1859.

MARGARET McKINNON MORRISON

This Dissertation is submitted to the Faculty of  
Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Dundee in  
fulfillment of the conditions of Ordinance 14, for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

July, 1975

DECLARATION

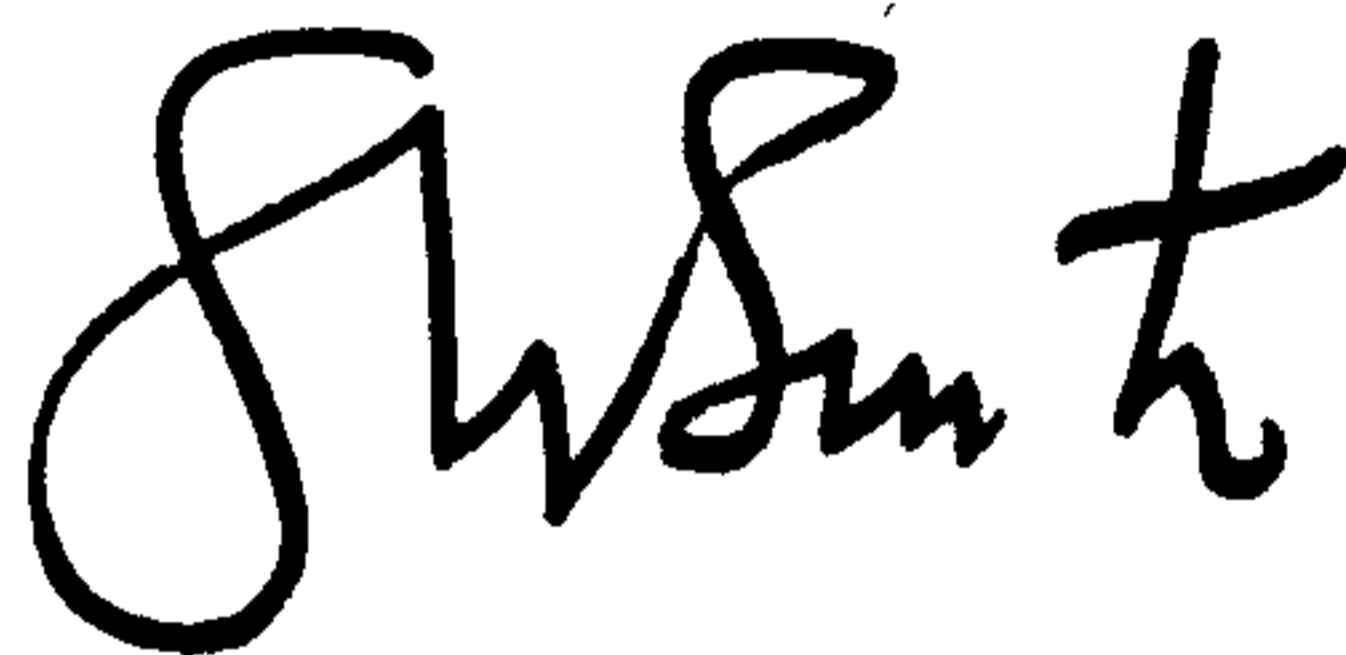
I hereby declare that all the material cited in the Dissertation has been consulted by myself, except where otherwise stated. The research herein undertaken was carried out by myself. The Dissertation is of my own composition and has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

*Margaret M. Morrison*



STATEMENT

I certify that Margaret McKinnon Morrison has spent fifteen terms of research work under my direction since October, 1970, and that she has fulfilled the Conditions of Ordinance 14 so that she is qualified to submit this thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. W. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a distinct "h" at the end.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the University of Dundee, for the award of a Research Scholarship which enabled me to write this dissertation; and Dr S.W. Smith, for his continuous advice, patience and encouragement in supervising the preparation.

I am indebted also to the staff of the following libraries and museums for their assistance: The British Library, London; The British Museum Newspaper Library, London; The Library of the Society for Theatre Research, Senate House, London University; The Theatre Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Westminster Central Reference Library, London; and especially to Miss Ann Walton, Highgate Library, London.

The responsibility for any error is, of course, mine.

ABSTRACT

The first section outlines the adaptation of the West End theatres to middle class audiences between the years 1843 and 1866, paralleling the growing disillusionment with the theatre and society during that period with the increasing middle class preference for an aristocratic life style. The basis of the predominant "drama" in melodrama and its appropriateness to the bourgeois temperament is discussed.

The second section deals with the influence on theatre criticism of social and political attitudes and the identification of contemporaneity with democracy. The meaning of contemporaneity in drama, acting and staging, and the consequent debate on Shakespeare production, is examined, chiefly with reference to Macready.

The third section discusses the effect of conservative and progressive doctrines on social and theatre criticism, referring mainly to Mill and G.H.Lewes, and their common focus on bourgeois dominance as the consequence of democracy. Proposals for the regeneration of the theatre and society are compared, citing the theories of Arnold, Henry Morley, Bagehot and Ruskin; Shakespeare production is examined in the context of the contemporary concern with education, as understood respectively by the middle class and its critics.

The fourth section investigates Kean's entrepreneurial approach to theatre management and his tailoring of Shakespeare to middle class taste. His productions are discussed as embodiments of bourgeois values and attitudes, and the factionalism of his critics placed in the context of the wider contemporary debate on the nature of art in a society dominated by commercial values. The conclusion refers to the essential conservatism of the commercial theatre.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
<b>Section One: Theatre, Audience and Productions in the Mid-Victorian Period</b>	
<b>I: Mid-Victorian Theatre</b>	1
<b>II: Theatre Organization and the Audience</b>	16
<b>III: Mid-Victorian Stage Productions</b>	37
<b>IV: The "Drama" and Melodrama</b>	59
<b>V: The "Drama" and Legitimate Drama</b>	86
<b>Section Two: Contemporaneity in the Theatre and in Critical Writing</b>	
<b>VI: The Political and Social Importance of the Theatre in Critical Writing</b>	108
<b>VII: Contemporaneity in Acting</b>	122
<b>VIII: Contemporaneity in Staging</b>	152
<b>Section Three: The Decline and Regeneration of the Theatre and Society</b>	
<b>IX: The Criticism of Contemporaneity in the Theatre and in Society</b>	183
<b>X: The Disillusionment with Democracy</b>	209
<b>XI: The Aspiration to Gentility</b>	235
<b>Section Four: Charles Kean at the Princess's Theatre, 1850-1859</b>	
<b>XII: Kean as Manager</b>	255
<b>XIII: The Productions</b>	271
<b>XIV: The Criticism</b>	292
<b>XV: Art and the Social and Cultural Background</b>	315
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	340
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	344

**SECTION ONE**

**Theatre, audience and productions in the mid-Victorian period**



## I Mid-Victorian Theatre

The passing of the Act for Regulating Theatres in 1843 marks the beginning of the mid-Victorian period in the theatre. It established the legal conditions under which the theatres operated in the years that followed, and although in itself its effect on actual stage productions was nugatory, the very fact of its enactment altered the perspective in which the contemporary theatre was viewed over the next two decades. Considerable expectations of immediate beneficial consequences were aroused; the exuberant rhyme of Planché's<sup>1</sup> The Drama at Home, for example, produced at the Haymarket Theatre in 1844, assures the drama itself of its release from restrictions:

"I say you're free to act where'er you please,  
 No longer pinioned by the patentees,  
 Need our immortal Shakespeare mute remain,  
 Fixed on the portico of Drury Lane;  
 Or the nine Muses mourn the drama's fall  
 Without relief on Covent Garden's wall."<sup>2</sup>

The manifest failure of the theatre to realise in the ensuing years the hopes that were entertained for it resulted in the despondency over its actual state shown in the statements made to the Parliamentary Committee on Theatrical Licences in 1866. Charles Kean, for example, directly attributes the shortcomings of the theatre to the 1843 Act:

1. James Robinson Planché (1796-1880), a prolific writer of burlesques, extravaganzas and pantomimes, was associated with Madame Vestris at the Olympic, Covent Garden and Lyceum theatres. He designed and supervised the costumes for the 1824 production of King John at Covent Garden, the first to approximate to historical accuracy. In 1834 he published a History of British Costume, and through his interest in heraldry became Rouge Croix Pursuivant of Arms at the Herald's College.

2. Quoted in J.R. Planché, Recollections and Reflections (London, 1876), II, p.70.

"The change is going on every night....we are going deeper into the mire....If you go on licensing theatres, you will drive the higher class of drama off the stage - the art will vanish...the greatest blow the drama ever received was the doing away with the patent theatres....<sup>3</sup>

With the open acknowledgement of disillusion in contrast to the initial optimism, the period drew to its close.

The Act<sup>4</sup> commanded attention mainly because it terminated the exclusive rights of the two patent theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, to present legitimate plays, that is, the traditional dramatic repertoire that had accumulated during and since the time of Shakespeare, and contemporary plays which conformed to the five-act pattern. Under this monopoly, established in 1662 and rigidly enforced after the Licensing Act of 1737, those two theatres alone were licensed to remain open all the year round, while a limited licence permitted the Haymarket in addition the same rights during the summer months only. The regulations under which the other London theatres, the minor houses, operated stipulated that the entertainments offered should include a certain quantity of vocal or instrumental music; the Adelphi and Olympic theatres, for example, were licensed only for the performance of burletta, a somewhat nebulous category, ultimately defined, according to Planché, "after much controversy both in and out of court", for working purposes, as

"dramas containing not less than five pieces of vocal music in each act, and which were also, with one or

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3. Quoted in Dutton Cook, Hours with the Players (London, 1881), II, pp.247-8.

4. The history of theatrical monopoly from 1660 to 1843 is discussed in Watson Nicholson, The Struggle for a Free Stage in London (Cambridge, 1906).



two exceptions, not to be found in the repertoire of the patent houses."<sup>5</sup>

In the decade preceding the Act, however, the status of such restrictions had become purely nominal. Douglas Jerrold<sup>6</sup> writes in 1835:

"His Lordship [the Lord Chamberlain] says there shall be six songs in each act of every Burletta and the due number are constantly sent to the deputy licenser;... who pockets the fee with a full conviction that, in five out of six instances, not one of the songs will be retained..."<sup>7</sup>

Suburban theatres such as Astley's, the Surrey, the Victoria and Sadler's Wells were licensed for music and dancing only, a regulation commonly circumvented in the years preceding the Act by the addition of a muted and virtually inaudible piano accompaniment to the plays performed.<sup>8</sup> In ending the patent monopoly of the regular drama, consequently, the Act merely gave legal status to the existing state of affairs.

The new arrangement for licensing theatres, however, was only one of the main provisions of the Act; it was also concerned with the censorship of plays,<sup>9</sup> and required that

5. J.R. Planché, Recollections and Reflections, II, p. 73.

6. Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857), author of many plays, the most successful being Black-Ey'd Susan (1829). He was associated with Punch from its beginning in 1841, and in his later years was more engaged in journalism than play-writing.

7. Dedicatory letter to T.J. Serle published with the comedy The Schoolfellows. Quoted in Blanchard Jerrold, The Life and Remains of Douglas Jerrold (London, 1859), p. 91.

8. The inconsistencies of the legal position and the subterfuges occasioned by it are described in J.R. Planché, Recollections and Reflections, pp. 70-76.

9. Relevant clauses from the Act for Regulating Theatres, 22nd August 1843, are quoted in Frank Fowell and Frank Palmer, Censorship in England (London, 1913), pp. 372-374.



"One copy of every new stage play...intended to be produced and acted for hire at any theatre...shall be sent to the Lord Chamberlain."

for his approval before performances. The grounds stated for interdicting the performances of any play were "the Preservation of good Manners, Decorum, or of the public Peace", the contravention of any such prohibition to be penalised by a fine "not exceeding the sum of fifty pounds" and withdrawal of the theatre licence. Planché saluted the Act as a removal of restrictions, which indeed it was for the semi-licensed theatres, but equally under its terms control was established over any place of entertainment by the stipulation that "All theatres for the performance of plays must be licensed." The criterion for the definition of a theatre was "acting for hire", the evidence of which is stated thus:

"In every case in which any money or other reward shall be taken or charged, directly or indirectly, or in which the purchase of any article is made a condition for the admission of any person into any theatre to see any stage play, and also in every case in which any stage play shall be acted or presented in any House, Room or Place in which distilled or fermented excisable liquor shall be sold, every actor therein shall be deemed to be acting for hire."

The definition of the term "Stage Play" is equally comprehensive, including

"every Tragedy, Comedy, Farce, Opera, Burletta, Interlude, Melodrama, Pantomime or other Entertainment of the Stage, or any part thereof"

The regularisation of the legal status of previously unlicensed places of entertainment subjected them to the Lord Chamberlain's authority, as to the material performed, from which they had hitherto been exempt by reason of their extra-legal position.

The 1843 Act, while it removed the old restrictions, thus imposed new ones as to the nature of entertainments offered both at regular theatres and anonymous saloons, and is consistent with the government interest in attempting to ensure order in places of public gathering shown by the inclusion in the Metropolitan Police Act of 1839 of a provision authorising the police

"to enter into any house or room kept or used...for stage-plays or dramatic entertainments into which admission is obtained by payment of money, and which is not a licensed theatre and to take into custody all persons who shall be found therein without lawful excuse"<sup>10</sup>

The consolidation of legal control over the theatre occurred at a period of marked social unrest, when the Chartist agitation was at its height; equally pressure was brought to bear on parliament for theatrical reform at the same times as it was subjected to pressure for political and social reforms. In 1832, the year of the First Reform Bill, a Select Committee was appointed to enquire into the state of the law affecting Dramatic Literature, while the 1866 Committee preceded the passing of the second Reform Bill by a year. The association between the theatrical and the social and political spheres was one equally recognized by government and by reformers, as is attested respectively by the coincidence of government action relating to the theatre with periods of social unrest and that of agitation for theatrical reform with reform in other areas.

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10. Quoted in Clive Barker, "A Theatre for the People", in Nineteenth Century English Theatre, ed. Kenneth Richards and Peter Thomson (London, 1971), p.21.



The termination of the patent monopolies thus carried implications beyond its immediate theatrical reference in placing the minor theatres on an equal footing with the patent houses. The association of the theatres royal with aristocratic privilege, and of the new system of ordering the theatres with democracy, is implied in the language used by Planché, for example, to describe the 1843 Act and its effects; the old regulations "oppressed and degraded" the actors, and the abolition of archaic "privileges" is "liberty accorded".<sup>11</sup> The political and social overtones borne by the Act impart to the course of development of the theatre in the next two decades an importance, for those concerned with it, beyond its specific context, shown sometimes overtly and sometimes solely by implication, in contemporary comment and discussion as will be shown in Section II; in the mid-Victorian period, the theatre becomes an arena for the testing of democratic principles. The expectations roused by the Act parallel the equally optimistic expectations entertained from other kinds of reform, while the disillusionment with the condition of the theatre in the eighteen sixties is also a disillusionment with democracy as an infallible means of achieving social improvements.

The effects of the 1843 Act are seen, not in changes in the theatre itself, but indirectly, in changes in contemporary attitudes to the theatre. The immediate consequence of ending the distinctions between the patent

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11. J.R.Planché, Recollections and Reflections, II, p.76.

and minor houses was a redefinition of what constituted "the theatre" in accordance with a standard of evaluation of the condition of the theatre, which remains constant over the period, based on the incidence of performances of the legitimate drama. Kean in 1866 condemns the removal of theatrical restrictions as resulting in the absence of "the higher class of drama" from the stage, which he takes as proof of the degeneration of the theatre; equally Planché celebrates the passing of the Act in terms of the expected imminent proliferation of the legitimate drama:

"Sheridan now at Islington may shine,  
 Marylebone echo 'Marlowe's mighty line;'  
 Otway may raise the waters Lambeth yields,  
 And Farquar sparkle in St. George's fields..."<sup>12</sup>

Before 1843, the patent theatres alone had the legal right to present such plays, and consequently critical attention was necessarily directed to these two theatres in contemporary estimations of theatrical achievement. After 1843, in contrast, all theatres were, theoretically, potential homes for "the higher class of drama", and accordingly open to serious critical consideration.

The dramatic criticism of the earlier part of the century did not exclude the minor theatres from consideration, but adopted a different tone in dealing with them from that in which the patent theatre productions were discussed. The exclusive right of the latter to the perfor-

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12. J.R.Planché, Recollections and Reflections, II, p.70.



mance of the legitimate drama was held equally to require them to promote such plays as the primary justification of the privilege. In a speech before Parliament in 1832, Bulwer,<sup>13</sup> arguing for the termination of the monopoly, charges the patent houses with failure to fulfil their obligation.

"Where are the plays to produce and encourage which we gave you the exclusive privilege.....You were to preserve the dignity of the drama from being corrupted by mountebank actors and absurd performances; you have therefore, we trust, driven jugglers and harlequins from the national stage...you have preserved the dignity of the national drama inviolate...For if you have not done this, then you have not fulfilled that object for which we took from your brethren those privileges we have entrusted to you."<sup>14</sup>

Because a higher dramatic and theatrical standard was expected from the presentations at the patents, the actual entertainments they offered were judged more stringently than those of the minor theatres. William Hazlitt, for example, in his dramatic criticism for the Morning Chronicle, the Examiner, the Champion and the Times in the second decade of the century, concentrates on reviewing the productions at the theatres royal,<sup>15</sup> and in turning to the minor theatres in a discursive essay in the London Magazine<sup>16</sup> of March, 1820, opens with a preamble rejecting the gravity and seriousness of the conventional critical stance as

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13. Edward Bulwer, later Lord Lytton (1803-1873), novelist and author of several plays, including The Lady of Lyons (1838). He sat in parliament as a radical from 1831 to 1840, when he lost his seat, and returned in 1852 as a Conservative.

14. Quoted in Watson Nicholson, The Struggle for a Free Stage in London, pp. 326-327.

15. William Hazlitt, Dramatic Essays, ed. William Archer and R.W.Lowe (London, 1895).

16. William Hazlitt, "Minor Theatres" in Dramatic Criticism, selected by George Rowell (London, 1971), pp. 173-181.

inappropriate to his subject:

"...we feel the pen in our hands flutter its feathered down with more than its usual specific levity, at the thought of the idle, careless career before it...At sight of the purlieus of taste, and suburbs of the drama, criticism 'clappeth his wings, and straightway he is gone.' In short, we feel it as our bounden duty to strike a truce with gravity, and give a furlough to fancy...."

Similarly, Leigh Hunt in his career as dramatic critic between 1805 and 1832<sup>17</sup> shows the same propensity to distinguish between the patent and minor theatres by the adoption of a different style of treatment for each; the tone in which he describes the opening of the Olympic theatre under the management of Madame Vestris<sup>18</sup> in the Examiner of January 4th, 1831,<sup>19</sup> is openly frivolous:

"What a phrase is this, the Olympic Pavilion and how smoothly it flows over the tongue, especially since a lady has become the womanager (for manager we must not call her)!"

In the eighteen thirties, the kinds of presentations offered by the patents and the minors grew increasingly similar, as the patent houses borrowed entertainments that had proved successful at the minors, and the minors encroached on the legitimate repertoire. The Morning Chronicle of July 1, 1833,<sup>20</sup> quotes a contemporary comparison between

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17. Leigh Hunt, Dramatic Essays, ed. William Archer and R.W.Lowe (London, 1894).

18. Eliza Vestris (1797-1856) began her theatrical career as a dancer and opera singer. She managed successively the Olympic, Covent Garden and Lyceum theatres, in association with her second husband, Charles Mathews, an actor, from their marriage in 1835, concentrating chiefly on the production of burlesques and extravaganzas.

19. Quoted in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Lost Theatres of London (London), 1968, pp.273-274.

20. Quoted in Watson Nicholson, The Struggle for a Free Stage in London, p.317.



the performances at the minor Strand theatre and those at the majors:

"Everybody will acknowledge them [the Strand's presentations] to be a vast deal more legitimate, entertaining, and useful, than half the performances at the two soi-disant PATENT theatres..."

Similarly, the Examiner in 1835<sup>21</sup> writes of the Haymarket as "the only theatre now where we catch a glimpse of the good old comedy". As far as actual stage productions were concerned, the 1843 Act merely confirmed a change that had already taken place; the official demotion, however, of the theatres royal from their position as purveyors of the national drama meant that contemporary commentators on the theatre no longer felt it necessary to take them into consideration in discussing the stage, while the productions at the minor theatres could be examined with the stringent standards, resulting from higher expectations, not previously felt to be applicable.

The theatres that came into prominence in place of the majors in the mid-Victorian period as the focus of critical attention were those minor houses which had challenged the majors prior to the passing of the Act. G.H.Lewes,<sup>22</sup> as dramatic critic for the Leader between 1850 and 1854, records regularly the productions at the Olympic, Lyceum, Haymarket and Princess's theatres as well as at Drury Lane<sup>23</sup> while Henry Morley,<sup>24</sup> in The Journal of a

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21. Quoted in Watson Nicholson, The Struggle for Free Stage in London, pp.413-414.

22. George Henry Lewes (1817-1878), author and journalist. In addition to the theatre, he was interested in positivism and materialism, and wrote a biography of Goethe. From 1854 he lived with George Eliot.

23. John Foster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. William Archer and R.W.Lowe (London, 1896), pp.73-280.

24. Henry Morley (1822-94), began his literary career as a lecturer and journalist. In 1865 he became Professor of English at University College, London. He edited many reprints of classics and wrote a First Sketch of English Literature (1873).

London Playgoer<sup>25</sup>, reports the dramatic performances at the same group and at the Adelphi and the suburban Sadler's Wells in addition, over the period 1851 to 1866; much of The Journal first appeared as reviews in the Examiner. He describes these in his "Prologue" as "the chief London theatres"<sup>26</sup> and it is the productions at these houses which constitute what was considered by contemporaries to be "the theatre" in this period.

Royal patronage further confirmed the contemporary estimation of these houses as the equivalent for their time of the theatres royal in the earlier years of the century.

An annual series of private performances of current London productions in the Rubens Room at Windsor Castle over the Christmas period was initiated in 1848, under Charles Kean as general director. The Times<sup>27</sup> comments on the first season that

" the plays acted at Windsor Castle are the same that may be seen at the Haymarket and the Lyceum; the actors in the Rubens Room are precisely the same individuals who appear on the public boards; and it would be absurd to say that an entertainment which occupies a high rank at Windsor Castle loses that rank when it comes to the metropolis."

J.W.Cole,<sup>28</sup> Kean's biographer, in a tabulation of the royal performances up to 1853, provides statistics:

"thirty-two dramatic pieces had been performed....none were supplied from the resources of Charles Kean's own theatre the Princess's; the remaining twenty-three chiefly from the Haymarket, the Lyceum, Sadler's Wells and the Adelphi."<sup>29</sup>

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25. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer (London, 1891).

26. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer, p.9

27. Quoted in J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, FSA (London 1859) I, p.350.

28. John William Cole, who used the stage name of Calcraft, managed the Theatre Royal, Dublin, from 1830 to 1851. After financial failure, he became Charles Kean's secretary. He died in 1870.

29. J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, FSA, II, p.98.



While these West End theatres consolidated their position and reputation in the mid-Victorian period, Covent Garden and Drury Lane succumbed further to the process of decline as successfully operating theatres which had begun well before 1843. At Covent Garden, in the years immediately preceding the Act, both Macready<sup>30</sup> as manager from 1837 to 1839, and Madame Vestris, from 1839 to 1842, had failed to attract sufficiently large audiences to make their undertakings profitable; after 1843 the theatre became an opera house.<sup>31</sup> Macready was equally unsuccessful at Drury Lane from 1841 to 1843, and during the next two decades, the theatre passed through the hands of a number of managers, none of whom were able to make the theatre a solid financial proposition; as at Covent Garden, opera rather than drama ultimately predominated.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the relative stability of the managements of the other theatres in the mid-Victorian period show their viability. The Adelphi<sup>33</sup> remained under the control of Webster<sup>34</sup> until

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30. William Charles Macready (1793-1873) was the most prominent actor on the London stage during the eighteen thirties and forties. He retired in 1851. His efforts in the theatre were directed to the encouragement of the legitimate drama, and he introduced many reforms in acting and theatre organisation.

31. The history of Covent Garden is dealt with in Henry Saxe-Wyndham, The Annals of Covent Garden Theatre, from 1732 to 1897 (London, 1906).

32. The history of Drury Lane is dealt with in H. Barton Baker, The London Stage (London, 1889), I.

33. The history of the Adelphi is dealt with in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Theatres of London (London, 1963).

34. Benjamin Webster (1797-1882), actor, dramatist and manager. He wrote a number of successful farces and was prominent as a character actor.

his retirement in 1872; the Olympic<sup>35</sup> was under one continuous management from 1853 to 1864; the Princess's remained under Charles Kean from 1850 to 1859 and the suburban Sadler's Wells<sup>36</sup> under Phelps<sup>37</sup> from 1844 to 1862; the Keeleys<sup>38</sup> ran the Lyceum<sup>39</sup> from 1843 to 1847 and were succeeded by Madame Vestris who remained till 1855; Webster managed the Haymarket<sup>40</sup> from 1837 to 1853 when he left to concentrate solely on the Adelphi; his successor, Buckstone<sup>41</sup>, retained control till 1870.

In addition to these theatres, several of the suburban theatres proved equally commercially viable, such as the Victoria,<sup>42</sup> the Britannia and the Surrey<sup>43</sup>;

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35. The histories of the Olympic and Princess's theatres are dealt with in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Lost Theatres of London (London, 1968) and Errol Sherson, London's Lost Theatres of the Nineteenth Century (London, 1925).
36. The history of Sadler's Wells is dealt with in Dennis Arundell, The Story of Sadler's Wells, 1683-1964 (London, 1965).
37. Samuel Phelps (1804-1878), actor and manager. At Sadler's Wells he produced all but four of Shakespeare's plays.
38. Robert Keeley (1793-1869), actor of comedy roles, and his wife Mary Anne Goward (1806-1899), whose most famous parts were those of Smike in an adaptation of Nicholas Nickleby and the title role in Jack Sheppard. From 1850 to 1851, they shared the management of the Princess's with the Keans.
39. The history of the Lyceum is dealt with in A.E. Wilson, The Lyceum (London, 1952).
40. The history of the Haymarket is dealt with in H. Barton Baker, The London Stage (London, 1889), I.
41. J.B. Buckstone (1802-79), actor of comedy roles and the author of some two hundred farces and melodramas.
42. The history of the Victoria is dealt with in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Theatres of London (London, 1963).
43. The histories of the Britannia and Surrey theatres are dealt with in H. Barton Baker, The London Stage (London, 1889), II.



their productions were not, however, accorded the same kind of serious critical treatment as the subject matter of regular theatrical reviewing that the former group of theatres received. Such suburban theatres remained outside the province of theatrical journalism, and such contemporary notice as they did receive in the press came not on account of their classification as theatres, but as exotic phenomena to the interest of which their nominal classification was purely incidental. Mayhew's description of the Victoria gallery<sup>44</sup> presents this theatre as something remote from the experience of his readers, to whom he is conveying information as to the nature and behaviour of the people to be found there; he goes "to see the sight in the gallery" and finds that "it is better to wait until the first piece is over". Dickens' article on the Britannia Theatre published in All the Year Round in 1860<sup>45</sup> is similarly a report of a journey of exploration, his stated interest being in "the spectators at this theatre", and accordingly he "[enters] on the play of the night...by looking about me at my neighbours."

The passing of the 1843 Act initiated a phase during which the productions which were successful in attracting audiences were also those necessarily taken by

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44. First published in the Morning Chronicle in 1848, and reprinted in 1851 in Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor. The text of the article is reprinted in Mayhew's London, ed. Peter Quennell (London, 1969), pp.51-55.

45. Reprinted in Charles Dickens, The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces, etc. (London, 1964), pp.51-36.

contemporaries as constituting "the theatre" once there was no longer in existence a recognised home for the legitimate drama. Before 1843, there was no automatic assumption that the minor houses should, in their presentation of stage entertainments, take into consideration the obligation to uphold the standards of the national theatre and the legitimate drama, such as was attributed to the patent theatres, and in the mid-Victorian period the managements of the former group continued as before to direct their efforts primarily to attracting audiences and thereby rendering their theatres paying propositions. The propensity of the criticism to which they became subject by reason of their new status, however, was to evaluate the entertainment they provided by the criteria of judgement applied to the patents. The effects of the removal of privilege on the condition of the stage were considered in terms of how far the resultant kind of theatre succeeded or failed in fulfilling what were formerly held to be the purposes of the patent theatres; the manifest failure of the contemporary theatre to achieve what the theatres royal had failed to realise resulted in the eventual despondency over the condition of the stage and the benefits of the abolition of protection. This disillusionment with freedom in the theatre, because of the association between the theatrical and the social, political and even economic spheres, carried wider implications than its immediate frame of reference; the criticism of the theatre and its development in the mid-Victorian period is thus influenced by contemporary social criticism and equally becomes itself a criticism of society.



## II Theatre Organisation and the Audience

Managerial policy of the West End theatres was not altered by the Theatres Act. As in the eighteen thirties, pleasing the audience was the main consideration, in achieving which, both by the organisation of their theatres and in the entertainment presented, managers became increasingly skillful during the mid-Victorian period. During the period 1840 to 1866, no new theatres were built in the West End, while in the decades immediately preceding and following new theatres proliferated:<sup>1</sup> Baker's "Chronological List" of London theatres shows four new theatres built between 1832 and 1840, and eleven between 1866 and 1874. The theatres already in existence thus remained adequate, as to number and structure, to accommodate the potential audience until the middle of the eighteen sixties, when changing conditions in the theatre made new theatres again necessary. In contrast, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, built in 1812 and 1809 respectively to meet the requirements of the theatre conditions of the early years of the century, became progressively more obsolete from the eighteen thirties onwards, as the continued failures of successive managements to run them profitably show.<sup>2</sup>

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1. H. Barton Baker, The London Stage (London, 1889), I, pp.x-xi.

2. Dewey Ganzel, "Patent Wrongs and Patent Theatres: Drama and the Law in the Early Nineteenth Century" in PMLA, LXXVI (1961), pp.384-396.

The most successful of the West End theatres, in terms of attracting audiences and duration of management, was the Haymarket, under the control of Webster from 1837 to 1853 and of Buckstone thereafter. In his farewell speech from the stage on his retirement in 1853,<sup>3</sup> Webster speaks of his conception of the role of the manager as the servant of the public, totally under the dominance of its taste:

"every popular favourite is a viceroy over him... the ways and means are not compulsory, but solely dependent upon the will and pleasure of our sovereign the public."

His objective as manager he states to have been "the approval" of this public, and as evidence of his efforts to win it, he lists the "improvements" made during his tenancy to meet audience requirements in the arrangement of the auditorium

"I have backed the pit...I have stalled off all what was originally the orchestra...and introduced gas..."

The West End managers were prepared to expend considerable amounts on the decoration of the theatre interior. Webster asserts:

"I have expended, with no ultimate advantage to myself, on this property over £12,000..."

The Haymarket was altered or redecorated in 1843, 1848 and 1853; the Adelphi was reconstructed and redecorated in 1848, and demolished and entirely rebuilt in 1858; the Princess's under Kean between 1850 and 1859 was periodically refurbished and in 1858 totally redecorated; the Lyceum's interior, under Madame Vestris's management, was notably lavish. Comfort in seating and luxuriousness of decoration

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3. Quoted in W. MacQueen-Pope, Haymarket: Theatre of Perfection (London, 1948), p.281.



were the two aspects of the auditorium which commanded the managers' attention. The Haymarket playbill for April 28th, 1843,<sup>4</sup> triumphantly announces that

"the theatre has undergone extensive alterations.... and the whole of the interior decorated in the most costly and elegant style! By a curtailment of the useless portion of the stage in front of the curtain, and advancing Orchestra and Lights near the actors and scenic effects, the lessee has been enabled to appropriate the portion so obtained, to form a certain number of Orchestra Stalls, which can be retained for the parties taking them for the whole of the evening."

A further announcement of 1848<sup>5</sup> proclaims that "backs have been added to all the seats in the Circle". The convenience of the audience was a paramount consideration of the manager; the form of the rebuilt Olympic of 1849, for example, was that of

"an elongated horse-shoe, with but few projections, so as not to present any interruption to sight or sound"<sup>6</sup>

Additional innovatory attractions were "the abolition of all fees to attendants" and the gratuitous presentation "to each visitor to the boxes, stalls and pit, a bill of the night's performances." The style of decoration adopted was "Arabesque" and lighting by gas, with a chandelier dominating the auditorium.

In the eighteen thirties, the minor houses were already noted for the care given to the arrangement of their auditoriums; at the newly-opened Olympic of 1831,

4. Haymarket playbill, April 23rd, 1843 in the Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

5. Quoted in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Theatres of London, (London, 1963), p.98.

6. Illustrated London News, January 12th 1849, quoted in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Lost Theatres of London (London, 1968), pp.273-274.

Leigh Hunt, as he reported in the Examiner of January 4th,

"Found one of the prettiest interiors we are acquainted with, a perfect circle all but the stage, with the fronts of the boxes painted in medallions, and the whole presenting an aspect warm and cheerful."<sup>7</sup>

The changes in the auditorium arrangement introduced by the West End managers from the eighteen forties show a continuation of the interest in audience convenience, developed by increasing skill in devising means to further it. Thus, while the traditional seating divisions of boxes, pit and gallery remained, orchestra stalls were introduced at the front of the pit, and quickly became an accepted part of the normal seating; whereas Webster gives his new stalls special mention in 1843, the Illustrated London News description of the Olympic in 1849 merely notes their presence in passing in detailing the capacity of the theatre, without any further comment.

These stalls disrupted the previous rigid allocation of the seating divisions to particular social groups, as described by Planché in his Olympic Revels, performed at the Olympic in 1831:

"Ye belles and ye beaux  
Who adorn our low rows  
Ye gods who preside in the high ones;  
Ye critics who sit  
All so snug in the pit, -  
An assemblage of clever and sly ones!"<sup>8</sup>

The boxes, both public and private, surrounding the auditorium, remained the most expensive part of the house, and the gallery the cheapest; the pit, priced midway between

7. Quoted in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Lost Theatres of London (London, 1968), pp.266-267.

8. Quoted in Allardyce Nicoll, A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800-1850 (Cambridge, 1930), I, p.12.



the other two parts, afforded the best view of the stage, and was traditionally the resort of those in the audience who were prepared to take a serious interest in the performance. Lamb, in his essay "Playhouse Memoranda" first published in the Examiner in 1813<sup>9</sup>, describes the kind of spectator in each division of the house, contrasting the boxes and the gallery; in the former he finds

"such frigid indifference, such unconcerned spectatorship, such impenetrability to pleasure or its contrary, such being in the house and yet not of it"

while in the latter "the joy is lively and unallayed". In the pit, the part of the house favoured by such regular, interested and informed playgoers as Lamb himself, Hunt<sup>10</sup>, Hazlitt<sup>11</sup> and Henry Crabb Robinson<sup>12</sup>, was to be found the more critical section of the audience, "the front row sages and newspaper reporters", together with "John Bull tradesmen and clerks of counting houses". The appropriation of the best position in the pit for the new orchestra stalls relegated both the amateur and professional connoisseurs of the drama to the back of the house and handed over the dominant and most central seats to a kind of spectator hitherto uncatered for: one who was prepared to pay prices comparable to those of the boxes, and also wanted a good view of the stage in comfortable circumstances. The stalls

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9. Victorian Dramatic Criticism, selected by George Rowell (London, 1971), pp.181-183.

10. Leigh Hunt, Dramatic Essays, ed. William Archer and R.W.Lowe (London, 1894).

11. William Hazlitt, Dramatic Essays, ed. William Archer and R.W.Lowe (London, 1895).

12. Henry Crabb Robinson, The London Theatre 1811-1866, ed. Eluned Brown (London, 1966), Robinson (1775-1867) retired early from a legal career. He had a wide acquaintance among contemporary public and literary men. His journal, begun in 1811, records his frequent visits to the theatre.

were specifically adapted for the kind of spectator the West End manager wanted to attract, and tended to level the abrupt distinction between the fashionable part of the audience in the boxes and the reputedly more discriminating but comparatively unfashionable patrons of the pit.

This dissolution of the rigid division of seats, together with the curtailment of the "useless" apron stage, rid the nineteenth century playhouse of conventions which had lingered on from the previous century. Hogarth's painting of Act IV of a performance of The Beggar's Opera from the early seventeen thirties shows not only that the important parts of the action took place well in front of the proscenium arch, but that the stage itself was encumbered with spectators, a practice not abolished until 1762, when the Drury Lane auditorium was enlarged.<sup>13</sup>

The picture stage of the nineteenth century was largely the creation of <sup>de</sup>Loutherbourg, an Alsatian painter of battle pieces and romantic landscapes, while scenic director at Drury Lane from 1773 to 1781. The candle hoops hitherto hung well to the front of the stage were replaced by a series of head lights behind the proscenium, drawing the actors inside its arch. <sup>de</sup>Loutherbourg's novel and spectacular scenic devices, such as sudden changes in colour by the use of silk screens, transparencies, and mechanical figures and ships, broke with the traditional stage décor of painted

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13. Information about playhouse structure and staging practice is derived from Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., The Oxford Companion to the Theatre (London, 1966); Geoffrey Ashton and Iain Mackintosh, The Georgian Playhouse (London, 1975); Richard Southern, Changeable Scenery (London, 1952); Richard Leacroft, The Development of The English Playhouse (London, 1973).



backdrop and wings; such settings suggested an imagined place of action rather than reminding the audience of the artificiality of the stage. Previously, the style of theatre presentation was based on the acknowledgement of artifice; Restoration and eighteenth century audiences, ranged throughout a continuously lighted auditorium, took no consideration of the maintenance of illusion, accepting their own visible presence as part of a convention which included the fixed décor of the proscenium with its doors.

Improvements in stage lighting led to the actor's confinement within the proscenium arch, an area used in the mid-eighteenth century only for occasional scenic spectacle and processions. With the introduction of oil burners during the latter decades of the eighteenth century, and gas, first used at the Lyceum in 1817, the actor began to be part of a unified stage picture, entering within the scene instead of on to the apron through the proscenium doors, and thereby suggesting that the scene itself extended off-stage. Although the majority of London theatres were converted to gas lighting during the eighteen twenties, the Haymarket was one of the last; only then did Webster's apron-stage become "useless".

With the disappearance of the proscenium doors, eliminated in the rebuilt Drury Lane of 1811, followed by Covent Garden in the alterations of 1812 and 1813, the sense of intimacy created by the habitual use of an architectural feature common to both stage and auditorium was lost, as the actor became separated from the audience by the proscenium arch. From the end of the eighteenth century,

acceptance of illusion as the objective of stage performance is conjoined with the demand that stage and audience should be clearly distinguished from one another. A Treatise on Theatres of 1790 quotes with approval from an earlier work:

"The actors instead of being too brought forward ought to be thrown back at a certain distance from the spectator's eye and stand within the scenery of the stage, in order to make a part of that pleasing illusion for which all dramatic exhibitions are calculated. A division is necessary between the theatre and the stage and so characterised as to assist the idea of these being two separate and distinct places."<sup>14</sup>

The great increase in capacity of the two patent houses at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth promoted this sense of separation, as the emphasis in stage performance shifted from the verbal to the visual. Richard Cumberland, the playwright, comments on the Drury Lane of 1794:

"Henceforward theatres for spectators rather than playhouses for hearers....The splendour of the scenes, and the ingenuity of the machinist and the rich display of dresses aided by the captivating clamours of music now in a great degree supersede the labours of the poet."<sup>15</sup>

The theatre was no longer an extension of real life but a different plane of existence; in the vast patent houses at the beginning of the nineteenth century, large scale effects alone created sufficient stage impact to command attention throughout the house, while the minutiae of the actor's performance were lost on the majority of the

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14. George Saunders, Treatise on Theatres, quoting a work by Count Algarotti (1762), in Geoffrey Ashton and Iain Mackintosh, The Georgian Playhouse (London, 1975), X.

15. Richard Cumberland, Memoirs (London, 1806), pp.57-58.



audience. In providing magnificence and spectacle in scenery and staging, the theatres royal could overshadow a relatively small theatre like the Haymarket, with a capacity only half that of Drury Lane, but the smaller Haymarket stage was better suited for presenting players at close range. The demand for satisfactory and consistent stage illusion finally resulted in the kind of playhouse which replaced in popularity and viability the patent houses, the minor theatres of the West End. As modified during the mid-Victorian period, a due demarcation between actors and audience was maintained, with sufficient stage space for effective spectacle, while the compactness of the auditorium made appreciation of the more delicate details of the actor's performance possible.

On the two-dimensional platform stage of the eighteenth century, the actor, surrounded through 270 degrees by his audience, was backed by dimly-lit scenery which accompanied his performance without being integrated into it; in the nineteenth century playhouse, the actor, placed behind the proscenium arch, cut off from a darkened auditorium with its anonymous spectators, became part of a composite and well-lit stage picture. The improved stage-lighting, however, which drew the actor back into the scene, also revealed its defects. At the beginning of the century, scenery was expected to be at least appropriate to the action, so as not to tax audience credulity; by mid-century, the old wing and backdrop system was found defective, in undermining "scenic illusion". The writer of the note on scene painting in The Penny Cyclopaedia of 1842 gives his

objections:

"In fact....wings....in themselves...rather detract from than at all aid illusion and effect; more especially in interiors, where what should represent a continuous wall or surface on either side is broken into several pieces, which are besides placed parallel to the back scene or flat, instead of being at right angles to it...if the spectator be near to the stage, or placed on one side of the house, the whole becomes more or less distorted, so that all scenic illusion is destroyed...."<sup>16</sup>

In the previous year, Madame Vestris had dispensed with the intrusive wings when she produced Boucicault's London Assurance at Covent Garden in an approximation of the box set, using an arrangement of flats forming unbroken walls to represent the three sides of a room. The use of borders to conceal the top of the stage remained common practice well into the latter half of the century; the writer of an article in All the Year Round in 1863 advocates their replacement by a ceiling-cloth, entirely closing in the whole, to "render the illusion of the scene more complete."<sup>17</sup>

Increasing dissatisfaction with the staging conventions evolved for a different kind of theatre altogether, and a growing demand for perfection and consistency in representation on stage in the mid-Victorian period, paralleled the progressive dominance of the auditorium by the stall audience. The playbills of the eighteen forties and eighteen fifties<sup>18</sup> show further innovations in theatre

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16. Quoted in Richard Southern, Changeable Scenery (London, 1952), p.324.

17. "A New Stage Stride" in All the Year Round, October 31, 1863, pp.229-234.

18. Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



organization aimed primarily at the orchestra stall patron, which extended to the new section of the house the kind of conveniences previously restricted to the private boxes alone. The list of prices on the Haymarket bill for October 12th, 1843, for example lists both stalls and the public boxes at 5s, and the pit at 3s; together with the private boxes at two guineas and one and a half, which could be reserved in advance, the stalls alone similarly could be "retained the whole of the evening". By 1859, the promotion of the stalls at the expense of the pit had led to a decrease in pit prices to 2s, and an increase in stall prices to 6s, with the public boxes the same at 5s, as listed on the bill for November 28th. The Adelphi bills, for example, likewise show the decline in importance of the pit and the corresponding advancement of the stalls; while the bill for February 22nd, 1847 gives boxes at 4s, pit at 2s, and gallery at 1s, with unpriced private boxes, that for the rebuilt theatre of May 30th, 1859 gives private boxes at two guineas, family boxes at £1 and stalls at 5s, all of which can be "secured the whole evening", with the unreserved pit at 1s.6d. The movement on the part of the

managers to increase the conveniences for audience accommodation in the stalls was not a response on their part to a sudden eruption into their theatres of a new kind of audience, but rather part of a series of progressively skillful adaptation of the resources of the theatre to the already apparent demands of the existing audience. Hunt, in the Examiner article of January 4th, 1831,<sup>19</sup> refers to audience complaints at the ensuing chaos consequent on the lack of strict allocation of seating:

"The rush took place, they said, the moment the doors were opened, and those who got possession of the seats were inexorable to the after-comers"

The demands of the audience on which the attention of the West End manager was focussed were for an increase in order, comfort and convenience in the provision made for them in the auditorium; the most striking characteristics of the mid-Victorian audience in comparison with that of the early years of the century remarked on by contemporaries are a new respectability and restraint in conduct. Cole writes in 1859:

"Modern audiences are less easily worked up to strong demonstration than they were at the beginning of the present century....Audiences now-a-days are more numerous than ever; but they sit, for the most part, in silent admiration. A round of applause is as startling as a peal of thunder in a cloudless sky. Where is it to come from? The stalls, boxes and even the pit, are too genteel to clap their hands; and the Olympian deities are awed into silence by their isolation, and the surrounding chill."<sup>20</sup>

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, it is the absence

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19. Quoted in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Lost Theatres of London (London, 1968), pp.273-274.

20. J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859), I, pp.92-93.



of any mediating group between gallery and boxes that is remarked on in the theatres royal and the disreputable nature of these theatres in general. Prince Puckler-Muskau, a German who visited England in the years between 1826 and 1829, expresses his amazement at theatre audiences at the patent houses in his Tour:<sup>21</sup> he describes them as "brutal, indifferent and ignorant," adding that

"the English theatre is not fashionable, and it is scarcely ever visited by what is called 'good company'."

He finds the performance to be frequently rendered inaudible by interruptions from the gallery, while the pit and boxes are rendered intolerable by the hurling of missiles from the gallery and the presence of prostitutes, to which joint causes he attributes the absence of "respectable families".

It is to this "respectable family" element that the organization of the West End theatres was adapted. In the eighteen thirties, it is the means of consolidating such patronage that is in question, and for which subsequent innovations in the theatrical arrangements are made in the ensuing decades. Hunt, advocating the curtailment of the length of performances in the Tatler of July

7th 1831<sup>22</sup> as a general rule at the theatres in imitation of Madame Vestris's practice, emphasizes specifically the consequent convenience to the family group:

"The late hours frighten mothers and grandmothers. It is not pleasant to take children away before the

21. Hermann Puckler-Muskau, Tour in England, Ireland and France, in the years 1826, 1827, 1828, and 1829 (Philadelphia, 1833), pp.51-62.

22. Leigh Hunt, "Late Hours at the Theatre" in Victorian Dramatic Criticism, selected by George Rowell (London, 1971), pp.190-191.

entertainments are over, and it is impossible to keep them up till one or two o'clock"

Planché similarly praises the innovation of early hours because it enables "families to reach their homes before midnight".<sup>23</sup> Thus the "respectable families" whose absence from the patent theatres Pückler-Muskau remarks on at the end of the eighteenth twenties had gravitated to the minor houses in the early eighteenth thirties; by the eighteenth forties playbill announcements of early hours appear. The Lyceum bill for December 2nd, 1848, states that "the Performances...are arranged to terminate as near eleven o'clock as possible".

That the theatres sought to recommend themselves to their patrons by the adoption of shorter hours indicates that the audience the managers aimed at was not a local one; early termination allowed for travelling time. The location of a number of theatres in the same area similarly indicates that potential audiences were drawn from a much wider territory than that immediately surrounding the theatre. From the early eighteenth thirties, as public transport improved and living conditions in the centre of the city degenerated, those who could afford to do so had already begun to move to the outlying areas.<sup>24</sup> The suburban population grew rapidly, especially in the Hackney, Kensington and Paddington areas, and this growth accelerated in the eighteenth thirties; between 1831 and 1861, for

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23. The Extravaganzas of J.R. Planché (London, 1879), quoted in A.M. Nagler, A Source Book in Theatrical History, (New York, 1959), pp.462-463.

24. Information on the growth of the suburbs and the expansion of public transport is derived from Francis Sheppard, London 1808-1870: The Infernal Wen (London, 1971).



example, the population of Kensington increased from the twenty thousand mark to around eighty thousand. Public omnibuses, introduced by Shillibeer in 1829, carried a large proportion of the consequent and ever-increasing traffic between suburbs and city as the separation between home and place of work became more general; by 1834 there were 376 licensed omnibuses operating in London, which within five years increased to 620, and by 1850 there were over 1300. The heaviest traffic was to Paddington, closely followed by the routes to Kensington and Hammer-smith. Steamboat services similarly expanded; in 1837 a frequent service between London Bridge and Westminster Bridge was begun, but by the eighteen fifties the railways had superseded water travel. The London and Greenwich Railway Company opened a line between London Bridge and Deptford in 1836, which in 1838 was extended to Greenwich, and other lines were opened in the following decade.

These early commuters were also the potential West End theatre audience; an account in the Penny Magazine<sup>25</sup> in 1837 describes the omnibuses as bearing

"the merchant to his business, the clerk to his bank or counting house, the subordinate official functionaries to the Post Office, Somerset House, the Excise, or the Mint, the Custom House or Whitehall."

Those "who can endeavour to live some little distance from London" are defined by the writer as those

"whose incomes vary from £150 to £400 or £600 and whose business does not require their presence till nine or ten in the mornings, and who can leave it at five or six in the evenings; persons with limited independent

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25. Quoted in Francis Sheppard, London 1808-1870: The Infernal Ven (London, 1971), pp.121-122.



means of living, such as legacies or life-rents, or small amounts of property, literary individuals; merchants and traders small and great...."

Thus during the eighteen thirties a large number of people in easy financial circumstances, even if not actually wealthy, became available as potential theatre patrons, while the progressive decentralisation of the city from that period equally made it ever more necessary that in order to survive, theatre managers should attempt principally to attract such an audience.

By the eighteen fifties, the area round the West End theatres was noted for its squalor and degeneracy. Henry James records, in his account of a visit to the Olympic at that time

"our dismal approach to the theatre, the squalid slum of Wych Street, then incredibly brutal and barbarous as an avenue to joy"<sup>26</sup>

Engels selects the same area for specific mention in describing, in 1844, the worst of living conditions in the metropolis:

"In the immediate neighbourhood of Drury Lane Theatre... are some of the worst streets of the whole metropolis ...in which the houses are inhabited from cellar to garret exclusively by poor families"<sup>27</sup>

Immediately to the west was Seven Dials, the location of the Tom-all-alone's of Bleak House, and the equally notorious area of St. Giles, while Mayhew provides copious information on the "circulating harlotry of the Haymarket and Regent

26. Henry James, "A Small Boy and Others" in Autobiography (London, 1956), p.180.

27. Frederick Engels, The Condition of the Working-Class in England (London, 1974), pp.61-62.



Street" in the fourth volume of London Labour and the London Poor<sup>28</sup> published in 1862.

The attention to comfort and convenience in the theatre was matched by an orderliness of behaviour on the part of the audience so accommodated, which was correlated by contemporaries with the presence of family groups. Westland Marston,<sup>29</sup> describing the new respectability of Sadler's Wells under Phelps' management,<sup>30</sup> juxtaposes the presence of the "Islington paterfamilias" and the "respectful, almost solemn hush" in which the performances were heard. Dickens, in an article entitled "Shakespeare and Newgate" in Household Words, October 4th 1851, on the same theatre<sup>31</sup> also associates order and comfort with the "respectable family":

"The pit...is made very comfortable, and is constantly filled by respectable family visitors. A father sits there with his wife and daughters, as quietly, as easily, as free from all offence, as in his own house."

The progressive dominance of the family element in the mid-Victorian audience and the equation of its presence with respectability leads to Sala's<sup>32</sup> description in Twice Round The Clock of Queen Victoria at the theatre

28. Henry Mayhew, London's Underworld, ed. Peter Quennell (London, 1969), p.32.
29. John Westland Marston (1819-1890), critic and playwright. He wrote a number of plays in the legitimate form which were unsuccessful.
30. Westland Marston, Our Recent Actors (London, 1888), II, p.36.
31. Reprinted in The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens, Household Words 1850-1859, ed. Harry Stone (London, 1969), I, pp.343-349.
32. George Augustus Sala (1828-1896) began his career as an artist and illustrator. He turned to journalism in the late eighteen forties, and was employed by Dickens on Household Words and All the Year Round.



in 1859 as a matriarch, not as a monarch:

"Mark yonder, that roomy box on the grand tier, which a quiet, plainly dressed party has just entered. There is a matronly lady in black....Presently there sits down by the matronly lady's side, a handsome, portly, middle-aged gentleman, in plain sober evening dress....."<sup>33</sup>

The West End manager in the mid-Victorian period adapted the organisation of his theatre specifically for audiences which, during the decade preceding the Theatres Act, had seceded from the patent theatres and in turning to the minor theatres, had shown themselves to be of sufficient weight to make it profitable for the manager to meet their requirements from the theatre. In terms of social position, this group shared some of the characteristics of both the fashionable and wealthier box patrons and the respectable and relatively more discriminating pit patrons. They enjoyed reasonable financial security, and were prepared to spend money to obtain the kind of conveniences hitherto restricted to the boxes in the theatre. They were equally prepared to devote a proportion of income to living in the suburbs to escape the inconveniences of the city and to separate themselves from the disreputable and poverty-stricken town dwellers, as in the theatre they separated themselves from the chaotic gallery audience. At the same time, in common with the pit audience, they were prepared to take their entertainment seriously and attentively, and consequently expected an orderliness to prevail

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33. Quoted in E. Royston Pike, Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age (1850-1875) (London, 1967), p.53.



in the theatre so that concentration on the stage was possible, an orderliness already established as their own pattern of living in the regularity of the daily journey from a family-based home to the place of work. In terms of income and way of life, this section of the theatre audience can be correlated with the middle-class who were rising to prominence as a social group at the same time as they were establishing a dominance as patrons in the theatre.

Initially, the main provision made for this audience was the introduction of the orchestra stall, a kind of seating which united the comfort of the boxes with the proximity to the stage of the pit, thus levelling the abrupt distinction between the two kinds of seating in the theatre as, in social terms, the expanding middle-class blurred the abrupt division between the upper-class and the rest of society. In the course of the mid-Victorian period, however, the orchestra stall gradually became a line of demarcation between boxes and pit rather than a bridge; the stalls were progressively assimilated to the boxes and the pit to the gallery, as seating prices indicate, as the stall patrons annexed the privileges of the box patrons. By the end of the mid-Victorian period, the stalls had become an extension of the boxes rather than, as at the beginning of the period, an alternative to them. In seceding from the patent houses and turning to the minor theatres during the eighteen thirties, the rising middle-classes by implication were rejecting all that they associated with the theatres royal as strongholds of obsolete aristocratic privilege, hindering the development of the theatre by



other agencies without fulfilling their own duty in that area; instead the middle-classes sought a theatre that, instead of imposing itself on them, would respond to them, and serve of their own interests rather than compel them to serve alien interests. As the middle-classes became more firmly established as a distinct social group, however, they gradually turned from self-consciously attempting to establish autonomy by demonstrating their influence in their own chosen area and defining themselves by contrast against what was conceived of as the outmoded aristocracy, to recreating a modified aristocratic pattern. The eventual confidence of the middle-classes in the security and stability of their own position is demonstrated in the theatre by the mid-eighteen sixties where the kind of entertainment for which the middle-class-dominated audience had shown their preference was provided in a theatre organised to incorporate as normal features the provisions in accommodation evolved by managers to gratify the increasing expectations of their audience. Consequently towards the end of the eighteen sixties, new theatres proliferated, as the theatres which had been suitable in the eighteen thirties became progressively outmoded and incapable of adaptation to the new conditions; thus the minor houses were in the course of the mid-Victorian period superseded, as they had themselves superseded the patent theatres. The polarisation of seating arrangements in the theatre at the end of the mid-Victorian period was as distinct as that in the patent houses in the early part of the century; the attempt to level seating distinctions proved satisfactory



only as a transitional phase, as much as the advocacy of the levelling of social distinctions resulted in a disillusionment which ultimately tended rather to recommend their reinforcement.

### III Mid-Victorian Stage Productions

In the entertainments they presented, the West End managers were primarily concerned with pleasing the audience. their theatres were organised to attract, in which they stood in contrast to those contemporary commentators on the theatre who, not actively concerned with the running of theatres as financially profitable business ventures, proffered advice and recommendations in accordance with abstract and theoretical standards of what the theatre should be, with an urgency imparted by the political and social overtones that theatrical matters had assumed. The types of stage production that became the common currency of the successful theatres are indicative, consequently, of the taste of the audiences who patronised them; those that fell into abeyance during the mid-Victorian period did so because they had become, like the patent theatres, obsolete. Critical injunctions and pleas grounded in a concern with the condition of the contemporary theatre measured by the frequency of productions from the legitimate repertoire had little influence on what the majority of audiences actually went to see.

The immediate result hoped for from the Theatres Act, that the minor houses would assume the responsibility for the national drama neglected by the theatres royal, did not take place.<sup>1</sup> The managers were willing to present Shakespeare and the legitimate drama on occasion, but not

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1. Information on plays presented is derived from the relevant playbills in the Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



to rely solely on such plays for their programmes. Such a hopeful but naively conceived response to the new general availability of Shakespeare to all resulting from the Act as that of a certain Captain Harvey Tuckett, an aspiring amateur, who opened the Lyceum in January, 1844, with Henry IV, he himself appearing as Falstaff, only to play to empty benches,<sup>2</sup> was an adequate demonstration that the name of Shakespeare alone did not suffice to draw audiences. The West End managers capitalised on their new legal access to the legitimate/<sup>drama</sup> to supplement rather than to replace their more usual type of programmes, taking care when they did so to ensure that such presentations were enhanced by additional attractions. At the Haymarket, under Webster, for example, seasons of the legitimate/<sup>drama</sup> were introduced as occasioned by the engagement of actors noted for such roles; such series of presentations included that of 1843, when Charles Kean appeared in the parts from the regular drama in which he had established himself, and that in the autumn of 1850, when Macready, during his farewell engagement prior to his retirement, appeared in the legitimate plays which comprised his own personal repertoire.<sup>3</sup> The only successful managements for which Shakespeare provided the staple material rather than the occasional novelty were those of Kean at the Princess's and Phelps at Sadler's Wells; Phelps' audience, however, was not the same as that of the West End theatres, being predominantly local in composition,

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2. A.E.Wilson, The Lyceum (London, 1952), p.64.

3. George C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York), 1966, II, pp.237-256.



as Marston's reference to the "Islington paterfamilias" indicates, supplemented, according to his description,<sup>4</sup> by the kind of spectator who would previously have been found in the old pit:

"the attractions of the little theatre spread until it became a sort of pilgrim's shrine to the literary men of London, to the younger members of the Inns of Court, and to those denizens of the West in whom poetic taste still lingered."

Kean, alternatively, went to such lengths in providing Shakespeare's plays with additional attractions that it became, for contemporaries, a debatable point as to whether such stage productions could be considered as productions of Shakespeare at all.

During the mid-Victorian period, the predominant category of stage productions was that labelled "drama"; in Henry Crabb Robinson's diary<sup>5</sup> the term is first used to refer to a particular kind of play in the eighteen thirties, in contrast to its general use up to this time as a name for the whole genre. In the early years of the century, Robinson uses the traditional terms of "tragedy" and "comedy" to refer both to obviously legitimate plays, defined as such by virtue of belonging to the generally agreed corpus of national dramatic literature, and to contemporary plays cast in the legitimate mould. Thus in 1811, for example, Fletcher's Rule a Wife and Have a Wife is "comedy", and in 1812 Julius Caesar is recorded as "tragedy"; the 1813

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4. Westland Marston, Our Recent Actors (London, 1888), II, p.36.

5. Henry Crabb Robinson, The London Theatre, 1811-1866, ed. Eluned Brown (London, 1966).



reference to "Coleridge's Tragedy Remorse" accords descriptively to the play the status to which it lays claim by virtue of its external features. Plays of less definite characteristics are referred to by less definite names, such as the "comic piece Windham and Whackam" and the "sentimental piece My Spouse and I" in 1815. In the eighteenth twenties, the vague and general terms used proliferate: the indefinite "piece", "representation", "play" and even "thing" appear with increasing frequency, applied to such presentations as Amphitryon, a combination of Plautus, Dryden and Molière, and anonymous and ephemeral items such as The Art of Lying. With the appearance of the "drama" category in the eighteen thirties, applied for example to the 1835 The Last Days of Pompeii, an adaptation of Lytton's novel, Robinson uses his vocabulary of dramatic terms more specifically; "comedy" and "tragedy" are largely reserved for items from the traditional legitimate repertoire, whose status is sanctioned by age, and frequently qualified by such epithets as "old" and "stock", as "Morton's old comedy" Cure for the Heartache in 1844, which was first presented in 1797. At the same time, new plays cast in legitimate form tend progressively to be denied the dignity of the traditional terminology, and are instead subsumed under the heading of "drama" as is Lovell's<sup>6</sup> The Wife's Secret in 1848, despite the conventionality of its five act form and historical setting.

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6. George William Lovell (1804-1878), secretary of the Phoenix Life Assurance Company. He was the author of several successful plays in the legitimate form.



In contrast, the terminology applied by Robinson to productions of lesser pretensions remains largely constant; "spectacle", "farce", "burlesque" and "extravaganza" are used with a comparative confidence, though by the end of the eighteen forties the distinction between "burlesque" and "extravaganza" has become less definite; in 1850 his note on Alcestis refers to it as

"a burlesque of the Greek tragedy of Euripides by young Talfourd - not an agreeable extravaganza -"

The category of "melodrama", however, used regularly in the early years of the century, dies out roughly contemporaneously with the introduction of "drama"; presentations placed under the former term are generally described in terms of their sensational aspects and contrivance of plot, as in the note in 1813 on Pocock's<sup>7</sup> The Miller and his Men, where the hyphenated spelling of the term is a vestige of its foreign origin:

"The Melo-drama of The Miller and his Men interested me as all Banditti occurrences do. The scenes however - And in such pieces those are the most material parts of the exhibition are not so horrid as I have seen before and the plot is not well contrived - In such pieces a gross and palpable probability is the great requisite."

The "melodrama" John du Bart of 1815 Robinson condemns as "a most wretched thing...the sea fight cannonade and explosion were but poorly acted" but is better pleased by "a Melodrama - The Quito-Gate" in 1816:

"Splendid scenery and a succession of interesting incidents - exciting alarm - hairbreadth escapes of all kinds etc. - These were the attractions..."

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7. Isaac Pocock (1782-1835), painter and author of several popular melodramas, a number of farces, and adaptations from Scott.



From 1822, the references to "melodrama" grew increasingly critical of that type of entertainment; in The Two Galley Slaves of that year he

"could not fancy Terry in the villain - he is too good an actor to be thrown into melodramatic situations..."

though The Chinese Sorcerer of 1823 was not totally unredeemed:

"the scenery is so beautiful that I actually cared nothing for the execrable stuff of words by which it was accompanied."

The dismissive tone becomes more marked during the decade; in 1826 he writes of

"The Knights of The Cross a melodrama from Walter Scott's Crusaders [The Talisman] - gorgeous without taste in the decorations and the incidents not sufficiently prepared to excite interest..."

One of his last references to "melodrama" associates it with the old Victoria Theatre, then named the Coburg and, although at that time enjoying a somewhat higher reputation than it did in the mid-Victorian period, restricted in its regular patronage to the inhabitants of the immediate neighbourhood of Lambeth; it was "the resort only of the aborigines"<sup>8</sup>.

Robinson describes his visit thus:

"a bad evening - vile acting of vile pieces and the house offensive by a bad smell..."

Robinson's use of descriptive terms for stage productions indicates the evolution of "drama" as a category of entertainment with a progressively specific meaning from its introduction around the beginning of the eighteenth thirties; between the early years of the century and the appearance of "drama" so used, the traditional "tragedy" and

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8. H. Barton Baker, The London Stage (London, 1889), II, p.237.



"comedy" were supplemented by "melodrama". As the latter term became increasingly pejorative, the former terms became restricted in meaning, leading to a period around the eighteen twenties marked by the use of an assortment of vague and indefinite terms; the confusion of this transitional stage is resolved by the "drama" label.

Robinson's practice is corroborated by that of his contemporaries throughout the period covered by his diary. The wider application of "tragedy" at the beginning of the century, appears in such reviews as that of Coleridge's Remorse in the Critical Review of April 1813<sup>9</sup>, which refers to the play as "a new tragedy"; the author of an article in Baldwin's London Magazine of January 1822, dealing with Byron's Sardanapalus, The Two Foscari and Cain refers to Byron's "new domain of classic tragedy"<sup>10</sup> and equally Byron himself in his preface to Sardanapalus<sup>11</sup> describes that play and The Two Foscari as "Tragedies". Contemporary reviewing likewise shows the degeneration in meaning of "melodrama"; the writer in the Monthly Mirror of December 1802<sup>12</sup> attempts a purely descriptive definition of a novel term with reference to the first melodrama to be billed as such, Holcroft's<sup>12a</sup> A Tale of Mystery:

"By Melodrama we suppose is meant a drama, in which the language, situations, and passions are accompanied by music."

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9. Reprinted in Romantic Bards and British Reviewers, ed. John O. Haydon (London, 1971), pp.136-138.
10. Reprinted in Romantic Bards and British Reviewers, ed. John O. Haydon, (London, 1971), pp.276-282.
11. Lord Byron, Poetical Works, ed. Frederick Page (Oxford, 1970), p.453.
12. Reprinted in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff, (London, 1974), pp.56-58.
- 12a. See Chapter IV, p.67, n.18.



In contrast the writer in the Morning Chronicle of April 5th, 1836<sup>13</sup>, refers in a derogatory manner to "the usual materials of melodramatic interest" which include "a 'female in distress'", "poetical justice", a "gallant protector" and "striking incidents". Equally the uncertainty about dramatic categorisation in the transitional period and the lack of consensus as to the meaning of any particular term is seen, for example, in Scott's preface to his rejected The Doom of Devergoil<sup>14</sup>, in which "mimic goblins" were "intermixed with the supernatural machinery":

"I have called the piece a Melodrama, for want of a better name; but, as I learn from the unquestionable authority of Mr Colman's Random Records, that one species of the drama is termed an extravaganza...."

The fluidity of dramatic terms caused endless trouble for the 1832 Committee which, despite the legal necessity, was unable to arrive at any specific definition for "burletta"; the Report records Bulwer's lengthy and detailed but ultimately fruitless questioning of at least seven witnesses on the subject.<sup>15</sup>

The establishment of a new dramatic term in the mid-Victorian period points to the establishment of a particular kind of stage production which necessitated its introduction and justified the duration of its existence.

13. Reprinted in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London, 1974), pp.201-202.

14. The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, ed. J. Logic Robertson (Oxford, 1940), p.965.

15. Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature (London, 1832).

"Drama" is applied to virtually any new play produced at the West End theatres which lies outwith the old farce, burlesque or extravaganza categories.<sup>16</sup> Such a division indicates that "drama" should be comparatively serious and bear a resemblance to the real world; the other three categories all present a world lying outside what could be considered as normal experience, where the disparity itself is intended to induce laughter or wonder. The term does not make any distinctions either on the basis of the source of material used or the form in which it is cast, and is consequently applied equally to original plays and to those adapted from the French, as well as to those which adopt the legitimate form as to those which do not.

The productions described by Robinson as "drama" include Byron's Sardanapalus, previously classified both by author and reviewer as "tragedy", in an 1834 entry, and an adaptation of "Dickens's Chuzzlewit" in 1844. Morley's<sup>17</sup> use of the term is equally comprehensive, making no distinctions either as to form used or origin of material; under this category he subsumes, for example, Boucicault's<sup>18</sup> five act Jamie Pride, on February 10, 1855, and the same author's three act The Colleen Bawn, a "transformation of Gerald Griffin's excellent novel," on September 15th, 1860. Similarly the journal entries refer consistently to Tom

16. Playbills in the Theatre Collection of The Victoria and Albert Museum.

17. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer. From 1851 to 1866 (London, 1891).

18. Dion Boucicault (1822-1890), actor and dramatist of Irish extraction, the author of some 150 plays, many translations from the French and adaptations of novels.



Taylor's<sup>19</sup> plays as "dramas". The productions so named include his collaborations with the novelist Charles Reade, Masks and Faces (1852) based on Reade's own novel, and the original Two Loves and a Life of 1854; Still Waters Run Deep (1856), its plot being "from a French novel"; an adaptation of "Madame Girardin's charming drama, Une Femme qui déteste son Mari, A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing" (1857); "The Fool's Revenge, suggested by Le Roi s'amuse and Rigoletto," of 1859, in blank verse and five acts; and The Ticket-of-Leave Man (1863), originally "the Leonard of MM. Edouard Brisbane and Eugène Nus."

The "drama" thus disregards the old distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate plays while sharing the propensity of melodrama to find a large proportion of its material in the French theatre. The first melodrama to be so described, A Tale of Mystery, was a translation of Pixérécourt's Coelina, ou l'enfant du mystère, and for the next few decades, translations from Pixérécourt and subsequently from Scribe, the foremost practitioners of that form in France, proliferated.<sup>20</sup> The continuing reliance on French originals in the mid-Victorian period is indicated by such comments as that of W.B. Donne<sup>21</sup>, writing on "The

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19. Tom Taylor (1817-1880), dramatist and editor of Punch. He was Professor of English at University College, London, from 1845 to 1847, was called to the Bar in 1845, and served on the Board of Health and later the Local Government Board, 1850-1871.
20. Allardyce Nicoll, A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800-1850 (Cambridge, 1930), I, pp.81-84.
21. William Bodham Donne (1807-1882) was Examiner of plays in the Lord Chamberlain's Office from 1857 to 1874. A classical scholar, he contributed to the Edinburgh Review, the Quarterly Review, Fraser's Magazine and the Saturday Review.

Drama" in the Quarterly Review of June 1854:

"The popular drama of the day is...in no intelligible sense of the term national, but...a Parisian exotic."<sup>22</sup>

Morley carefully cites sources in discussing new productions in accordance with his condemnation of the "mischievous custom" of suppressing such acknowledgement, an indication of the wide extent of the practice of translation.

In terms of stage success, Taylor was by far one of the most popular authors of "dramas" for the West End theatres in the mid-Victorian period. His plays occupy a good deal of space in Morley's journal, and Robinson in 1854 describes him as "very popular as well as able". Taylor found ready markets for his plays at the Olympic, Haymarket and Adelphi theatres, and in writing for the stage had, as much as the managers with whom he dealt, success in terms of audience rather than critical approval as his primary objective. His view of the merits of the stage is set out in his introduction to The Ticket-of-Leave Man,<sup>23</sup> Superficially, he would appear to be enthusiastic about the work of recent and contemporary authors for the stage, but what he writes is in fact somewhat ambiguous:

"There has been no period, for the last two centuries, in which invention and activity have been more conspicuous in the dramatic field than during the [last] thirty or forty years..."

It is by effort rather than by achievement that he characterises the plays from the eighteen thirties onwards. The

22. Reprinted in William Bodham Donne, Essays on the Drama (London, 1863), pp.120-155.

23. Quoted in English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, I, Dramas 1800-1850, ed. Michael R. Booth (Oxford, 1969), p.1.



list of "dramatists" of the "epoch" which he gives, in its ordering and grouping of names, similarly implies more than is said. The lengthy catalogue falls into two unmarked parts, each arranged in chronological order; the first is of those authors who dealt in the legitimate form:

"Miss Mitford, Sheridan Knowles, Bulwer Lytton...  
Browning...Marston, Home, Lovell...Mrs Gore..."

The second is of writers concerned with stage not literary success:

"Peake, Poole, Hooke, Planché...the Mortons, Mark  
Lemon, Buckstone...Fitzball...Bernard, Coyne, Oxenford,  
Shirley Brooks..."

Placed in juxtaposition though without division or comment, the two lists indicate the growing sterility of the legitimate writers in contrast to the advancing skill of the journeymen authors in terms of theatrical viability. Mrs Gore,<sup>24</sup> placed at the end of the first list by virtue of chronology, also functions as the *reductio ad absurdum* by implication of the legitimate form in the mid-Victorian theatre; her signal achievement was as the author of the comedy Quid Pro Quo, a dismal failure on stage, which won the prize of £500 offered "for the encouragement of Dramatic Literature" by Webster in 1843, for an "original English comedy", "in 5 Acts, illustrative, in plot and character, of modern British Manners and Customs."<sup>25</sup> The names with which the second list concludes are those of the authors who

24. Catherine Gore (1799-1861), novelist of fashionable English Life. Between 1824 and 1862, she published some seventy novels, the most successful of which were Manners of the Day (1830), Cecil (1841) and The Banker's Wife (1843).

25. Haymarket playbill, October 12, 1843, in the Theatre Collection of The Victoria and Albert Museum.

provided the contemporary stage with a steady stream of ephemeral but highly successful material, and it is to the same authors that Mathews refers as being the common currency of the contemporary theatre, rather than "the higher dramatists", in 1859;<sup>26</sup> it is not "the taste for Shakspeare and the higher dramatists" that draws audiences, but the plays of "Mark Lemon, Stirling Coyne, Bayle Bernard, and Maddison Morton".

The "dramas" which the West End theatres presented in response to the taste of its audience are typified by Taylor's work, in that he shared the objectives of the theatre managers and succeeded markedly in realising them. Morley refers frequently to his skill in adapting his plays to both the particular capacities of the actors who performed them and to the audiences of the theatres at which they were performed. Of Taylor and Reade's collaboration, Two Loves and a Life, which Morley considers to be "of its kind....excellent", presented at the Adelphi in 1854, he writes

"The authors have evidently determined that they would deprive the Adelphi audience of not one of its usual delights....There is the Adelphi audience fitted to perfection with its play, and every actor fitted to perfection with his or her part; yet, after all, nothing is displayed more perfectly than the true power of the authors....the oldest tricks of the stage being made new and striking by some touch which sets the stamp of genius upon them."<sup>27</sup>

He also praises Taylor's versatility and wide range of

26. The Life of Charles James Mathews, ed. Charles Dickens (London, 1879) II, p.297.

27. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer, From 1851 to 1866 (London, 1891), pp.69-70.



ability, with reference to the author's work for Astley's, a suburban theatre specialising in large scale spectacle, and, as the extreme contrast, for Sadler's Wells, at this date, 1859, under Phelps' management:

"Mr Tom Taylor this week has especially shown his dexterity in fitting any company of actors with a play that will develop their particular resources and those of their theatres. For Astley's he has produced a hippodrome upon the life of Garibaldi, full of horses and gunpowder explosions. For Sadler's Wells he has written a play in blank verse, The Fool's Revenge....." 28

Taylor's career as a dramatist extends from the eighteen forties into the eighteen seventies;<sup>29</sup> his development is one of technique, of increasing skill in gauging audience taste and adapting himself to it.

Even in his earliest plays, what was noticed as most individual was his tendency to concentrate on the detail of mise-en-scène rather than on striking incidents. A Times review of the one act farce Our Clerks<sup>30</sup> (Princess's, 1852) comments on its similarity to the earlier "drama", To Parents and Guardians (Lyceum, 1846):

"[Mr Taylor] does not so much aim at complications in plot...but rather seizes upon some position in actual life, and endeavours to exhibit it with all its appurtenances. Thus his popular piece of Parents and Guardians brings upon the eye of a spectator a large private boarding school, with its attendant follies and squabbles, and in the same manner Our Clerks sets forth the probable conditions of a life in chambers in the Temple."

Thus, while "there was no pretence to novelty of construction",

28. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer, From 1851 to 1866 (London, 1891), p.200. (Hereafter referred to as Journal).

29. A list of Taylor's plays is given in Allardyce Nicoll, A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900 (Cambridge, 1946), II, pp.592-594.

30. Times, March 8th, 1852.

Our Clerks still showed something "completely sui generis" to the reviewer:

"It is the atmosphere in which the personages move that gives the piece its distinctive character, and in producing this the author has shown all that knowledge of life and power of elaborating details which separate him from other writers of the stage and approximate him rather to the Dickenses and the Thackerays..."

Morley refers to the same concentration on the elaboration of mise-en-scène; he writes of The Overland Route (Haymarket, 1850), to which he refers as Overland Mail, as being "a drama of life and manners, rather than of incident".<sup>31</sup>

Taylor's plays are compounded from a juxtaposition rather than an integration of two main elements, plot and setting. In plot, he employs sentimental and domestic themes, which are worked out by stock characters in stock situations, already familiar to audiences; in contrast, the setting, against which such incidents as the plots give rise to are placed, is selected for novelty and potential for effective stage presentation. The independence of plot and setting is indicated by the varying of setting and the repetition of identical plot devices, while within the bounds of any particular play, the plot is in no way affected or modified by the particular setting. Thus, for example, in both Two Loves and a Life (Adelphi, 1854), set in the time of the second Jacobite rebellion, and the contemporary The Ticket-of-Leave Man (Olympic, 1863), the same plot device, the separation of hero and heroine is employed, brought about in the former play by the factionalism resulting from rebellion, and in the latter by the wrongful imprisonment of

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31. Henry Morley, Journal, p.206.



the hero for passing forged banknotes.

The resolution of plot is ultimately in terms of the personal and individual concerns of the characters, despite a nominal concern with treating wider issues rising out of the setting. Equally the importance of setting in any play lies in the opportunities offered for stage effect, not for the larger moral or social issues which are perfunctorily introduced, to be resolved at the final curtain with a moral cliché, simultaneously with the reconciliation of hero and heroine. The stated focus of interest in The Ticket-of-Leave Man, the injustice of social prejudice against the ex-convict, within the play only functions to create difficulties for the hero and heroine to combat, and opportunities for the depiction of the London underworld; its implications are in no way examined, and the whole question is finally dismissed by the hero's concluding words that

"You see, there may be some good left in a 'TICKET-OF-LEAVE MAN' after all."<sup>32</sup>

while a tableau is formed of injured hero recumbent in his wife's arms, surrounded by captured criminals, triumphant police officers, and benevolent employer. Similarly, in Masks and Faces, the demonstration of the fallibility of popular judgement of character is limited to showing the goodness of heart underlying the flippant exterior of the actress, Peg Woffington, which dictates the self-sacrifice which brings about the reconciliation of the estranged

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32. Tom Taylor, The Ticket-of-Leave Man, in Nineteenth Century Plays, ed. George Rowell (Oxford, 1965).

husband and wife. The issue raised is again terminated with a moral tag:

"Stage masks may cover honest faces, and hearts beat true beneath a tinselled robe....  
On the world's stage, as in our mimic art,  
We oft confound the actor with the part."<sup>33</sup>

The employment of the London theatrical world of the seventeen forties has relevance for neither the nominal centre of interest nor for the working out of the plot; within the play, it functions to permit the depiction of the contrasting worlds of the successful actresses and the starving poet.

The characteristics of the "drama" as demonstrated by Taylor's plays are a concentration on domestic and personal themes, the use of stock characters and situations, and the resolution of plot in personal and individual terms, in the action, all of which combine to present to the audience something which is already familiar and expected. The action and the background are totally independent of each other, and in the presentation of the background it is the recreation on stage of the novel and the unfamiliar that is the object. Consequently, while the plots used are all fundamentally the same, the settings used vary widely, and the rudimentary nature of the plots is in marked contrast to the elaborate care and detail employed in the mise-en-scène. In Masks and Faces, for example, I.2. takes place in

"A spacious and elegant apartment...opening into a garden formally planted, with statues, etc....A table set for a collation, with fruits, flowers, wine and plate,....Settees and high-backed chairs, a side table with plate, salvers, etc...."

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33. Tom Taylor and Charles Reade, Masks and Faces, in Nineteenth Century Plays, ed. George Rowell (Oxford, 1965).



Squalor requires an equal attention to minutiae; the stage directions for the starving poet's attic in II run thus:

"A large, roughly furnished garret....@asel with WOFFINGTON'S picture on it, half concealed by a green baize drapery. Colours, palette, pencils, maulstick, etc., etc...MRS TRIPLET reclining in a large chair... Violin hanging against wall...TRIPLET seated at a small table...Wooden chairs, BOY is rocking cradle.."

The necessity of continual novelty renders the repetition of an already used background in subsequent plays impossible; thus in the course of Taylor's career, while his plots remain static, increasing ingenuity is apparent in choice of setting in the interests of discovering new material, and his early propensity for selecting historical backgrounds eventually gives way to a reliance on material drawn from the contemporary world.

During the eighteen fifties, Taylor's ventures into the contemporary sphere increase in frequency. Slave Life (Adelphi, 1852) is based on Uncle Tom's Cabin; The Nice Firm (Lyceum, 1853) presents

"a peep at a day's 'business' perpetrated by this highly respectable firm of solicitors"

The third act of An Unequal Match (Haymarket, 1857) is set in contemporary Ems, while The Overland Route (Haymarket, 1860) shows "the passengers on board the Simoon homeward bound" and Up at the Hills of the same year deals with "Anglo-Indian Life"; Our American Cousin of 1861 presents "the republican American's contemptuous notion of an English lord" and the Olympic's Sense and Sensation of 1864 includes scenes in "a milliner's workroom" and "a boarding school".<sup>34</sup>

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34. Information derived from Henry Morley, Journal.

The progressive exhaustion of the past as a source of material for "drama" is indicated by the failure of The First Printer (Princess's, 1856), another collaboration with Charles Reade, set in fifteenth century Holland; it was withdrawn after nine performances. Cole writes of it as

"[a] play of so much merit, well acted and carefully got up"

and attributes its lack of success to "the insoluble problems of public caprice."<sup>35</sup>

The Ticket-of-Leave Man fully demonstrates the potential stage effectiveness of material from the contemporary world as at least equalling that from the past, with the added advantages of complete novelty and topicality of situation. The settings employed range from the detailed recreation of a suburban tea garden, with which the first act opens:

"The Bellevue Tea Gardens, in the south-west suburbs of London. Summer evening. Front of the tavern with ornamental verandah....arbours....with tables and seats; trees, shrubs, statues, etc. at the back, with ornamental orchestra and concert room."

to the domestic interior of the heroine's room in II, "humbly but neatly furnished..."; the commercial interior of a "Bill-broking Office" in III; while IV presents successively the coffee-room of the Bridgewater Arms, in contrast to the more refined tea garden; a moonlit city street; and finally

"The churchyard of St. Nicholas with tombstones and neglected trees..."

The same tendency to turn from the past to the

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35. J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859), II, p.164.



present for material for settings is apparent in the work of other popular playwrights for the West End theatres during the period, and results from the same reason, the necessity for continual novelty of background in the "drama" of which the structure is a juxtaposition, not an integration, of two contrasting foci of interest; to maintain the clear demarcation between plot and setting, between the already known and the unfamiliar, requires the contrast between the two elements to be a very definite one. Thus the characters and situations employed by the "drama" are stereotyped and instantly recognisable to audiences, as is the sentimentality of the domestic themes used; while, to emphasise the novelty and unfamiliarity of the background, increasing detail and elaboration in its stage presentation becomes essential as documentary evidence of its character as something different from that which has been previously seen in the theatre. Boucicault<sup>36</sup> accordingly moves from such works of the eighteen fifties using historical settings as Sixtus V (Olympic, 1851), Genevieve; or, The Reign of Terror (Adelphi, 1853) and Louis XI (Princess's, 1855) to the contemporary The Octoroon of 1860, and The Streets of London (Princess's, 1864). The playwrights listed for their popularity by Mathews and by Taylor tend similarly to draw increasingly on the present for their material in the course of the mid-Victorian period, a tendency dictated by a manifest preference for the contemporary over the historical

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36. Plays listed in Allardyce Nicoll, A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900 (Cambridge, 1946), II.

on the part of audiences. Oxenford's<sup>37</sup> The Porter's Knot (Olympic, 1858), which Morley describes sardonically as "the theatrical event of the last day or two...which adds one more to the number of remarkable successes" at that theatre, depicts the minutiae of a porter's everyday life in the present, "labouring day by day and month by month"; the same author's Ivy Hall of 1859 was withdrawn within a fortnight, its "tediousness...having been found incurable", despite its display "to perfection" of "traditional scenery of the days of the old English gentleman, in hall and park", and employment of "genuine old English airs".

This "drama" which was evolved in the course of the mid-Victorian period at the West End theatres as a direct response to the manifest inclinations of contemporary taste resulted from a gradual process of assimilation of those elements which continued to prove attractive in the previous dramatic modes employed, the pseudo-legitimate drama and the melodrama, while at the same time those facets now obsolete in terms of potential audience appeal were discarded and other elements not wholly appropriate in terms of the same criterion considerably modified. The dominant middle-class section in the theatre audience showed its strength and stability as a social group as much by the kind of entertainment it called for from the theatres as by the reorganisation of the theatrical system that it

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37. John Oxenford (1812-1877), dramatic author, critic and translator, wrote over seventy plays, and contributed copiously to periodicals. He held the position of dramatic critic on the Times from about 1850 for over a quarter of a century. His translations included works of Calderon, Boiardo, Molière and Goethe.



induced; neither of the already existing contemporary dramatic forms were immediately appropriate for such an audience. The melodrama had become discredited as a reputable dramatic mode, and relegated to the hinterland of local theatres patronised by local audiences, as Robinson's diary entries show, a section of society to mark itself off from which the middle class had already begun to establish itself in the new suburbs; equally the legitimate mode was similarly inapposite, bearing as it did associations with the old patent theatres and aristocratic privilege. The "drama" of the period, as much as the theatres of which it was performed, and the question of the consequent condition of the stage, thus had a relevance in the social and political dimensions for its audiences and commentators.

#### IV The "Drama" and Melodrama

The "drama" fulfilled the requirements of its middle-class patrons by eschewing the sensationalism and exaggeration associated with melodrama on the one hand, and the poetry, five act form and historical settings of legitimate drama on the other; instead, it purported to draw on the "real" world for its material, in the detailed portrayal of contemporary life and manners, while looking to its introduction of wider issues, the important topics of the day, to lend it the dignity of seriousness associated with legitimate status.

By the eighteen fifties, melodrama as a stage entertainment was connected with the more disreputable suburban theatres and their audiences. Dickens describes such "Amusements of the People" in Household Words<sup>1</sup> as peculiar to the "lower" classes and totally unknown to "the upper half of the world". At Sadler's Wells before Phelps' management<sup>2</sup> the degenerate audience applauded a degenerate entertainment. The theatre then was

"entirely delivered over to as ruffianly an audience as London could shake together...it was a bear-garden, resounding with foul language, oaths, catcalls, shrieks, yells...fights took place anywhere, at any period of the performance. The audience were of course directly addressed in the entertainment. An improving melo-drama, called BARRINGTON THE PICKPOCKET, being then extremely popular at another similar theatre, a powerful counter-attraction, happily entitled JACK KETCH was produced here, and received with great approbation."

The word "melodrama" itself became a convenient term of

1. Household Words, March 30, 1850.

2. "Shakespeare and Newgate", Household Words, October 4, 1851.



reference for everything at variance in the mid-Victorian theatre with scenic illusion and the portrayal of life and manners. For Charles Rice, writing in the eighteen thirties<sup>3</sup>, melodrama is drama that fails through implausibility and incoherence, lacking that "continuity of action" which is "one of the most interesting parts in the construction of a piece of any description." From the late eighteen thirties on, the word came to be used with increasing frequency as a general term, the antithesis to a subdued and pedestrian "reality". In an 1838 Edinburgh Review article on Oliver Twist, the author is advised to

"beware lest he converts a certain Mr Monks....into a mere melo-dramatic villain...There is such perfect truthfulness in the generality of his characters, that deviations from nature are less tolerable than when found in other works."

A Fraser's Magazine writer on "Literary Style" in 1857 elaborates on Dicken's "melodramatic" tone:

"Mr Dickens delights in the sayings and doings of strange, grotesque, out-of-the-way people, of whom we hardly ever meet the prototypes in flesh and blood... he fastens some distinctive oddities upon two or three of his characters, and never allows them to speak without bringing out the peculiarity....His portraits are in fact caricatures....His characters are all exaggerations."<sup>4</sup>

In addition, "sentiment" is "carried to maudlin excess".

The portrayal of the "reality" which should be the writer's concern excludes the exaggerations, and consequently distortions, of "melodrama". Charlotte Bronte, writ-

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3. Charles Rice, The London Theatre in the Eighteen-Thirties (London, 1950), pp.46-47.

4. Dickens, The Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London, 1971).

ing to G.H.Lewes in 1847<sup>5</sup> in reply to his advice to "beware of melodrama" and "adhere to the real" describes how in The Professor she previously took "Nature and Truth as [her] sole guides":

"[I] restrained my imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement, over-bright colouring, too, I avoided, and sought to produce something which should be soft, grave and true."

George Eliot, writing in the Westminster Review in 1856 on Dickens<sup>6</sup>, likewise condemns melodrama as misrepresentation, leading to a pernicious and unreal view of the social order. The "false psychology" of his "preternaturally virtuous poor children and artisans, his melodramatic boatmen and courtezans" encourages

"the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance and want."

The word "melodrama" carried no such connotations when first introduced in 1802 with the production of A Tale of Mystery, as the name of the new stage form. The Monthly Mirror<sup>7</sup> reviewer defines the term thus:

"By Melodrame we suppose is meant a drama, in which the language, situations, and passions are accompanied and heightened by music."

He expands on the characteristics of the genre as exemplified in the piece under discussion; music is the integral element:

5. Quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Bronte (London, 1960), p.233.

6. "The Natural History of German Life", Essays of George Eliot, ed. Thomas Pinney (London, 1963), pp.266-299.

7. Reprinted in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London, 1974), pp.56-58.



"The composer tells the story as well as the author. The characters are introduced with appropriate melodies; the progress of the scene is illustrated in a similar way; and every incident and feeling is marked by correspondent musical expression."

The piece as a whole is directed to the senses:

"the subject of the Tale of Mystery demands the aid of pantomime, and there is also an opportunity for spectacle, and a dance; so that beside the charm of novelty, this entertainment exhibits a combination of everything that is calculated to please the eye and the ear, and, we may add with strict justice, to gratify the taste, and powerfully to interest the feelings of the public."

Melodrama, with all these attractions, readily acquired, and maintained, an immense popularity at the enlarged patent houses, which had become, according to Cumberland, "theatres for spectators rather than playhouses for hearers"; it virtually supplanted the legitimate drama. Harris, the manager of Covent Garden, gave testimony in a chancery suit that his theatre made no profit on regular drama from 1808 to 1821, subsisting entirely on pantomime, spectacle and melodrama.<sup>8</sup> Poetic tragedy was presented in combination with melodrama and spectacle; to ensure the success of Macready's Covent Garden debut in Othello in 1816, Aladdin was added to the bill. Contemporary poetic dramatists wrote for the reader rather than the theatre audience; Byron, in the preface to Marino Faliero<sup>9</sup>, denies any connection between his dramatic writing and the stage:

"I have had no view to the stage; in its present state it is, perhaps, not a very exalted object of ambition."

The successful stage author found poetry irrelevant. Hazlitt,

8. Joseph Donohue, Theatre in the Age of Kean (Oxford, 1975), p.56.

9. Lord Byron, Poetical Works (London, 1959), pp.407-408.

writing in 1817 on Dimond's The Conquest of Taranto<sup>10</sup>, comments on its inappropriateness where audiences have no interest in literary merit, and want only "a striking and impressive exhibition":

"An appeal to the understanding is superfluous, where the senses are assailed on all sides....The gleams of wit or fancy glimmer but feebly on a stage blazing with phosphorus....Commonplace poetry is good enough as an accompaniment to all this."

The author, to provide the "style of drama" which is "a great favourite with an immense majority of the play-going public", should be "little more than the ballet-master of the scene", and work

"in conjunction with the scene-painter, the scene-shifter, the musical composer, the orchestras, the chorusses [sic] on the stage, and the lungs of the actors."

The new melodrama was readily assimilated to the English stage because of its strong similarity in themes and treatment to the kind of plays already popular at the patent houses at the end of the eighteenth century. The plays of Pixérécourt<sup>11</sup>, the main source of English melodrama for the first decade of its existence, were distinguished from much of the English drama, apart from the music, only by the greater dexterity of their workmanship. In 1779, Sheridan burlesqued in The Critic the general style of sentiment, sensation and extravagance which Robinson and his contemporaries were to associate with melodrama in the next century. The continuing popularity at the patent houses of

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10. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P.P. Howe (London, 1930), V, pp.366-368.

11. Gilbert de Pixérécourt (1773-1844), author of many melodramas, the staple fare of the secondary Paris theatres.



this kind of play at the end of the eighteenth century showed both in revivals from the standard repertoire and in successful new plays, whether translations or original compositions.<sup>12</sup> Of the Shakespearean tragedies, Richard the Third, in the Cibber version which emphasised the melodramatic elements, was probably the most popular; Massinger's A New Way to Pay Old Debts, with its "heavy villain", Sir Giles Overreach, was also frequently presented; from the Restoration period, Otway's pathetic tragedy, Venice Preserved, was retained. The very banditti welcomed by Robinson in The Miller and his Men as a melodramatic convention originated not with Pixérécourt but with the English Gothic novelists; stage adaptations of Mrs Radcliffe's novels had introduced English audiences to the remote mountains and sequestered castles of early melodrama in the seventeen eighties.<sup>13</sup> Of contemporary serious playwrights, Cumberland<sup>14</sup> and Colman the younger<sup>15</sup> were most popular. The sentimental drama of the former is typified by The West Indian (1771), an emotional plea on behalf of the social outcast, which was performed twenty-eight times in its first season at Drury Lane; The Wheel of Fortune, presented eighteen times in its first season at the same theatre, maintained its popularity well into the next century. None of Colman's plays, in a career

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12. Joseph Donohue, Theatre in the Age of Kean (Oxford, 1975), Chapter two.

13. Bertrand Evans, Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley (London, 1947), Chapter four.

14. Richard Cumberland (1732-1811). His dramatic style was satirised by Sheridan and Goldsmith.

15. George Colman the younger (1762-1836), manager of the Haymarket from 1789, Examiner of Plays from 1824.

lasting from 1782 to 1823, ever finally failed on stage; his heterogeneous compositions included musical as well as tragic and comic elements. The Iron Chest (1796), became another long-standing stock-piece. Low comedy and emotional distress are combined with a happy ending; the play begins with a glee sung by a starving family, and ends with a tenor solo.

Sentiment and sensation had always been reliable dramatic material; in the earlier part of the eighteenth century however, a new note entered the theatre, with Lillo's The London Merchant and Moore's The Gamester: domestic subjects, set in bourgeois rather than aristocratic life. This theme, the basis of Colman's and Cumberland's plays, also formed the subject matter of melodrama. The Times reviewer of A Tale of Mystery<sup>16</sup> traces the origin of the French form back to the Drame, itself influenced by Lillo and Moore:

"The Drame of the French stage was first introduced by the celebrated La Chaussée, who, by intertwining the tragic and the comic in the same production, and selecting for his Muse subjects of domestic misfortune, was the Author of that new species of composition in France called La Comédie Mixte; ou, Drame ....This kind of composition....has given birth to the Melo-Drame....."

The Drame broke with the traditions of the French theatre:

"the invention occasioned innumerable attacks from the critics of the day, and was roughly treated, as a scandalous corruption of the art, yet it has stood the test of more than half a century, and still triumphs over the feelings of the audience..."

The contemporary drama of the late eighteenth century English stage similarly abandoned the canons of the legiti-

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16. Reprinted in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London, 1974), pp.53-56.



mate drama, by discarding the established categories of tragedy and comedy, blank verse, and aristocratic protagonists and settings; vociferous critical objections, however, only arose at the very close of the century, with the conservative reaction against political and social reform in the years following the French Reign of Terror.

In Biographia Literaria, published in 1817, Coleridge includes a letter dated 1798<sup>17</sup>, in which he discusses "our modern sentimental plays" in the form of a debate between the "Defendant" of the "modern plays" and the "Plaintiff", who is Coleridge. The former describes their attractions; they substitute for "your kings and queens, and your old school-boy Pagan heroes" of classical tragedy "our good friends and next-door neighbours", whose "great or interesting" actions are thus catalogued:

"They find rich dowries for young men and maidens who have all other good qualities: they browbeat lords, baronets, and justices of the peace...they rescue stage-coaches at the instant they are falling down precipices...."

In addition,

"what is done on stage is more striking even than what is acted. I once remember such a deafening explosion, that I could not hear a word of the play for half an act after it...."

The gratification of this drama lies in its presentation of

"our own wants and passions, our own vexations, losses and embarrassments....[the poet] gratifies us by representing those as hateful or contemptible whom we

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17. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London, 1894), pp.257-262. The purported date of the letter would assign it to Coleridge's radical days, while its content suggests the later, conservative Coleridge. The ascribed date possibly indicates an attempt by the Coleridge of 1817 to dissemble his earlier political stance.

hate and wish to despise....He makes all those precise moralists, who affect to be better than their neighbours, turn out at last abject hypocrites, traitors...and your men of spirit...prove the true men of honour....the poor become rich all at once, and in the final matrimonial choice the opulent and high-born themselves are made to confess that VIRTUE IS THE ONLY TRUE NOBILITY AND THAT A LOVELY WOMAN IS A DOWRY OF HERSELF!"

Coleridge as "Plaintiff" denounces such a drama, based on the exaltation of the ordinary individual as hero, sensational incident and the realisation on stage of the audience's aspirations in the actual world, as "a moral and intellectual Jacobinism of the most dangerous kind":

"the whole secret of dramatic popularity consists with you, in the confusion and subversion of the natural order of things...in the excitement of surprise by representing the qualities of liberality, refined feeling, and a nice sense of honour...in persons and classes of life where experience teaches us least to expect them; and in rewarding with the sympathies that are the dues of virtue those criminals whom law, reason and religion, have excommunicated from our esteem!"

Coleridge's objections are to a drama which presents a world where the aristocracy is no longer in control, and even lacks the qualities which would entitle it to dominance. His denunciation represents an extreme and possibly retrospectively recanting view, but the dramatists themselves were well aware of the need for caution in the theatre in the current climate of opinion; the readiness to denounce any suggestion of revolutionary tendencies is indicated in the Advertisement prefixed by Holcroft<sup>18</sup> to the published text of Knave or Not, performed at Drury Lane in 1798<sup>19</sup>:

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18. Thomas Holcroft (1745-1809), dramatist, novelist and translator. Because of political prejudice against him after his arraignment for treason, some of his plays were printed anonymously.

19. The Life of Thomas Holcroft, ed. William Hazlitt (London, 1925), II, p.101.



"Before the comedy appeared, all parties were anxious that no sentiment or word should be spoken, which could be liable to misrepresentation. Some few passages, therefore, are committed to the press, which never were spoken on stage....A few years ago, this would have been common-place satire..."

In dramatising Caleb Williams, a novel by the anarchist philosopher Godwin, as The Iron Chest, Colman accordingly discarded the book's political tendency; Sheridan, in preparing his version of Kotzebue's<sup>20</sup> Pizarro, was equally careful to expunge anything approaching specific political doctrine, capitalising rather on a topical sense of patriotism divorced from Whig or Tory views, at a time when "Liberty" seemed threatened by Napoleonic France. The play became a famous piece of loyalist propaganda, with what one critic<sup>21</sup> called its

"happy allusions to the contest in which we are at present engaged with the inveterate enemies of social order and happiness."

Another reviewer found it "hardly possible to describe the rapturous bursts of loyalty and enthusiasm that arose..." The dramatic qualities of the piece were equally admired for their audience appeal, in combining the sentiment and spectacle subsequently identified with melodrama:

"To gratify the present taste in favour of the German drama, and to strengthen a performance conducted after that manner, with the additional attractions of striking machinery, scenic grandeur, and the fascinations of appropriate music, were objects that seemed calculated to combine the different suffrages of the votaries of extreme sensibility and the admirers of romance and spectacle."

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20. August Kotzebue (1761-1819), German author of over two hundred plays, popular in adaptation on the English stage at the end of the eighteenth century.

21. Reviews of Pizarro are quoted in Joseph Donohue, Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age (Princeton, 1970), pp.137-148.

The revolutionary fervour of French melodrama was diluted in adaptation to a general spirit of Libertarianism; though conservative in politics, however, in its bourgeois themes and illegitimate dramatic structure, it carried subversive implications exceeding those of the English plays by its reliance on music rather than language, the basis of the legitimate theatre.

The popularity of music and songs with theatre audiences led Colman to include a strong musical element in his pieces. In melodrama, however, music became an integral part of the drama rather than a mere adjunct; the text no longer stood by itself in an entertainment conceived in terms of stage performance, and through music, language became largely redundant. The anonymous author of the preface to The Woodman's Hut<sup>22</sup> (1814) remarks that

"music supplies the place of language, and though the expressions of music are not so nicely marked, still in conjunction with action, the purport of the scene is easy to be understood."

Like the "modern sentimental plays", melodrama relied on "what is done on stage"; its own identity was crystallised by its use of music to replace the dramatic poetry of the legitimate plays. The Times reviewer of A Tale of Mystery expressed relief at the lack of verbal effect:

"There is no extravagance of idea - no laborious research after simile and metaphor - no display of pomp and inflated expression."

Instead, the "novelty and interest" resulted from the combination of "fable, incident, dialogue, music, dancing and pantomime", and the composer was as important as the author

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22. Quoted in Michael R. Booth, English Melodrama (London, 1965), pp.38-39.



in his "arduous task" of "elucidating and enforcing the various passions and situations". Music acquired the pre-eminence no longer accorded to language, and the author's role was to provide opportunities for the other departments of the stage.

In A Tale of Mystery, the text gives many calls for music, and in the concluding sequence, dialogue is totally replaced by music and physical action. The orchestra follows each turn of the plot, and the directions run the gamut of the emotions: "hurrying" and "confused" music, music "to express chattering contention" and "pain and disorder", "music of doubt and terror", "soft music" after the conspirators plan their murders followed by "music expressing pain and alarm" and then "the successive feelings of the scene". The music directs the audience's emotional response; it is used to mark entrances, announcing by its theme what character is coming on stage and what emotional tone he brings to the situation, and is called on in the course of action to strike a particular emotional pitch and lead the audience into a change or heightening of mood. In conception, melodrama sought to appeal to the senses, not the intellect; Holcroft declares his aim in the Advertisement to the published text (1802)<sup>23</sup> to be "to fix the attentions, rouse the passions, and hold the faculties in anxious and impatient suspense." Music circumvents the spoken word, and the role of the author is minimalised.

In melodrama, music brings out what words or action fail to convey, giving a subjective colouring to

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23. Reprinted with text in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London, 1974), pp.30-52.

characters, situations and incidents; intensity of feeling is substituted for subtlety of depiction. As an organic part of the drama, it imposed a definite stylisation on the action. One critic, writing in 1818, remarks:

"A Melo-drame occasionally borders upon a Ballet, the action, in striking situations, being accompanied and heightened by music."<sup>24</sup>

Both structure and performance became equally subject to rigid conventions; melodrama substituted its own prescriptions for those of the legitimate drama, repeating its main features endlessly throughout its lengthy career on the nineteenth century stage, in its concentration on externals, emphasis on situation at the expense of motivation and characterisation, firm moral distinctions, unchanging character stereotypes, rewarding of virtue and punishment of vice, and spectacular effect. The style of performance was equally standardised, the prescribed emotions being conveyed through prescribed gestures and movements<sup>25</sup>; the stage directions for the actor in A Tale of Mystery refer him to a conventional code for the external portrayal of inward emotions; Montano, for example, "starts with terror and indignation. He then assumes the eye and attitude of menace" on the villain's appearance.

Melodrama dramatises in vivid terms the basic conflict between absolutes, between good and evil, vice and virtue. Through music, the moral position of the characters is made evident immediately on entrance; speech and gesture

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24. Quoted in Joseph Donohue, Theatre in the Age of Kean (Oxford, 1975), p.108.

25. The acting of melodrama is further discussed in Chapter VII.



are not intended to convey an impression of verisimilitude, but to externalise internal feelings. Since there is no ambiguity about character, the action is occupied by a series of events at the end of which a hostile or uncertain world is reconciled to the just deserts of already ideal human beings. The ultimate issue is never in doubt; music, as the accompaniment to the action, provides a framework of order for the struggle between good and evil. The audience accordingly is offered the satisfactions of a world where everything is as it appears to be, and goodness invariably receives its due rewards; herein lies the "gratification" found by Coleridge's "Defender", in the quality of wish-fulfillment.

By using music rather than words as its basis, melodrama perfected the kind of play already popular at the patent theatres, embodying popular attitudes in a form which lent itself to the embellishments of spectacle and reliance on physical action of an increasingly pictorial stage. The decline of the legitimate drama at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth reflects the change in the composition of the patent theatre audiences, in the years following the French Revolution and during the Industrial Revolution.<sup>26</sup> For much of the eighteenth century, the relatively small auditoria of the theatres royal were dominated by the aristocracy and upper middle-classes in the boxes, and the respectable bourgeoisie in the pit, who

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26. Information on audiences is derived from Michael R. Booth, "The theatre and its audience", The Revels History of Drama in English, VI (London, 1975) and H.W. Pedicord, The Theatrical Public in the Time of Garrick (Carbondale, 1966).

dictated the style of drama and nature of its performance; this traditional division of seating lasted well into the nineteenth century, as Planché's verse shows.<sup>27</sup> The lower classes were in a relative minority, confined to the upper gallery. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, the pit audience alone would appear to have become the dominant section in the audience, rejecting the kind of drama fostered under aristocratic patronage; it was the rise in pit prices and increase in the number of private boxes that provoked the O.P. riots, and the rioters succeeded in forcing compliance from the Covent Garden management. The plays of this period of transition reflect the attitudes of a politically conservative middle-class, impatient of aristocratic social hegemony; hence Coleridge's paranoid reaction to the "Jacobinism" of such a drama, representing the aspiration to a total reorganisation of the social order.

Melodrama, however, was also readily annexed by the minor and suburban theatres, its reliance on music rather than words bringing it within the terms of the burletta licence under which theatres other than the patent houses operated. By the middle of the eighteenth century there was little in the patent theatre productions outside the legitimate repertoire, apart from superior presentation, to distinguish them from the programmes offered at such minor houses as the Coburg and the Surrey. At the same time, an increasingly disreputable element, noted by Prince Pückler-Muskau, became predominant at the patent houses,

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27. Quoted in Chapter II.



while the respectable family section of the audience, together with the more fashionable class, seceded. In response to the taste of a cruder kind of audience, melodrama became even more spectacular in presentation and exaggerated in action; the term, associated with the entertainment of the lower strata of society, came to refer to those characteristics which became most salient in response to the taste of its public, extravagance and excess.

Originally, melodrama was defined chiefly by its use of music. Scott, however, writing in 1824, attributes the "deep, decided and powerful effect" of "the modern anomaly entitled a melo-drame" to "the delineation of external incident"<sup>28</sup>; the witnesses called before the 1832 Committee define melodrama in terms of the impact of "what is done on stage", making no reference to music. According to Charles Kemble,

"the most successful melo-dramas have been those which depended on strong excitement in the story or incidents of the piece...."

Jerrold contrasts melodrama with the legitimate drama; the latter is "mental" and the former "physical", consisting of "what are called a great many telling situations".<sup>29</sup> In consigning exaggerated action to melodrama, the theatre catering for a public who would not have considered themselves to resemble the patrons of melodrama retained music as an integral element of its presentations. For his pres-

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28. Reprint of Scott's Introduction to Ballantyne's Novelist's Library, X, in Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction, ed. Ioan Williams (London, 1968), p.110.

29. Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature (London, 1832), pp.44, 158.

tige production of Byron's Manfred in 1834 at Covent Garden, intended to vindicate his entitlement to control a patent theatre with its obligations to the legitimate drama, the manager Bunn commissioned an elaborate score from the esteemed Sir Henry Bishop.<sup>30</sup> David Mayer concludes from a study of theatre scores<sup>31</sup> that in the nineteenth century, music was "an essential ingredient of theatrical performance" and the orchestration "elaborate" when financially possible; the piano score for The Miller and his Men extends to fifty pages, providing considerably more incidental music for the action, apart from songs, than is suggested by the cues for "music" or "appropriate music". Music remained an important part of stage performance throughout the century; Mayer cites as his last example the score for a 1907 production of The Corsican Brothers, first presented by Kean at the Princess's in 1852, in which "music is prominent in every scene". Kean himself employed a resident minor composer, Hatton, at the Princess's, and in his production of The Corsican Brothers, the effectiveness of the apparition scenes derived largely from the accompaniment of the "Ghost Melody". When Irving revived the play, Percy Fitzgerald recalled the earlier production:

"It took hold of the public with a sort of fascination - the strange music of Stöpel, and the mysterious, gliding progress of the murdered brother across the stage, enthralling every one."<sup>32</sup>

Lewes was equally impressed by the impact on the audience:

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30. Sherwyn T. Carr, "Bunn, Byron and 'Manfred'", Nineteenth Century Theatre Research (Spring, 1973), pp.15-28.

31. David Mayer, "Nineteenth Century Theatre Music", Theatre Notebook, Vol. XXX, no.3 (1976), pp.115-121.

32. Percy Fitzgerald, Sir Henry Irving (Philadelphia, n.d.), p.113.



"with ghostly terror, heightened by the low tremolo of the violins, and the dim light upon the stage, the audience, breath-suspended, watches the slow apparition, and the vision of the duel which succeeds..."<sup>33</sup>

The integration of music into drama in melodrama, rather than defining the form, as its early commentators, impressed by the novelty, thought, is indicative of more fundamental characteristics, already existing in the English sentimental play. By redefining the form, tainted by lower class associations, in terms of physical action and exaggeration, the mid-Victorian bourgeois could accept in the "drama" an entertainment basically melodramatic in structure and appeal without its stigma. The continuing importance of music in the middle-class theatre signalises the unacknowledged retention of a whole dramatic mode, whose essential qualities were, as Coleridge's "Defender" states with reference to "modern sentimental plays", action and gratification: "what is done on stage" rather than what is conveyed verbally, coupled with the reflection back to the audience of its own attitudes, the expression of a class viewpoint.

Coleridge, a critic from a hostile political camp, denounced the sentimental drama for its "Jacobinism", its "confusion and subversion of the natural order of things"; the melodrama, however, as adapted to English audiences, was carefully conservative in its political stance; but representing as it did the world from the bourgeois viewpoint of the patent audiences of the early nineteenth century, rather than from that of the upper class audiences of the previous century, its embourgeoisement

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33. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays (London, 1896), pp.185-189.

appeared revolutionary to the later Coleridge, upholder of the old social order. Throughout its stage career, in all its metamorphoses, the melodrama, when adapted to the viewpoint of the dominant section of the audience, a theatrical dominance reflecting social dominance, remained firmly conservative, in the sense that it implicitly advocated social stability rather than upheaval: necessarily so, as it expressed the attitudes of a class concerned to consolidate its social position. To the mid-Victorian middle classes, the supporters of the "drama", the blatant melodrama of the suburban theatres was objectionable as the entertainment of a different social class, geared to audiences "as ruffianly ...as London could shake together". The bourgeois sense of social security, in contrast to Coleridge's fear of revolution, is reflected in the dismissive comments on melodrama, patronising rather than denunciatory; Dickens sums up the entertainment offered to the "lower half" of the world as "an incongruous heap of nonsense".<sup>34</sup>

Overtly political material did not enter the theatre after the 1737 Licensing Act enforced censorship control. Lytton, writing in 1833<sup>35</sup>, draws attention to what he considers to be an arbitrary limitation imposed on the subject matter of drama by a censorship rigidly excluding "political allusions" as well as "immorality"; the actual effect of legal controls on the theatre, made more comprehensive by the 1843 Act, is difficult to estimate, since authors and

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34. "The Amusements of the People", Household Words, March 30th, 1850.

35. Lord Lytton, England and the English (London, 1970), pp.301-313.



managers alike were naturally well aware of what was permissible on stage. Lytton, referring to the evidence given before the 1832 Committee, states that

"it is universally allowed that a censor is not required to keep immorality from the stage, but to prevent political allusions."

Certainly, it would appear from the witnesses' statements that moral and religious conservatism accorded with audience taste. Charles Kemble's comment expresses the general opinion:

"Such is the improved state of education, and the moral and religious feeling, that in any theatre I do not think that the audience would suffer anything that was licentious to be heard on stage."

The managerial position on politics, whatever audience attitudes might have been, is probably best represented by Davidge, proprietor of the Coburg:

"it would never be to the benefit of any theatre to meddle with political matters generally, because what you might derive from the representation of plays which might give pleasure to one party, you would lose by giving offence to the other."<sup>36</sup>

The ingenuity shown by managers in circumventing the burletta restrictions, and the impossibility of rigidly enforcing such a legal provision in opposition to public opinion, would suggest little general demand for a theatre dealing overtly with political subjects, even in the year of the Reform Bill, when interest in politics was high.

By the eighteen sixties, the West End theatres represented the dramatic establishment which they themselves had challenged in the years preceding the abolition of the

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36. Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature  
(London, 1832), pp.51, 85.

patent monopoly. According to the evidence given before the 1866 Committee, the censorship controls still agreed largely with the taste of audiences, by now even more conservative than those of the eighteen thirties. Boucicault<sup>37</sup> considers "the public themselves", rather than the censor, to be "the principal check" on "improper pieces", and dismisses the suggestion that "political allusions" or caricature would be approved:

"I have tried political allusions occasionally, and I have seen them tried, but they did not answer."

The audiences, rather than the law, dictated to managers and dramatists, and could be even more stringent in their demands than the official censor:

"there are very many things that the Licensor passes that the public does not pass; we very often have pieces performed containing things which the Licensor has passed, and which even the actors themselves have passed (though they are more sensitive than the Licensor, because of course, they do not want to be hissed), but what escapes them does not escape the public."

Melodrama, as the drama of audience gratification, retained its hold on the theatre of the mid-Victorian period as the "drama" by reinforcing middle-class preconceptions and aspirations, and adapting its external characteristics to bourgeois taste. It asserts a fixed viewpoint with which its audience can be expected to agree before the play begins; its course on stage is one of confirmation, of affirmation not analysis. Its mode, accordingly, is visual rather than verbal, relying on the force of the "telling incident" to bear down argument before it. Scott's definition of melodrama attributes its power to the

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37. Report from the Select Committee on Theatrical Licences (London, 1866), p.145.



"passion of fear" induced through "the delineation of external incident"; the appeal to the emotions, underlined musically, is intended to preclude rational questioning. He emphasises, as necessary consequences, the maintenance of consistency and the use of stereotyped characters:

"the characters of the agents...are entirely subordinated to the scenes in which they are placed...The persons introduced...bear the features, not of individuals, but of the class to which they belong...it is necessary that these characters...should be forcibly sketched in outline; that their dress and general appearance should correspond with and support the trick of the scene..."

Melodrama excludes everything not in line with the viewpoint represented; it is enacted in an isolated sphere, and character and setting, although abstracted from the real world, are given the illusion of authenticity through consistency and verisimilitude. Physical reality and multiplicity of detail in stage presentation are advanced as verification of the asserted viewpoint; because the setting and characters look real, so, by extension, are the attitudes they embody. Melodrama presents its audience with a simulacrum of the real world without its inherent disadvantages.

The mid-Victorian middle-classes found in the scenic illusion and portrayal of life and manners of the "drama" tangible evidence for their own preconceptions; the absence of the strong colouring in incident and situation of the cruder, more blatant overt melodrama acted in itself, by its very mundanity, as a further proof of the correspondence of the "drama" to real life. For the ambiguities and uncertainties of everyday life, their theatre substituted a simplified world of absolutes and constants, reducing the complexities of reality to the fixed categories of instantly

recognisable good and evil. Mistaken judgement becomes impossible where everything is as it appears to be; certainty, reassurance and self-confidence are promoted by the equation of appearance with reality, and the removal of the possibility of doubt and deception. The "truth" of the "drama", for its audience, was verified by the reality of appearance of the physical detail of stage presentation, the circumstantial evidence of authenticity; the production style of the "drama", therefore, relied primarily on visual elaboration, carried through into the minutiae of costume and scenery, grounded on indisputable facts which dissolved the last hesitations to acquiesce.

The movement of the "drama" from predominantly historical to contemporary settings separated it from legitimate drama; it was also promoted by dissatisfaction with the kind of proof offered for the reality of the historical past when shown on stage. Additional factual documentation, however well supported, could not command the same immediate conviction as the instant recognisability of contemporary settings, using the objects and situations of everyday life. A historical "drama" which was required to demonstrate its factual fidelity necessitated further evidence to supplement what could be seen on stage. Thus Lytton, in publishing Richelieu (Covent Garden, 1839), expanded the text as performed considerably, adding documentary footnotes. The preface assures the reader:

"To judge the author's conception of Richelieu fairly, and to estimate how far it is consistent with historical portraiture, the play must be read." 38

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38. Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, The Dramatic Works (Leipzig, 1860), I, p.6.



Leigh Hunt likewise in his preface to A Legend of Florence (Covent Garden, 1840)<sup>39</sup> insists that while the story "resembles several of the like sort that are popular in other countries"

"nobody...in Italy ever doubted the main facts. The names of the parties most concerned are those of real families...their characters...correspond in their elements with those here attempted to be drawn out."

To support the latter assertion, he cites the "Osservatore Fiorentino". The demand for fidelity to established fact in the stage presentation of historical events is seen in Cole's discussion of the failure of Taylor and Reade's The First Printer (Princess's, 1856), which he attributes to the play's deviation from the accepted account of the invention of the printing press. The author's statement of sources affixed to the playbill, that

"they founded their opinion on the faith of a tale handed down by Adrian Junius, the celebrated antiquary, and principal of Haarlem College."

Cole considers insufficiently authoritative to counteract the traditional version.<sup>40</sup>

Melodrama, with its reliance on the incontrovertibility of fact and equation of appearance with reality, moulded for the mid-Victorian middle-class a kind of theatre which accorded with its own temperament by furnishing apparently incontestible proof of the absolute truth of the partial and one-sided class attitudes it expressed. Stage productions were praised for their "truth" and "reality" and contrasted with melodrama's exaggerations and distortions,

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39. Leigh Hunt, A Legend of Florence (London, 1840), pp.ix-x.

40. J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859), II, pp.160-164.

in presenting the real world. Thus Lewes, in his review of The Day of Reckoning (Lyceum, 1850), opposes "reliance upon Nature" to the "melodramatic" and equates it with "truth"; in writing of Masks and Faces (Haymarket, 1852), he draws attention approvingly to "how truly" the actors performed their roles, to "the unmistakable reality of the emotion" in the play and its "truthfulness". Instant conviction is conveyed by the externalisation of emotion, immediately recognisable because it accords with experience in everyday life. The conventions of expression, however, are based on class mores, which are assumed to be universal standards; the achievement of Madame Vestris' "natural manner" in The Day of Reckoning is to create the character of a lady "such as we meet in drawing rooms."<sup>41</sup>

The "drama" relied with the melodrama on action and gratification for its appeal and worked through externalisation and exclusion; internal emotions and moral qualities are made visible, reactions and feelings given palpable form in music and the nature of everything presented on stage made absolutely plain. The clarity of character and event is maintained by excluding all inconsistencies and anything not directly reinforcing the business on stage. Presentation, accordingly, becomes of primary importance in the mid-Victorian theatre; the tangible reality of the physical details of costume and setting promote unquestioning acceptance of the truth of dramatic incidents, and the assumptions on which they are based. Presentation further

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41. John Forster and G.H. Lewes, Dramatic Essays (London, 1896), pp. 222-225, 122-126.



acquires importance in that it is the only area where innovation and variation is possible; melodrama and the "drama" are essentially static, manipulating standardised characters and situations to confirm a set of already acknowledged clichés. The tedium of endless repetition is therefore avoided through novelty of staging; the early melodrama transposed itself from the exotic, Gothic settings of its original sources into historical backgrounds, capitalising on the topical popularity of the novels of Scott and his imitators. In the eighteen twenties, a vogue for "witch dramas" began, in imitation of Weber's opera Der Freischutz (Covent Garden, 1824); the Newgate novels of the eighteen thirties produced a wave of highwaymen heroes. The "drama" similarly reflected the fluctuating fashionable interests of its audiences, in the pursuit of new material with which to clothe the expected cliché; the contemporary settings which replaced the earlier historical backgrounds and subjects gradually introduced to the theatre virtually all the aspects of middle-class life.

The "drama" and its audience thus mutually sustained each other; the "drama" existed as a means of promoting and reinforcing those beliefs and assumptions which made for its stability and survival as a social group. Its developments and modifications were responses to changes in the attitudes and views of its audience; the progressive disillusionment with the condition of the theatre towards the end of the mid-Victorian period is indicative of the equal sense of bourgeois disillusionment with its own class values. The loss of belief in what had previously commanded

unhesitating acceptance resulted from a growing perception of the limitations of partial attitudes, inflated to absolute values. Democratic principles, which had given the middle-class political power reflecting their economic position, were called in question as a means of furthering bourgeois social hegemony. In the theatre, this dissatisfaction was reflected in a growing acknowledgement of the failure of the "drama" to equal legitimate drama in greatness of achievement. The "drama", in rejecting the legitimate conventions, had successfully established for itself an identity totally free from upper class associations; it failed however to realise for its audiences the dignity of seriousness and centrality of contemporary relevance which would have made the "drama" rival the status of the legitimate theatre.



## V The "Drama" and Legitimate Drama

With melodrama in the ascendant at the patent theatres during the second decade of the nineteenth century, and audiences who, according to Hazlitt, looked to the theatre for "a striking and impressive exhibition" and were not concerned with the drama from "a literary point of view"<sup>1</sup>, the aspiring poetic dramatist who did not disdain production of his work adopted the techniques that had proved popular. This amalgamation of melodrama with legitimate trappings produced Maturin's<sup>2</sup> Bertram (Drury Lane, 1816), in which Edmund Kean, at the height of his popularity, played the title role. The play is strictly "legitimate" with its five act form and poetic language, factors which Hazlitt considered irrelevant to its stage success. Not "the genius of poetry" but "the sighing of the forest gale and the vespers of midnight monks" made it effective.<sup>3</sup> The text shows Maturin as ballet-master rather than author; he leaves a large amount to be filled out by the actors from his copious stage directions, and the action called for is melodramatic in its extravagance. Bertram "meditates in gloomy reflection" and declaims "with frantic violence", while the heroine, Imogene, is found "throwing herself vehemently on her knees", "sinking down", "shrieking", and rushing in "with her child, her hair dishevelled, her dress

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1. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P.P. Howe (London, 1930), V, pp.366-368.

2. Charles Robert Maturin (1787-1824), author of Melmoth the Wanderer (1820) and other Gothic novels.

3. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P.P. Howe (London, 1930), V, pp.366-368.

stained with blood". Maturin's audience was impressed not by his poetry but by "what [was] done on stage". One spectator thirty years later still remembered Bertram's death:

"the agonised glance he threw on the dead Imogen [sic], the rapidly-changing features, fiercely agitated by the storm of passion within, and finally the desperate energy with which he plunged the fatal weapon, to the very hilt, into his bosom, caused a thrill of horror, and almost awakened a transient emotion of pity."<sup>4</sup>

To the conservative critic, the infiltration of melodramatic techniques into the aristocratic stronghold of legitimate drama pointed to a more insidious kind of opposition to the establishment and to social order than that offered by a drama which merely opposed legitimate conventions. Coleridge took the play as evidence of the further extension of "Jacobinism" to the moral sphere.<sup>5</sup> Such a play could not restore Drury Lane "to its former classic renown". Instead it provided "a melancholy proof of the depravation of the public mind"; the adulterous hero, when he comes "reeking from the consummation of this complex foulness and baseness" is received by "a British audience" not as "an insult to common decency" but "with a thunder of applause":

"The shocking spirit of Jacobinism seemed no longer confined to politics. The familiarity with atrocious events and characters appeared to have poisoned the taste, even where it had not directly disorganized the moral principles, and left the feelings callous to all mild appeals, and craving alone for the grossest and most outrageous stimulants."

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4. Bertrand Evans, Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley (London, 1947), pp.193-199. English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Michael R. Booth (Oxford, 1969), I, pp.11-12.

5. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London, 1894), pp.274-293.



Other critics shared Coleridge's view, finding in Bertram

"that same mischievous compound of attractiveness and turpitude, of love and crime, of chivalry and brutality, which in the poems of Lord Byron and his imitators has been too long successful in captivating weak fancies and outraging moral truth."<sup>6</sup>

The incorporation of melodramatic techniques galvanized legitimate drama into a momentary popularity; after its initial success, however, Maturin's play passed out of the repertoire, and his two other plays both failed. As melodrama became increasingly disreputable, the extravagance and excess principally associated with it disqualified the work of the dramatist who relied on such techniques from legitimate status. Instead, the regular drama turned to the restraint that was to become the chief characteristic of the "drama", prefiguring the mid-Victorian form behind a facade of legitimate conventions. Knowles<sup>7</sup>

Virginus, in which Macready played the title role, is based on the story of Virginus and Appius; despite its Roman setting and gestures towards political issues, it is the "domestic misfortune" of the Drame to which the Times reviewer ascribes the origin of French melodrama which forms the play's interest. R.H. Horne<sup>8</sup>, writing in 1844, points out the irrelevance of historical setting; it is in "his truly domestic feeling" that Knowles "personifies our age":

"In what consists the interest and force of...."

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6. Quoted in Bertrand Evans, Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley (London, 1947), p.194.

7. James Sheridan Knowles (1784-1862), prolific and successful dramatist.

8. Richard Henry ("Hengist") Horne (1803-1884), collaborated with E.B. Browning on the critical work, A New Spirit of the Age. Author of several unsuccessful plays.

Virginus? The domestic feeling. The costume, the setting, the decorations are heroic. We have Roman tunics, but a modern English heart - the scene is the forum, but the sentiments are those of the 'Bedford Arms'.<sup>9</sup>

The appeal of the play is entirely emotional; any larger intention is disclaimed in the epilogue:<sup>10</sup>

"No moral now we offer, squar'd in form,  
But Pity....  
We do not strain to show that 'thus it grows',  
And 'hence we learn' what everybody knows  
...  
Dwell then upon our tale; and bear along  
With you deep thoughts - of love - of bitter wrong..."

Knowles repeated his success with William Tell (Drury Lane, 1825), The Hunchback (Covent Garden, 1832) and The Love Chase (Haymarket, 1837); Talfourd<sup>11</sup> weakly imitated the formula in Ion (Covent Garden, 1836) but the play, though greatly praised at the time, passed rapidly out of the repertoire. His other plays, The Athenian Captive (Covent Garden, 1838) and Glencoe (Covent Garden, 1840) were comparative failures. With the end of the patent monopoly in 1843, the poetic drama lost its natural market and fell into abeyance, leaving the mid-Victorian "drama" to replace it.

The "drama" which became the ascendant mode at the West End theatres acquired its reputability with the increase in social prestige and power of its middle-class patrons. Its immediate origins were in the "domestic drama", the transition between melodrama and the "drama". For the

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9. A New Spirit of the Age, ed. R.H.Horne (London, 1907), p.304.

10. English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Michael R. Booth (Oxford, 1969), I, pp.148-149.

11. See Chapter VI, n.19.



exotic settings and extravagant action of the discredited form, domestic drama substituted everyday life and serious interest, aiming at the kind of industrious artisan class whose social respectability, if not their financial circumstances, marked them off from the patrons of melodrama. At such minor suburban houses as the Coburg and the Surrey, the new kind of play shared programmes with the outright melodrama.<sup>12</sup> Jerrold's son attributes the creation of the genre to his father, with Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life (Coburg, 1828):

"There is a strong serious interest in the piece throughout. It was, perhaps, the earliest of that long series of "domestic dramas" which Douglas Jerrold gave to the English stage, producing a new and original class of dramatic entertainment, that brought home the interest put upon the scene, to the hearts of the people."<sup>13</sup>

By the mid-Victorian period, the Coburg, renamed the Victoria, had become one of the most notorious suburban houses; in its earlier years it attracted a less disorderly audience. It was considered

"a very handsome theatre, and the looking glass curtain, which was invented in 1822...was one of the sights of London."

The name was changed in 1833 to commemorate a visit by Princess Victoria.<sup>14</sup>

Domestic drama addressed itself directly to its audiences in its subject matter, in representing their

12. Charles Rice, The London Theatre in the Eighteen-Thirties (London, 1960), p.233. H.C.Robinson, The London Theatre, ed. Eluned Brown (London, 1966).

13. Blanchard Jerrold, The Life and Remains of Douglas Jerrold (London, 1859), p.79.

14. H.Barton Baker, The London Stage (London, 1889), II, pp.237-239.

everyday life and its concerns; it relied on the "serious interest" of "real life", not the "strong excitement", exaggeration and exoticism of melodrama. The Theatrical Inquisitor<sup>15</sup> praises the "domestic nature" of Fifteen Years and its treatment of "incidents and casualties of common everyday occurrence in almost every family". Everyday life, however, did not necessarily exclude "telling situations"; the reviewer lists the incidents portrayed:

"the attendant evils, and consequent remorse inseparable from a continued round of drunkenness, the gradual decline and fall from a state of affluence and comfort, to one of degradation, wretchedness, and misery, and the commission of aggravated crime..."

The playbill justifies such apparent sensationalism by attributing moral purpose to it:

"the piece contains scenes of the most highly wrought character; a development of circumstances which may fairly be inferred, as the natural results of proneness to inebriety, a frightful series of horrors, arising from the seductive, but destructive cup of the Bacchanal [sic]..."

In its treatment of the social problems which lend it "serious interest", domestic drama remains essentially melodramatic, relying for its effects on "telling situations" and "what is done on stage", not on verbal analysis or debate. It treats themes with which its audiences could be expected to be personally concerned, and presents characters drawn from their own social level, with whom they could identify. Settings recreate the domestic interiors and rural or urban backgrounds familiar from the real world. Beneath this realistic facade, however, domestic drama is as remote from everyday life as the most exotic of overt melodramas.

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15. Reprinted review in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London, 1974), pp.162-163.



The object of melodrama is gratification, the reassurance of its public; easy and fallacious solutions are offered to the problems it raises, and all difficulties resolved in the happy ending, when virtue is duly rewarded and vice punished. William, the sailor hero of Jerrold's highly successful Black-Eyed Susan (Surrey, 1829), condemned to death for striking his superior officer, escapes execution only because it is revealed at the last moment that his discharge from the Navy had been obtained before the assault. The Factory Lad (Surrey, 1832) in contrast offers no final resolution at all; it accordingly failed on stage. Material from the real world in the end is found appropriate for dramatic treatment because of its stage potential in terms of "striking incidents". In his preface to Martha Willis, the Servant Maid<sup>16</sup> (1831) Jerrold justifies his choice of "everyday experience" for his play in terms of its superiority to fiction as a source of the "telling situations" he himself was to associate with melodrama in the following year:

"It is the object of the present drama to display, in the most forcible and striking point of view, the temptations which in this metropolis assail the young and inexperienced on their first outset in life....This great metropolis teems with persons and events, which, considered with reference to their dramatic experience beggars invention...It is these scenes of everyday experience - it is these characters which are met with in our hourly paths that will be found in the present drama."

The visual mode of melodrama leads to a further evasion in handling these everyday crises. Abstractions are necessarily personified; injustice on stage is represented

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16. Quoted in Michael R. Booth, English Melodrama (London, 1965), p.129.

by a palpable, concrete villain and the investigation of social problems thus avoids any analysis which goes deeper than the attribution of the misfortunes and sufferings of virtue to the machinations of vice. Social oppression emerges not as the result of a whole system of repression but of the depravity of individuals who distort social institutions to advance their own interests at the expense of those in their power. Thus in The Factory Lad,<sup>17</sup> a change of employer is the root of social distress, not the impersonal economic transformations of the relations of production. The late employer would not desert his men "in a time of need, nor prefer steam machinery to honest labour". His son however curtly dismisses several hands to make way for steam looms, paying no attention to their remonstrances, and exits "sneeringly". Individual malpractice frustrates state provision for social welfare and justice. The magistrate is labelled by his name, Bias; his present position is the result of "robbery and oppression" when overseer, "the man appointed to protect the poor":

"the cart, laden with provisions for the workhouse, by your order stopped at your own door to pretend to deliver some articles ordered for yourself but which belonged to the poor famished creatures who had no redress but the lash if they dared to complain."

Because domestic drama embodies class attitudes, wealth, power and property become potential hallmarks of vice; the natural oppressors of the virtuous poor are those above them on the social scale who hold them at their mercy. The villain is denounced, thwarted and punished, how-

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17. English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Michael R. Booth (Oxford, 1969), I.



ever, not as the representative of a class but as an individual; no general reorganisation of power and leadership in society is envisaged. Domestic drama questions but does not reject the social order, both because it embodies the ethic of a class prepared to work for advancement within the social order, and because of the convention of the happy ending. The necessity of providing audience reassurance by justifying the rightness of the way things are and affirming the eventual triumph of poetic justice denies the possibility of a disturbing or unsettling outcome, prompted by revolutionary sentiment. The melodramatic basis of domestic drama results in social conservatism, and the protagonist's acquiescence in the injustice which disrupts his domestic felicity becomes a measure of his heroism. Thus William, in Black-Eyed Susan, assents to his execution, agreeing with his judges that "the course of justice cannot be evaded"<sup>18</sup>, despite the provocation which led to his crime: he had surprised but not recognised the superior officer whom he struck in the act of forcing his attentions on his wife Susan.

In contrast, Harry Halyard, the hero of My Poll and My Partner Joe (Surrey, 1835), denounces the press-gang, but in the end, like William, reconciles himself to the unjust exactions of authority:

"Fiends incapable of pity first gave birth to the idea [of the press-gang], and by fiends only is it advocated. What, force a man from his happy home, to defend a country whose laws deprive him of his liberty? But I must submit...I shall strike for the hearts I leave weeping for my absence without one thought of the green hills or the flowing rivers of a country that treats me as a slave."<sup>19</sup>

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18. Nineteenth Century Plays, ed. George Rowell (Oxford, 1953).

19. Hiss the Villain, ed. Michael R. Booth (London, 1964).

Even in The Factory Lad, despite the apparent uncompromising realism of its ending, the validity of any questioning of the social order is undercut by the fact that its most virulent attacker is insane, and he also attributes distress not to the institutions themselves but to "the avaricious, the greedy, the flint-hearted" who are "deaf to the poor man's wants."

The domestic drama is the "drama" in embryo, differing only from the subsequent kind of play in the class of audience at which it is aimed. The progressive social advancement of the dominant theatre audience is seen in Lytton's highly successful The Lady of Lyons (Covent Garden, 1838), which also marks the transition from poetic drama to its successor. The play combines a historical setting, the early years of Republican France, with domestic sentiment, in its idealisation of married love and the home. The hero, Melnotte, however, is of peasant origins, though with an innate sense of refinement and aspiration to social advancement, which he achieves through his own efforts. Pauline, the heroine, is the daughter of a wealthy but vulgar tradesman; her mother's aristocratic pretensions are ridiculed, while the two "gentleman" characters are cast in villainous roles. Lytton discards the regular drama's "kings and queens", relics of a pre-democratic theatre, constructing on the central domestic subject a more middle-class version of domestic drama. The heroes of Black-Eyed Susan and My Poll are content to build their domestic felicity on a modest competence; Lytton's play, in contrast, vindicates the aspiration to wealth and social advancement of a rising



class. Melnotte combines ambition and the ability to achieve it with the moral principles notably lacking in the "gentleman" characters; his natural gentility is contrasted both with their superficial sophistication and the vulgarity of the social ambitions of Pauline's parvenu parents, rooted in vanity.

The play expresses the attitudes of a social class rising in prestige and importance, confident in its own abilities; this group defines itself in opposition to a degenerate aristocracy, and condemns as indicative of moral weakness the attempt to imitate the manners of the discredited class, superior by tradition in social position but not in essential worth. In terms of dramatic form, The Lady of Lyons moves closer to the "drama" than the equally domestically-orientated Virginus type of legitimate drama. Lytton alternates between prose and poetry, retaining the blank verse of the regular drama for high emotional effects, such as Melnotte's lyrical description to Pauline of

"The home to which, could love fulfil its prayers,  
This hand would lead thee...." 20

and his vindication of the deception by which he married her, an ornamented discourse on love as "A fountain of ambition and bright hopes." The last scene and a half, resolving plot complications into the final happy ending, dispenses entirely with prose. By underlining his "telling situations" verbally rather than musically, Lytton lays claim to legitimate status for his play, as the dedication suggests:

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20. Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, The Dramatic Works (Leipzig, 1860).

"To the author of "Ion", whose genius and example have alike contributed towards the regeneration of the National Drama, this play is inscribed."

In production, however, the assistance of other departments of the stage proved essential; Lytton's original text was revised by Macready, who played Melnotte, while the extent of the actor's alterations to Lytton's next play, Richelieu (1839), virtually demoted the author to the position of his assistant.<sup>21</sup> The dissatisfied dramatist restored the excised material in his published version, distinguishing in his preface between the play as literature and the play as performed:

"Many of the passages...omitted [on the stage], however immaterial to the audience, must obviously be such as the reader would be least inclined to dispense with - viz, those which, without being absolutely essential to the business of the stage, contain either the subtler strokes of character, or the more poetical embellishments of description."

Lytton implicitly acknowledges poetry to be superfluous in the theatre, while his experience with Macready had shown that the author alone could not create stage material.

With its poetry and historical setting, The Lady of Lyons could be defined as "legitimate"; the contemporary "drama", however, lacked the dignity of both these traditional characteristics to inflate its status above that of domestic drama. It sought instead to vindicate its pretensions to equal the aristocratic mode by the assiduous cultivation of restraint and serious interest. By subduing the "telling situations" of melodrama, still salient in

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21. Macready's Reminiscences and Selections from his Diaries and Letters, ed. Sir Frederick Pollock (London, 1876), pp.440, 462-471. Charles H. Shattuck, Bulwer and Macready (Urbana, 1958).



domestic drama, the "drama" maintained a degree of difference; the limits of art in the mid-Victorian theatre became the limits of good taste, the restraint associated by the bourgeoisie with gentility. Increasing refinement of the audiences imposed stricter limitations as Boucicault found. Jerrold, in Fifteen Years, could show "the natural results of proneness to inebriety" in "scenes of the most highly wrought character"<sup>22</sup>, in contrast, the audience found the prison scene, with convicts working a treadmill, in Reade's It's Never Too Late to Mend (Princess's, 1865) unacceptable, and duly protested.<sup>23</sup>

In its treatment of social problems, the attitude of the "drama" differs from that of the earlier kind of play, and the change is indicative of the difference between their respective patrons. For the socially and financially secure middle-class audiences of the later period, social problems were matters of philanthropic not personal interest, a change in orientation reflected by the distancing of the crises of "everyday experience" on stage. The attitude is that of the parliamentary blue book, providing documentary information from empirical investigation into areas outside the personal experience of the intended audience; the characters involved are objects of pity, not identification. In Fifteen Years, the play focuses on the social and financial consequences of addiction to drink, a temptation which the audience is assumed to have encountered, thereby to

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22. Reprinted review in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London, 1974), pp.162-163.

23. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer (London, 1891), p.313.

"point a moral". The Theatrical Inquisitor comments on the piece as object lesson:

"What can tend to the prevention of an indulgence in a gross and bestial vice, more than a display of the follies, wickedness, and crimes by which such an indulgence is attended." 24

Reade, however, in dealing with the rigours of the prison system, is obliged to show his audience what he is talking about; hence the treadmill scene. The expected audience viewpoint is represented not by the convicts, whether justly or unjustly punished, but by the benevolent prison clergyman, who tries to alleviate the harsh conditions; the consequences are summated in an appeal to audience sympathy through pathos:

"A boy who has only stolen a few potatoes from a rich man's cart, to keep himself from starving, dies of his prison tortures when upon the point of hanging himself in the presence of the audience." 25

Reade's prime malefactor is the malignant prison governor; "drama", like domestic drama, relying for effect on "what is done on stage", translates analysis of social problems into concrete representation, which attributes responsibility for injustice and oppression to a specific, palpable villain who abuses the power entrusted to him. The oppressed correspondingly become "preternaturally virtuous" and the dramatist's investigation, conducted in terms of the melodramatic conflict between stereotypes of good and evil, dissolves into the "fallacy" of the happy ending,

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24. Reprinted in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London, 1974), pp.162-164.

25. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer (London, 1891), p.313.



epitomised in the tableau with moral caption, which concludes Taylor's enquiry into "the ticket-of-leave question". The technique and structure of mid-Victorian "drama" trivialises the apparent serious interest; audiences are flattered by a melodramatic appeal to their benevolence which leaves their confidence in the stability and rightness of the established social system undisturbed. The process is illustrated in the innumerable stage adaptations, English and American, capitalising on the immense success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), for one of which, Slave Life (Adelphi, 1852), Taylor was responsible. The novel's vivid portrayal of the cruelty, suffering and destruction caused by slavery exacerbated the sectional conflict in America and provoked considerable controversy in England. Dramatisation, however, suppressed the emotive content, making it "quite an agreeable thing to be a slave" in presenting what successive authors asserted to be the "true picture of negro life in the South", while "having Virtue triumphant at the last" instead of "turning away the audience in tears". Only those "facts" were selected for stage presentation which would leave audiences complacent; bourgeois taste imposed, under the demand of restraint, a censorship which excluded anything disturbing. Minstrel performers rapidly annexed the theme and removed any vestige of serious interest; Christy's Minstrels, popular in both Britain and America, topped their bill in 1854 with a burlesque "opera" of Uncle Tom's Cabin, in which Tom is not sold and Logree omitted. The last scene featured "Eva's Farewell" and concluded with the "Grand Characteristic

Dance, 'Pop Goes the Weazle'."<sup>26</sup>

In the "drama's" treatment of social problems the dissipation of serious interest into the "miserable fallacy" of optimistic platitude, to reassure and gratify the audience, recurs invariably, the consequence of adherence to unacknowledged melodramatic technique. The disguised melodrama of the "drama" admirably suited its middle-class patrons, with their faith in appearances and absolute reliance on the incontrovertibility of "fact", duly selected to accord with complacent attitudes; in the West End theatre, an appearance of dignity, elevation and morality was sufficient to upgrade melodrama into acceptable entertainment. For these manifestly respectable audiences, plays with a purpose justified patronage of the theatre, always suspect in the eyes of the serious and religious minded. Such a play as Uncle Tom's Cabin could reconcile the church, and consequently previous theatrical abstainers, to the stage; in New York, one theatre manager put on prominent display encomiums from clergymen and reformers.<sup>27</sup> A willingness to be amused without risking consistency of principle similarly underlies the popularity of oratorio, attributed by Lewes to the religious world's ready acceptance of "any flimsy subterfuge" to enjoy itself. Whereas a biblical play in costume would only be denounced,

"Saul in a black coat and white waistcoat, singing with unmistakeable operatic graces to a Michal in

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26. Robert C. Toll, Blacking Up (New York, 1974), pp.89-97.

27. Frank Rahill, The World of Melodrama (London, 1957), p.250.



crinolene and flounces, is considered very edifying, if the musical drama be called an oratorio, and be performed out of a theatre!"<sup>28</sup>

Middle-class taste, to which the theatre responded, insisted simultaneously on gravity of intention in its entertainment and confirmation of its own deepest preconceptions. "Drama", accordingly, in treating social problems, stopped short of the point where it might disturb rather than flatter or gratify its public; factual evidence was adduced only for the point of view agreeable to its patrons, a partiality which passed for the good taste of genteel standards of refined morality.

At the same time, non-theatrical entertainments such as illustrated lectures, readings, panoramas and dioramas, given in "halls", were presented as instruction rather than amusement. In these the attractions of the theatre were combined without the stigma. One writer, looking back on the eighteen sixties, explains the popularity of readings as a circumvention of religious and moral scruples:

"There was always a plentiful supply of entertainment arranged in such a way as to ease the scruples of the conscientious objector."<sup>29</sup>

"Oral instructors" is the term used by the Illustrated London News for the novelist-performers, of whom Dickens was by far the most successful. The content of such performances,

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28. G.H.Lewis, Selections from the Modern British Dramatists (Leipzig, 1867), I, 11.

29. This passage and the comments that follow on Dickens' readings are quoted in Charles Dickens: The Public Readings, ed. Philip Collins (Oxford, 1975), pp. liii-lxvi.

like that of the oratorio, was strongly theatrical in its appeal, as comments on Dickens' readings suggest. Carlyle writes:

"Dickens does it capitally...; acts better than any Macready in the world; a whole tragic, comic, heroic theatre visible..."

A provincial reviewer comments:

"He does not only read his story; he acts it...Each character is as completely assumed and individualised...as though he was personating it in costume on the stage."

Reviewers' standards of judgement are the same as those applied to the theatre; Dickens is praised, for example, for his restraint, in avoiding "distressing physical exercises". In catering for his public, Dickens moreover consulted bourgeois taste as carefully as any West End playwright, selecting material that would neither disturb his audiences, nor turn them away in tears. The social novels, accordingly, from Bleak House to Our Mutual Friend, were excluded, and passages of social criticism, such as Scrooge's vision of Ignorance and Want, excised from the earlier works; his programmes always ended with a cheerful piece, counterbalancing such sombre extracts as the death of Little Dombey.

The nominal non-theatrical status and educational purpose of such performances lent the dignity of serious intention to entertainments which contrived all the same to offer the attractions of dramatic representation. Similarly, Charles Kean's Shakespeare productions at the Princess's furnished West End patrons with entertainment fundamentally melodramatic in style and appeal, yet dignified by its legitimate label and avowed instructional objectives; the



"drama" also worked by subterfuge in annexing social problems as topics for the stage to dignify its essential triviality. Despite the willingness of bourgeois audiences to be deceived, and accept the "drama" at the face value of its own pretensions, its manifest banality of content and dogged preoccupation with peripheral minutiae in staging, which attracted audiences looking for confirmation of their own preconceptions and a consistent illusion of reality in the portrayal of life and manners, resulted in a general sense of critical disillusionment in the eighteen sixties; the theatre, freed from aristocratic dominance, had failed to realise the aspirations of the partisans of patent abolition.

If the theatre of the mid-eighteen sixties did not satisfy the more stringent of its critics in equalling the legitimate drama in greatness of achievement, it had by that time developed into a highly specialised and extremely skilfully operated channel for the expression and gratification of the tastes and attitudes of its predominant patrons. The middle-classes, no longer content with simply vaunting their own virtues and achievements, now sought the additional cachet of gentility, the quality peculiarly associated with the aristocracy whom they had superseded in wealth and social power, if not prestige. The "drama" of the last years of the mid-Victorian period accordingly expresses the outlook of a social group, disdainful alike of popular sentiment and the prejudices of the old aristocracy, who looked to its theatre for visible evidence of its own gentility.

With the Bancrofts' management of the Prince of

Wales, a new kind of fashionable theatre, catering for a determinedly fashionable audience, came into being. The social views of such patrons are expressed in Robertson's Caste (1867).<sup>30</sup> Here Eccles, the representative of the lower classes, and the Marquise, the incarnation of the old aristocracy, are treated as figures of fun. The denunciation of aristocratic privilege which provoked Coleridge's charge of "Jacobinism" in the "sentimental plays" is simply burlesqued when the filthy and feckless Eccles asserts, "I am one of nature's noblemen" and recites

"The rank is but the guinea stamp,  
The working man's the gold for a' that."

The Marquise's vaunting of the duties of nobility - "we were born to lead! The common people expect it of us" - is equally ridiculed. The dominant ethic expressed assumes both of the other main social groups to be equally impotent; the audience is gratified by the representation of potential threats to its hegemony as comic. The villain, instead, becomes the parvenu, the representative of the bourgeois vulgarity disdained by a middle-class aspiring to gentility. In Taylor's New Men and Old Acres<sup>31</sup> (Haymarket, 1869), the villain is defined by his ill-gotten wealth, ambition, and inherent social inferiority. The vulgar Bunter, who has acquired his fortune by trickery, is contrasted with Brown, equally low in his social origins, but whose wealth is the product of his own industry and commercial astuteness; on

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30. Nineteenth Century Plays, ed. George Rowell (Oxford, 1953).

31. English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Michael R. Booth (Oxford, 1973), III.



losing it, he is prepared to start all over again, whereas Bunter aims to increase his already vast resources by further deceit. Brown's entitlement to gentility is vindicated by his reverence for tradition and readiness to conserve the mores of an effete and powerless aristocracy, resigned to its inevitable eclipse and exploitation by the predatory Bunter; the ultimate measure of Bunter's vulgarity is his desire to obliterate the old and replace it with the new and essentially tasteless, his own taste.

Such "dramas" remain essentially melodramatic, gratifying audiences by depicting as admirable the kind of life and manners with which they aspired to be associated; reinforcing their social attitudes in the representation of everyday life offered on stage; and confirming their truth in the concrete if circumstantial evidence of realistic physical detail: the Robertsonian "cups and saucers". Underneath the fashionable facade, however, the interest is purely domestic; the hackneyed plots of Caste and New Men chant the misfortunes which keep their respective heroes and heroines apart, until the final resolution of all complications in the happy ending. The prosaic and commonplace nature of the events represented is stressed, a deliberate contrast to the high colouring of melodrama; the apparent truth to Nature, however, masks the central element of sheer fantasy and wish-fulfillment which governs such plays: the mockery and dismissal of the lower classes as serious contenders for social and political power in the years following the 1867 extension of the franchise. The ready bourgeois acceptance of the "flimsy subterfuge" which made

melodrama palatable as West End entertainment is paralleled by an equal willingness to be comfortably deceived by misrepresentations of the real world, where physical verisimilitude disguises the basic unreality of content. The appropriateness of melodrama as the mode of the "drama" resulted not only from its ready adaptation to the tastes and attitudes of its patrons; the technique of melodrama, relying on fact and appearance, matched the bourgeois temperament and habitual mode of thought, an equation suggested in mid-Victorian criticism, where the condition of the theatre is taken as an index of the condition of society.



SECTION TWO

Contemporaneity in the theatre and in  
critical writing

## VI The Political and Social Importance of The Theatre in Critical Writing

In the theatrical criticism of the mid-Victorian period the condition of the theatre is related to the condition of society. Donne, for example, writes in the Quarterly Review of June, 1854:<sup>1</sup>

"We have no sympathies with persons who regard with indifference the state and prospects of the drama as a national amusement. We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that the noblest dramatic poetry has been produced at the most brilliant epochs of national history."

Discussion of the theatre focussed on its asserted decline and the means of its regeneration, topics which, as Morley points out,<sup>2</sup> had absorbed the attention of commentators at least from the time of Shakespeare, who perpetually assumed the theatre to have degenerated:

"In speaking of the theatres, we may be liable to over-estimate the real ground of our complaint. In comment on shortcomings of the stage, let us remember that in its best and in its worst days it has been equally abused. In 1597, when Shakespeare himself was a player... Joseph Hall, afterwards a bishop, published his satires<sup>3</sup>.....whether the stage were good or bad.....the tide of complaint flowed on....."

As it was said in Garrick's day that there were no more Booths and Bettertons, so in our day it may be said that there are no more Kembles...no more of any of the actors who have become traditions of perfection since they were no more."

The critical writing of the mid-Victorian period, however, assesses the theatre as an index of social achievement, and

1. Reprinted in W.B. Donne, Essays on the Drama (London, 1963) p.120.

2. Henry Morley, Journal, p.15.

3. Joseph Hall (1574-1656) published volume one of his Virgidemiarum Sex Libri in 1597, a collection of satires on the abuses of the day, including literary matters, in the spirit of Juvenal. The book was condemned to be burnt by the High Commission. Collected editions of Hall's writings were issued in 1808, 1837 and 1863.



the question of the condition of the stage thus leads to the examination of the society which sustains it.

Theatrical criticism in the nineteenth century evolved together with the proliferation of newspapers and periodicals which provided it with a place of publication; by the middle of the century, reviews of particular performances and longer, more general articles on theatrical matters were established items in the regular journalism of the period. Between the beginning and the middle of the century, criticism of the theatre moved from conventional commendatory reportage to evaluation of a particular performance and ultimately to general discussion which ranged beyond the immediate theatrical occasion. The 1802 Times review of A Tale of Mystery,<sup>4</sup> for example, lists actors and roles and provides a plot summary, with indiscriminate praise:

"An entertainment more distinguished for novelty and interest, more happily composed...and more decidedly sanctioned by the approbation of an audience, has never been produced on the English stage...We do not recollect any piece, to the success of which the merits of the performers have so materially contributed... The House overflowed in every part at an early hour.."

Hunt, in his early essay, "Rules for the Theatrical Critic of a Newspaper",<sup>5</sup> written in 1805 during his time as dramatic critic for the News, ridicules this prevailing practice of conventional laudation. The basic "rule" is that "you will praise every play that is acted, and every actor that plays", for which he provides a "little glossary, collected

4. Reprinted in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London, 1974), pp.53-56.

5. Reprinted in Leigh Hunt, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1894), pp.124-127.

from the most approved critics "which includes such definitions as

"A Crowded House - a theatre on the night of a performance when all the back seats and upper boxes are empty.

...

Great applause - applause mixed with the hisses of the gallery and pit."

The reviews of Hunt,<sup>6</sup> written for the News between 1805 and 1807 and the Examiner from 1808 till 1813, and of Hazlitt,<sup>7</sup> during the second decade of the century, for the Morning Chronicle, the Examiner, the Champion and the Times, concentrate on particular performances which are evaluated in terms of their success or failure as stage productions; by the eighteen twenties press notices in general pass judgement in reviewing theatrical presentations. The Times reviewer of The Vampire in 1820,<sup>8</sup> for example, is prepared to draw attention to "rather an unlucky specimen of [the translator's] judgement" in placing the vampire inappropriately in the Western Isles of Scotland, and concludes the usual plot summary with the dismissive comment,

6. Reprinted in Leigh Hunt, Dramatic Essays.

7. Reprinted in William Hazlitt, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer & Lowe (London, 1895).

8. Reprinted in The Golden Age of Melodrama, pp.86-87.



"Such is the plot or rather the subject matter of the piece. It has but little pretension, and calls not for a rigorous judgement."

The reorientation of theatrical criticism over the first two decades of the century owed much to the individual efforts of Hunt, but it also coincided with a resurgence of interest in the theatre as an institution, and moreover a problematic one, following the "O.P." riots of 1809<sup>9</sup> at Covent Garden and subsequent criticism of the way in which the managers of the patent theatres exercised their privileges, resulting in the petitioning for a third theatre in 1810.<sup>10</sup> Part of the ensuing debate centred on the standard of presentations at the theatres royal, which percolated down to general reviewing, in its new tendency to estimate the merits of stage productions.

By the end of the eighteenth century, theatrical criticism had become evaluative and opinionative, but restricted its frame of reference to the purely theatrical. Outside the field of journalism, however, the theatre was being considered in wider terms, and its condition in general came into prominence as a subject of public debate in the 1831 to 1833 period, concurrent with the agitation for parliamentary reform, with the appointment of the Select Committee chaired by Lytton, which ranged over the subjects of the monopoly, censorship and dramatic copy-

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9. The introduction of higher seat prices on the opening of the newly rebuilt theatre were the immediate cause of nightly rioting in the audience, for the subsequent two months, demanding the restoration of old prices.

10. Watson Nicholson, The Struggle for a Free Stage in London (Cambridge, 1930), pp.175-246.

right, eventually resulting in the passing in 1833 of the Dramatic Authors Bill,<sup>11</sup> which extended a certain degree of protection to playwrights by investing copyright in the author for 28 years and forbidding performances of plays without the author's permission. The attention aroused by the Committee and the Bill, and the subjects thus introduced into the theatrical sphere by public debate again gave an impetus to theatrical criticism in the years that followed by extending the range of subject matter associated with the theatre beyond its previous limits. Criticism became prepared to consider a particular performance in relation to the contemporary stage in general, and the extent to which its influence thereupon was likely to be improving or debilitating. The development can be seen in the contrast between the Times review of the Drury Lane production of King Lear in 1820,<sup>12</sup> and the review in the same newspaper of the Covent Garden Henry V in 1839.<sup>13</sup> In 1820, the reviewer criticises the way in which the heath scenes are staged in the light of their specific effect on a particular production of the play:

"the manager, by a strange error, has caused the tempest to be exhibited with so much accuracy that the performance could scarcely be heard amid the confusion .....it is the bending of Lear's mind under his wrongs that is the object of interest...The machinery may be transferred to the next new pantomime."

In 1839, the "elaborate magnificence" of production is

11. Dewey Ganzel, "Patent Wrongs and Patent Theatres: Drama and the Law in the Early Nineteenth Century" in PMLA, LXXVI (1961) p.396.

12. Quoted in G.C.D. Odell, Shakespeare From Betterton to Irving (New York, 1966) II, p.165.

13. Quoted in G.C.D. Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving II, p.220.



considered in the light of general principles about the theatre:

"While, however, we praise the magnificence of the pageant, it must be remembered that it is as a pageant we praise it, and we still retain an opinion formed long ago, that excessive pageantry is no sign of a revival of the drama."

The public investigation into the effect of such non-theatrical factors as copyright on the condition of the stage in terms of its achievement in the presentation of plays brought into association with the theatre extraneous subjects from wider areas. Jerrold, in his article "The English Stage - 1832" in the Monthly Magazine<sup>14</sup>, writes from a legal and commercial point of view in considering the effect of low payment to playwrights on the theatre:

"The present legal condition of the drama is a more fruitful cause of injustice on the one hand, and risk and chicanery on the other, than in any other branch of commerce."

He considers a play as a commodity, in which the author as owner has rights requiring legal protection:

"We demand the interference of the legislature to protect property - to place the barrier of the law between piracy and private right. We demand this in the name of justice, and for the cause of the highest and brightest portion of English literature - the English drama.

Let such a measure be formed, and the theatre will again be the chosen arena for the exercise of the intellect of the country."

This kind of writing drew attention to the effect of, for example, legal and economic factors on the theatre; protectionism is shown in Jerrold's article to be relevant to the drama, and accordingly questions considered to be of

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14. Reprinted in Blanchard Jerrold, The Life and Remains of Douglas Jerrold (London, 1859), pp.391-400.

importance in the political, social and economic spheres were introduced into writing on the theatre, hitherto considered in isolation from non-theatrical questions. The political and social issues of the eighteen thirties, the agitation for parliamentary reform and political rights, were paralleled in the questions raised in theatrical matters, and the kind of debates in the wider sphere passed into that of the theatre in the discussion on the questions of monopoly, censorship and dramatic copyright.

Lytton's own discussion of the condition of the contemporary theatre in England and the English, published in 1833, places the theatre in the perspective of his political and social views. He analyses the current situation as a period of transition from an aristocratic to a democratic society, advocating Utilitarianism as the agent of transformation; his main concern is with the dangers of an aristocratically biased constitution, and consequently he devotes the greater part of the book to a discussion of the continuing vitality of the aristocratic tradition in political and social matters and its debilitating tendencies. Lytton's proposed solution lies in a strong government based on a national, independent coalition, one that is "strong not for evil but for good":<sup>15</sup>

"A government should represent a parent; with us, it only represents a dun...."<sup>16</sup>

In his chapter, "The Drama",<sup>17</sup> the political and

15. Edward Lytton Bulwer (Lord Lytton), England and the English (Chicago, 1970), p.398.

16. Lytton, England and the English, p.120, n.3.

17. Lytton, England and the English, pp.301-313.



social questions of aristocracy, democracy and reform emerge in theatrical terms in the advocacy of a drama which rejects the legitimate mould, specifically associated with aristocratic rule, for one relying on the domestic interests of ordinary people, who now stand in society in the focal position once occupied by the nobility. The current debased condition of the stage is attributed to the autocratic control exercised by the managers of the patent theatres under the terms of the monopoly; the degenerate taste for spectacle is inculcated in audiences by the managers intent on serving their own ends, and would be remedied by the termination of the monopoly and free competition, while the inadequacy of financial remuneration deterring dramatic authors would be rectified by the copyright law. The errors of a government supporting such privilege are contributory causes of the deterioration of the stage; the ultimate cause lies in political censorship, which safeguards government interests, while rendering it impossible for the stage to deal with the topics currently of greatest interest to the public.

In the light of the immovability of such a barrier erected by a government which disregards the ordinary people, Lytton advocates a drama relying on "the Simple" instead of on the legitimate model. He contrasts such a drama with that of the time of Shakespeare in terms of their respective appropriateness to their particular political and social situations; the "Simple" is represented by "tales of a household nature...the pathos and passion of everyday life" in contrast to that tragedy

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whose personages "were rightly taken from the great" because "in those days there was no people." Thus

"Kings were the most appropriate heroes of the tragic muse....the people did not represent themselves so much as they were represented in their chief."

Now, however,

"we cannot place ourselves in the condition of those who would have felt their blood thrill as the crowned shadows moved across the stage."

In addition,

"we know....that Kings' souls cannot be so large, nor their passions so powerful, nor their emotions so intensely tragic as those of men in whom the active enterprises of life constantly stimulate the desires and nerve the powers."

Thus the source of modern tragedy lies in the "Simple",

"its materials being woven from the woes - the passions - the various and multiform characteristics - that are to be found in the different grades of an educated and highly civilized people."

Lytton draws on the theatre for further evidence in support of his political and social views, and makes recommendations for its improvement in accordance with the same principles which dictate his suggested reforms in other areas.

Coleridge, in his letter dated 1798 published in Biographia Literaria in 1817, had, in a parallel manner, related political matters to the kind of drama presented in the theatre, but not to the conditions of the theatre itself, in terms of the effect of its organisation on the plays produced, as one of a range of social institutions. The assumption that theatre conditions, as much as trade conditions or living conditions, were affected by political and social factors, emerged from the conjunction of the questions of parliamentary reform and theatrical reform, and



the annexation into theatrical discussion of arguments from the wider area.

At the simplest level, theatrical comment in the eighteen thirties referred as a matter of course to non-theatrical matters in discussing the stage in general. Hunt, for example, in his Tatler essay of July 7th, 1831<sup>18</sup> on "Late Hours at the Theatre" raises the question of "the supposed decline of a taste for the drama"; he asserts that "the taste" has rather "shifted quarters" than diminished "numerically speaking". "The whole secret of the matter" is explained from social factors:

"the richer classes, besides the drawback of late hours and the diminution of tavern habits on the part of the gentry, have so abounded of late years in the luxuries of new books, music and visiting, that they have outgrown a disposition to go to the theatre...the diffusion of knowledge has been bringing up the uneducated classes to the point where the others left off, and giving them an increase in all sorts of intellectual pleasures..."

Hunt adduces the contemporary levelling of differences between social classes as a factor affecting the theatre, while Lytton attributes its degeneration to the continuing strength of aristocratic principles; for both, however, despite the variation of individual views of society, contemporaneity in the theatre, whether already realised or yet to be realised, implies democracy. Lytton's recommendation of the "Simple" in drama as the source of "dramatic interest" which belongs "to this age" appears in subsequent press criticism as the increasingly frequent reiteration that contemporary drama should draw on the contemporary world.

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18. Reprinted in Victorian Dramatic Criticism, ed. George Rowell (London, 1971), pp.190-191.

Although its particular manifestations in stage productions were not generally agreed upon, its relation to a democratic society was. The "real life" which the melodrama "founded on a simple domestic fable" is said to present, in the 1814 preface to The Woodman's Hut comes to be defined, as in Jerrold's 1831 preface to Martha Willis, The Servant Maid, as that of Hunt's previously "uneducated classes" or Lytton's "the people":

"It is these scenes of everyday experience - it is these characters which are met with in our hourly paths that will be found in the present drama."

Because the theatre was affected by contemporary factors outside its own immediate sphere, contemporaneity was considered essential to it. The democracy of contemporary society is equated with the treatment of the "everyday experience" of ordinary people in the drama. "The people" formed the audiences to whom such a drama was directed; in the same way, the legitimate drama, treating characters and incidents drawn from a higher social level, relied on the patronage of an audience drawn from that level of society.

In the eighteen thirties, critical writing began to diagnose manifestations of contemporaneity in elements of production style as well as in subject. Talfourd,<sup>19</sup> in the 1837 preface to the fourth edition of his pseudo-legitimate play, Ion,<sup>20</sup> produced at Covent Garden in 1836

19. Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd (1795-1854), was a lawyer by profession. His plays Ion (1836), The Athenian Captive (1837) and Glencoe (1840) were modelled on French tragedy and used blank verse. They were produced with Macready in the leading roles, Ion being the most successful.

20. Quoted in English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, I, Dramas 1800-1850, ed. Michael R. Booth (Oxford, 1969), p.14.



attributes the popularity on stage of what would otherwise have been rejected by audiences to Macready's performance in the title role:

"The consequence of this extraordinary power [of Macready's acting] of vivifying the frigid, and familiarising the remote, was...to render the play an object of attraction..."

The "remote" and "frigid" of the legitimate drama can thus be made contemporary and hence acceptable to audiences through a style of acting which renders it "familiar", which brings down the "elevation of language and manner" of legitimate drama to the level of the ordinary people; such acting democratizes the "loftier persons of tragedy". Similarly, the style of presentation can be rendered contemporary, also by making use of what is attractive to audiences. In addition to the "Simple", Lytton advocates that the drama, to be contemporary, should rely on the "Magnificent", which he considers to be as "modern" in production as the "Simple" is in subject matter:

"The Stage has gained a vast acquisition in pomp and show - utterly unknown to any period of its former history...The public have grown wedded to this magnificence...The astonishing richness and copiousness of modern stage illusion opens to the poet a mighty field, which his predecessors could not enter."<sup>21</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, critical writing in general was prepared to consider the condition of the stage in terms of its contemporaneity, whether thereby to deplore its decline or to advocate its regeneration, both in subject matter and production style. Since contemporaneity in the theatre resulted from contemporary

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21. Lytton, England and the English, pp.311-312.

society, critical approval or condemnation was ultimately dictated by the social and political attitudes of the individual critic; criticism, accordingly, judged the theatre in terms of non-theatrical and fundamentally abstract standards, in contrast to the theatre itself, where the managers were concerned with providing the audience with entertainment which would encourage their patronage. The critical notion of contemporaneity in the theatre derives from audience acceptability, but whereas the managers are concerned with what appeals to audiences only insofar as knowledge of such can be used to ensure the popularity of stage presentations, the critical concern is to assess the condition of the stage.

By the association of the current state of affairs in society with the conditions of the theatre, the stage comes to assume an importance as an index of the achievements in non-theatrical areas; to assess the condition of the theatre becomes equivalent to assessing the condition of society in general, as much as the individual assessment of society by the critic influences his assessment of the theatre. Donne's statement of the importance of the theatre overtly connects "the noblest dramatic poetry" with "the most brilliant epochs of national history", but the concept of the relation between the theatre and society permeates the criticism of the mid-Victorian period at a much less formal level, in the kind of language used by critics in discussing the stage, where terminology more strictly appertaining to social and political discussion becomes the natural style of discourse adopted in speaking of the



theatre. With the 1843 Act, the democratisation of the theatres received legal sanction, and over the next twenty years, the contemporary theatre, redefined as the stage productions at the West End theatres by the consequent alteration in the focus of critical attention, figures in critical writing as a microcosm of the wider social sphere, both explicitly and implicitly.

## VII Contemporaneity in Acting

Talfourd specifically attributes the stage success of Ion to Macready's performance in the title role, which had the effect of making popular on stage a play not in itself particularly attractive to audiences. The criticism of Macready's acting style in the eighteen thirties draws attention to those aspects of it, which as aspects of performance in general, are taken in the critical writing of the mid-Victorian period to indicate contemporaneity, in the same way that the contemporaneity of a play is defined by its reliance on domestic interest, the "everyday experience" of "the people".

Macready's own conception of the objectives of acting are shown by his comments on Kemble<sup>1</sup> and Edmund Kean,<sup>2</sup> as counterbalanced by those on Talma,<sup>3</sup> whom he took as his model, in his Reminiscences.<sup>4</sup> Kemble's performance in

1. John Philip Kemble (1757-1823) made his London debut in 1783 and retired in 1817. As an actor he was most successful in tragedy, his formality and somewhat pedantic manner being found especially suited to the character of Coriolanus. He managed both Drury Lane and Covent Garden in succession, and attempted a degree of historical accuracy in costuming and staging.
2. Edmund Kean (1787/90-1833) first appeared in London in 1814. His most successful parts were the more villainous of Shakespearean roles, such as Iago and Richard III. He was notorious for his scandalous behaviour in private life. His last appearance on stage, during which he collapsed, preceded his death by a few weeks.
3. Francois-Joseph Talma (1763-1826), made his debut at the Comédie-Francaise in 1787. In the latter part of his career he concentrated entirely on tragedy, his last appearance being in 1826. In the theatrical speaking of verse, he allowed the sense rather than the metre to dictate the pauses, and suppressed the exaggerations of the declamatory style.
4. William Charles Macready, Reminiscences, ed. Sir Frederick Pollock (New York), 1875, pp.102, 100.



Addison's Cato, which he saw in 1816, he found to be "merely sensible cold declamation"; he objects that "his attitudes were stately and picturesque but evidently prepared" and the performance as a whole he condemns on the grounds that

"the want of variety and relief rendered it uninteresting, and often indeed tedious."

Kean he approved of for his "energetic displays" in contrast to the immobility of Kemble, but thought him lacking in Kemble's "dignity". For Macready, Talma united the best qualities of the two styles:

"Every turn and movement as he trod the stage might have given a model for the sculptor's art, and yet all was effected with such apparent absence of preparation as made him seem utterly unconscious of the dignified and graceful attitudes he presented...There was an ease and freedom, whether in familiar colloquy, in lofty declamation, or burst of passion, that gave an air of unpremeditation to every sentence, one of the highest achievements of the histrionic art...His object was not to dazzle or surprise by isolated effects: the character was his aim; he put on the man, and was attentive to every minutest trait that might distinguish him. To my judgement, he was the most finished artist of his time, not below Kean in his most energetic displays, and far above him in the refinement of his taste and extent of his research, equalling Kemble in dignity, unfettered by his stiffness and formality."

The objective of the actor, for Macready, should be to present a character on stage as a consistent whole compounded from a multiplicity of details marking individuality, in such a manner as to appear spontaneous in all the various aspects of character portrayed, the familiar, the dignified and the passionate. The actor's achievement thus depends on his ability to create an impression of naturalness through artificial technique, and of consistency of character through variety.

For Macready, Talma's excellence as an actor lay in the synthesis he effected between the two styles of acting, one associated with Kemble and the other with Kean, neither of which alone could result in the creation of a complete character. The two styles are distinguished from each other by the different relation of each to what contemporary critics call "nature"; the Kemble style achieves its "dignity" by rising above "nature", the Kean style its "energy" by being rooted in "nature". Hunt describes Kemble's style in 1807<sup>5</sup> in terms of its "loftiness" as opposed to "humility", of its "preparation" as opposed to "enthusiasm":

"The grander emotions are his chief study; he attaches a kind of loftiness to every sensation that he indulges, and thus conceives with much force the more majestic passions, at the same time that he is raised above the pathetic passions, which always carry with them an air of weakness and humility...He never rises and sinks as in the enthusiasm of the moment; his ascension though grand is careful, and when he sinks it is with preparation and dignity."

Equally, Hazlitt, writing retrospectively in 1816<sup>6</sup> on Mrs Siddons,<sup>7</sup> the female counterpart of her brother Kemble, characterises her acting style by its elevation above "nature":

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5. Leigh Hunt, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1894), pp.3-11.
  6. William Hazlitt, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1895), p.103.
  7. Mrs Siddons (née Sarah Kemble, 1755-1831) achieved London success on her second appearance in 1782, and appeared almost exclusively in tragic parts, being particularly noted for her performance as Lady Macbeth.



"It was something above nature. We can conceive of nothing grander."

The main defect of the Kemble style, for Hazlitt, very much a partisan of Kean, was its very rejection of "nature" and reliance instead on the deliberateness and artificiality associated with conscious art; he writes in 1817<sup>8</sup>, at the end of Kemble's long career, that while Kemble's "conscious grandeur of conception" had "all the regularity of art", it lacked the unexpected bursts of nature and genius". The measure of difference between Kemble and Kean is that between "nature" and "art". Hazlitt's description of Kemble's performance as Richard III in terms of its limitations in comparison with Kean's emphasises the lack of energy, animation and vitality:

"his Richard III wanted that tempest and whirlwind of the soul, that life and spirit, and dazzling rapidity of motion, which fills the stage, and burns in every part of it, when Mr Kean performs this character."

Kean's Othello is "a masterpiece of natural passion" which "might furnish studies to the painter or anatomist";<sup>9</sup> as Richard III he is "more bold, varied and original than Kemble," giving "an animation, vigour and relief to the part".<sup>10</sup>

A reliance on "nature" results in an acting style characterised by its energy, its spontaneity, its vitality and its variety, and gives the impression on stage of the freedom from restriction of an irrepressible force; the

8. William Hazlitt, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1895), pp.134-143.

9. William Hazlitt, "Kean as Othello", in Victorian Dramatic Criticism, ed. George Rowell (London, 1971), pp.53-54.

10. William Hazlitt, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1895), pp.4-10.

acting style relying on "art" achieves grandeur through its immobility, care of preparation, self-consciousness and regularity, the effect on stage which results being that of consistency of conception through restraint. The main defect of the former style is the fitfulness of the portrayal of character which results, its dissolution into "isolated effects"; Hunt, recording in 1815 his first impressions of Kean as Richard III,<sup>11</sup> found him to be "natural only in the particular", and Hazlitt states as the actor's peculiar excellence his ability to present "a succession of striking pictures."<sup>12</sup> The latter style portrays a unified character, but is ultimately "uninteresting" because of the very regularity and eschewal of "variety" by which it is achieved; the usual description of Kemble's performances is "statue-like".<sup>13</sup>

The immense and immediate popularity of Kean from his first appearances in 1814 resulted from the current dissatisfaction with what Hunt, in his review of Kean's Richard III, calls the "artificial style"; Kean's reliance on "nature" seemed to furnish what was felt to be "desirable in theatrical representation". The transition from the earlier style to the later parallels the transition from tragedy to melodrama; with Kemble are associated the characteristics held to be unsatisfactory in the drama

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11. Victorian Dramatic Criticism, ed. George Rowell (London 1971), pp.51-53.

12. William Hazlitt, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1895), p.2.

13. William Hazlitt, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1895), p.141.



adhering rigidly to the legitimate pattern, the reliance on rules, deliberate restraint and lifelessness. A review in Baldwin's London Magazine of January, 1822<sup>14</sup> criticises Byron's Sardanapalus, The Two Foscari and Cain as typifying those defects of the legitimate drama:

"the plays appear to us 'coldly correct, and critically dull'. They abound in elaborate antitheses, frigid disputations, stately commonplaces, and all the lofty trifling of those English tragedies which are badly modelled on the bad imitations of the Greeks by the French."

Kean's acting style, like melodrama, rejected the restrictions of prescribed rules, and achieved a consequent potency of effect, appropriate to "theatres for spectators" rather than "playhouses for hearers" in its reliance on action rather than the declamatory attitudes on which Kemble grounded his performances.

Cumberland remarked on the transition in the theatre from the verbal to the visual in 1794, when Kemble was at the height of his popularity and his powers as an actor; Kemble, creator of the part of Rolla in Pizarro, did not exclude moments of telling visual effect from his performance, but introduced strongly contrasting points into the generally dignified and decorative manner employed, a technique which could still rouse audiences, even if only momentarily, twenty years later. Macready describes Kemble's last performance of Cato as "awakening no response" in an

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14. Reprinted in Romantic Bards and British Reviewers, ed. John O. Haydon (London, 1971), pp.276-282.

audience who listened "with respectful, almost drowsy attention" to the "five acts of declamatory, unimpassioned verse", except for one point:

"Like an eruptive volcano from some level expanse, there was one burst that electrified the house... Kemble, with a start of unwonted animation, rushed across the stage...huddling questions one upon another with extraordinary volubility of utterance...he gasped out convulsively, as if suddenly relieved from an agony of doubt, 'I am satisfied.' and the theatre rang with applause most heartily and deservedly bestowed."

Such "bursts" were dismissed as claptrap by critics advocating naturalness in acting, as artificial because carefully planned, part of a stylised vocabulary of mechanical effects, owing nothing to the spontaneous impulse which apparently governed Kean. In the same way that Kemble's style became outmoded together with the formality of legitimate drama, objections to Kean's style increased with the growing disapproval of melodrama; the very energy which had initially contrasted so refreshingly with Kemble's rigidity came to be questioned as excessive. Macready's synthesis of the two acting styles is similarly the expression in terms of stage performance of the characteristics of the "drama", which sought to capitalise equally on the potency of stage effect of melodrama, and the "dignity" of the legitimate drama.

The concern with "everyday experience" taken as indicative of contemporaneity in the "drama" becomes what



Talfourd calls "the power of....familiarising the remote" in acting. Macready suggests the necessity of the introduction of this factor to effect his proposed synthesis in his list of the various aspects of character, where to "lofty declamation" and "burst of passion" he adds "familiar colloquy". The implications of a style of performance relying on the "familiar" as the mediator between the "lofty" and "passion" are brought out by Hunt, in his Richard III review, where he expands his conception of "the great stage-desideratum", which he states to be the ability in an actor "to unite common life with tragedy", and finds Kean to achieve when he succeeds in being "familiar". "Nature" comes to mean the ordinary, and in acting as in the "drama" relies on minuteness of factual detail; what Hunt looks for in "theatrical representation" is

"something as natural in its way, with proper allowance, of course, for the gravity of the interests going forward, as the man who enters his room after a walk, takes off his hat, pinches off one glove and throws it into it, gives a pull down to his coat or a pull up to his neckcloth, and makes up the fireplace with a rub of his hands and a draught of the air through his teeth."

Macready's approval of Talma's attention

"to every minutest trait that might distinguish him" implies that a consistent character creates an impression of individuality through the accumulation of details from everyday life which render him "familiar", and consequently recognisable from everyday experience.

Hunt, in defining "nature" as "common life" and advocating its introduction into tragedy, makes allowance



for a difference of degree in the kind of ordinary detail proper to "the gravity of the interests going forward", which is not identical with but parallel to the details of behaviour of a man returning from a walk. Macready would appear either to have made no such distinction or to have been unsuccessful in conveying any impression on stage that tragedy differed from "common life". "Individuality" in Macready's acting style is a reduction of the wider sphere of tragedy to the particular sphere of melodrama, by the process of making a character specific through detail based on "common life", the "individuality" of a stage character is a measure of his resemblance to "our good friends and next door neighbours". Hunt, reviewing Macready's performance as Macbeth in 1831<sup>15</sup> finds the actor's "defect" to lie in his failure to portray the tragic hero as something above the level of the ordinary man:

"It wants in its general style and aspect that grace and exaltation which is to the character what the poetry is to the language; which, in fact is the poetry of the tragedy...It wants the Royal Warrant...that habitual consciousness of ascendancy, and disposition to throw an ideal grace over its reflections...which enables the character to present itself to us as an object of moral and intellectual contemplation."

Hunt sees Macready's acting style as one which strips tragedy of all its innate characteristics; the poetry of tragedy is that factor by which it is raised to the higher level of the "ideal", which treats of the larger province of the "moral and intellectual". The association of tragedy with aristocracy is suggested in Hunt's comments, where

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15. Leigh Hunt, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1894), pp.209-212.



"exaltation" and "poetry" are described in terms of the "ascendancy" of "the Royal Warrant". Macbeth is a tragic hero by virtue of his nobility in social terms, and Macready's emphasis on the "familiar" is at once incompatible with Macbeth's social elevation and with the poetry of the play:

"Mr Macready delivered the words like a mere commonplace...he spoke [the] words, as merely intimating a fact...Mr Macready seems afraid of the poetry of some of his greatest parts, as if it would hurt the effect of his naturalness and more familiar passages."

The "familiar" belongs to the world of "fact" and "commonplace", and is at variance with that of the "ideal", "exaltation" and "poetry" of tragedy. Macready thus did not "unite common life with tragedy" but substituted common life for tragedy and reduced it to the level of particularity and fact, to that of melodrama.

Macready's acting style thus effected in terms of performance that which the "drama" effected by its adoption of the material of "everyday experience"; the contemporaneity of each is the result of reliance on the "commonplace", of the specific, compounded through the details of "real life", where "real" implies the accumulation of facts from the lives of "those characters which are met within our hourly paths". As an actor, Macready was most successful, according to contemporary critical judgement, and most popular, according to audience approval, in the roles of the "drama" rather than in those of Shakespeare, where his performance harmonised with the play performed rather than contrasted with it. A list of Macready's roles in "order of excellence" in the Theatrical Journal of April 18th, 1850



places those of the "drama" at the head; first and second places are occupied by Werner, from Byron's play, and Richelieu, from Lytton's, respectively, while his Lear comes eighth and his Hamlet twelfth.<sup>16</sup>

The harmony between Macready's style, the "drama" and the taste of his audiences resulted from the fundamental but disguised melodramatic mode common to all. The success of his performance as Richelieu, according to Marston's account,<sup>17</sup> lay in his "familiar touches", providing "natural relief" which was not "incompatible with Richelieu's dignity", part of Macready's propensity for and success with "contrasts of feeling and character" and "fine variety" developed through the portrayal of a multiplicity of "traits". The dignified hero is made to appear "natural" through the "familiar", while the "variety" and "contrast" of "traits" is equated with complexity of character; Marston, like Macready, takes the simplifications of the melodramatic mode as being in essence what they are asserted to be, without looking beneath the immediate superficialities. Ultimate conviction of the "individuality" of the character of Richelieu in the play itself is carried by the reduction of the wider sphere to the personal the portrayal of the public world in terms of the private, in that Richelieu is credible because he is motivated not by abstract ideals but by personal aspirations; Marston accordingly praises Macready

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16. Quoted in E.B. Watson, Sheridan to Robertson (Cambridge, 1926), p.183, n.1.

17. Westland Marston, Our Recent Actors (London, 1888), I, pp.38-53.



for avoiding

"the error...of over-idealizing Richelieu, by delivering his patriotic speeches in such tones of exalted devotion as might have befitted Brutus. Macready's apostrophes to France...were given with a self-reference...that showed her triumphs to be part of his own."

Marston, like Hunt, associates the "ideal" with "exaltation" and Shakespearean drama, to which he counterposes, with an approval lacking in Hunt's review of Macready's Shakespeare performance, the "familiar" and particularity of detail in the actor's style. The "exaltation" of the "ideal" is taken not just as being "something above nature" as for Hazlitt, but as something "remote" from the "everyday experience" of the audience, as for Talfourd; the "familiar" is necessary to mediate between the "ideal" and "common life", the latter being assumed to be the actor's and the drama's object of portrayal, and the interest of the audience.

Macready's acting style was essentially a process of diminishing the "ideal" to the "ordinary", the universal to the particular, the noble to the commonplace, the permanent and timeless to the contemporary and mutable, poetry to prose, the public to the private, tragedy to melodrama and the aristocratic to the democratic. That he did not unite "tragedy" with "common life" as he intended is made clear in Lewes' analysis of Macready published in On Actors and the Art of Acting in 1875.<sup>18</sup> The characters in which he excelled

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18. Victorian Dramatic Criticism, ed. George Rowell, (London, 1971), pp.80-82.



"were not characters of grandeur, physical or moral.. They were domestic rather than ideal...He was irritable where he should have been passionate, querulous where he should have been terrible...In tenderness Macready had few rivals...in all parts [he] strove to introduce ...familiarity of detail."

Macready, by "familiarising the remote", prolonged the popularity of legitimate drama in an increasingly naturalistic theatre, where audiences, attuned to visual effect, looked to the stage for a "portrayal of life and manners". Instead of re-establishing poetic drama in the mid-Victorian theatre, however, his style rather lent impetus to the increasingly dominant "drama", where familiar detail enhanced the impression of "reality"; the introduction of the material of "everyday experience" into tragedy served only to emphasise the essential and necessary remoteness from "common life" of legitimate drama for many critics.

Macready's performance style, however, brought to life for his audiences plays like Talfourd's which in themselves would have been found tedious; detail helped to explain the actions of the legitimate heroes to audiences no longer attuned to listening to verse in the theatre. The same purpose of making everything clear on stage underlay Macready's elocutionary technique. Lewes describes it as "mannered and unmusical" but effective in following "the winding meanings through the inventions of the verse" so that he "never allowed you to feel...that he was speaking words which he did not thoroughly understand". Melodrama, in substituting music for poetry, circumvented the problem of the spoken word, which from the beginning of the century had presented increasing difficulties to the actor of the legitimate. Kemble himself used pantomime as visual clari-



fication of blank verse, to ensure that the audience were in no doubt as to the intentions of the character portrayed; as King John, in the scene with Hubert, he made the non-verbal explicit through exaggerated facial expression. First rolling his eyes to Arthur, in a series of glances, accompanied by "shudderings and inward conflicts", he prowled "tiger-like...to and fro" as he "eyed his young victim"; with the addition of gloomy frowns, his murderous intentions were clearly indicated, while shudders expressed the internal conflict of "compunction and conscience".<sup>19</sup> Kean's violence of action provided a similar orchestration of the verbal, which simultaneously rendered the meaning of the blank verse unambiguous and lent it the interest of visual embroidery; the formal and, for audiences, soporific, rhythm of the blank verse itself was broken up by his "transitions", sudden shifts in tone, which eventually became, as Hazlitt noted, as mechanical as Kemble's even declamation:

"Even the most commonplace drawing monotony is not more mechanical or more offensive, than the converting these exceptions into a general rule, and making every sentence an alteration of dead pauses and rapid transitions..."<sup>20</sup>

Macready's own originally innovatory diction also became, in the view of critics, a tedious mannerism, a painful habit of breaking up his sentences which was dubbed "the Macready pause". Such techniques, once they lost their freshness in the legitimate theatre, were adopted in the acting

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19. Maarten Van Dijk, "John Philip Kemble as King John: Two Scenes", in Theatre Notebook, Volume XXIX, 1975, number 1, pp.22-32.

20. William Hazlitt, The Complete Works, ed. P.P. Howe (London, 1930), volume 5, p.201.



of melodrama; stylised by repetition into non-naturalistic tricks, they provided the performer of melodrama with ready-made additions to his vocabulary of stage effects. Melodrama, by mid-century, became the repository of acting techniques outworn in legitimate drama, from which it cobbled together a style relying on immediate stage effect, whether dictated by dramatic logic or not. From Kemble was derived the clap-trap turn at the end of a declamatory speech; Kean's violence of action and abrupt transitions were readily incorporated; the rate of delivery of speech slowed down under the influence of "the Macready pause". Such techniques, once assimilated, hardened into rule, giving melodrama, on stage, the formality of ballet, in the emphasis on prescribed gesture, facial expression, speech and movement for specific situations. Prescribed stock characters, portrayed according to prescribed conventions, played out the ritual struggle between vice and virtue, gratuitously and meaninglessly exaggerating legitimate techniques designed to promote clarity and naturalness into the incoherence and confusion sneered at by the more sophisticated critics but applauded by audiences.

Melodrama on stage crudely caricatured the legitimate theatre. Macready elaborated stage business with familiar touches, to make the characters he portrayed seem "natural"; in melodrama, endless and excessive detail accumulated into wild improbability, in the infinite prolongation of action by expected prefatory rituals. Dickens dismissively describes in Nicholas Nickleby the theatrical conventions preceding death as



"a series of writhings and twistings...curlings of the legs...rollings over and over...gettings up and tumblings down again...."

Such energetic action ignored the presumable physical weakness of the character; the stage business of melodrama was dictated by its established conventions, and not governed by considerations of "reality" or "nature". Melodrama, like the "drama", was an entertainment designed primarily to please its audiences, and accordingly the degree of crudity of technique depended not on the play performed but on the theatre concerned and its patrons; whereas the middle-class looked for restraint in the performance of their "drama" at the West End houses, the wildest exaggeration characterised the offerings at the suburban theatres.

The performance styles of melodrama and the "drama" were equally designed to make everything plain to the spectator in the auditorium, to remove the potential ambiguities of the spoken word by providing visual elucidation of character and action. The social and moral conservatism of middle-class taste reflected in the "drama", was supported by a criticism emphasising the moral probity of the stage, resulting from the association made between the theatre and the wider social context during the eighteen thirties, ending in the eventual identification of the condition of the theatre with the condition of society in general in the mid-Victorian period. In 1828, the Theatrical Journal reviewer of Fifteen Years presumed as self-evident that the theatre should "point a moral"; Donne in his 1854 essay in the Quarterly Review, specifically equated the production of "the noblest dramatic poetry" with "the most



brilliant epochs of national history".<sup>21</sup> Externalisation, the equation of appearance with essence common to the middle-class temperament and the melodramatic mode of representation, made the portrayal of moral probity on stage a matter of "refined manners"; the quality prized by West End audiences both in social conduct and in the entertainments of the theatre, as signalling their difference as a social group from the lower classes and as distinguishing the "drama" from melodrama. On stage, refinement was shown by restraint, the muting of "bursts of passion" by touches of the "familiar". The emphasis on manners as morals is suggested in the approval of Madame Vestris, whose private life was notorious, as a social reformer. Her achievement at Covent Garden is described in 1842 by one critic<sup>22</sup> in terms of the social improvements effected by her entertainments:

"What has Madame Vestris done for the English stage? She has banished vulgarity, coarse manners...from the boards...and, in their place, has evoked the benefits that flow from a dramatic representation of polished manners, refinement and politeness.. Sure are we that a desirable tone of refinement, both in manner and conversation, has been extensively spread in private life by the lady-like deportment and acting of Madame Vestris."

The emphasis on restraint in the West End productions received further impetus from the influx of translations and adaptations of French plays, which increased from the eighteen forties, as Shakespearean and pseudo-legitimate drama passed out of stage currency; the theatres came to

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21. Reprinted in W.B.Donne, Essays on the Drama (London, 1863), p.120.

22. Quotation from the Morning Post in E.B.Watson, Sheridan to Robertson, (Cambridge, 1926), p.204.



rely increasingly for their programmes not on the repeated items of a stock repertoire, but on novelties, creating a demand for a constant stream of new pieces, most readily supplied by importation. French drama dispensed with legitimate trappings and any apparent attempt to deal with abstract issues; whereas Virginus makes nominal play with political issues, and finds room for speeches on liberty in its classical Roman setting, the French plays dealt overtly with "life and manners" in the presentation of realistic characters and treatment of the commonplace. Taylor's The Ticket-of-Leave Man is representative of such a drama in its adapted form at its best. No longer remote from everyday experience, such a drama did not require the familiarisation of the domestic touch and physical detail; instead emphasis on physical detail amplified the mundane into stage significance. Elaboration of character became the main point of the actor's performance, a style cultivated by Charles Kean, initially in playing roles from the French drama, in such plays as The Corsican Brothers and Louis XI, and subsequently in Shakespeare.

Underplaying, rather than the exaggeration of the actor of melodrama, was the essence of Kean's style, a restraint associated by Lewes with the polite manners of refined society. He writes of Kean's performance of the double role of the twins in The Corsican Brothers:

"You must see him before you will believe how well and how quietly he plays them, preserving a gentlemanly demeanour and drawing-room manner.... which intensifies the passion of the part and gives it terrible reality."<sup>23</sup>

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23. John Forster and G.H. Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), p.186.



The actor's naturalness of manner, equated with the subduing rather than the expression of emotion, is the quality particularly praised by mid-Victorian critics such as Morley and Marston, as well as Lewes; the writers of the early years of the century, in contrast, stressed the dignity of Kemble, which lifted his performance above nature, and the impulsive energy of the older Kean, identified with a spontaneous naturalness. The drawing-room manner advocated by Hunt became the dominant stage style, a reflection of contemporary moves. One critic writes of Wigan, a leading actor under Kean's management:

"In delineating the keen, though suppressed emotions, that may actuate thorough-bred gentlemen of the nineteenth century, he cannot be surpassed. He is the actor belonging precisely to that epoch of civilisation in which the duty of controlled feelings has become pre-eminently imperative, while the capacity for pain is perhaps greater than ever."<sup>24</sup>

The familiar detail which Macready used to set off the grandeur of passion came to replace passion altogether; in the "drama", the actor's repression of sensationalism significantly distinguished West End plays from suburban melodrama and all its excesses.

The muted effects of Kean's style rescued melodrama, in the guise of the "drama", for the middle-class. Dutton Cook suggests the appeal of his "repose" and repression of "all excitement of attitude and gesture":<sup>25</sup>

"he never sank to the level of conventional melodrama,

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24. The Saturday Review, XI (Feb. 23, 1861), p. 194, quoted in Alan S. Downer, "Nineteenth Century Acting", PMLA LXI (1946), pp. 522-576.

25. Dutton Cook, Hours with the Players (London, 1881), vol. II, p. 255.



but rather lifted it to the height of tragedy. He might appear in highly coloured situations, but he betrayed no exaggeration of demeanour; his bearing was still subdued and self-contained."

Cook, like Lewes, is impressed by the "concentration and intensity" which results from this "deadly quiet", its "curious silencing and chilling influence over the spectators"; the dangers of underplaying, however, did not pass unremarked. One critic comments:

"It is quite possible that the artist, in his extreme anxiety to avoid caricature, may glide into the opposite extreme of missing character altogether..."<sup>26</sup>

Restraint, for some critics, indicated not subtlety but lack of ability, a slipshod abandonment of standards indicative of the degeneration of the theatre following the 1843 Act which deprived it of the focal point of a national theatre to preserve and perpetuate an established tradition. Kean himself, in his evidence before the 1866 Committee, criticised contemporary acting standards, attributing the assumed decline jointly to the ending of the patent monopoly, which ended the old system of training by apprenticeship, and the proliferation of theatres and music halls where the untrained actor could readily find employment. Other witnesses shared this viewpoint, looking back nostalgically to the early years of the century. Such testimonies repeat the substance of similar criticisms made before the 1832 Committee exemplifying the eternal tendency to idealise the past condition of the theatre at the expense of the present, on which Morley comments.

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26. Saturday Review, XII (1861), p.560, quoted by Downer, "Nineteenth Century Acting".

More damaging evidence of the progressive decline of the theatre over the mid-Victorian period was found by disillusioned critics in what they saw as its incapacity to handle plays dealing with anything other than the trivial; concrete proof was found in the effect on Shakespearean drama in particular of contemporary acting style. Macready's familiar touches, to the unsympathetic critic, debased greatness; his Macbeth was found to be

"elaborated to effeminacy...frittered into epileptic starts and whining pusillanimity...the performance is all through made small with literalities."<sup>27</sup>

Kean's performance of Shakespearean roles tested out fully the effect of contemporary acting on legitimate tragedy; its dual effects are pointed out by one critic, writing in 1862:<sup>28</sup>

"Ever since Macready's day tragedy has become more homely and we see in Mr Charles Kean a very Dutch transcript, graphic and real, but utterly devoid of regal proportions."

The animated and at times almost violent critical debate roused by Kean's Shakespearean productions and his own playing of tragic roles in the eighteen fifties focused the whole question of the condition of the mid-Victorian theatre, including the "drama" and its patrons. By the middle of the next decade, the West End theatre had become the exclusive property of one particular social group, the most fashionable and aristocratically-inclined of the middle-classes; its drama is typified by Robertson's plays for the Bancrofts

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27. Political and Literary Journal, Oct. 19, 1849, quoted by Downer, "Nineteenth Century Acting".

28. Theatrical Journal, XXIII (1862), p. 124, quoted by Downer, "Nineteenth Century Acting".



at the Prince of Wales, acknowledged by Bancroft himself as a class entertainment. Robertson's achievement as playwright was that he

"rendered a public service by proving that the refined and educated classes were as ready as ever to crowd the playhouses, provided only that the entertainment given there was suited to their sympathies and tastes."

Bancroft describes such plays as a "return to Nature", and Robertson was generally praised for his "realism", "truth", "nature" and "plausibility", all the qualities marking off West End plays and performances. The very achievement of such an entertainment, however, lay in its limitation of audience, theme, and performance, as Henry James noted:

"The pieces produced there dealt mainly in little things - presupposing a great many chairs and tables, carpets, curtains, and knicknacks, and an audience placed close to the stage. They might, for the most part, have been written by a cleverish visitor at a country house, and acted in the drawing room by his fellow inmates. The comedies of the late Mr Robertson...are among the most diminutive experiments ever attempted in the drama... this gentleman's plays are infantile, and seem addressed to the comprehension of infants."<sup>29</sup>

From the late eighteen thirties, the West End theatres increasingly cultivated the early "drama" in answer to the critical demand that the stage should pursue a moral purpose as a justification of the social importance increasingly accorded to it, and to the manifest audience approval of entertainment characterised by restraint and unimpeachable morality. The critical estimation of the stage, however, was also bound up with the incidence of production of the old legitimate drama, particularly the plays of Shakespeare, as both a standard by which to evaluate its achievement and as a vindication of its position as a social institution; the status of Shakespeare, unlike that of the "drama", in terms of dramatic achievement, was universally acknowledged, and in addition, the moral probity of Shakespearean drama was beyond question. The aesthetic merit and moral integrity of Shakespeare were equally attested to by esteemed critical authority, past and present; Coleridge, in his

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29. Quotations from English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Michael R. Booth (Oxford, 1973), III, pp.40-41.



1818 lectures, had asserted "the title of the English drama" to be "created by, and existing in, Shakespeare" and had also commented on the certainty of his moral judgement:

"he never renders that amiable which religion and reason alike teach us to detest....he does not... [carry] on warfare against virtue, by causing wickedness to appear as no wickedness..."<sup>30</sup>

Carlyle equally in 1840<sup>31</sup> states Shakespeare to be "the chief of all Poets hitherto". Shakespeare production consequently seemed to offer a means of realising simultaneously both the moral and artistic purposes of the stage, despite the lack of enthusiasm for the plays among contemporary audiences, which the infrequency of Shakespearean production at the West End theatres indicated.

Although the nature of Shakespearean drama, epitomising as it did the inappropriateness of the legitimate to contemporary audience taste, seemed to render its establishment as the common currency of the theatre a matter of considerable difficulty, Macready's performances in Shakespearean roles had shown the possible means by which such plays could be presented on stage so as to accord with the interests of audiences. The nominal esteem for Shakespeare and absence of any practical manifestation of it in the theatre was a commonplace, on which Coleridge had commented in the letter dated 1798 published in Biographia Literaria,<sup>32</sup> in charging his "Defender" with the

30. S.T. Coleridge, Notes and Lectures (Liverpool, 1874), p.43, pp.65-66.

31. Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes and Hero-Worship (London, 1959), p.335.

32. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London, 1894), p.260.



accusation that "you only pretend to admire [Shakespeare]". The plays treated of the actions of kings and nobles, in a context of political and public events, and were cast in poetry, the elements which Lytton had cited as reasons for substituting a drama concentrating on the "Simple" for the legitimate drama. The very characteristic on which the reputation of Shakespeare's drama rested thus appeared as the limitations which made it alien to audiences; the elevation and dignity rendered it remote from the everyday world where audience interest lay. Through the "familiar" of contemporary acting style, however, the remoteness could be obviated, a process which would not necessarily distort Shakespeare, since it was by its "universal" quality that his genius most distinguished itself, where the "universal" implied an all-inclusiveness. Thus Hazlitt writes in 1820<sup>33</sup> of "Shakespeare's mind" that

"it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias or exclusive excellence more than another. He was just like any other man, but that he was like all other men...He was nothing in himself, but he was all that others were, or that they could become...There was no respect of persons with him. His genius shone equally on the evil and on the good, on the wise and the foolish, the monarch and the beggar."

Because of his ability to "[change] places with all of us at pleasure",

"[his] characters are real beings of flesh and blood; they speak like men, not like authors."

The excellence of Shakespeare's characters lies in their

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33. William Hazlitt, "On Shakespeare and Milton", Lectures on the English Poets, III, in The Complete Works, ed. P.B. Howe (London, 1930), V, pp.44-68.



particularity, the individuality of their recognisability in terms of everyday experience; they are "real" in the sense of being true to "common life" because the mind of their creator has the ability to understand all kinds of man. The "universal" of great drama is here not elevation above "nature" but the inclusion of all nature. The thesis became a commonplace of Shakespearean criticism throughout the century. Thus Walter Bagehot, writing in 1864,<sup>34</sup> takes as Shakespeare's achievement the creation of a multiplicity of characters each with a particular identity:

"Shakespeare...wishes to give a whole party of characters in the play of life, and according to the nature of each. He would 'hold the mirror up to nature', not to catch a monarch in a tragic posture, but a whole group of characters engaged in many actions, intent on many purposes, thinking many thoughts....His characters, taken en masse, and as a whole, are as well-known as any novelist's characters."

Shakespeare added "to the common stock" -

"a new multitude of men and women...with all their various natures roused, mixed, and strained. The severest art must have allowed many details, much overflowing circumstance to a poet who undertook to describe what almost defies description."

Bagshot specifically opposes the mass and variety of Shakespeare's characters to the single figure of the monarch, and in equating his achievement with that of the novelist, defines the poet's method as one of "many details", the multiplicity of traits from everyday life on which the actor's creation of character was also based.

The contemporary critical interpretation of

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34. Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning or Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry", English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century) ed. Edmund D. Jones (London, 1956), pp.368-420.



Shakespeare's achievement as dramatist accorded largely with critical notions of the objectives of the drama, in agreeing on the primacy of creating "real" characters drawn from ordinary life depicted through detail. The similarity resulted from the common ground of Shakespeare criticism and criticism of the contemporary theatre in the denial of the necessity of aristocratic material, both in the sense of subject matter and dramatic form, to achieve artistic greatness. The "elevation" of Shakespearean drama resulted not from remoteness from ordinary experience, as the form in which his plays were cast suggested, but from the inclusion of all experience, which only required to be brought out on stage by the application of the performance style of an actor such as Macready to become immediately perceptible to audiences.

Forster,<sup>35</sup> in his theatre reviews for the Examiner written between 1835 and 1838<sup>36</sup>, prefaces his comments on Macready's Shakespearean roles with general remarks on the particular plays, the effect of which is to demonstrate the fundamentally democratic and hence contemporary nature of the plays, as a preamble to indicating Macready's success in the interpretation of Shakespearean character. It is in the degree to which the characters share in the ordinary elements of human nature that their elevation as tragic

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35. John Forster (1812-1876) was educated at University College, London. He edited the Foreign Quarterly Review from 1842 to 1843, the Daily News in 1846, and the Examiner from 1847 to 1855. His work includes biographies of Goldsmith (1848), Landor (1869), and Dickens (1872-1874).

36. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.1-72.

heroes lies, as with Othello:

"The sublimity of the after-suffering of Othello issues as much out of those kindly springs and impulses which make up his ordinary and educated being, in its tenderness, its restraint, its simplicity, and its trust..."

In contrast, it is impossible to play "the exact Hamlet of Shakespeare", because this would require the actor

"to [abstract] himself from the audience, the actors, and the theatre, and, wrapped in a veil of subtle intellectual refinement, only.... [reflect] aloud."

Such a performance, Forster concludes, would be "pointless and imprecise"; the abstraction from the level of the mundane concerns of common life is, for Forster, an imprecision contrary to the purpose of the stage, which is to present characters as distinct individuals through the traits derived from the actual world. The exceptional individual is thus justified by relating what makes the character stand above everyday life to the ordinary and familiar. In considering Coriolanus, accordingly, Forster sets out to show the character is as much plebeian as patrician, and rather a specific individual than anything else:

"Coriolanus is not an ideal abstraction of the dignities and graces, but a soldier of the early republic of Rome, a man of rough manners but of fiery and passionate sincerity...his style and temper are much the same, whether he addresses patricians or people.. It is the silliest of mistakes to suppose that Coriolanus is an abstraction of Roman-nosed grandeur - an embodiment of dignified contempt of the common people...He has none of the characteristics of an oppressor or scorner of the poor."

Coriolanus thus becomes a middle-class hero; the individuality of the Shakespearean hero is in the end a measure of the extent to which by sharing the emotions of ordinary man he attains elevation, and similarly the



familiarity of the actor's style is the means by which dignity is achieved through the details of ordinary existence. His success in achieving this point of balance between elevation and the ordinary is dependent on his own individual personality, which is individual to the extent that it is representative of middle-class virtues. Contemporaneity in acting style thus emerges as a concern with finding a point of balance between the patrician and the plebeian, between "nobility" and what is in the end "vulgarity"; Forster finds the American actor Forrest<sup>37</sup> to be "vulgar" in his performance as Macbeth, in that

"all nice traits and distinctions are lost....the absolute truth and identity of a character is never thought of...."

Forrest thus loses "nobility" in portraying the character because he abrogates those details which show the similarities between the tragic hero and the ordinary man. Forrest's most striking moments on stage are described as "coarse effects"; he relies on "violent contortions of physical effect". Forster is objecting to the actor's lack of restraint. Kean's bursts of passion become in Forrest's performance "vulgar tricks", and the physical is associated with a lower and less discriminating class of society than that which approves restraint, and so is capable of appreciating nobility.

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37. Edwin Forrest (1806-1872), a prominent American tragedian, was much criticised in the early part of his career for rant. His 1836 visit to London was a slight success; on a later visit in 1845 he was received with marked hostility, which he attributed to the machinations of Macready.

Failure to achieve a point of balance between nobility and vulgarity, elevation and the natural, through restraint and the familiar, thus results in a debasement of Shakespeare, not a reinterpretation showing his fundamental accordance with the contemporary world; the point of balance depends on the actor as the representative of middle-class refinement. In the democracy associated with what is contemporary in the theatre, the "people" whose everyday experience provides dramatic material, are the middle classes rather than the lower classes; it is through their mediation that a harmonious and stable ordering of society is to be reached. The process of democratisation, in the theatre and in society, is consequently that of the proselytisation of middle class values and attitudes rather than a levelling of all social classes into one homogeneous group. The lower classes, the "vulgar" and "plebeian", are excluded from incorporation into the socially dominant group, as in terms of the stage, it is to the less respectable theatres that the forms of entertainment manifestly lacking the characteristics in accord with middle class taste are relinquished.

The critical concern with the moral probity and aesthetic achievement of the theatre coalesced with the aspiration of the West end theatre audiences to "dignity" in stage presentations; audiences were disposed to accept Shakespearean productions as a vindication of their theatre in terms of serious purpose provided such plays could be presented so as to include the same elements which made the "drama" acceptable, at the same time that the reinter-



pretation of Shakespearean drama in terms of contemporary social attitudes demonstrated his fundamentally democratic and hence contemporary qualities. The "familiar" style of acting emphasised the domestic character of Shakespeare's plays; at the same time, the plays themselves were also seen as offering potential opportunities in their settings for the other main element of stage presentation indicative of contemporaneity, that of the "magnificent".

VIII Contemporaneity in Staging

The critical identification of spectacle as the contemporary factor in production style was made on the grounds of its manifest popularity with audiences, as with the "familiar" in acting style and domestic interest in subject. In addition, spectacle was considered to be contemporary because the technical means of realising it had reached their highest point of development in the current theatre. At the end of the eighteenth century, the increased size of the patent houses gave new scope for visual effects; the new Drury Lane of 1794, which prompted Cumberland's remark on the transition from "playhouses for hearers" to "theatres for spectators" had a capacity approaching four thousand. Stage accommodations were proportionately magnified, and the latest in stage machinery installed, intended to prevent "the Necessity of having a number of Scene shifters in the way of the performance".<sup>1</sup> Oil burners had already replaced candlelight, and continued in use until the introduction of gas in 1817. Here Kemble, as manager, set out to make full use of the resources at his disposal, foreshadowing in his first season the subsequent course of development in staging, with its dual emphasis on realism and on spectacle.

The first play presented was Macbeth, in a new and lavish mounting which demonstrated Kemble's principles in Shakespearian production. His biographer, James Boaden,

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1. Quoted from the account of the architect, Henry Holland, in Richard Leacroft, The Development of the English Playhouse (London, 1973), p.148.



himself a playwright and critic, writing in 1825, contrasts the "correctness" of Kemble's production style with the "error" of haphazard staging prevalent in the contemporary theatre, where

"The ancient kings of England, or Scotland, or Denmark, wore the court dress of our own times...The old scenery exhibited architecture of no period and excited little attention...nothing could be less accurate or more dirty than the usual pair of low flats that were hurried together..."

Kemble proposed

"to attend to all the details as well as the grand features, and by the aids of scenery and dress to perfect the dramatic illusion."<sup>2</sup>

The new production broke with stage tradition in the characterisation of the witches:

"the witches no longer wore mittens, plaited caps, laced aprons, red stomachers, ruffs, etc....or any human garb, but appeared as preternatural beings"

This "attempt...to strike the eye with a picture of supernatural power" joined spectacle to "appropriate vestures":

"Hecate's companion spirit descended on the cloud...In the cauldron-scene, new groups were introduced to personify the black spirits and white, blue spirits and grey. The evil spirits had serpents writhing round them, which had a striking effect."<sup>3</sup>

The success of the Macbeth production, with seven performances, was far surpassed, however, by that of the sheer spectacle of Alexander the Great, with thirty-six. In staging Shakespeare, Kemble relied for scenery on William Capon, whose antiquarian zeal and "passion" for "the ancient archi-

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2. Quoted from James Boaden, Life of Kemble, in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York, 1966), II, p.86.

3. Quoted from W.C.Oulton, Continuation of Victor's Theatres of London, in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, II, p.92.

ecture of this country" produced

"works, which were to be records as well as decorations, and present with every other merit, that for which Kemble was born, - truth."<sup>4</sup>

Alexander, in contrast, was the creation of the current ballet-master at the King's Opera in the Haymarket, and "calculated", according to the playbill, "to shew the extent and powers of the New Stage"; the effect of its ingenious transformations and elaborate spectacle was outweighed by the striking novelty of Alexander's car, "drawn by two elephants, and accompanied by Darius' car, drawn by three white horses."<sup>5</sup>

For the oratorios which replaced the drama during Lent, Kemble also anticipated nineteenth century staging techniques in introducing a three-dimensional set, replacing the wings with continuous flats and using what would appear to be appropriate borders, to suggest a roof. The Thespian Magazine describes this "Gothic Cathedral" setting:

"The flies....[are] carved like the fretted roof on an antique pile, and the wings to the side scenes, are removed for a complete screen...."

The effect is to perfect "the deception of the scene"<sup>6</sup>; Kemble's use of scenery and costume was such as to suggest that the stage was a self-contained world, divorced from the auditorium, to be observed by the spectator, rather than an extension of the auditorium, serving as a platform for

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4. Quoted from James Boaden, Life of Kemble, in A.M.Nagler, A Source Book in Theatrical History (New York, 1952), p.412.

5. Quoted in Joseph Donohue, Theatre in the Age of Kean (Oxford, 1975), p.23.

6. Quoted from the Thespian Magazine, March, 1794, in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, II, p.91.



declamation.

Scenic illusion lent a new appeal to the flagging legitimate drama in the early decades of the nineteenth century, but its attractions were consistently outweighed, as Kemble found in his first season, by sheer spectacle; the strongest combination, for audience appeal, was that of melodrama with spectacle, as the success of such pieces as The Miller and his Men attested. At Covent Garden, from 1809 to 1821, the annual Christmas pantomime subsidised the losses throughout the rest of the year<sup>7</sup>; Drury Lane staved off bankruptcy only by introducing Edmund Kean, who lent the legitimate drama the attractions of melodrama. The stage became an arena for visual effect, for a series of splendid three-dimensional pictures containing moving figures, framed by the proscenium; Wyatt, the designer of the 1812 Drury Lane, defines the proscenium as a picture frame, separating the "spectatory" from the "scene", "a boundary line to confine the eye to the subject within that line".<sup>8</sup> The introduction of gas lighting, first on the stage and finally extending to the whole auditorium, by 1825 at Covent Garden, completed the disjunction of spectator from stage, the illuminated focal point before a darkened auditorium.

In the same way that the "drama" evolved from melodrama, so the staging of legitimate plays bore the influence of practices initially designed for the more spectacular, sensational and ultimately denigrated form. The

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7. Joseph Donohue, Theatre in the Age of Kean, p.56.

8. Quoted in Richard Leacroft, The Development of the English Playhouse, p.167.



spoken word declined in stage importance in proportion as that of visual effect increased; the reviewer for Bell's Weekly Messenger, attending the Macbeth production of the new Covent Garden in 1809, when the O.P. riots prevented a single word being heard, still found his attention fully occupied by what he could see:

"of the dresses, the decorations, and the scenery, we cannot speak with too warm an eulogium....The scenery in particular excels in general effect and appropriate detail all we have yet witnessed...To the mechanists in the management of the scenery much praise is due."<sup>9</sup>

In the staging of legitimate drama, however, in contrast to melodrama and pantomime, where spectacle and mechanical ingenuity were accepted, and expected, as integral parts of the entertainment, the introduction of elaborate effects was increasingly justified as linked to a higher purpose. Boaden emphasises that, for Kemble, the servant of "truth", stage panoply was only a means to the worthy end of giving "a more stately and perfect representation of [Shakespeare's] plays".<sup>10</sup> Once the initial novelty of melodramatic techniques applied to legitimate plays wore off, the general attitude of reviewers became less enthusiastic; the Examiner critic writes thus on Kemble's methods in 1813:

"The Managers of this Theatre, who occasionally affect to be classical, regale us now and then, to prevent a satiety of farce and pantomime, with a fragment of Shakespeare; they strip it indeed of many of its chief beauties; but then to make amends, they supply its mutilations by gorgeous ornaments and pompous shows ....Thus Antony and Cleopatra is acted for the sake of the sea-fight and the funeral procession."<sup>11</sup>

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9. Quoted in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, II, p.99.
10. Quoted in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, II, p.86.
11. Quoted in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, II, p.108.



Hostility to such stage spectacle increased simultaneously with the dismissive attitude to melodrama; in retaliation, the promoters of Shakespearean show insisted on their antiquarian authenticity. Thus the playbill for Charles Kemble's 1823 King John revival, superintended by Planché, cited a list of "indisputable Authorities" guaranteeing the historical accuracy of the "Dresses and Decorations".<sup>12</sup>

In staging, notions of truth, reality and authenticity provided a justification for spectacle which distinguished legitimate production style, and subsequently that of the "drama", from melodrama; visual effect was accordingly recommended to the respectable audiences, whose patronage became increasingly important to West End managers from the eighteen thirties, by appealing to the same concepts underlying the "drama". Lytton<sup>13</sup>, pragmatic in his approach to the theatre, recognises, in the early eighteen thirties, the inadequacy of the ungarnished spoken word as a means of fixing audience attention, and emphasises the new availability to "the poet of the drama" of "[the] most elaborate devices of machinery", which were "utterly unknown to any period of [the Stage's] former history"; as a consequence,

"[the] astonishing richness and copiousness of modern stage illusion opens to the poet a mighty field, which his predecessors could not enter...The poet of the drama hath no restrictions on his imagination from the deficiency of skill to embody corporeally his creations, and that which the epic poet can only describe by words, the tragic poet can fix into palpable and visible life."

The new opportunity for the theatre is that of rendering physically concrete what could previously only be suggested verbally; the new ability to render specific on stage the formerly intangible Lytton considers as a freedom from old limitations for the poet's imagination. Spectacle thus acts as a mediator between the "imagination" and "visible life" in the same way that the "familiar" unites "common life" with "tragedy"; both function to make what would in itself be remote from audiences "real" on stage in the sense of being recognisable from personal experience. The

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12. Quoted in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, II, p.171.

13. Edward Lytton Bulwer, England and the English (London, 1970), pp.301-313.



poet's imaginative faculty is thus conceived of as a barrier to audience communication, in the same way that the elevation of tragedy places it beyond the reach of the audience's sympathies; the essential qualities of artistic greatness thus become in the mid-Victorian period the limitations which render it inaccessible, and necessitate the infusion of an additional factor not to raise the audience to the higher level but to reduce what exists on the higher level to proportions which the ordinary man can grasp.

Fifteen years before Lytton, Coleridge had written of the object of tragedy<sup>14</sup> as that of raising the spectator above the confinement of his own individuality to an imaginative experience of what could never be experienced in ordinary life:

"[the elder dramatists] wished to transport the mind to a sense of its possible greatness during the temporary oblivion of the worthless "thing we are", and of the peculiar state in which each man happens to be; suspending our individual recollections and lulling them to sleep amid the music of nobler thoughts."

For Lytton, the achievement of the drama drawing on the "Simple", "the pathos and passion of every-day life" is that it excites "a vivid emotion in the audience", while the "Magnificent" produces "admiration". The ultimate effects on the audience of the kind of stage production relying on the elements of contemporaneity which Lytton recommends are those which Coleridge castigates as the "mere sensations" and "empty curiosity" induced by "our modern sentimental plays".

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14. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London, 1894), pp. 257-262.



## Tragedy

"excite[s] the minds of spectators to active thought, to a striving after ideal excellence. The soul is not stupified into mere sensations, by a worthless sympathy with our own ordinary sufferings, or an empty curiosity for the surprising, undignified by the language or the situations which awe and delight the imagination."

In the theatre, the elements of contemporaneity substitute the physically real for the imaginatively true, presenting the superficial instead of the essential through the restriction of its frame of reference to the particular and the exclusion of wider relevance. Within the confines of the "drama", where acting, staging and subject matter harmonised with each other, spectacle was a consistent part of stage production; when transposed outside its own limits, and applied to Shakespearean drama, the manifest inconsistency between the play itself and the means of presentation gave rise, in critical writing, to a closer examination of the implications of spectacle for the condition of the theatre, as to whether it was in fact a means of regenerating the stage or one of the factors responsible for its decline.

The elaborate production style employed by Madame Vestris at the Olympic during the eighteen thirties in the presentation of light comedies, operettas and burlesques is approved for its consistency with the kind of entertainment offered. The New Monthly Magazine reviewer describes the theatre in October, 1836,<sup>15</sup> as

"a confectioner's shop, where, although one cannot

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15. Quoted in E.B. Watson, Sheridan to Robertson (Cambridge, 1926), p.193.

absolutely make a dinner, one may enjoy a most agreeable refectation, consisting of...trifles light as air, served upon the best Dresden China in the most elegant style."

It is the appropriateness of the decoration that is remarked; the successful application of spectacle in production depends on its consistency with what is produced. The Theatrical Observer reviewer comments on the 1834 production of Planché's translation from Scribe, Minister and Mercer,<sup>16</sup> that

"the costumes were rich and appropriate and the whole mise-en-scène was in the best possible taste."

"Taste" is the factor which determines the success of the use of spectacle; "[The] best possible taste" which achieves appropriateness is the possession of the middle-class quality of refinement. A review in the same publication of the 1841 production of London Assurance<sup>17</sup> at Covent Garden praises the "superlative grandeur" of the furnishings of a drawing room as evidence of its creator's refined social status:

"the drawing room so magnificently furnished...[was] such as [was] never before seen beyond the pale of fashionable life, and could only have been imitated by one used to that society."

The "grandeur" achieved through spectacle approved in the context of a contemporary play, is a function of magnificence; spectacle replaces the "elevation" of tragedy, achieved through its "poetry", which Hunt considered Macready's performance to debase to "mere commonplace", with what the reviewer calls "the most costly arts of decoration".

Contemporaneity in staging achieves "grandeur" to

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16. Quoted in E.B. Watson, Sheridan to Robertson (Cambridge, 1926), p.273.

17. Quoted in E.B. Watson, Sheridan to Robertson (Cambridge, 1926), p.274.



the extent that the "palpable and visible" objects it presents are physically "magnificent"; spectacle is the exaltation of the inanimate to produce "empty curiosity", the transposition to a superficial plane of the "awe and delight" of the "imagination" which results from the "poetry" in tragedy. The "admiration" induced by spectacle is proportionate to the degree of self-evident "reality" of its objects, in the same way that the credibility of a character as an individual depends on the traits drawn by the actor from "everyday experience"; thus the London Assurance reviewer praises the objects used for being "bona fide realities", not "stage properties".

As manageress successively at the Olympic, Covent Garden and the Lyceum during the eighteen thirties, forties and fifties, Madame Vestris anticipated, in her drawing room sets, the production style associated with the Bancrofts at the Prince of Wales in the eighteen sixties, with its reliance, remarked by Henry James, on "little things...a great many chairs and tables, carpets, curtains and knick-nacks".<sup>18</sup> Planché praises her "scrupulous attention" to "all those accessories which form the peculiar charm of Theatrical Representation, by perfecting the illusion of the scene"<sup>19</sup>; gas lighting made it necessary to furnish the stage with minute care by showing up the barrenness and imperfections obscured by oil. Realistic settings and properties could now be fully appreciated; "the illusion

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18. Quoted in Michael R. Booth, English Plays of the Nineteenth Century (Oxford, 1973), III, p.41.

19. Quoted in A.M. Nagler, A Source Book in Theatrical History (New York, 1952), p.463.

of the scene", however, was undermined by the wing and border system of scenery, an incongruity which Madame Vestris herself attempted to resolve for at least one production, replacing the wings by continuous flats with practical doors. Old staging practices, however, remained in general use throughout the mid-Victorian period, despite their manifest inappropriateness; sporadic scenic innovations, such as built-up set pieces, diversity of levels and multiple room sets, were reserved largely for special productions, and the old stock of conventional forest, chamber and garden settings continued to re-appear. The systematic and painstaking care of Charles Kean in the eighteen fifties contrasted greatly with the more usual managerial practices. A writer of an article on "Scenery of the Stage" in the Art Journal in 1853 describes contemporary staging "absurdities":

"The scenes are still in two slides, and when they meet in the centre, the most delicately painted landscape is presented to the public eye, divided by a cutting line...The wings...are often disfigured by coarse masses of red, meant as a continuation of curtain drapery to reduce the height of the proscenium."<sup>20</sup>

Macready, during his managements of the two patent houses, employed two production styles: one for special presentations, particularly of Shakespeare, giving full play to the whole panoply of stage resources; the other, and more usual, style, relied on conventional stock settings. The elaborate techniques employed were not in themselves innovatory, being part of the "astonishing richness and copiousness of modern stage illusion" in regular use outside legitimate drama, in pantomime, opera and melodrama; the

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20. Art Journal, N.S., V(1853), p.228.



diorama used in the 1839 Henry V production, depicting the voyage of the English fleet to Harfleur, was a sophistication of the panorama introduced in pantomime in the eighteenth twenties. The use of gauze, employed with great effect by Phelps at Sadler's Wells, was first introduced by <sup>de</sup>Loutherbourg, together with new devices for thunder, wind and rain; the "vampire trap", for rapid appearances and disappearances, was called after Planché's 1820 play of that name.

In the early Victorian period, the pantomime transformation scene represented the highest point of the stage's technical development, with its visible metamorphosis of the entire scene, using transparencies, rising and falling gauzes, opening pieces and rising and sinking pieces. Lavish display for its own sake became increasingly predominant in pantomime from the eighteen thirties, altering the structural balance of the traditional form, where the main interest lay in the adventures of the harlequinade characters. A writer in the Times of 1840 complains that the old protagonists and plot

"are no longer the staple commodity of the piece. They rather act as the thread to connect a number of works by scenic painters and mechanics which have little to do with their own vicissitudes." 21

Similarly, in pantomime's close relative, the extravaganza, the final transformation scene became the focal point of the whole entertainment, provoking Planché, who provided Madame Vestris with a series of extravaganza texts for her three managements to this comment:

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21. Quoted in Michael R. Booth, English Plays of the Nineteenth Century (Oxford, 1976), V, pp. 48-49.

"The last scene became the first in the estimation of the management. The most complicated machinery, the most costly materials, were annually put into requisition...I was positively painted out."<sup>22</sup>

In staging A Midsummer Night's Dream at Covent Garden in 1840, Madame Vestris used the extravaganza method to obtain a concluding striking effect, as Planché relates, illustrating Oberon's words "Through the house give glimmering light...":

"It was accordingly arranged with Grieve, the scenic artist...that the back of the stage should be so constructed that...it should be filled with fairies, bearing twinkling coloured lights..."

Planché insists on the propriety of the show, as "carrying out implicitly the directions of the author, and not sacrilegiously attempting to gild his refined gold"<sup>23</sup>; the John Bull reviewer, however, remarks on

"the obtruding sense of the similarity of this scene, gorgeous as it is, to the finale of a ballet at the Opera..."

The same journal had criticised Macready's 1838 production of The Tempest, where scenery from the afterpiece of the preceding April, Sinbad the Sailor, was used, in similar terms:

"A mimic vessel is outrageously bumped and tossed about ...the red fire, Salamander Spirits, and trumpery phantasmagoria...are...altogether unwarrantable..."

For into an Easter-piece, and a very indifferent one, has The Tempest been transformed. Ariel is whisked about by wires and a cog-wheel, like the fairies in Cinderella..."<sup>24</sup>

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22. Quoted in Michael R. Booth, English Plays of the Nineteenth Century (Oxford, 1976), V, p.48.

23. Quoted in G.C.D. Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York, 1966), II, pp.223-224.

24. Quoted in G.C.D. Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, II, pp.225, 218.



While legitimate productions, in illustrating Shakespeare, approached purely spectacular entertainments, using the same methods of staging, the accompanying emphasis on historical accuracy in illustration provided a distinction. Planché had supplied Charles Kemble with the fruits of his antiquarian researches for the 1823 King John; in Madame Vestris' A Midsummer Night's Dream, according to John Bull, the "costume for the most part rest[ed] upon authority". Macready's historical productions were equally authentic in details of costume and setting, embodying corporeally, as Lytton anticipated, the creations of the poet; the palpability of the built-up pieces, as well as their correctness, prompted the Times reviewer of the 1842 King John to praise the "solidly constructed edifices" in particular, out of this "animated picture of those Gothic times".<sup>25</sup> Physical reality of setting underlined verisimilitude, in legitimate drama with its historical backgrounds and in the "drama" with its fashionable drawing rooms. Macready, in staging Lytton's contemporary comedy, Money, in 1840, showed the same concern with "bona fide realities" as did Madame Vestris in the following year; for the club scenes, the fashionable dandy, Count D'Orsay, supplied the authentic details<sup>26</sup> available only to "one used to that society".

The verisimilitude and authenticity of mid-Victorian staging extended from large-scale effects down to the smallest details; the note of correctness in Madame

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25. Quoted in G.C.D. Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, II, p.230.

26. Macready's Reminiscences, ed. Sir Frederick Pollock (London, 1876), p.492.

Vestris' A Midsummer Night's Dream, the John Bull reviewer remarks, was carried through from the "magnificent view of Athens in the first scene" to the "petasi or hats", "straw baskets which hang at the back of Demetrius and others". With audiences attentive to visual not verbal effects, and increasingly expectant that such effects should be as realistic as possible, the confinement of the actors within the frame of the proscenium arch, as part of the picture, was confirmed; the concern for totality of effect which produced Demetrius' hat necessitated the integration of the supernumeraries, not just the principal actors, into the action animating the picture decorated by their authentic costumes. The Times reviewer remarks on "the new effect" in the wrestling scene in Macready's 1842 As You Like It, of

"including the space where the wrestlers encounter with ropes and staves, round which the courtiers and spectators stand, pressing eagerly forward, watching every movement of the combatants."<sup>27</sup>

In the King John production of the same year, it is again the attention to "the smallest minutiae" of "the decorative characters of the piece" that is particularly noticed. The crowd scene acquired a hitherto unknown prominence as animated decoration, paralleling that of the scenery; elements previously subordinated to the principal actor's performance became essentials in the mid-Victorian period, and received applause in their own right.

The playbills of the mid-Victorian period provide detailed descriptions of scenery, naming the scene painters;

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27. Quoted in G.C.D. Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, II, p.229.



the practice only began with the advent of <sup>de</sup>/Loutherbourg, and the artists responsible for the stock scenery which formed a background to the eighteenth century actor's performance remained anonymous. Garrick's retention of Loutherbourg, and Kemble's of Capon, to decorate particular shows, were exceptional. In contrast, the managers of the nineteenth century were regularly associated with particular artists, whose names frequently were printed larger on the playbills than those of the actors and, inevitably, of the authors. With Macready is associated Clarkson Stanfield, a maritime painter who subsequently, like <sup>de</sup>/Loutherbourg, became a Royal Academician; William Beverley created some of the most sumptuous of Madame Vestris' productions; Phelps relied on Frederick Fenton while Charles Kean, at the Princess's, employed a team of master painters, capable as a body of furnishing a whole range of different types of setting according to their varying talents. The theatrical scene-painter became an artist in his own right, and accordingly, on occasion, despite the integral importance of his work to stage production, felt restricted by the arena offered for his talents in the theatre. <sup>De</sup>/Loutherbourg, dissatisfied with a form of entertainment in which actors diverted attention from the scenery, left the theatre to create the Eidophusikon, an attempt to construct a performance from scenic effects alone; Stanfield turned to easel-painting entirely, working for Macready only as a special favour, to assist the actor in his project of regenerating the decaying patent theatres; Telbin and Grive, who worked for Kean, both members of scene-painting families prominent

throughout the century, applied themselves to dioramas, as did Beverley. Telbin, indeed, projected an Eidophusikon-like entertainment:

"he was getting restless and dissatisfied with the result of his labours. He felt it was now or never to make a move on his own account, and in his own way...

The subject chosen was "Venice", the Venice of the Doges...It was proposed to approach Venice by way of the Lake of Lucerne and the St. Gothard Pass, the Swiss subjects to be treated in a way suggested by and in conjunction with Rossini's overture to "William Tell".<sup>28</sup>

Where the theatre relied on so many components, the performance of the actor ceased to be its focal attraction. The talents of an Edmund Kean could bring financial stability to Drury Lane; the success of his son Charles, in contrast, never considered by his contemporaries to be an actor of the same calibre, lay in his abilities as theatrical entrepreneur, the manager of the show who directed, organised and welded together its multiple elements. At the Princess's Theatre, Charles Kean consolidated the patronage of the respectable, and increasingly fashionable, middle-classes; using the techniques, resources and materials available to him, he restored the social and cultural importance to the theatre which it had begun to lose at the end of the previous century. His critics remained largely dubious, and even scornful, of his methods; his productions, however, fully expressed the taste and attitudes of his audience, and pointed out the path to stage success for his successors, through his "bold and masterly adaptation of modern

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28. Account by Telbin's son, in James Laver, Drama: Its Costume and Decor (London, 1951), pp.210-211.



materials to modern taste".

Kean was not himself a great innovator, but built on existing stage methods, systematising occasional practices into a coherent and consistent procedure. Ellen Terry describes the long and exacting rehearsals for both principals and supers as "a lesson in fortitude":

"Rehearsals lasted all day, Sundays included, and when there was no play running at night, until four or five the next morning!"

New recruits were trained in elocution and deportment.<sup>29</sup>

Vestris, Macready and Phelps exercised a similar care, and Kean established it as a routine. Such discipline of the entire company made possible the organisation of large numbers of supers in crowd scenes noted for their animation and naturalness; the Art Journal comments on the 1859

Henry V:

"No one has succeeded so well as Mr Kean in thus managing to drill masses of men into natural actors. His crowds are not the usual stage crowds, wedged in a throng and moving to measured spots. They break forth into picturesque irregularity - they each act independently of the other, and all according to individual proprieties of feeling."

Equal care went into welding together the various departments of staging; a unity of conception marked the work of the numerous scene-painters, technicians and costumiers, achieved by Kean's overall supervision. The Art Journal reviewer of the 1855 Henry VIII writes:

"The artists...seem to labour in harmony, and this fact is apparent even in all the less important details of the management; the machinist and costumier obviously work under the direction of a mastermind."<sup>30</sup>

29. Ellen Terry, The Story of My Life (London, 1908), pp.12, 18-21.

30. Quoted in Muriel St.Clare Byrne, "Charles Kean and the Meininger Myth", Theatre Research, VI (1964), pp.137-153.

Planché praised Madane Vestris for a similar "scrupulous attention" to every aspect of production, and Kean's staging techniques, impressive though they were in their variety and flexibility, similarly drew on known methods. Practical pieces, such as platforms, staircases, bridges and balconies, diversified the stage level in Kean's productions as the usual, not exceptional, mode, of building a scene. The novelty of Kean's procedure lay not in the discovery or invention of hitherto unknown techniques, but in the ingenious application of already existing methods to create on stage a production style which accorded with the temper of the times. The Corsican trap, specifically evolved for the 1852 The Corsican Brothers, epitomises Kean's abilities as contriver, using established methods for new effects which influenced subsequent stage practice. The "ghastly and marvellous effect of the apparition"<sup>31</sup>, rising slowly through the stage and, at the same time, drifting across it, held audiences, according to Lewes, "breath-suspended"; the device, essential to the production of the play, was necessarily installed wherever it was acted. The "new" trap combined a slider, by which the trap door could be pulled across the stage, with scruto and a bristle trap. The scruto, a length of flooring made of narrow strips of wood fixed to a canvas back, attached before and behind the trap door, rolled up before the trap door as it moved while the corresponding length behind unrolled, so that the aperture of the slider opening remained filled; the bristles obscured the opening of the trap door itself, bending upwards as the ghost passed through.<sup>32</sup> Something like "completeness of illusion"

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31. John Coleman, Players and Playwrights I Have Known (Philadelphia, 1890), p.93.

32. Richard Southern, "Theatres and Stages", The Revels History of Drama in English (London, 1975), VI, pp.88-90.



was thus achieved, in the apparently inexplicable appearance of the ghost.

Other managers readily adopted Kean's methods. Shakespearean production, for the rest of the century, necessarily required a wealth of splendour and archeologically exact historical reproduction: the Bancrofts with their chief scene-painter journeyed to Venice in preparation for their 1875 The Merchant of Venice; the nucleus of Irving's repertoire, as well as his production style, derived from Kean. Boucicault, who worked for Kean during the early years of his management, and provided the English version of The Corsican Brothers, turned playwriting into a business of linking together a series of striking effects, relying strongly on ingenious mechanical contrivances, as Kean had done in "illustrating" Shakespeare. In The Colleen Bawn (1860), the "sensation" scene shows the underwater rescue of the drowning heroine; The Octoroon (1859) has a fire and steamboat explosion; Flying Scud (1866) brings the Derby on stage. Beginning with After Dark (1868), Boucicault progressively increased the number of sensation scenes in his plays. At the same time, he surrounded his "telling situations" with realistic detail, depicting the contemporary world with a minute accuracy paralleling Kean's historical verisimilitude; Janet Pride (1855) brings on stage the Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey. Boucicault's plays proved immense stage successes; like Robertson and Taylor, his basic principle as playwright was to please his audience, and the ways of pleasing were those tested and perfected by Kean, in applying the notions of contemporaneity advocated by the pragmatic Lytton.

At the end of the eighteen thirties, when Macready came to manage the patent theatres, his reputation as an actor was established, and critical discussion of his productions centred on his abilities as showman, as part of the general debate over the condition of the theatre and the place of spectacle. For critics, concerned to determine the appropriateness of spectacle in staging Shakespearean drama, the "taste" of the creator of the spectacle was the pivotal factor, and he succeeded to the extent that his taste was representative of middle-class aspirations after refinement. It was assumed that the contemporary world was in the position of being able to make a unique contribution to Shakespeare because of its

command of technical resources for spectacular staging previously unknown. Spectacle could supply what Shakespeare lacked because of the limitations of his own times. Thus a review of Macready's 1838 Coriolanus production writes in John Bull:<sup>33</sup>

"The manner of its production is of itself a work of genius. It is the reverential yet firm filling up of a picture, whose outlines have been drawn by a master's hand...it is only now that [the play] has received a living comment and interpretation."

Spectacle is here considered to succeed because Macready has maintained a "reverential" attitude to Shakespeare, who is the "master"; in contrast, the same reviewer considered his 1838 production of The Tempest to fail, transforming the play into "an Easter-piece, and a very indifferent one", because he failed to make "scenic resource" "subservient" to "the higher purposes of the scene". In the 1839 review of Henry V, Macready is again considered to have failed, the failure being attributed to his lack of "discretion" and gross errors of "taste and discrimination"; the success of the Drury Lane production of The Merchant of Venice in 1841 results from the "good taste" capable of realising an "elegance" which accords primacy to the play:

"all the accessories...were in good taste - properly subdued, yet sufficiently prominent, brilliant and elegant as the dialogue they illustrated - aiding the general effect without in any point interfering with or overlaying the poetic purpose of the dramatist."

Macready's two periods of management at the patent theatres, at Covent Garden from 1837 to 1839 and at Drury

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<sup>33</sup> Quotations from John Bull reviews of Macready's productions are from G.C.D. Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York, 1966), II, p.214, p.218, p.222, pp.226-227.



Lane, from 1841 to 1843 were the first attempts at elaborate staging of Shakespeare as a regular system, and occurred contemporaneously with the increasingly marked propensity of theatrical critics to relate the contemporary stage to the wider social and political context. The weekly John Bull, founded in 1820 by partisans of George IV "to counteract the tide of newspaper sympathy" with Queen Caroline, remained consistently and rapidly Tory in its political orientation; Greville<sup>34</sup> in 1830, at the time of popular agitation for reform, records that "'John Bull' alone fights the battle" "to arrest the torrent of innovation and revolution that is bursting in on every side".<sup>35</sup> Its theatre reviewer's comments on Macready's production are couched in terms verging on the political, implying the necessity of the maintenance of a due subservience of the democratic element to that which should be dominant, the aristocratic; stability is the result of the deferential co-operation of the democratic in advancing the interests of the aristocratic.

The use of terms, which could equally appropriately be introduced into political discussion, in critical writing on the theatre in the later years of the eighteen thirties is indicative of the identification of the condition of the theatre with the condition of England, and the tendency of

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34. Charles Greville (1794-1865), held the Clerkship to the Privy Council from 1821 to 1859, and was thereby afforded exceptional opportunities for observing the inner workings of high political circles, recording his observations in a political diary which he kept for forty years.

35. H.R. Fox Bourne, English Newspapers (London, 1887), II, pp.5-10, p.71.

critics to evaluate contemporaneity in the theatre in terms of their particular attitudes to contemporary social and political conditions. Thus Forster, writing in the Examiner on Macready's productions, demonstrates in his analysis his own political stance. The Examiner was primarily a political paper, founded by Leigh Hunt and his brother in 1808, and had been in its early days famous for its uncompromising Radicalism; it was, at the time when Forster wrote theatre reviews, under the editorship of Albany Fonblanque,<sup>36</sup> "a thoroughgoing Radical of Bentham's school" who, however, remained independent of any particular party alignment. Forster himself was a close friend and adviser of Dickens who, founded the Daily News, which Forster edited in 1846. In the introductory article, Dickens stated the "principles" to be advocated as those of

"progress and improvement...such as...the advancing spirit of the time requires..."

The "social improvement" of "the English people" is considered to be bound up with "the well-doing of arts and commerce"; such an inextricable involvement of the social with the cultural and economic points to a similar inseparability of "the true interests of the people" with those of "the merchant and the manufacturer". Accordingly the "effort" will be to show the "employer and employed"

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36. Albany Fonblanque (1793-1872) became the owner of the Examiner in the eighteen thirties. He was a close friend of Bentham, the Mills and Grote, and contributed to the Westminster Review from its beginning in 1823. The following quotation is from H.R.Fox Bourne, English Newspapers (London, 1887), II, p.39.



"their mutual dependence, and their mutual power of adding to the sum of general happiness and prosperity."

In contrast to the conservatism of John Bull, the reforming Liberalism of Forster and the Examiner is one which accepts the social conditions consequent on the "innovation" so abhorrent to the former, its objective being to improve what is already in existence rather than return to the previous system; stability in society is held to result from the union of the wealthy middle and lower classes through the mediation of an intermediate group whose characteristics are those of the "conductors" of the Daily News. This group is "calm and moderate", acting with "a gentleman's forbearance and responsibility", exercising its "power" for what is "good and honest" and so preserving "self-respect" while being "respected" by those it seeks to influence;<sup>37</sup> its virtues are those of the middle class. Forster accordingly treats the introduction of spectacle into the staging of Shakespeare as a realisation of the nature of Shakespearean drama through the mutual assistance afforded by each to the other, brought about through the mediation of Macready as a perceptive and discriminating point of balance. Thus in discussing the Coriolanus production,<sup>38</sup> he stresses Macready's success in realising Shakespeare's meaning through his staging by integrating the decoration with the play; the "pictorial effects" are "in themselves most beautiful always", but also

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37. H.R.Fox Bourne, English Newspapers (London, 1887), II, pp.140-142.

38. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.1-72.

form "an actual portion of the lofty purposes and passions of the play" and do not stand "apart from it, picture-like". The whole production Forster finds to demonstrate "the power of the artist-actor to grasp the entire conception of the poet's genius".

The question of spectacle in staging Shakespeare assumed a greater importance in the production of the histories and tragedies than the comedies and romances. Because the latter kinds of play were not considered as being marked by the serious purpose of the former, they were thus seen as closer to the contemporary "drama", where spectacle was generally held to be admissible in providing a lighter kind of drama with a physical grandeur as a substitute for the dignity lacking in the objectives of the plays themselves. Spectacle here functioned in a manner similar to that of the historical settings of the earlier "drama", in providing an elevated superficialities which, by the equation of appearance with essence, could be taken as evidence of higher purpose. In the absence of profundity of thought, elaboration of presentation was advanced as serving the same purpose. Forster, for example, writes of The Tempest as "a day-dream", produced by Macready "with a grandeur of scenery and fairy flights." The historical plays of Shakespeare, and the tragedies with historical settings, however, raised both the problems encountered by the "drama" in annexing historical settings of the maintenance of "truth" to historical fact, together with the additional problem of maintaining a "truth" to Shakespeare, to his "poetic purpose" and "higher purposes". The problem



is that of harmonising the physical grandeur of spectacle, the "truth" to fact, with the tragic grandeur of poetry, the "truth" to Shakespeare.

Forster, by identifying Shakespeare's intention with his own conception of the plays and with the effect achieved by Macready's style of production, circumvents the whole issue, by according to the middle class attitudes and opinions in the light of which he understands both Shakespeare and the historical events the status of absolute truths, common to the historical situation, to Shakespeare, and to himself. Thus in Coriolanus Shakespeare's intention is to provide a stage version of Plutarch's historical account, maintaining a strict fidelity to his original as to fact, his own addition being limited to "filling up" the outline already provided. Shakespeare "modelled his tragedy" after Plutarch, whose "original sketch" he "filled up" with "power and grandeur", in much the same way as the John Bull reviewer found Macready to have "filled up" Shakespeare's "outlines". Thus Forster joins "Shakespeare and Plutarch" together in discussing Macready's achievement in providing the theatre with "the nearest approach the stage has ever presented to the intention Shakespeare had in view", and the success of all those participants in the final production of Coriolanus lies in the factual accuracy of embodiment of "the genius of Rome" of the early Republic:

"that high-souled thought and temper, which, whenever the few great minds of the earth have since her fall made a stand against violence and fraud in the cause of liberty and reason, has still in the midst of them conjured up her image - the comfort of the battle-field of Hampden, the glory and consolation of the scaffolds of More and Vane and Sydney!"

Shakespeare, Plutarch and Macready variously succeed because they remain "true" to historical fact as Forster sees it; the Rome he evokes in his account of the production is one which matches his own conception of the middle class leadership which will create a unity between the wealthy and lower classes and thereby lead to social improvement for all.

Kemble's production of the play, with its representation of "all the grandeurs of imperial Rome", clustering "fine buildings together with equal disregard to the proprieties of place or time", he criticises as "unreal"; in contrast, Macready's representation of "the rude city of the rude age of the Conqueror of Corioli" is "truth", and the success of the whole production in its fidelity to Shakespeare and Plutarch is epitomised in the portrayal of the mob, "the starving, discontented, savage, cowardly, fickle, tumultuous Roman people". "Truth" to history thus emerges as being, for Forster, "truth" to his own historical preconceptions, which are unacknowledged projections on to the past of his own particular values. This kind of "truth" to fact can thus be equated with the "higher purposes" of Shakespeare, since, for Forster, the representation of republican Rome is a representation of his own political and social ideals. Throughout his account, he counterpoints Macready's production as incarnating "Shakespeare and Plutarch" against Kemble's "misrepresentations"; the contrasts drawn are those between the imperial and the republican, "gorgeous tinsel" and "simplicity", "ill-imitated grandeur" and "the grandeur itself"; and in



the character of Coriolanus, the "embodiment of dignified contempt against the poor common people" and "a man...of fiery and passionate sincerity". Because republican Rome is, in comparison with imperial Rome, visually less opulent, Forster identifies the absence of "the gilt gingerbread of a Lord Mayor's show" with "simplicity", and by equating physical characteristics with moral qualities, the superficial with the essential, is able to define "nobility" as a function of the ordinary and mundane, in the same way that he conceives the grandeur of Shakespeare's heroes to be rooted in their participation in the sentiments of common life. Thus the "comparatively rude and barren city" generates "moral grandeur", in the restraint of its buildings.

Forster's mode of thought, which finds confirmation for its own partial values and attitudes by adducing evidence for their permanence and absoluteness in all other spheres encountered, accords with that of the middle class theatre audiences and the melodrama which was the core of their entertainment. The application of the elements of contemporaneity to the production of Shakespeare he considers as a means of expressing Shakespeare's meaning more vividly on stage; Shakespearean drama, like everything else, is annexed as support of his own preconceptions. Lytton, in contrast, sees the present and the past as separated by an unbridgeable chasm, the change between a time when "the people did not represent themselves so much as they were represented in their chief", and the present, when it is "the people" themselves who are involved in "the active

enterprises of life"; accordingly the old drama is totally inappropriate for the present, either as a model for contemporary playwrights or as material for the contemporary theatre:

"[to] revive the stage we must now go forward, the golden bridge behind us is broken down by the multitude of passengers who have crossed it."

The past and its drama is now too remote to be reclaimed by the present:

"[a] new order of things has arisen in the actual world, and the old rules instituted for the purpose of illustrating the actual world...crumble to the dust!"

Contemporaneity in the theatre, for Lytton, is to be realised "by a bold and masterly adaptation of modern materials to modern taste" not "by returning to past models." "The true poet" who is thus to "revive the glories of the drama" thus parallels the paternalistic government which Lytton equally advocates, ruling in accordance with the interests of the people, not coercing them in accordance with alien interests; such an author should cultivate "to the highest" "the germ of a popular impulse", and thus "the public mind" will be "at once conciliated and exalted".

Between the extremes of Utilitarian total abandonment of the past and the middle-class inability to distinguish past from present lie the attitudes represented by the John Bull reviewer and by G.H.Lewes. Contemporaneity for the former is permissible in the theatre to the extent that it furthers the Shakespearean higher purposes, which are seen as distinct from those of the production style, in the same way that in the political and social sphere,



the forces of disruptive innovation should be harnessed to the perpetuation of the old system, not permitted to overturn it. The present differs from the past, but is a deterioration not an improvement, and the defects of the present will accordingly only be resolved by a return to the previous order. For Lewes, contemporaneity in the theatre is, as for Forster, an application of modern techniques to assist in rendering Shakespeare effective on stage in the present; in reviewing Charles Kean's production of King John for the Leader on February 14th, 1852<sup>39</sup> he states that "Macready was wholly right in the principle of his revivals", not because there was an essential harmony between the purposes of Shakespeare and those of spectacle because of the identity of past and present, but because of the division between past and present. Lewes assumes the necessity of introducing on to the stage what manifestly accords with audience taste, not, like Lytton, to replace the old drama, but to assist in recreating Shakespeare in terms that will make his plays acceptable to audiences differing from those for whom the author originally wrote:

"The audiences in Shakespeare's day listened with hungry ears to all the poetry and history, because to them the stage was the source of almost all their literary culture...we must have some accessory attraction to replace that literary and historical interest which originally made Shakespeare's historical plays acceptable...Scenery, dresses, groupings, archeological research, and pictorial splendour, can replace for moderns the poetic and historic interest."

Like the John Bull reviewer, he sees the function of con-

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39. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.177-183.

temporaneity in the theatre to be to assist Shakespeare to survive in the present, not because he assumes the necessity of the perpetuation of the past as the desirable currency for the present but because, although the past is no longer applicable to the present, it need not therefore necessarily be discarded. Neither does Lewes assume the superiority of the present over the past, but acknowledges that the two differ, and that consequently if the present is to retain what is worth preserving, modification is required. His appraisal of Shakespeare presentation and audience taste is non-evaluative, and rather seeks to elucidate than to judge, in accordance with his own inclination to the positivism of Comte whose Positive Philosophy he was expounding in a series of articles which ran concurrently with his theatre criticism in the Leader.<sup>40</sup>

The discussion in critical writing of contemporaneity in the theatre draws on and contributes to social and political discussion, and the interrelation between the various subjects continues throughout the debate over the focal points of interest in the two decades after the Theatres Act, the decline of the theatre and the means of its regeneration, which becomes equally an analysis of the failings of democracy and an investigation of the possible alternative systems of ordering society.

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40. H.R.Fox Bourne, English Newspapers (London, 1887), II, p.250.



**SECTION THREE**

**The Decline and Regeneration of The Theatre  
and Society**

## IX The Criticism of Contemporaneity in The Theatre and in Society

The theatre criticism of the mid-Victorian period, in relating the condition of the stage to that of society, runs parallel to contemporary social comment. Lewes, for example, despite the pragmatism of his approach, in the end subsumes his criticism of the theatre of the early eighties under the crucial question of the age, the perpetuation of the best of the past in a present where democracy had produced social, political and cultural situations without any precedents to supply standards of judgement.

John Stuart Mill defines the two main camps into which mid-Victorian opinion divided over the social issue, the "Conservative" and the "Progressive", and suggests a possible resolution in his two essays, on "Bentham" and "Coleridge"<sup>1</sup>, which appeared in 1838 and 1840 respectively in the London and Westminster Review, which he himself edited. In his Autobiography, he states the two main objectives he had in conducting the review:

"One was to free philosophic radicalism from the reproach of sectarian Benthamism...to show that there was a Radical philosophy, better and more complete than Bentham's while recognizing and incorporating all of Bentham's which is permanently valuable."

The other was to inspire and strengthen the English radical camp particularly in Parliament.<sup>2</sup> In his two essays, he establishes a balance between the two main attitudes to contemporary society, to which he refers as the "Conservative", represented by Coleridge, and the "Progressive", represented by Bentham. Neither is wholly right or wrong; Mill is concerned to demonstrate the partial nature of each, and the consequent necessity that each should assimilate what is best in the other.

Although Bentham and Coleridge "seem to have scarcely a principle or a premise in common",

"[in] every respect, the two men are each other's

1. Reprinted in John Stuart Mill, Essays on Literature and Society, ed. J.B.Schneewind (London, 1965), pp.240-289, 290-347.

2. John Stuart Mill, Autobiography, (London, 1873), p.214.



'completing counterpart': the strong points of each correspond to the weak points of the other"

The difference between the two is that

"to Bentham it was given to discern more particularly those truths with which existing doctrines and institutions were at variance; to Coleridge, the neglected truths which lay in them."

Their methods of procedure consequently differed; the "originality of Bentham in philosophy" lies in his "method of detail":

"this practice of never reasoning about wholes till they have been resolved into their parts, nor about abstractions till they have been translated into realities...."

The "Progressive" is concerned with the concrete and particular minutiae. Coleridge's procedure was that of "digging down to the root", a concern with fundamental essences:

"The long duration of a belief, [Coleridge] thought, is at least proof of an adaptation in it to some portion or other of the human mind: and if, on digging down to the root, we do not find...some truth, we shall find some natural want or requirement of human nature which the doctrine in question is fitted to satisfy..."

Bentham's objective is to establish "truth" from empirical evidence:

"By Bentham...men have been led to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, Is it true?...Bentham judged a proposition true or false as it accorded or not with the result of his own enquiries..."

Coleridge's objective is to understand "the meaning" of "any ancient or received opinion". The "two sorts of men" represented by Bentham and Coleridge, the "Radical or Liberal" and the "Conservative", "seem to be, and believe themselves to be, enemies", but "are in reality allies".

The former demands

"the extinction of the institutions or creeds which [have] hitherto existed...[and presses] the new doctrines to their utmost consequences."

The latter demands that such "institutions and creeds" "be made a reality", and reasserts "the best meaning and purposes of the old" doctrines. Accordingly each advances by assimilating what is best in the other, to complement his own partial views:

"a Tory philosopher cannot be wholly a Tory, but must often be a better Liberal than Liberals themselves; while he is the natural means of rescuing from oblivion truths which Tories have forgotten, and which the prevailing schools of Liberalism never knew."

For Mill, the present is marked by the conflict between the contemporary and the traditional, to be resolved into stability by the harmonisation of the two. Lewes' theatrical criticism<sup>3</sup> is, an attempt to maintain such a balance through reconciliation, in that while he draws on the past for his standards of critical judgement, he is equally willing to appreciate the contemporary theatre on its own merits. He defines the dual nature of the critics' function in an article of March 15th, 1851, with reference to Boucicault's Love in a Maze; despite his avowed objections to it as "a comedy, or as a literary work of pretensions" and its failure to interest him in performance, he praises its "cleverness" in working up "old materials", and "the animation of the dialogue":

"My office is twofold: First, that of Taster to the Public, intimating what dishes are piquant, pleasing, stirring, or nauseating and unwholesome; secondly, that of Critic intimating what is good and what is bad in respect of Art."

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3. John Forster and G.H. Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer & Lowe (London, 1896), pp. 76-280.



Lewes is consequently willing to accept the entertainments offered by the contemporary stage on the terms of their momentary value as highly enjoyable and totally ephemeral presentations; in the end, however, he dismisses them, condemning their artistic achievement and potential influence on the stage in general. His avowed critical tolerance collapses, and he turns from the theatre to abstract issues. Lewes' main critical concern is with the self-deception that results from the willingness to see superficial characteristics as essential qualities, the tendency of the bourgeois temperament. Thus as a critic he bypasses the contemporary stage, using the particular subject nominally under discussion as a starting point to examine wider social issues.

In comparing the audience reception of Rachel's<sup>4</sup> performances in the French classical drama with her performance in Scribe's Adrienne Lecouvreur in his article of July 13th, 1850, he accordingly seeks to elucidate the nature not of the performance but of the audience. Adrienne Lecouvreur itself he considers to be

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4. Rachel (1820-1858), stage name of Elisa Félix, one of the greatest tragediennes of the French stage. She appeared mainly in the plays of Corneille and Racine, Phèdre being her most noted part, and also in some modern plays.

"a melodramatic commonplace, admirably constructed, but vulgar and prosaic to the very core; all the old conventional stage effects are gathered together without a spark of life to animate them, and yet placed with such stage tact that they amuse."

No further notice is taken of the play or its performance, or the wider theatrical question of the perennial appeal of the conventional. Instead, the audience is judged for its reception of the play in terms of its deviation from the traditional standards of what is expected of the social and intellectual élite; the piece "produces greater effect on the public d'élite", who attend the performances of plays in French, "one necessarily selected from the educated classes", than does Racine. This preference for "vulgar frippery" over "the claims of Art" provokes Lewes' "grief, not unallied with contempt", but his concern is that the audience expressing such a preference should be under no misapprehension as to its nature:

"If you are not amused by French tragedy, say so, by all means; but submit to be told that the cause lies not in it, but in your ignorance...opinions are free; there is no disputing tastes; take your choice; only if you do choose the lower style, do not talk about Art."

Lewes refrains from making a judgement on contemporary society from the preference for contemporaneity, but judges the fallacious mode of thought which is associated with it. The present in itself is neither wholly good nor bad; the necessity is to be able to distinguish the good from the bad. The unthinking adherence to the past merely because of its status as tradition is equally fallacious; thus he castigates the deadening effect on the contemporary drama of the use of legitimate models in his article of



August 8th, 1850. Again his concern is with undermining the self-deceptions of uncritical/<sup>bourgeois</sup> thinking which results from the ready reliance on the superficial. He asserts that the "greatest injury yet sustained by the English drama was the revival of admiration for the Old English dramatists, their very excellence being fatal lures."

The indiscriminating reverence for the minor Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists has obscured for "our poets" the limitations of such plays, which are

"as poor in construction as they are resplendent in imagery and weighty lines."

The result is the misapprehension that "poetry [is] enough to make a drama", and the effect on the contemporary drama is the prevention of the creation of "a new form" to which the dramatists must inevitably have been driven "if they had never known this Old Drama."

Like Mill, Lewes' interest is in the fruitful harmonisation of past and present; conservative and progressive, when rightly understood. The drama which seeks to reproduce the past is an evasion of the present, not an attempt to understand or improve it. He cites the political parallel of the conservative Disraeli's "Young England" movement<sup>5</sup>; the "Young Englandism of Art" is a "brilliant fallacy" of "escape":

"disgusted with the Present, yet without faith in the Future, [the drama] flew into the Past."

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5. "Young England" was the league of a group of predominantly noble young men who acted fairly concertedly in Parliament between 1842 and 1845. The core of the party consisted of Lord John Manners, Ambrose Phillips de Lisle and Disraeli. They urged that "The Youth of a Nation are the trustees of Posterity"; their programme included improving the condition of the poor, restoring the harmony of all classes, raising the prestige of the throne, and popularising a respect for England's ancient institutions.

Alternatively, a progressive drama which accepts the contemporary necessity "to appeal to the public taste" and seeks "to move the general heart of men" by trying "to image forth some reflex of the world that all men know" is not necessarily thereby reduced to a total concentration on the mundane, on "drawing-room and cottage life", if conservative elements are not totally excluded. While the contemporary drama should be

"a reflex of our lives...issuing out of the air we breathe..."

it should also be "idealised". In an article on "Managerial Policy" of May 11th, 1850, he cites "fine acting, magnificent spectacle, or novelty" as the essentials for theatrical prosperity because of their audience appeal; if rightly used, such elements of contemporaneity, instead of only providing "amusement", can be a means of achieving "Art", and "the pictorial adjuncts of dress, scenery and distant time" provide a locus for "poetry" because it "moves more freely in a world of beauty and magnificence." The poverty of the <sup>stage</sup> <sub>in democratic</sub> <sup>society</sup> <sub>is</sub> the result not of the elements of contemporaneity themselves but of the present's loss of the ability of the past to turn "amusement" to the purposes of "Art". He accepts the premise of the contemporary theatre that there "one seeks amusement above all else", in his article of June 28th, 1851, but qualifies his assent to the contemporary principle with the objection that amusement itself is not "a worthy end", citing the use the dramatists of the past made of "amusement"; they "worked through Amusement up to Art". The contemporary theatre has diminished itself by its pointless rejection of the



objectives of the past:

"From the time when the Drama ceased to claim for itself the exalted aims of Art, and chose the lower aim of Amusement, the real greatness of the stage began to decline."

Lytton's advocacy of the "Magnificent"<sup>6</sup> as a "source of modern dramatic inspiration" is similarly a critique of strict conservatism, of the pointlessness of copying the external characteristics of the past as opposed to the immense potential gain to the present of adopting its spirit:

"Not then by pondering over inapplicable rules - not by recurring to past models, - not by recasting hacknied images, but by a bold and masterly adaptation of modern materials to modern taste, will an author revive the glories of the drama. In this, he will in reality profit by the study of Shakespeare, who addressed his age, and so won the future."

Lytton does not, however, envisage that the "Magnificent" should be turned to "a worthy aim and end" but sees it as sufficiently "worthy" in itself. He considers "the poet of the drama" to gain in his new opportunity "to embody corporeally his creations, and...fix [them] into palpable and visible life", and to supersede the poet of the past, who could "only describe by words". For Lewes, "the material" divorced from "the exalted aims of Art" is a loss for the present; the effect on the audiences at the contemporary theatres and those "in the days of Racine" of their respective dramas differs accordingly. While "the public" of "the present "demands Amusement", it is doubtful if it "demands Art"; that of Racine "demanded an artistic enjoyment".

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6. Edward Lytton Bulwer, England and the English (London, 1970), pp.301-313.

The former leave the theatre "with aching heads and confused judgement", the latter "with expanding minds, touched to fine issues by the magic of Art". The current drama limits its aim to that of "effect", he writes in his article of July 12th, 1851; it dispenses with "poetry, character, passion, consistency" and the end result is nothing "but a sense of fatigue".

In the end, Lewes' theatrical criticism says more about contemporary society than about its stage. The divorce of the present from the past, for Lewes as for Mill, leads to a contemporary world that deliberately diminishes itself; the present will progress not by rejecting the past but by assimilating "the best" from it, and conflict be resolved into harmony by the rejection of fixed categories of thought and the reliance on superficialities. Lewes' discussion of the decline and regeneration of the theatre is a restatement of Mill's analysis of the state of society, a confounding of the theatrical in the social issue which recurs in the critical writing of the mid-Victorian period.

Lewes himself aligns the re-adoption of the "Old Drama" with the Young England movement, a retreat into the past which Mill had also castigated as a fallacy based on delusion in an article of 1826 in the original Westminster Review, founded by the adherents of Bentham, to advocate

"those principles which tend to increase the sum of human happiness, and to ameliorate the condition of mankind"<sup>7</sup>

Mill associates the idealisation of the "Age of Chivalry"

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7. Quoted in George L. Nesbitt, Benthamite Reviewing (New York, 1934), p.35.



with the rigid and deluded adherence to aristocracy:

"The age of chivalry was the age of aristocracy in its most gigantic strength and wide-extending sway; and the illusions of chivalry are to this hour the great strongholds of aristocratic prejudice."<sup>8</sup>

The mid-Victorian variations in the purely conservative position are represented by Disraeli and Carlyle. Disraeli found in the feudal system a society with none of the abuses of the present, and in feudalism the principles which would regenerate contemporary society:

"If we have any relics of the feudal system, I regret that not more of it remains...[its] fundamental principle...is that the tenure of all property shall be the performance of its duties."<sup>9</sup>

The present is denounced for its encouragement of the "spirit of faction"; in a speech of 1844 he presents the effects of democracy in terms of the division of "the population of a country" into "a body of sections, a group of hostile garrisons".<sup>10</sup> In Sybil (1845) the results of the 1832 Reform Bill are questioned thus:

"Has it elevated the tone of the public mind? Has it cultured the popular sensibilities to noble and ennobling ends?...To acquire, to accumulate, to plunder each other by virtue of philosophic phrases, to propose a Utopia to consist only of WEALTH and TOIL, this has been the breathless business of enfranchised England for the last twelve years..."<sup>11</sup>

The passage resembles Coleridge's rhetorical questioning in the On the Constitution of Church and State (1830):

"Has the national welfare, have the weal and happiness

8. Quoted in George L. Nesbitt, Benthamite Reviewing (New York, 1934), p.51.

9. Benjamin Disraeli, Selected Speeches of the Late Right Honourable, the Earl of Beaconsfield, ed. T.E. Kebber (London, 1882), I, p.50.

10. Quoted in Walter Sickert, "Introduction" to Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil (London, 1956), pp.vii-viii.

11. Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil (London, 1956), p.31.

of the people, advanced with the increase of circumstantial prosperity? Is the increasing number of wealthy individuals that which ought to be understood by the wealth of the nation?"<sup>12</sup>

Carlyle in Past and Present (1843) depicts the degradation of the present in similar terms; "England is full of wealth...yet England is dying of inanition".<sup>13</sup> For Disraeli

"there is more serfdom in England now than at any time since the Conquest...There are great bodies of the working classes of this country nearer the condition of brutes..."<sup>14</sup>

Carlyle writes:

"in thrifty Scotland itself, in Glasgow or Edinburgh City, in their dark lanes, hidden from all but the eye of God, and of rare Benevolence the minister of God, there are scenes of woe and destitution and desolation..."<sup>15</sup>

Carlyle equally denounces the competitive urge to accumulate and the emphasis on financial gain as the signal characteristic of contemporary society living by the "Gospel of Mammonism":

"We call it a Society; and go about professing the total separation, isolation. Our life is not a mutual helpfulness; but rather...it is a mutual hostility. We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that Cash-payment is not the sole relation of human beings..."<sup>16</sup>

A return to feudalism for Disraeli is the re-establishment of an order based on mutual co-operation, where all recognise and perform their "duty". The objective of leadership is to fulfil what is recognised to be its obligations:

12. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, On the Constitution of the Church and State, ed. John Barrell (London, 1972), p.50.
13. Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (London, 1960), p.1.
14. Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil (London, 1956), p.175.
15. Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (London, 1960), p.5.
16. Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (London, 1960), p.141.



"we are anxious to do our duty, and if so, we think that we have a right to call on others, whether rich or poor, to do theirs." 17

Such a system is typified by the Marney Abbey of Sybil, with its "capacious hospital";

"a name that did not then denote the dwelling of disease, but a place where all the rights of hospitality were practised; where the traveller...asked the shelter and the succour that were never denied, and at whose gate...the peasants on the Abbey lands, if in want, might appear each morn and night for raiment and for food." 18

The prosperity of all classes under such a personalised rule is the basis of Carlyle's dismissal of "Liberty"; the Gurth of Scott's Ivanhoe, "born thrall of Cedric the Saxon", to Carlyle

"seems happy, in comparison with many a Lancashire and Buckinghamshire man of these days, not born thrall of anybody...Gurth had the inexpressible satisfaction of feeling himself related indissolubly, though in a rude brass-collar way, to his fellow mortals in this earth...Gurth is now "emancipated" long since; has what we call "Liberty". Liberty, I am told, is a divine thing. Liberty when it becomes the "Liberty to die by starvation" is not so divine!" 19

The conservative criticism of the present, which thinks in terms of decline from an idealised past, and advocates for its regeneration the return to an aristocratic system of duties and allegiances, is also the basis of Mrs Gore's view of the condition of the contemporary theatre, and of that of the John Bull reviewer, in his insistence that spectacle maintain a due subservience to

17. Quoted in Walter Sichel, "Introduction" to Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil (London, 1956), pp.vii-viii.

18. Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil (London, 1956), pp.58-59.

19. Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (London, 1960), p.204.

Shakespeare. In her 1844 preface to her prize-winning comedy Quid Pro Quo,<sup>20</sup> written to fulfil the requirements of Webster's Haymarket competition, to provide a

"PROSE COMEDY, in 5 Acts, illustrative in plot and character, of modern British Manners and Customs."<sup>21</sup>

She discusses the contemporary theatre in terms of the consequences of democracy, both as it has affected the patronage of the theatre and the material available to the dramatist. She focusses on the social dominance of the group brought to power by democracy; the levelling of social differences has removed the visible evidence of class distinctions and so abstracted the interest for a drama which seeks to portray contemporary manners:

"Now that professional distinctions are extinct, and that the fusion of the educated classes has smoothed the surface of society to a rail-road level, a mere Daguerrotypic picture of the manners of the day would afford little satisfaction."

The audiences produced by such a "smoothing" have also made "what is termed...high life comedy" extinct, as "the experience of the past twenty years" in showing such "a style of piece" "to be wholly ineffective on the modern stage" has proved. The taste of contemporary audiences, while cutting off such resources from the dramatist, has further required that the entertainment offered to them should be marked by "exaggeration in writing and acting".

Democracy has thus reduced the material available to the drama and perverted its course of development by

20. Quoted in English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, III, Comedies, ed. Michael R. Booth (Oxford, 1973), p.16. The play failed on stage.

21. Haymarket playbill for October 12th, 1843, in the Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



handing over the control of the theatres to an audience with debased taste. Mrs Gore contrasts the existing condition of the theatre with that under which its regeneration could be brought about;

"a new order of dramatic authors would be encouraged to write, and of performers to study."

for the "refined pleasure" of

"those aristocratic and literary classes of the community who have absolutely withdrawn their patronage from the English stage..."

A "regenerated" drama would be one which accorded with "refined" taste, the refinement aspired to by the middle classes, seen by Mrs Gore as the prerogative of aristocracy and culture. The play provided to meet both the terms of the competition "for the encouragement of Dramatic Literature" and to meet the exigencies of the contemporary situation is what the authoress describes as a "play of the Farquar, or George Colman, school"; that is, a return to the old legitimate comedy. The framework within which Mrs Gore discusses the condition of the theatre is similar to that of Disraeli's analysis of the condition of England; both denigrate contemporary attitudes and look back nostalgically to the days of aristocratic patronage, finding in the recreation of the past the means of regenerating the present. The degree of debasement of the class brought to power by democracy Mrs Gore estimates by their "taste", the essential failing of which is its lack of refinement; Disraeli makes his evaluation from the conception of "a Utopia...of WEALTH and TOIL". Both are commenting on the fundamental grossness in values, standards and taste of the

middle-classes, to be amended by the restoration of the beneficial influence of a superior class. For Disraeli, and for Mrs Gore,

"It is not so much to the action of laws as to the influence of manners that we must look..."<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, the restoration of aristocratic leadership will fit the aberrant middle classes for leadership themselves by imbuing them with a sense of superior values. Carlyle, similarly places the leadership of society in the hands of an elite but the group is more widely drawn, and its role more active; he proposes a combination of industrialists, landed aristocrats and "natural aristocrats", the men of genius, who would create

"an army ninety-thousand strong, maintained and fully equipt in continual real action and battle against Human Starvation, Chaos, Necessity [and] Stupidity."

Legal force, not just influence, is required:

"Legislative interference, and interferences not a few, are indispensable."<sup>23</sup>

Carlyle as a conservative adopts policies from the progressive camp; he can conceive of the contemporary figure of the industrialist combining with the landed aristocrat in a paternalistic government taking positive action for the benefit of those governed, one which is, in Lytton's description, "strong not for evil but for good". The "Captains of Industry" are thus for Carlyle potential regenerators of society, and not just, as for Disraeli, to

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22. Quoted in Walter Sichel, "Introduction" to Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil (London, 1956), pp. vii-viii.

23. Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (London, 1960), pp. 252-254.



be rescued from their debasement by a social leadership which excludes them. Thus Carlyle urges his "Plugson of Undershot" to

"Arise, save thyself, be one of those that save thy country...Cease to count scalps, gold-purses; not in those lies your or our salvation...Let God's justice, let pity, nobleness and manly valour...testify themselves...It is to you I call; for ye are not dead, ye are already half-alive..."<sup>24</sup>

Carlyle's interest in Plugson is a consequence of his concept of the "Hero", the "Great Men" who

"were the leaders of men...the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain..."

Thus

"Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked there."<sup>25</sup>

"[T]he vivifying influence in man's life" is the "admiration for one higher than himself". The measure of the failure of the contemporary order is that in advocating "Democracy, Liberty and Equality" it

"denies the existence of great men; denies the desirability of great men."<sup>26</sup>

In the awakened Plugson is a potential Hero; R.H.Home, in the essay "Sheridan Knowles and William Macready" in A New Spirit of the Age<sup>27</sup>, similarly casts his discussion of the

24. Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (London, 1960), pp.260-264.

25. Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes and Hero Worship (London, 1959), p.239.

26. Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes and Hero Worship (London, 1959), pp.249-250.

27. R.H.Home, A New Spirit of the Age (London, 1907), pp.301-334.

contemporary drama and stage in terms of its heroes, the two chief representatives, Knowles and Macready respectively. Regeneration of the drama is to be wrought by the appearance of a Great Man; the dramatists of the present only await

"the man, come when he may, who, having the material means in his power, shall mould a form congenial to the present spirit of the age...the abundant existing dramatic generation will gather round it, and the Drama again become popular."

Horn's estimation of the condition of the theatre in social terms, by is made/a comparison with the past, and the triviality of the contemporary drama attributed to the audiences who support and engender it. "The Drama should be the concentrated spirit of the age", and by this definition he advances the ephemeral work of such authors as Jerrold, Planché, Buckstone and Oxenford for the Olympic, Adelphi and Haymarket theatres as "the genuine offspring of the age" because such a drama alone

"catches the manners as they rise, and embodies the characteristics of the time."

Such plays are the contemporary equivalent of the drama of the Elizabethans and Jacobean, but comparatively diminished in status of achievement because they are written not, as were the plays of the elder dramatists, for "inquiring and earnest minded men" but for a public whose "taste has been perverted" into a predilection for "gaudy and expensive shows" addressed "to the external senses". Thus "our modern acted dramatists" are reduced to effecting "little more than pastime for the hour":

"The acted drama of our age is at the best but of a poor kind. It has been popular because it has been small, and it was small because it sought popularity."



Home's criticisms of the present drama are a criticism of the debased taste of "the age"; like Lewes, he considers the contemporary drama in terms of reduction, limitation and stunting, a diminishing of its potential in response to the paltry requirements of its audience, which is equally diminished by that very drama.

Such mid-Victorian discussions of the condition of the theatre consistently turn from the stage itself to focus on audiences as a microcosm of contemporary society; they resolve into treatments of the signal characteristics of contemporaneity, democracy, and the social group associated with it, the middle classes, whose "taste" is the governing factor in the theatre as their attitudes and standards dictate the nature of the society they dominate. The social analysis was made by <sup>he</sup> Mill, in his essay "Civilization",<sup>28</sup> published in the London and Westminster Review in 1836; <sup>he</sup> considers the consequences of "advancing civilization, which the state of the world is now forcing upon the attention of thinking minds". "Advancing civilisation" is the "growth of a middle class" whose "energies...are almost entirely confined to money-getting" while "those of the higher class are nearly extinct". Mill here denounces democracy, as Disraeli and Carlyle were to do, in terms of the secession of the aristocracy and the materialism of the middle classes. "[A] high state of civilization" also leads to "immense competition", the factionalism and separation equally noted by Disraeli and Carlyle, which in the sphere of literature is manifested in

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28. John Stuart Mill, Essays on Literature and Society, ed. J.B.Schneewind (London, 1965), pp.148-182.

the kind of paltry production found by Lewes, Home and Mrs Gore in the theatre:

"Literature becomes more and more a mere reflection of the current sentiments, and has almost entirely abandoned its mission as an enlightener and improver of them."

Mill's remedies are "greater and more perfect combination among individuals" and

"national institutions of education, and forms of polity, calculated to invigorate the national character."

The first remedy is a deviation from the Utilitarian philosophy of Bentham, and more in the conservative spirit of Disraeli. The laissez-faire economics of the Utilitarians were grounded in competition; a writer in the Westminster Review in the eighteen twenties defends the principle in trade and industry thus:

"the legislator can do no more than guarantee to each individual the fruits of his own industry. Should he... give to anyone something more...he can only do so by encroaching on the property of others, or, in other words, by discouraging their industry." 29

In the sphere of literature, where "the age of patronage.. is gone" and that "of booksellers...has well nigh died out", Mill envisages a time

"when authors, as a collective guild, will be their own patrons and booksellers."

Under the contemporary competitive system

"it is difficult for what does not strike during its novelty to strike at all."

To counteract such a situation, he advocates

29. Quoted in George L. Nesbitt, Benthamite Reviewing (New York, 1934), p.37.



"some organized co-operation among the leading intellects of the age, whereby works of first-rate merit...might come forth with the stamp on them...of the approval of those whose name would carry authority."

Home proposes a similar solution to the defects of the theatre system, at present under the control of the managers, who "persist in pandering to [the] perversion" of "public taste":

"instead of enlarging the sphere of the Drama, he is sure to narrow it to his own exclusive standard."

The failure of Macready as a manager is that "he has produced on the stage no great or standard work of dramatic genius" through his "constant errors in judgement" occasioned by his innate inability to distinguish dramatic literature from "second and third rate plays". The remedy lies in a collective appropriation of the theatre by the dramatists, who "can alone call forth any new spirit and form of Drama"; once the dramatists have "a ready access to the theatres", "a new dramatic period" will ensue.

The co-operative remedy for the "evils" of democratic society similarly recurs as the proposed corrective for the failings of the theatre system in Donne's essay "Plays and their Providers"<sup>30</sup> published in the conservative Fraser's Magazine<sup>31</sup> in September, 1853. He presents the contemporary theatre as an arena for the "insane rivalry" between managers to gratify "the vulgarest of tastes", while the drama itself is involved in a "rivalry with literature";

30. All the essays referred to are reprinted in W.B. Donne, Essays on the Drama (London, 1863).

31. John Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (London, 1969), p.37.

since

"we can take tea and scandal, or sup full with horrors at home, through the medium of our novelists."

the theatre must provide "something yet more stimulating" to compensate for

"the disasters of heated rooms, narrow benches, crowds, or unjust cabmen..."

The current "ungenerous competition", he writes in his 1854 article "The Drama" for the equally conservative Quarterly Review<sup>32</sup> would be resolved by managerial co-operation; "an understanding among the managers of the metropolitan theatres" would end rivalry by assigning "to different theatres different classes of drama".

The kind of education envisaged by Mill "to invigorate the individual character" is one directly opposed to that advocated by the Utilitarians. In a review<sup>33</sup> of Bentham's plan of education for the middle and upper classes, the Chrestomathia, in the Utilitarian organ, the Westminster, in 1824, Dr Southwood Smith<sup>34</sup> distinguishes between the kind of education appropriate to "those who are to be engaged in the active business of life" and that appropriate to the "gentleman" and the "member of the learned professions". Whereas the study of "Latin and Greek" "has great value, especially as a means of exercising

32. John Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (London, 1969), pp.6-7.

33. Quoted in George L. Nesbitt, Benthamite Reviewing (New York, 1934), p.78.

34. Southwood Smith (1788-1861), became physician to the London Fever Hospital. A friend of Bentham and Chadwick, he contributed to the Poor Law Commission Inquiries in 1838 and collaborated with Chadwick on the Central Board of Health, 1848-1854.



the intellectual faculties, and is conducive to the formation of a pure and correct taste."

and is "indispensable" to the professional man and "highly ornamental" to the gentleman, to the third section of the middle and upper classes it is "utterly useless"; their

"main object is to become acquainted with things, and... to think only in order to act..."

Lytton similarly approves of "Latin, but not too much of it; and arithmetic and calligraphy" as the proper studies for "the middle classes, by which I mean chiefly Shopkeepers and others engaged in trade".<sup>35</sup>

"Pure and correct taste" is thus seen as the prerogative of the non-commercial classes; refinement distinguishes the gentleman from the tradesman. Mill characterises the middle class by their "money-getting pursuits", but advocates the kind of education which will strengthen and enlarge "intellect and character" for those engaged in "money-getting life":

"The empirical knowledge which the world demands, which is the stock in trade of money-getting life, we would leave the world to provide for itself; content with infusing into the youth of our country a spirit, and training them to habits, which would ensure their acquiring such knowledge easily, and using it well."

Mill's aim is

"to put an end to every kind of unearned distinction, and let the only road open to honour and ascendancy be that of personal qualities."

This is "what the progress of democracy is insensibly but certainly accomplishing". Education for Mill thus implies the spiritual and moral improvement of the mercantile

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35. Edward Lytton Bulwer, England and the English (London, 1970), p.167.

classes, the section of society forming the theatre audiences to whose lack of refinement Mrs Gore attributes the decline of the drama and to whose perverted taste Home attributes its triviality. For Mrs Gore, as for Disraeli, regeneration requires the restoration of the social hierarchy; the levelling of social distinctions is cited by the former as one of the causes of the decline of the drama. Refinement in the theatre is not to be restored by improving the already existing audience, but by importing one signalised by its "pure and correct taste". Carlyle, alternatively, hopes for the awakening of Plugson to an awareness of "nobleness and manly valour" and Lewes' entire theatre criticism, in attempting to undermine the self-delusion of an audience willing to consider "Amusement" as "Art" which has resulted in a theatre where "the material stifles the spiritual", seeks to bring about such an awakening.

The demand of theatre audiences for comfort and even luxury in the arrangement of the theatre auditorium is thus an assertion by the new middle classes of their right to the prerogatives of the upper classes, as the emphasis on restraint in the "drama" is an answer to the charge of "exaggeration and sensation" made against melodrama.

"Dignity" in the "drama" is accordingly sought through the adoption of elements associated with the legitimate drama, in the same way that the middle class aspiration to refinement and good manners is a claim to the status of "gentleman". The criticism of contemporaneity in the theatre is couched in terms of contraction, diminution and debasement;



the measure of the limitations of the middle class is that Shakespeare has to be reduced to the level of the familiar and ordinary to be acceptable. The materialism of the audience and its lack of spiritual awareness is represented by the substitution of spectacle for poetry, the emphasis on the physically "real" as opposed to the higher truth of the imagination. "Taste" is thus a class quality. Thackeray equates that of the middle classes with vulgarity, as Forster describes Forrest's lack of restraint, his "violent contortions of physical effect" as Macbeth, as "vulgar tricks". In his article "May Gambols" in Fraser's Magazine in June, 1844,<sup>36</sup> Thackeray writes thus of a painting of "NOAH'S ARK IN A DOMESTIC POINT OF VIEW":

"The ark is vulgarised here and reduced to the proportions of a Calais steamer...All the greatness of the subject is lost...[the]personages] have little more interest than a group of any emigrants in the hold of a ship..."

Familiarisation thus vulgarises and debases greatness, which is, by implication, as much the prerogative of a distinct social class as domesticity. In contrast, Mrs Oliphant<sup>37</sup> describes the middle class ideal, in an article of April, 1855<sup>38</sup> published in the conservative Blackwood's Magazine<sup>39</sup>, with reference to Dickens' heroes. They are

36. Reprinted in William Makepeace Thackeray, Critical Papers in Art (London, 1904), pp.207-233.

37. Mrs Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897) was a prolific novelist and reviewer. She contributed frequently to Blackwood's.

38. Reprinted in Dickens, The Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London, 1971), pp.327-336.

39. John Gross, The Rise and Fall of the English Man of Letters (London, 1971), pp.10-18.



"home-bred and sensitive...They are spotless in their thoughts, their intentions and their wishes."

The reliance on the maintenance of social respectability is extreme; David Copperfield

"is a pure, thoroughly refined and gentle-hearted boy; but his respectability is strong upon him...He cannot afford to defy the world's laugh, or to scorn it... the class and society which Mr Dickens draws...is more exacting than that grander and gayer society which calls itself 'the world'."

Mid-Victorian theatre criticism makes no positive examination or estimation of the theatre itself, assuming its degeneration as the starting point for discussing the state of affairs of society. The arguments used derive from contemporary social criticism. The problem of regeneration in the theatre and in society eventually becomes that of striking a balance between the vulgar materialistic energy of the new middle-classes and the refinement of the inactive upper classes, between the present and the past, aristocracy and democracy, the legitimate and the "drama", and between the traditional and contemporaneity. Mill's solution of harmonising the "Conservative" and the "Progressive" by demonstrating apparently opposed and conflicting philosophies to be "completing counterparts" comes to replace the earlier rigidly "Tory" and "Radical" proposals of mutual rejection. Social and theatrical improvement are thus equally to be brought about by a cross-fertilisation of the best of the present with the best of the past, by reconciliation and assimilation instead of antagonism and rejection. For Mill, the resulting society will be one in which individual intellect and character will be strengthened and enlarged; for Lewes, its theatre will be one where "the spectator's



soul" is elevated "to the poet's region", and fixed on "great ideas".<sup>40</sup>

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40. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.151-155.

## X The Disillusionment with Democracy

The theatre criticism of the mid-Victorian period became social criticism because of the critical tendency to concentrate on West End audiences in general rather than on particular productions; both kinds of critic were accordingly concerned with the same problem, that of middle-class dominance. Regeneration of the theatre and of society alike meant regeneration of the middle-class, through an educative progress in which the arts in general could be instrumental. Lewes' advocacy of a theatre devoted to "Art" which would leave its audience with "expanding minds", rather than merely to "Amusement", leading only to "aching heads and confused judgements"<sup>1</sup>, is prefigured in Mill's statement on the importance of literature "as an enlightener and improver" of "the current sentiments".<sup>2</sup>

The traditional notion of the theatre as inculcator of moral virtues, handed on from the eighteenth century, developed in the mid-Victorian period into a conception of the theatre as a means of effecting a spiritual renaissance. Lillo, for example, in his dedicatory preface to The London Merchant<sup>3</sup>, published in 1731, defines "the end of Tragedy" as

"The exciting of the Passions, in order to the correcting of such of them as are criminal, either in their nature, or through their excess."

In the same way, Johnson exhorts the audience of Irene (1749) in his prologue to<sup>4</sup>

"Learn here how Heav'n supports the virtuous mind  
 .....  
 Learn here what Anguish racks the guilty Breast,  
 In Pow'r dependent, in Success deprest.  
 Learn here that Peace from Innocence must flow..."

A review of Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life (1828) refers in passing similarly to the function of the stage as being "To point a moral, And adorn a tale"<sup>5</sup>, and even in 1852 a bill advertising a revival of Jack Sheppard at the Haymarket<sup>6</sup> refers to the function of the stage as a moral educator:

1. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.151-155.
2. John Stuart Mill, Essays on Literature and Society, ed. J.B.Schneewind (London, 1965), pp.148-182.
3. Eighteenth Century Tragedy, ed. Michael R.Booth (London, 1965), pp.3-6.
4. *Ibid.*, p.69.
5. Reprinted in The Golden Age of Melodrama, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London, 1974), pp.162-163.
6. Quoted in J.R.Stephens, "Jack Sheppard and the Licensers: The Case against Newgate Plays" in Nineteenth Century Theatre Research (Spring, 1973), p.5.



"All objectionable passages are carefully expunged.... the most scrupulous may rest assured that in "adorn- ing the tale" the great end of Dramatic Representa- tion - "to point a moral" - has not been forgotten."

Such assertions of the moral didacticism of the drama are rather a negative guarantee, in the nineteenth century, of its moral probity, in accordance with the demand of audiences for refinement in stage presentations as an expression of their own aspirations to refinement; the shift in the mid- century is to a conception of the theatre as

"one of the strongest of all secular aids towards the intellectual refinement of the people"<sup>7</sup>

Theatrical criticism and social criticism coalesce in taking as the central point of interest the regeneration of the individual in contemporary society, and social criticism comes to include theatrical criticism in adopting the notion of the purpose of art as ultimately social. The criticism of democracy still identifies its two main defects as competition and materialism from which is derived a third, the notion of the diversity of contemporary society and the lack of any guiding principle of evaluation. Thus the critic's "duty" is to expose the deceptions of that "Amusement" which presents itself as "Art". This "Amusement" itself makes it impossible for its audience to judge it rightly; in the theatre, for example, the multiplicity of effects leaves the spectator confused. Lewes denounces the "material" which "stifles the spiritual" as

"the glitter of processions, the clash of swords, the tumult of orchestras, the splendour of dresses, the movement, noise, screams and "grand effects" which dazzle and confuse us...."<sup>8</sup>

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7. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer (London, 1891), p.9.

8. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.151-155.



The excessive employment of "effects" in the theatre results from the concentration on the "material" and from competition; Donne in his Fraser's Magazine article of September 1853 "Plays and their Providers"<sup>9</sup> attributes excessive decoration on stage to the "insane rivalry" of managers, competing with each other for public attention. The elements of decoration themselves compete with each other in stage presentation for primacy of audience attention.

Matthew Arnold equally considers contemporary society in terms of multiplicity and confusion, to be combated by discovering the "general ideas which are the law of this vast multitude of facts". In the essay "On the Modern Element in Literature" in 1857<sup>10</sup> he characterises "our present age" as having around it

"a copious and complex present, and behind it a copious and complex past....the present age exhibits to the individual man who contemplates it the spectacle of a vast multitude of facts awaiting and inviting his comprehension."

In a letter written at the end of the eighteen forties, he had already asserted the necessity for

"an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness..."<sup>11</sup>

Without such an "Idea", this "confused spectacle" leads only to what is described in the 1857 essay as an "impatient imitation of mind". Since all these facts "have not an equal

9. All the essays by W.B.Donne referred to are reprinted in W.B.Donne, Essays on the Drama (London, 1863).
10. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), pp.57-75.
11. The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. Howard Foster Lowry (Oxford, 1968), p.97.



value - do not merit a like attention", criticism is required to penetrate beneath the superficial mass to discover the essential qualities. In "On Translating Homer" (1861) criticism is defined as

"the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge...to see the object as in itself it really is."<sup>12</sup>

The 1865 essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"<sup>13</sup> further elaborates this concept as the

"disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects for its own sake...It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics and everything of the kind..."

"Its best spiritual work" is

"to keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarising, to lead him towards perfection by making his mind dwell on what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things."

Criticism, for Arnold, is the means of "strengthening and enlarging" the individual of the present day.

Contemporary democracy he characterises as the cult of mediocrity:

"democracy accepts a certain relative rise in condition ...as something desirable in itself, because though this is undoubtedly far below grandeur, it is yet a good deal above insignificance."<sup>14</sup>

The "great middle classes of this country", Arnold writes in the 1861 essay "Democracy",<sup>15</sup> want "culture and dignity"

12. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), pp.83-84.

13. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), pp.130-156.

14. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), pp.41-54.

15. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), pp.99-125.

and "ideas". Their limitations need to be resolved through the assimilation of the aristocratic qualities of "eminent superiority in high feeling, dignity and culture" which at the present time "tend to diminish among the highest class" itself. Arnold's problem, like Mill's, is to discover a means of harmonising the upper and the middle classes:

"On what action may we rely to replace, for some time at any rate, that action of the aristocracy upon the people of this country, which we have seen exercise an influence in many respects elevating and beneficial, but which is rapidly ....ceasing?"

As the alternative to democracy with all its inadequacies, Arnold proposes "State-action", particularly in the sphere of education; there, by giving to the "private schools" of "the middle classes" a "national character",

"it can confer on them a greatness and a noble spirit....It would really augment their self-respect and moral force; it would truly fuse them with the class above..."

The sense of the limitations of democratic



society led in the theatre to the overt disillusionment in the eighteen sixties with the results of the abolition of the monopoly. Kean's statement to the 1866 Committee, that

"the greatest blow the drama ever received was the doing away with the patent theatres...The remedy... should have been, not less, but more patent theatres..."<sup>16</sup>

is foreshadowed in the change of attitude to the contemporary theatre apparent in the series of speeches given by Dickens<sup>17</sup> at the annual dinners of the General Theatrical Fund.<sup>18</sup> At the first anniversary festival on April 6th, 1846 he celebrates the emancipated minor theatres for providing what the patent theatres failed to provide:

"Covent Garden is now but a vision of the past....the statue of Shakespeare is well placed over [the] portal [of Drury Lane] since it serves...emphatically to point out his grave...the oldest and most distinguished members [of the acting profession] have been driven from the patent theatres to delight the town in [the minor] theatres..."

In 1849 he alludes to "the regeneration of the Drama" but affirms his belief in its inevitability, "that it must come to pass". By 1851, he is clearly dubious; his speech of that year is reported thus:

"he would not dismiss the hope that the British Drama would ultimately 'look up' after a pretty long contemplation of its feet....No doubt the Drama had its abuses like other institutions, but so far from that being a reason why they should decry it, it was a reason why they should endeavour to elevate and improve it...he hoped that it would, and believed that it could, be restored to its proper position among the Arts."

16. Report from the Select Committee....1866, p.231.

17. All references to Dickens' speeches are from The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K.J.Fielding (Oxford, 1960).

18. The General Theatrical Fund was an association founded in 1839 to provide pensions for retired actors from all theatres, in imitation of the theatrical funds of the patent theatres, which were limited to actors belonging to their regular companies.



Kean advocates State Intervention to regenerate a theatre which, in the hands of the middle-classes, has manifestly failed to realise the expectations entertained of it.

The converse but allied conception to that of the State as regenerator of defective social and cultural institutions, the notion of art as education, through which the State can impart "culture and dignity" to those it grooms, is set out with reference to the theatre and "spontaneous pastimes" in general in Donne's essay "Popular Amusements", published in July, 1856 in the Westminster, then considered to be a "platform of advanced opinion".<sup>19</sup> He proposes a State whose duty is to promote the improvement of those it governs:

"the State....has a direct interest in the well-being of its members....[Man's] animal and intellectual faculties alike, demand nurture and relaxation, and the Government which shuts its eyes to the amusements of the people....beholds only half of its proper functions...."

Consequently the State should promote "recreations" which

"diffuse a relish for exercises and pastimes that promote at once health of body and cheer and content of spirit."

Donne's attitude belongs to the progressive camp, in advocating the paternalistic government envisaged by Utilitarian theory; Arnold's critique of society though equally insistent on the necessity for State intervention, leads on to a partially conservative position, but one tempered by progressive influences. The roles of criticism and of the State as presented by Arnold, in terms of their effect on individual character, are the same. Criticism's aim is the "perfection" of man to be achieved through imbuing him with a sense of "what is excellent in itself" which will lead him to transcend his own "self-satisfaction"; that of the State is to impart "a noble spirit" to the individual through the propagation of "culture and dignity" and "ideas", since it

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19. John Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (London, 1969), p.69.



is "practical life" that characterises England, and the root of practical life is "very inadequate ideas" which "will always satisfy

"the mass of mankind [who] never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are."

The "practical man" is characterised by the fixed, mechanical habits of thought which, confused by the "world's multitudinousness", are his only resource:

"the rush and roar of practical life will always have a dizzying and attracting effect upon the most collected spectator..."

Because "the practical man is not apt for fine distinctions", the critic is thus "one of a very small circle"; it is in these distinctions that "truth and the highest culture greatly find their account" and consequently a democratic society is incompatible with a high level of culture.<sup>20</sup>

The present therefore can neither provide the "culture and dignity" nor the "ideas" necessary to it; criticism and the State must both look elsewhere for their resources, and consequently Arnold advocates <sup>a conservative</sup> cultivation of "the ancients", and <sup>a progressive</sup> receptivity to foreign influences. In the 1853 Preface to his Poems<sup>21</sup> he writes of the effect of "commerce with the ancients" as producing

"in those who constantly practise it, a steadying and composing effect upon their judgement, not of literary works only, but of men and events in general...They wish neither to applaud nor to revile their age; they wish to know what it is...they want to educe and cultivate what is best and noblest in themselves."

From the study of the past are derived for the present the

20. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J. Keating (London, 1970), pp.130-156.

21. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J. Keating (London, 1970), pp.41-54.



standards and values it lacks; from "foreign thought" is derived "a current of fresh...ideas":

"By the very nature of things, as England is not all the world, much of the best that is known and thought in the world cannot be of English growth, must be Foreign...it is just this that we are least likely to know, while English thought is streaming in upon us from all sides, and takes excellent care that we shall not be ignorant of its existence. The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell much on foreign thought..."<sup>22</sup>

Like the dramatic criticism of his contemporaries, Arnold's literary criticism is formed by his social criticism; in demonstrating the limitations of democracy and the potential effects of literature as an agent of regeneration on the individual, he comes to emphasise the importance of education, the study of the past and the assimilation of foreign influences. He conceives of literature, the State, and the individual equally in national terms. It is the "Englishman" that is the focus of his attention in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"; the "English nation" and the "English people", in "Democracy", are to be benefitted by the State; "On the Modern Element in Literature" is concerned with the effect of the literature of "other ages" on "our own age and literature". Similarly it is in terms of a national institution that the theatre is considered, and its drama as an index of national greatness, in comparison with the theatre and drama of other nations; writers on the theatre in the mid-Victorian period, however, largely deny the desirability of foreign influences. The predominant attitude is essentially conservative; Shakespeare is taken as the standard of dramatic excellence, and the achievement of the contemporary theatre assessed in terms of the incidence of Shakespeare production. Thus Dickens, in his 1846 General Theatrical Fund speech, cites both the defection from production of Shakespeare and the concentration on foreign entertainments as equal and related instances of the degeneracy

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22. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), pp.130-156.



of Drury Lane:

"Drury Lane is so devoted to foreign ballets and foreign operas that it is more deserving of the name of the Opera Comique, than of a national theatre..."

In his 1849 speech, he associates English greatness in comparison with other nations with its dramatic heritage:

"In England, of all countries on the earth, this interest [in the drama] is purified and exalted by the loftiest masterpieces of human fancy, and the proudest monuments of human wit."

Arnold, while sharing the nationalist perspective, diagnoses it in the "Democracy" essay as a middle class characteristic:

"The great middle classes of this country...believe that the freedom and prosperity of England are their work..."

Dickens himself was considered to be, by his contemporaries, both as man and author; the representative and upholder of middle class values and attitudes. Mrs Oliphant, for example, in her 1855 Blackwood's article,<sup>23</sup> attributes his popularity to this characteristic:

"it is to the fact that he represents a class that he owes his speedy elevation to the top of the wave of popular favour...he is...the historian and representative of one circle in the many ranks of our social scale..."

The "middle class of England" accordingly "carries its novelist in its heart" as

"the literary interpreter of these intelligent, sensible, warm-hearted households, which are the strength of our country, and occupy the wide middle ground between the rich and the poor."

Arnold's advocacy of foreign influence as a source of "ideas" contrasts markedly with the chauvinism of the middle classes with whose regeneration he is concerned. It

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23. Reprinted in Dickens, The Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London, 1971), pp.327-336.

is to the Greek tragic stage, moreover, that he looks for "excellent models" for the present, in the 1853 Preface, in preference to the Shakespeare that dominates the middle class conception of the dramatic past; his critical practice, in its divergence from middle class standards, is a practical working out of the principles he advocates to counter the limitations of democracy. Lewes, like Arnold, considers foreign influence in terms of the potential benefits it can render to national life, with reference to the theatre. In his article of December 7th, 1850, entitled "The Perfection of Acting"<sup>24</sup> he finds in Planché's adaptation of "a French drame", The Day of Reckoning,

"more unmixed delight - more exquisite enjoyment - than I have for a long while received from the English stage."

He attributes the excellence of the production to Madame Vestris' "reliance upon Nature" in performing her role, a "natural manner" which "recalls the finished art of French comedy". He equates the "natural" with "truth", the truth of ordinary life; Vestris' acting is natural because she represented "a lady...such as we meet with in drawing rooms". The "truth" in which French theatre excels is, however, for Lewes, one restricted to performance alone; in his article of April 2nd, 1853<sup>25</sup> on La Dame aux Camélias he castigates the French stage for its lack of the moral standards of the English; the play is an "unhealthy idealisation of one of the worst evils of our social life";

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24. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.122-126.

25. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.240-243.



"Paris may delight in such pictures, but London, thank God! has still enough instinctive repulsion against pruriency not to tolerate them. I declare I know of few things in the way of fiction more utterly wrong, unwholesome and immoral."

In terms reminiscent of Coleridge's denunciation of the "moral and intellectual Jacobinism...the confusion and subversion of the natural order of things, their causes and their effects" which he found in Bertram, "an insult to common decency",<sup>26</sup> Lewes elaborates on the tendency "to confuse the moral sense, by exciting the sympathy of an audience" for "corruption". His objection is to the "false psychology" of which George Eliot complains in Dickens' "melodramatic...courtezans" in her 1856 Westminster Review article.<sup>27</sup> The "real" is what "experience teaches us"; the French play is fallacious, grounded on a deception which Lewes, in his role of critic, is concerned to expose.

Donne similarly advocates in "Plays and their Providers" that English actors assimilate techniques from the French:

"our actors might...import a few hints from their foreign brothers. From the French comedians they might learn that the art of acting is not a mere outline, but a careful filling up of character..."

Like Lewes, Donne sees in French acting technique, with its reliance on detail and "traits", the "truth" in representation found by Macready in Talma's acting style, where a character is "real" to the extent that the detail of everyday life is incorporated into the stage portrayal. He is

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26. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London, 1894), pp.262, 289.

27. Reprinted in Dickens, The Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London, 1971), p.343.



careful, however, to stress the relative insignificance of such superficial "hints" in contrast to the fundamental superiority of English actors:

"In these respects, more than in any actual superiority of gifts, external or internal, consist, in our opinion, the real advantages of foreign artists above our own."

The increasing reliance of the English stage on French material in the mid-Victorian period furnished apparently incontrovertible proof of its degeneration; the theatre, in turning away from its great dramatic heritage, was driven to foreign sources because of its incapacity to supply a contemporary native drama, an incapacity explained by such critics as Mrs Gore and Horne in social terms, as a consequence of democracy. The playwrights themselves offered less theoretical reasons. Boucicault, in an 1877 article on "The Decline of the Drama"<sup>28</sup>, blames the theatre managers for "the deluge of French plays that set in with 1842, and swamped the English drama of that period." He describes the dramatist's situation thus:

"the usual price received by Sheridan Knowles, Bulwer and Talfourd at that time for their plays was £500. I was a beginner in 1841, and received for my comedy, London Assurance, £300....Three years later I offered a new play to a principal London theatre. The manager [Webster] offered me £100 for it. In reply to my objection to the smallness of the sum he remarked, 'I can go to Paris and select a first-class comedy; having seen it performed, I feel certain of its effect. To get this comedy translated will cost me £25. Why should I give you £300 or £500 for your comedy of the success of which I cannot feel so assured?'.....I sold a work for £100 that took me six months' hard work to compose, and accepted a commission to translate three French plays at £50 a piece....the English dramatist was obliged either to relinquish the stage altogether or to become a French copyist."

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28. The Dolmen Boucicault, ed. David Krause (Dublin, 1964), p.21.



The playwright's financial status declined steadily from the eighteen thirties, as managerial expenditure on other departments of the stage, particularly staging, increased; the 1832 Select Committee Report records the complaints from a number of authors of their financial dealings with managers. By the eighteen sixties, however, the situation was improving, as the social and cultural position of the theatre in general, and accordingly its economic viability, improved. Although Taylor received only £200 for The Ticket-of-Leave Man, the Bancrofts paid Robertson £1, £2 and £3 a night respectively for Society, Ours and Caste; in 1869 he received £10 a night for Home at the Haymarket. Boucicault himself, as a highly successful playwright, insisted on a sharing arrangement with managers, which in the case of his agreement with Webster of the Adelphi for The Colleen Bawn and The Octoroon realised a profit of thousands.<sup>29</sup>

Theatre critics, analysing the situation, tended to ignore the purely business side of the theatre, governed by entirely economic considerations; Donne, for example, takes the incursion of French drama as a starting point for a denunciation of democratic society. The French drama he considers a threat to national identity, in that it leads the English theatre into the representation of what is "unreal". In "The Drama" he condemns "the popular drama of the day" which is imported "ready-made from the banks of the Seine", because it is "in no intelligible sense of the term national, but....a Parisian exotic." Such a drama removes the stage from actual life; in "Plays and their Providers" he criticises its failure to model itself "upon the realities of life";

"our ways are not as their [the French's] ways...the actor can no longer copy from the life which he sees ....It would be useless for him to study actual life for the purpose of representing sentiments that occur only in the teeming brains of authors."

Donne's association, in "The Drama", of "the most brilliant epochs of national history" with "the noblest dramatic poetry" leads to his conception, in "Popular Amusements" of the drama, "as a national amusement", as the "emblem and exponent of [a people's] interior being" and the embodiment

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29. Michael R. Booth, "Public taste, the playwright and the Law", The Revels History of Drama in English, VI (London, 1975), pp.29-57.



of "national character"; a stage subsisting on foreign plays is consequently one which abrogates its identity as a nation.

Donne attributes the incursion of French plays on to the English stage to the effects of "advancing civilisation" on English society. The contemporary world, from which a drama based on "the realities of life" and deserving to be termed "national" should be derived, is one in which "the external and salient points of individual character" are levelled:

"society has ceased to be divided into castes, or distinguished by outward and visible tokens of grandeur and debasement. Our manners and habits have grown similar and unpicturesque...Our humours and distinctions are well-nigh abolished, and the drama...is deprived of its daily bread."

Importation from France is thus rendered necessary because of the impoverishment of life; the democracy of the contemporary world, which brought the middle class into prominence, thus implies eventual foreign domination, and becomes a threat to the middle class that is "the strength of the nation."

During the latter part of the eighteen forties and in the eighteen fifties, democracy was gradually redefined as antagonistic to the continuance of the middle class as the dominant social group rather than as furthering its advancement. That section of society, the property owners, enfranchised by the 1832 Reform Act, saw in the prospect of further Parliamentary Reform only the erosion of their own power by the expansion of the electorate. Since the tendency of democracy, by levelling social differences, was to undermine national identity, a hierarchical society alone



could provide the motive and opportunity for individual advancement and sustain the progress of the middle-class. The middle-class thus attempted to recreate an aristocratic social pattern for themselves. Such a recreation did not indicate a return to the past, as did Disraeli's feudalism, or Mrs Gore's proposed aristocratic patronage of the theatre, but a perpetuation of the present, through the adoption of the past.

This disillusionment with democracy as a basis for the social order is reflected in the theatrical sphere in the testimonies of managers before the 1866 Committee; experienced men, such as Webster, Buckstone and Kean, called for a return to the old hierarchical system of organisation, but on an expanded basis, along the lines suggested by Donne in his 1853 essay "Plays and their Providers", where a "dramatic congress for the purpose of adopting a classification of the theatres" is proposed, by which particular theatres would be allotted particular "species of drama". By the eighteen sixties, the effects of theatrical free trade presented West End managers, the representatives of the establishment, with more urgent problems; the new music halls were proving to be considerable rivals, drawing away large segments of their audiences and transgressing on

what was felt, by managers, to be their exclusive right to dramatic representations, by introducing scenes of spoken dialogue into mixed programmes of song, dance and music.

Webster, for example, righteously asserts that "the drama should [not] be degraded by being acted before smoking and drinking in any establishment", and Buckstone that

"The music halls have been a great injury to the theatres, especially to the half prices....the music halls carried away that class of young men; so that the half price is hardly worth taking at all."<sup>30</sup>

The music halls, however, by filtering off the less respectable elements in theatre audiences, contributed to the restoration of the theatre as a fashionable entertainment, directed primarily at a middle-class aspiring to aristocratic status. The secession of the upper classes from the theatre left the middle-class an arena in which to imitate aristocratic behaviour, in the same way that the aristocratic abrogation of their social "duties" gave the middle-class the opportunity to behave in accordance with their conception of aristocratic standards.

The growing distaste for democracy, together with the hostility to a drama drawing on foreign resources, awoke a new interest in Shakespeare and the legitimate drama. Morley in the Prologue, dated 1866, to his Journal<sup>31</sup> thus follows his condemnation of the unreality of

30. Report from the Select Committee...1866, questions 2967, 3408.

31. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer (London, 1891), pp.5-25.



French plays on the English stage with the advocacy of the plays of "standard English writer[s]" as an alternative. The reprehensible kind of entertainment is that which is based on deceiving its audiences, such as burlesque, where "vacuity of thought" gives itself "all the airs of wit" and the translations of French plays, whose "unreal sentiment" results from their basis in French stage character not in "a true study of French life". He proposes instead a return to the old drama, but it is the old drama modernised by the removal of "the points of discord with existing ways of thought"; ultimately the drama Morley envisages as having the "honesty" of the

"perception of essentials of character acquired from a direct study of life itself"

as opposed to the "untruth" of the French plays is one which is as much disguised melodrama as the "drama" itself, in both its historical and contemporary incarnations. The stage potential of Marlowe's The Jew of Malta lies for Morley in its melodramatic elements; he concludes that a reworking of it, expunging such "obsolete stage effects" as the strangling of Friar Barnardine, would provide "incidents even more highly spiced" than "a modern melodrama", together with "the poet's energy of thought" instead of "bald slipshod English."

The middle class readoption of Shakespeare with the proviso of liberty to remove from the original play anything felt to be at variance with the contemporary world thus was, in practice, yet another attempt to acquire dignity as a class through the inflation of their own values and standards by clothing them with a spurious aristocratic

appearance. Poetry was looked to this time to provide the elevation already sought in historical settings and the treatment of serious interest. Equally, the transmutation of the aspiration to refinement in manners into an intention of recreating a hierarchical aristocratic society was a similar manifestation of the propensity to equate external characteristics with essential qualities. The return to the past advocated by Arnold was to provide a source of standards of judgement for the present which it lacked in itself; the middle class return to the past was, in actuality, a demonstration of the mechanical habits of thought which Arnold diagnosed as characterising the present, and which such a return was intended to cure, in the way that wealth was equated with greatness:

"In our modern world...the whole civilisation is... mechanical and external, and tends constantly to become more so...Nine Englishmen out of ten...believe that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being so very rich."<sup>32</sup>

The education that Arnold envisaged his State would administer was intended to "confer...a greatness and a noble spirit" on the middle classes, and "truly fuse them with the class above" by imparting a "national character" to their schools; the kind of education the middle classes thought they would acquire from Shakespeare was an ability to imitate aristocratic manners more successfully which they equated all the same with "greatness" and "noble spirit". In the end they adhered to the "inadequate ideas", the partial views of the melodramatic mode of thought,

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32. Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Cambridge, 1966), pp.49-51.



with which Arnold found them to be satisfied; in identifying themselves with the nation, and seeing national greatness as dependent on a hierarchical society, they set out to ensure the perpetuation of such a hierarchy by recreating it. The reduction of national character to middle-class character reinforced the chauvinism that rejected foreign influence, and the absence of an influx of "ideas" confirmed already inflexible attitudes.

Morley sees the regenerated theatre as placed under the patronage of the "honest Englishman of the educated middle-class"; it is by seeking to please his taste that managers and dramatists will create a regenerated theatre, as opposed to that directed to any or all of the alternative patrons,

"Mr Dapperwit in the stalls, Lord Froth in the side-boxes, and Pompey Doodle in the gallery."

The peculiar virtue of such a figure lies in his ability to appreciate "truth" gained through his combination of abstract and practical learning; he is

"akin to all that is human, trained not only in school and college, but in daily active stir of life, to interest in all true thinking and true feeling, to habitual notice of varieties of character, and to a habit of noticing its depths in real life."

This nicety of discrimination, acquired by contact with everyday life, is not, as Morley suggests, an ability to judge values but rather to categorise new facts by their correspondence to what is already known. The "honest Englishman" therefore will not easily be deceived in the theatre, since his powers of observation will immediately lead him to mark any deviation in stage character from "ordinary life", the test for "truth". He alone can

appreciate

"those suggestions of yet subtler [character] exploration which should be among the highest charms of good drama."

Morley, like Lytton, substitutes for the legitimate standards of the conservative critics that of truth to everyday experience, proposing a drama based on the "portrayal of life and manners". This drama would necessarily require reinforcement on stage from the "illusion of the scene" to match Morley's definition of it as an animated version of the novel, "wherein well-written description takes the place of scenery". Morley's whole conception of the theatre, thus, in its patronage and drama, is a recasting of the legitimate theatre's patronage and drama in middle-class terms, where "truth to life" is the object of the drama instead of "ideal excellence", and middle-class taste replaces the aristocratic. Such a theatre is attributed with the dignity previously the prerogative of the patent theatres and the legitimate drama and is to be founded on mutual respect between manager and patron; the manager is

"to have faith in his patrons, not to look down on them...[and] give to his public of every kind of dramatic entertainment that which is most thorough... let it be something real...."

The playgoer will then accordingly "have reason to respect his entertainers."

The progressive criticism of Morley, although it rejects the traditional standards of the conservative critic, turns away also from the theatre in general discussion; by focusing on the audience, the theatrical debate again becomes a matter of social analysis, with the question



of which section of society should provide its leaders as the fundamental issue. Morley shares the attitudes, the faith in fact and appearance as absolutes, of the middle-class which he sees as best qualified to form the theatre and society. The "dignity" which is for Arnold the prerogative of the aristocracy and absent from the middle-classes, to be acquired through "commerce with the ancients", is for Morley the result of middle-class imitation of aristocratic behaviour, and is a function of reliance on everyday experience, not on the "great actions" with which Arnold's "ancients" were concerned. The middle-class response to their disillusionment with democracy was to adopt an aristocratic facade derived from habits of social conduct and equate it with the essential qualities of that class, while retaining the essential qualities of their own.

Bagehot's notion of the "picturesque", set out in his 1864 essay "Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning or Pure, Ornate and Grotesque Art in English Poetry"<sup>33</sup>, exactly defines the progressive notion of what art should be in a society dominated by the middle-class, in contrast to Arnold, who tempers progressive views with conservative standards. Bagehot's object is to adapt art to a bourgeois market, whereas Arnold intends by social amelioration to create a market for the kind of art he proposes. Bagehot finds "essence" in the art which draws on "reality" rather than "ideas". The "picturesque" is "the characteristic expression, the typical form" which it is "the business of

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33. Reprinted in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund O. Jones (Oxford, 1956), pp.368-420.

the poet, of the artist" to treat. Such "types", the "essence", are "mirrored in reality"; the propensity of "the artistic mind of secondary excellence" is to care "for ideas":

"to care for notions and abstractions; to philosophize; to reason out conclusions; to care for schemes of thought...."

The "picturesque" is "a quality distinct from that of beauty, or sublimity, or grandeur", those generally associated with the "ideal". The great artist is he who

"finds his mental occupation...in the real world...in the stagnant home of his own thoughts he will find nothing pure, nothing as it is..."

Bagehot characterises "the real world" by its estate of flux and "multitudinousness"; there,

"the face of nature, the moving masses of men and women, are ever changing, ever multiplying, ever mixing one with the other."

Its effect on the observer is that of confusion and finally fatigue:

"Some fine countries...have not this picturesque quality...after a time somehow we get wearied...we find disjecta membra, but no form...we go away from such places in part delighted, but in part baffled; we have been puzzled by pretty things..."

With the discovery of "the type of the genus", "we seem to comprehend its character"; the "accumulation" of "elements" is thus combined into a "collected image". Bagehot's "type" functions in the same way as Arnold's "Idea", but is derived from the visible world, and its typicality lies in the degree of its ordinariness in terms of everyday experience. For Bagehot, accordingly, the "ideal", "the perfect embodiment", is dependent on its truth to the reality which is verifiable by empirical evidence, as for Forster the "sublimity" of Othello



"issues as much out of those kindly springs and impulses which make up his ordinary and educated being..."<sup>34</sup>

The "type" expresses the attitudes of a bourgeois public in its own terms and gives a tangible form to the preconceptions common to both the artist and his audience. The concrete image of the "picturesque" embodies the qualities of the "ideal" by clarifying the "traits" of the real world, which are identical to those of the "ideal", but "indistinct". For Bagehot, the difference between the "ideal" and the "real" is one of degree, not of kind; the "inferior specimen" found in the real world is given its "perfect embodiment" in the "type". The basis of such an art lies in the observable facts of everyday life, evident to all, not in the abstract perceptions of the artist. Art, therefore, is the correct presentation of ordinary experience, and expresses the higher truths of the "ideal" through a strict fidelity to fact and appearances.

Bagehot's "type" vindicates the mechanical mode of thought of the middle-classes with its reliance on empiricism and faith in appearances. The aristocratic qualities of "culture and dignity", from this viewpoint, are only a matter of behaviour, to be acquired by adopting the appropriate social manners; to behave like an aristocrat is to be an aristocrat. For Arnold, in contrast, culture is an "inward operation", a process of education which leads to the re-examination of "stock notions and habits" and there-

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34. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), p.15.

by to "perfection"<sup>35</sup>; the middle-class conception of education ignores fundamental values and notions of spiritual improvement, to rely instead on a Gradgrindian system of accumulating empirical facts.

The middle-class public found this kind of edification in its theatre, in the portrayal of "life and manners" backed by scenic illusion which conveyed information about the real world. Audience enthusiasm for factual detail in presentation and truth to nature in acting gave impetus to a drama relying on the simple for its themes, staged with magnificence; the success of the mid-Victorian theatre lay in its exact adaptation to audience taste. Theatre critics who questioned its validity as art ignored the essential condition for the theatre's existence, that it should please its patrons, and instead of judging the stage in terms of its suitability to its public, introduced abstract standards derived from the traditions of a different kind of theatre directed to a different kind of audience. Kean's Shakespeare productions, by bringing the legitimate theatre into direct collision with the contemporary through production style, accordingly became the focal point for the controversy between the two principle camps of theatrical and social criticism, the conservative and the progressive. The conservative critic saw in the application of the methods of contemporaneity a debasement of "the higher purposes of the scene"; the John Bull reviewer found Macready's 1838 production of The Tempest to have transformed the play

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35. Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Cambridge, 1966), pp.6, 7.



"into an Easter-piece" because of its predilection for the "material".<sup>36</sup> This condemnation resembles Arnold's criticism of the "mechanical and external" character of "our modern world".<sup>37</sup> In contrast Forster finds in the contemporaneity of the same production something that "Shakespeare himself" would have approved.<sup>38</sup> This critical viewpoint, like Bagehot's, sees the "ideal" as dependent on the "ordinary", and the questions raised in the debate reach far beyond the theatrical sphere, because of the critical tendency to turn to social analysis.

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36. Quoted in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York, 1966), II, pp.218-219.

37. Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Cambridge, 1966), p.49.

38. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), p.65.

## XI The Aspiration to Gentility

Arnold defines the essential qualities of the aristocracy as "culture and dignity"; dignity results from culture, the "inward operation" of spiritual improvement. For the middle-classes who identified culture with genteel behaviour, dignity was a matter of social status; Thackeray in a letter to the Morning Chronicle in 1850, headed "The Dignity of Literature", discusses the "social rank" of "the literary profession".<sup>1</sup> Mid-Victorian ideas of theatrical greatness centred also on "dignity". Donne includes "dignity of thought" among the attributes of those nations which produce "the noblest dramatic poetry"<sup>2</sup>, and Dickens refers to "the honour, dignity and glory of the English stage".<sup>3</sup> Culture and dignity in the theatre accordingly meant Shakespearean production; his status as the greatest English dramatist in the legitimate tradition, with its aristocratic associations, was unquestioned.

Production and patronage of Shakespeare also provided an opportunity to perform, in the theatrical sphere, the duty abrogated by the aristocracy. The notion of social duty as one of the attributes of gentility was emphasised by Ruskin, the arbiter of taste for a middle-class unsure of its own. His denunciation of bourgeois limitations parallels Arnold's critique of democracy. In a speech at

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1. William Makepeace Thackeray, Critical Papers in Literature (London, 1904), pp.391-395.

2. W.B.Donne, "The Drama", in Essays on the Drama (London, 1863), pp.120-155.

3. The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K.J.Fielding, (Oxford, 1960), p.77.



Bradford in 1864<sup>4</sup>, he denounced the materialism of his audience which had actually led them to seek his advice on the best style of building for a new Exchange:

"I do not care about this Exchange, - because you don't ... you think you may as well have the right thing for your money. You know there are a great many odd styles of architecture about; you don't want to do anything ridiculous; you hear of me...as a respectable architectural man-milliner; and you send for me that I may tell you the leading fashion...."

Architecture, however, Ruskin conceived of as the expression of a whole way of life, not a matter of transient fashion. Thus he recommends that their Exchange should be

"built to your great Goddess of "Getting-on"...I can only at present suggest decorating its frieze with pendant purses..."

The obsession with "Getting-on" Ruskin dealt with in a lecture delivered at Manchester in the same year.<sup>5</sup> He contrasts the urge to acquire

"more horses, and more footmen, and more fortune, and more public honour, and - not more personal soul"

with the aspiration to become "mighty of heart, mighty of mind";

"he only is advancing in life, whose heart is getting softer, whose blood warmer, whose brain quicker, whose spirit is entering into living peace"

"Essential education" is one which results in "advancement in life" and not "in the trappings of it"; Ruskin distin-

4. John Ruskin, "Traffic", The Crown of Wild Olive, II, in Works, ed. E.J.Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London, 1905), XVIII, pp.433-458.

5. John Ruskin, "Of Kings' Treasuries", Sesame and Lillies (London, 1965), pp.1-47.

guishes the "gentleman" from the "vulgar person" in terms of spiritual and moral qualities, not material possessions and status.

Ruskin's writings are aimed particularly at the commercial entrepreneur, the prototype of bourgeois success, who, having acquired sufficient wealth to prove his grandeur, now aspired to visible demonstration of his entitlement to gentility. "Essential education" is especially necessary for "the manufacturers" whose potential power over the rest of society is dealt with in a lecture given at Bradford in 1859<sup>6</sup>, where he defines their "duty" as being to produce "what will educate as it adorns", "what is best", rather than "corrupting public taste" by "catching at every humour of the populace" or "trying to attract attention by singularities, novelties, and gaudinesses". The truly educated manufacturer will in turn "make his wares educational instruments" and

"become more influential for all kinds of good than many lecturers on art, or many treatise writers on morality."

To the middle-class, Ruskin proposed a notion of social "duty" as an attribute of the "gentleman", which emerged in practice in the middle-class concern with philanthropy as a vindication of their own claims to social dominance. The assumption of a philanthropic interest in the welfare of society was an adoption of a paternalism similar to that of the traditional aristocracy, and an assumption of the duties neglected by the hereditary aristocracy. Philanthropic zeal, as visible evidence of gentleman-

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6. John Ruskin, "Modern Manufacture and Design", The Two Paths (London, 1965), pp.136-160.



liness, instanced the confusion of the material with the spiritual, of "advancement" in "the trappings" of life with "advancement in life" itself, and was characteristic of the middle-class concern with improving their status once established in society. Dickens, speaking in 1856 at the first anniversary dinner of the founding of the Royal Hospital for Incurables<sup>7</sup> is reported as saying that

"He felt it was their duty to do everything that could be done to give these poor creatures even a chance of recovery."

For the philanthropist, the prime social benefit was education, in the administration of which social "duty" would be visibly fulfilled; the arts in general, and the theatre in particular, were pressed into service as a means of informal instruction. Ruskin had asserted the importance of art in general as "protective and helpful to all that is noblest in humanity"<sup>8</sup>; the combination of education with adornment proposed to the manufacturer is advanced as a parallel to the writer's opportunity "to publish what will educate as it amuses". The periodicals of the mid-Victorian period equally stress this dual objective; the role of the gentleman there is indicated in a handbill announcing the forthcoming publication of Dickens' Household Words in 1850; it is

"Designed for the Entertainment and Instruction of all classes of readers, and to help them in the discussion of the most important social questions of the time."<sup>9</sup>

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7. The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K.J. Fielding (Oxford, 1960), pp. 222-225.
  8. John Ruskin, "The Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art over Nations", The Two Paths (London, 1965), p. 95
  9. The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens. Household Words 1850-1859, ed. Harry Stone (London, 1969), I, p. 18.



Similarly, a prospectus for the Cornhill Magazine, dated September, 1859 promises to combine

"articles of an entertaining, with others also of a more solid and informing description, all, however, treated in an easy and agreeable style...."<sup>10</sup>

The theatre provided the major arena for such edifying entertainment, and acquired once more its old importance to the extent that it manifestly fulfilled a social purpose. Dickens, in his 1847 speech at the General Theatrical Fund dinner<sup>11</sup> couples the claims "of the English stage" "to be respected as an art" with its potential as "a noble means of general instruction and improvement". He praises the Britannia theatre<sup>12</sup>, where the interior reminds him of "a Fever Hospital", for its wholesomeness:

"The air of this theatre was fresh, cool and wholesome....very sensible precautions had been used, ingeniously combining the experiences of hospitals and railway stations..Asphalt pavements substituted for wooden floors....and no carpeting or baize used... These various contrivances are as well considered ...as if it were a Fever Hospital; the result is, that it is sweet and healthful."

The "general air of consideration, decorum, and supervision" has "an unquestionably humanising influence in all the social arrangements of the place". The theatrical entrepreneur with philanthropic intensions performs his social duty and vindicates his claim to gentility. At Sadler's Wells Dickens finds<sup>13</sup> an audience who "have really come to the

10. Anthony Trollope, An Autobiography (London, 1950), plate facing p.133.

11. The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K.J.Fielding (Oxford, 1960), p.78.

12. Charles Dickens, "Two Views of a Cheap Theatre" in The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces (London, 1964), pp.30-31.

13. Charles Dickens, "Shakespeare and Newgate" in The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens Household Words 1850-1859, ed. Harry Stone (London, 1969), I, pp.343-349.



Theatre for their intellectual profit" and a management which is "constantly addressing itself to the improved taste it has bred"; Phelps, consequently, is "a gentleman in spirit".

The provision of improving entertainment for the lower strata of society was sufficiently straightforward, in that it was required principally to inculcate basic principles of right and wrong; Dickens thus approves of the Britannia's "Melo-Drama" because it demonstrated that

"honesty was the best policy, and we [the audience] were as hard as iron upon Vice, and we wouldn't hear of Villainy getting on in the world..."

Sala is even prepared to tolerate the notorious Victoria theatre<sup>14</sup> because in the plays presented,

"For all the jargon, silliness and buffoonery, the immutable principles of right and justice are asserted ...were we to sift away the bad grammar, and the extravagant action, we should find the dictates of the purest and highest morality."

For the middle classes, this informal education implied notions of cultural improvement for social advancement; Sala lists the opportunities available to them but beyond the reach of the Victoria patrons, who

"haven't been to the University of Cambridge; they can't compete for the middle-class examinations; they don't subscribe to the Saturday Review; they have never taken dancing lessons...they can't even afford to purchase a Shilling Handbook of Etiquette."

Such a kind of education is directed to the advancement "in the trappings" of life denounced by Ruskin and excludes the notion of the "essential education" urged on a bourgeoisie obsessed with "Getting-on". The ultimate objective is a

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14. Extract from G.A.Sala, Twice round the Clock in E.Royston Pike, Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age (London, 1957), p.57.

visible rise in social status. The Saturday Review, for example, founded in 1855, both provided and produced improvement in status for its readers; it assumed a university-educated readership of "scholarly gentlemen and gentlemanly scholars", thus acting as a visible demonstration of the refinement of those who read or purchased it, while at the same time, since its reviewers were "mostly recruited direct from Oxford or Cambridge"<sup>15</sup>, it promoted that very refinement.

In the mid-Victorian theatre, Shakespeare production served a similar dual purpose for its patrons. While the West End managers made sporadic essays into the legitimate as part of their usual system of varying the kind of programmes they presented, three specific attempts were made in the mid-Victorian period to establish a theatre subsisting mainly on Shakespeare: that of the relatively short-lived management of the actor James Anderson<sup>16</sup> at Drury Lane from December, 1849 to June 1851;

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15. John Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (London, 1969), p.63.

16. James Anderson (1811-1895), enjoyed considerable popularity as an actor during his career. He made his London debut at Covent Garden under Macready.



that of Phelps at Sadler's Wells from 1844 to 1862; and that of Charles Kean at the Princess's from 1850 to 1859. Anderson's management failed, his rumoured losses amounting to £9,000.<sup>17</sup> The manifesto of his intentions published on the opening of his management in accordance with his self-conceived role as reformer is an invitation to his prospective audience to join an elite, superior to common prejudice and discriminating in itself:

"In this labour of love....the lessee addresses himself for courage and support to those who, not ashamed of being out of fashion, still cherish an affectionate regard for that art [the drama]....."

His appeal also adduces the prospect of social advancement, national sentiment, and royal example:

"the patronage of [the drama] has ever by polished nations been valued as the surest means of reflecting honour on themselves, in the exhibition of their achieved civilisation and mental cultivation...The truly generous efforts which have been made in the highest quarter [Queen Victoria's institution of the Windsor Theatricals] to revive a taste for the legitimate drama have been productive of the happiest effects. The time has at length arrived when the English people, animated by a bright example, demand the restoration on the stage of their national theatre and drama, which is the pride of this as it is the envy of every other nation."

Lewes writes in his article of May 11th, 1850,<sup>18</sup> that

"nothing could exceed the enthusiasm of the opening, and the success was immense..."

Anderson, although he judged rightly in the grounds of his appeal, failed in carrying through his project; Lewes describes as "injudicious" his neglect of what are asserted to be the essentials for theatrical prosperity, "fine acting,

17. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), p.79, n.1.

18. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.79-81.



magnificent spectacle, [and] novelty";

"The acting was mediocre; the spectacle...was not gorgeous enough to be attractive...and novelty there was none."

Anderson failed to attract the audience who would have made his venture pay: the securely established middle class, economically dominant and impatient of a social structure which denied their precedence and entitlement to leadership. Shakespeare required adaptation to accord with their taste, and the process of adaptation itself to be approved as a vindication of that taste. Morley, in recommending the production in the contemporary theatre of "the best of our old English plays"<sup>19</sup>, had been careful to justify their adaptation "to the modern taste" as the removal of local excrescences:

"the elements of an unfading interest are to be found in very many of our pieces...such plays could have the dust rubbed off, the points of discord with existing ways of thought removed..."

The prospective adaptor is urged "to pare the sound old English apple"; the introduction of elements of contemporaneity in the production of Shakespeare, when approved of, were vindicated in general as the removal of the defects to which Shakespeare was liable through not having the advantage of living in the present age. The modernisation of Shakespeare was his refinement and enhancement; his texts, for example, might require expurgation because of the

"conventional indelicacy which comes only of honest recognition of the whole nature of man, who has a body as well as a soul"

but equally the present had rescued Shakespeare from the "rash meddling" of the more recent past by restoring his original texts, a movement in which Macready had been primarily instrumental, followed by Phelps and Kean. Thus the John Bull reviewer writes of Macready's 1838 production of King Lear:

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19. Henry Morley, "Prologue", The Journal of a London Playgoer from 1851 to 1866 (London, 1891), pp.5-25.



"On Thursday evening - and the date will be marked in the annals of the stage - the tragedy of King Lear was brought out, freed from the interpolations which have disgraced it for nearly two centuries...The text spoken was, to a word, that of the poet..."<sup>20</sup>

In the same way, the middle-class claim to genteel status was not jeopardised by the insistence on contemporaneity in acting or staging. The resources of the present rather enabled Shakespeare to transcend the limitations to which he was subject as a man of his time; Forster writes of Macready's 1838 production of The Tempest that

"Shakespeare himself might have seen his own delightful play at last pass like an enchanted dream before him."<sup>21</sup>

To make Shakespeare contemporary was to realise his true meaning; only now did he receive "a living comment and interpretation".<sup>22</sup> Macready's performance of Coriolanus likewise made

"the nearest approach the stage has ever presented to the intention Shakespeare had in view."<sup>23</sup>

Spectacle, however, had to be treated carefully; an excess of it indicated a lack of "taste and discrimination"<sup>24</sup> and pointed to the kind of reliance on "vulgar resources", where

20. Quoted in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York, 1966), II, p.194.

21. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), p.65.

22. Review of Macready's production of Coriolanus in John Bull, March 19th, 1838, quoted in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York, 1966), II, p.214.

23. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), p.62.

24. Review of Macready's production of Henry V, John Bull, June 17th, 1839, quoted in G.C.D.Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York, 1966), II, p.222.



"vulgar" bears strong social implications, that Forster found in the physical exaggeration of Forrest's acting.<sup>25</sup> Stage decoration was required to maintain a due subservience to the text; "accessories", if "properly subdued" and "in good taste" could be "brilliant and elegant" without "over-laying the poetic purpose of the drama".<sup>26</sup>

Ruskin similarly advises his "manufacturers" to avoid excess of ornamentation, to be "refined, rather than splendid in design". The "tendency to flimsiness and gaudiness" is cited as the "prevailing error in English dress, especially among the lower orders, arising mainly from the awkward imitation of their superiors", while

"the typhoid fever of passion for dress, and all other display, which has struck the upper classes of Europe" is indicative of their particular social disease, the abrogation of their duties; this "guilt" of "wasteful and vain expenses" is an undermining of "social order", and is, Ruskin asserts,

"hastening the advance of republicanism more than any other element of modern change."<sup>27</sup>

The display of wealth as proof of greatness Arnold had cited as an example of the "mechanical" thinking typifying the middle class lacking in "culture";<sup>28</sup> the equation of

25. John Forster and G.H. Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.17-40.
26. Review of Macready's production of The Merchant of Venice, John Bull, January 3rd, 1842, quoted in G.C.D. Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York, 1966), II, pp.226-227.
27. John Ruskin, "Modern Manufacture and Design", The Two Paths (London, 1965), p158 and n.1.
28. Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Cambridge, 1966), p.51.



lack of ostentation with superior status was equally mechanical, and at the same time a rejection of the contemporary aristocracy as a pattern of behaviour, in that since they had deviated from the standards of taste expected of them, it was left to the middle classes to recreate that standard themselves. Restraint in theatrical spectacle was a tangible proof that the middle classes were performing the "duty" that the aristocracy had abrogated, and a demonstration of the superiority of the claims of the middle class to social dominance over those of the aristocracy. Anderson's assertion of the efficacy of royal example in reviving "a taste for the legitimate drama" was disproved in practice; like the West End managers, he found that Shakespeare alone did not appeal to audiences. The Windsor Theatricals, rather than regenerating the theatre, showed the obsolescence of the aristocracy as social and cultural leaders.

The Times of January 26th, 1849,<sup>29</sup> commenting on the first series of performances at Windsor considers its potential effect on the theatre rather in terms of a consequent reawakening in the aristocracy of a sense of their social responsibilities than in terms of the regeneration of the theatre. Whereas Mrs Gore assumed that aristocratic patronage would indubitably encourage "a new order of dramatic authors",<sup>30</sup> the Times refers only in passing to

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29. Quoted in J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859), I, pp.349-351.

30. Preface to Quid Pro Quo, in English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, III, Comedies, ed. Michael R. Booth, (Oxford, 1973), p.16.



such conjectures:

"Fancy has wandered back to the days of Elizabeth and the first James...and perhaps, wandering forward, has augured that a new stock of dramatists...may spring into existence...."

Instead, the reviewer concentrates on the effect on "the higher orders":

"A certain elevated class of the public, by shunning English theatres and skipping English critiques, might soon lose sight of the native drama altogether. But now, the plays and the actors are forced upon the attention of the higher orders from another point. He who studies the proceedings of the court, has an English theatrical programme thrust into his view..."

The theatricals themselves originated as a corrective to what was seen as a blatant defection of royalty from the duty of national leadership to patronise English theatrical presentations. Queen Victoria's reception at Court of the American dwarf, General Tom Thumb, exhibited under the auspices of the showman P.J. Barnum, had already led to criticism<sup>of</sup> royal philistinism in 1846, occasioned by the suicide of the neglected artist Haydon.<sup>31</sup> The visit of the French Théâtre Historique in the summer of

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31. Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846), a historical painter esteemed by Keats and Wordsworth in the early years of his career, became increasingly unsuccessful in later years. His exhibition at the Egyptian Hall in 1846 coincided with that of Tom Thumb, who drew immense crowds while Haydon's paintings were virtually ignored. His subsequent suicide gave rise to newspaper comment on English neglect of art, and Jerrold's "The English in Little", published in Punch in 1846 and 1847, a satire on Tom Thumb and the philistinism of the English and of royalty. Information is derived from The Autobiography and Journals of Benjamin Robert Haydon, ed. Malcolm Elwin (London, 1950), Angus Gasson, "Tom Thumb versus High Art: Douglas Jerrold's "The English in Little", The Victorian Newsletter (Fall, 1972), pp.25-26, and P.J. Barnum, Struggles and Triumphs, ed. J.G. O'Leary (London, 1967).



1848 provoked an uproar of nationalist feeling against the incursion of foreign performers on the English stage; the literature of the campaign which preceded the opening of Monte Cristo at Drury Lane specifically associated the Queen with the subversion of the English theatre by foreign companies. The Theatrical Journal of June 8th called on the public

"singly and collectively to set their faces against this new attempt to un-Anglicize our public amusements..."

and in conclusion asked

"Why does the Queen and court so often patronize these foreigners and so seldom visit any English playhouse?"<sup>32</sup>

A bill calling on "Britons" to "stand by the English Drama" was circulated, in which a preference for French theatrical entertainments is equated with "alienated English hearts" and the ultimate term of condemnation is "un-English":

"Shall the theatres royal(?)...erected and patented for the British Drama, be the means of crushing it by being devoted to Italian effeminacy and French immorality?"

The ensuing riot on the first night of the Drury Lane performance is described by the Times, the spokesman of the traditional establishment at this time despite the fluctuations in the political viewpoints it expressed,<sup>33</sup> as "a long, dull, dismal, dreary display of nationality", and despite its condemnation of the demonstrators as "rioters and blockheads, covering their country with disgrace in the eyes of Europe" and the House of Lords' denunciation of a

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32. Quoted in E.B. Watson, Sheridan to Robertson (Cambridge, 1925), p.17.

33. H.R. Fox Bourne, English Newspapers (London, 1887), II, pp.164ff.

petition to restrict the "number of foreign theatres" as "barbarous" and "'disgusting'" the Queen reacted promptly; on July 3rd, she attended the Keans' benefit performance, and on July 10th, that of Macready. In November, Kean was appointed manager of the Windsor Theatricals.

The aristocracy's detachment from national fervour discredited them in the eyes of a middle class who identified their own greatness with national supremacy; in encouraging foreign domination of the English stage, the aristocracy appeared to be seeking to undermine at once both national identity and the middle class. The strength of such chauvinistic and class feeling is indicated in the appeal made for State intervention by those principally involved; the Times identifies "some of these zealots" as "persons of standing and respectability in the histrionic profession". Webster was the presenter of the petition demanding State protection against foreign actors, and Charles Kean was reported to have applied to the Lord Chamberlain for an injunction against the Théâtre Historique.<sup>34</sup> In preference to the undermining of national institutions, the middle class were willing to invoke the assistance of the State; Arnold, writing in 1861,<sup>35</sup> felt it necessary to justify State action at considerable length, assuming as a matter of course the antipathy of the middle classes in particular to any extension of State power:

34. Account and quotations in The Life of Charles James Mathews, ed. Charles Dickens (London, 1879), II, pp. 167-178.

35. Matthew Arnold, "Democracy" in Selected Prose, ed. P.J. Keating (London, 1970), pp. 99-125.



"With many Englishmen, perhaps with the majority, it is a maxim that the State, the executive power, ought to be entrusted with no more means of action than those which it is impossible to withhold from it."

The disposition

"to view with jealousy the development of a considerable State-power...has...found extraordinary favour and support...from the middle-classes..."

The actors involved were obviously not without a degree of self-interest in requesting State regulation; the demotion of the aristocracy from its position of social dominance, however, is attested by the readiness with which the Queen submitted to the force of middle-class opinion. Her gesture of reconciliation and compliance was an instance of aristocratic conformity to middle class standards, a reversal of the previously existing situation in which the middle class were expected to follow the example of the contemporary aristocracy. The plays presented at Windsor were, as the Times commentator remarked

"The same that may be seen at the Haymarket and the Lyceum; the actors in the Rubens Room are precisely the same individuals who appear on the public boards..."

The royal reception of their middle-class entertainment is approved by the writer because of its approximation to that of the general theatrical public, and it is in solidly mercantile terms that their response is assessed:

"the Courtly assembly seems to have laid aside that frigidity which is usually the characteristic of private theatricals, and to have applauded with the zeal of a money-paying public, thoroughly pleased with the return for its outlay."

The aristocracy whose prestige the middle class sought for themselves was the aristocracy of tradition, apprehended in mechanical terms, not the contemporary discredited

aristocracy; at the same time, the middle-class attempted to exact from the aristocracy a compliance with their own habits of conduct. The Queen, in re-assuming her duty as monarch to patronise the English theatre and drama, did so by conforming to middle-class practice.

Working out in the suburbs of Islington, far from the traditional theatrical centre, Phelps was largely cut off from the patronage of the aspiring middle-class; nor did he intend to attract such an audience. However, his management succeeded in attracting sufficiently large audiences with productions of Shakespeare to render his theatre a viable financial proposition over a sustained period of time, thus realising one of the objectives stated in his opening announcement<sup>36</sup>,

"the hope of eventually rendering [Sadler's Wells] what a theatre ought to be - a place for justly representing the works of our great dramatic poets."

His productions paid the necessary attention to spectacle while retaining it within limits that satisfied his contemporaries; Morley, for example, implicitly counterpointing genteel with mercantile values, finds evidence of Phelps' "pure taste and right feeling" as opposed to "costliness" in the 1853 A Midsummer Night's Dream:

"Mr Phelps has never for a moment lost sight of the main idea which governs the whole play...The scenery is very beautiful, but wholly free from the meretricious glitter now in favour; it is not so remarkable for costliness as for the pure taste in which it and all the stage-arrangements have been planned."<sup>37</sup>

In realising his second major aim, however, that of demon-

36. Quoted in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Theatres of London (London, 1963), p.247.

37. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer from 1851 to 1866 (London, 1891), p.57.



strating that

"each separate division of our immense metropolis... may have its own well conducted theatre, within a reasonable distance of its patrons"

Phelps was unsuccessful. In the end, the financial viability of his project was maintained not by local audiences, but by an incursion of patrons from outside, the mid-Victorian equivalent of the old pittance:

"The literary men of London....the younger members of the Inns of Court, and....those denizens of the West in whom poetic taste still lingered."<sup>38</sup>

The Sadler's Wells management was intended as a recasting of the obsolete concept of a "National" theatre associated with the monopoly, in contemporary terms, for a time

"when stages which have been called "National" are closed, or devoted to very different objects from that of presenting the real drama of England, and when the law has placed all theatres upon equal footing of security and respectability."

The resultant theatre drew audiences from the Islington lower-middle and upper-working-classes, together with the least socially-conscious of the middle-classes from outside the neighbourhood; they found there an ideal to which they responded enthusiastically, Marston describes the theatre as "a sort of pilgrim's shrine":

"[in] the audience itself there seemed a parallel... between the adherents of the poetic school and the adherents of a proscribed faith in religion. A respectful, almost solemn hush pervaded the house during the less exciting scenes of a play....I have heard the execution of some passage in a tragedy hailed with something of the excitement which might have followed a political manifesto....It was felt that there was a Cause, scarcely less than sacred, to support, and that Phelps was its apostle."

On the other hand, Phelps' theatrical philanthropy, admired

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38. Westland Marston, Our Recent Actors (London, 1888), II, pp.35-37.



by Dickens, only acted as a deterrent on the original audience, "as ruffianly....as London could shake together". The Dickens article states as Phelps' achievement that he "reclaim[ed] one of the lowest of all possible audiences"; however, as it becomes clear from the article itself, Phelps rather expunged its undesirable elements:

"The friers of fish....and other costermonger-scum.... there first removed....by the aid of the police.... children in arms were next to be expelled."

With the checking of "outrageous language" through the implementation of "an old Act of Parliament", the "purification of the audience and establishment of decency" were completed.

Phelps' venture cleared Sadler's Wells of its original audience, giving the theatre over to new patrons altogether: Marston's "Islington paterfamilias" and Dickens' "staid and serious people of the neighbourhood", together with Morley's "honest Englishman of the educated middle-class". His productions appealed to a public already predisposed to the kind of entertainment he provided, who had not previously patronised the theatre regularly, rather than creating a different taste among established playgoers. Middle-class philanthropy, in the end, had little effect on those not already sympathetic to the middle-class values in which it was grounded. The Mechanics' Institutes, set up for the benefit of "the lower classes of society", to instil the bourgeois virtues of a

"taste for rational enjoyments....habits of order, punctuality and politeness"

through lectures and books<sup>39</sup> similarly attracted a different

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39. Quotation from J.W.Hudson, The History of Adult Education (1851) in Richard D.Altick, The English Common Reader (Chicago, 1967), pp.189-192.



social class from that originally envisaged; Dickens, at a reading given for the Chatham Mechanics' Institute in 1860, is recorded as expressing the hope that

"a time would come when a few mechanics might be found in a Mechanics' Institute."<sup>40</sup>

Middle-class philanthropy, conceiving of working-class advancement in its own terms, appealed in the end to the already converted instead of making new converts.

The Sadler's Wells productions articulated the ideals of a section of society, receptive to middle-class attitudes but not primarily concerned with social advancement, in contrast to Kean's audience in the West End. Phelps' approach to the staging of Shakespeare restrained the use of decoration, while still relying fundamentally on spectacle as a means of making the legitimate drama acceptable to his audiences. Kean, at the Princess's, in contrast, placed greater emphasis on decoration, and provoked the charge of "vulgarity"; the criticism he drew was both prolonged and intense, being, at root, a criticism of the values of the class who patronised his theatre, and of their pretensions to gentility.

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<sup>40</sup>. The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K.J. Fielding (Oxford, 1960), p.298.

SECTION FOUR

Charles Kean at the Princess's Theatre,  
1850-1859.



### XII Kean as Manager

When Charles Kean (1811-1868)<sup>1</sup> undertook in 1850 the management of the Princess's Theatre, one of the West End houses which came into prominence after the 1843 Act, he had been a noted actor in the leading roles of the legitimate repertoire for over ten years. His theatrical career began at Drury Lane in 1827, after he had been obliged to end his education at Eton when his father Edmund Kean's finances collapsed. His initial stage appearances were unsuccessful; disadvantageous comparisons were drawn with his father. During the eighteen thirties, he played mainly in the provinces, until he finally achieved public recognition with a series of performances at Drury Lane in 1838. In 1842 he married Ellen Tree, considered one of the best actresses of the time, and together they toured America in 1845 and 1846. From 1848 to 1859 Kean supervised the Windsor Theatricals, and in 1857 he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in recognition of his archeological researches for the Princess's productions. After relinquishing theatre management, he and his wife played London and provincial engagements, and made a tour of Australia and America between 1864 and 1866.

The Princess's,<sup>2</sup> built in 1830, had been in use

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1. Information derived from J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859) and the Dictionary of National Biography (London, 1917), X, p.1143.
  2. Information on the Princess's Theatre is derived from Erroll Sherson, London's Lost Theatres of the Nineteenth Century (London, 1925), pp.133-143 and Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Lost Theatres of London (London, 1968), pp.336-343.



as a theatre since 1840; its interior was already luxuriously appointed when Kean took it over. An architect's description of 1842 states the "decorations" to be

"principally in the Louis Quatorze style, than which for richness and boldness of relief, none is better adapted for the embellishments of theatres..."<sup>3</sup>

Kean's own renovations in 1857 eschewed "richness" for restraint. The Times<sup>4</sup> describes the improvement thus:

"The chief defect, which consisted in a predominance of hot heavy colour, is rectified by the adoption of a light renaissance style, in which French White and Gold predominate."<sup>5</sup>

Orchestra stalls, the most expensive type of seating offered with the exception of the private boxes, had already been introduced before Kean became manager; prices were similar to those of the other West End houses, ranging from stalls at six shillings to gallery at one shilling. The arrangement of the theatrical interior and the system of theatre operation, with performances commencing at seven and half-price at nine, resembled that of the other West End houses, designed to attract predominantly middle class audiences.<sup>6</sup> Kean's patrons would appear to have shown a

3. Quoted in Thomas Marshall, Lives of the Most Celebrated Actors and Actresses (London, 1846), p.73.

4. Oxenford, the Times reviewer, wrote under a specific injunction to avoid controversy, which results in a curiously ambiguous tone through his procedure of providing descriptions without making overt evaluation. Information is derived from Edmund Yates, His Recollections and Experiences (London, 1885), pp.211-212.

5. Times, October 6th, 1857.

6. Playbills for Princess's and West end theatres over the eighteen fifties in the Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Details of the Collection are included in the Bibliography p.307



preference for lack of ostentation, the restraint associated with gentility, in auditorium decoration in the latter part of the eighteen fifties, as opposed to the deliberate opulence employed at the beginning of the eighteen forties. He is also recorded as making provision in 1855 for those who dined at a fashionably late hour;<sup>7</sup> the Times refers to

"the custom established at The Princess's of accommodating the "late" diners by the performance of a little piece that defers until 8 o'clock the grand drama of the evening..."<sup>8</sup>

The Times reviews throughout the decade generally conclude with a reference to "hearty applause" and "repeated calls" for the actors, and frequently remark on the "crowded" state of the house;<sup>9</sup> a writer in the Theatrical Journal of 1853 recommends Kean to issue

"a certain number of checks sufficient to occupy all seats and standing room...which would do away with a great deal of the crushing...such as is to be found frequently at nearly all the theatres in London - the Princess's more especially than any other."<sup>10</sup>

The account in the Times of the last night of Kean's management remarks on

"the strong feeling that manifested itself through all [the] visible signs of enthusiasm...One spirit animated the mass that filled every available part of the edifice...that spirit was a sentiment of real gratitude and admiration."<sup>11</sup>

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7. Sala, for example, describing a visit by Queen Victoria to the opera in Twice Round the Clock (1859), notes that the performance began at eight. The passage is quoted in E. Royston Pike, Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age (London, 1967), p.53.

8. Times, February 23rd, 1853.

9. Times, March 22nd, 1851; February 25th, 1851; June 16th, 1852.

10. Theatrical Journal, September 7th, 1853.

11. Times, August 30th, 1859.



Kean began his management in partnership with the actor Keeley and his wife, and continued as sole manager after the first season. The King John production of 1852 was his first major Shakespearean production; it remained on the bills from February until July, and was subsequently revived in 1858;<sup>12</sup> the other main success of the second season, The Corsican Brothers, a French adaptation, was reintroduced intermittently throughout Kean's management, and was in all performed well over two hundred times. In the 1852 to 1853 season, elaborate productions of Macbeth and Byron's Sardanapalus were presented; the latter play remained on the bills from June, 1853 till February 1854, and Macbeth from February 1853 till the end of the season, with revivals in 1858. The French Faust and Marguerite and Richard III were the chief attractions offered in the fourth season; whereas the French play continued to be presented well on into the following season, Richard III, in the Cibber version, was withdrawn after nineteen performances. The preference for Cibber rather than Shakespeare was strongly criticised; the reviewer for the Atheneum, which became the Saturday Review's main rival,<sup>13</sup> writes

"we cannot....permit the work of the usurping playwright to be restored to the arena of the stage with...the prestige of a triumph."<sup>14</sup>

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12. Princess's Theatre playbills, 1850-1859, in the Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859), II.

13. H.R.Fox Bourne, English Newspapers (London, 1887), II, pp.250, 295.

14. Atheneum, February 2nd, 1854.



Louis XI, again from the French, and Henry VIII, introduced in the 1854 to 1855 season, were both extremely successful. Louis XI, after a lengthy initial run, was intermittently reproduced during the remainder of Kean's management, while Henry VIII played for one hundred successive performances, an unprecedented record in Shakespearean stage presentation<sup>15</sup>, and continued on into the sixth season, to be replaced by The Winter's Tale, which played every night from April till the end of the season in August. The seventh season opened with Sheridan's adaptation of Kotzebue's Pizarro, only moderately successful in comparison with the other main production of that year, A Midsummer Night's Dream, which ran initially from October, 1856 till March, 1857. Richard II and The Tempest were also elaborately staged during the same season, with similar success. The Merchant of Venice, introduced in the eighth season, ran consecutively from June till October, 1858; the Lear production of April of the same year, in contrast, was withdrawn after two month's intermittent presentation. This production was relatively unspectacular, and though praised by critics for its

"subordination of the mechanist and the painter to the poet and actor"<sup>16</sup>

it failed to attract sufficiently large audiences to justify a lengthy run. Kean's last production, Henry V, ran consecutively from March till July of 1859.

15. J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859), II, p.155.

16. Illustrated London News, April 24th, 1858.

Kean's major productions, almost without exception, drew strong support from the predominantly middle class patrons of the West End theatres; during the eighteen fifties, this section of society began to imitate the social habits and taste of the aristocracy, a tendency reflected in the system of programming adopted at the Princess's and the change to a more subdued style of auditorium decoration. Kean's management succeeded in making Shakespeare the staple fare of the contemporary theatre and the Princess's, as much as Sadler's Wells, came to represent an ideal for its patrons, as the Times description of the audience "feeling" on the last night of the management shows:

"The great magician...was breaking his wand in the presence of his admirers, and there was something almost painful in the excitement..."<sup>17</sup>

In attending the Princess's productions, audiences at once showed their gentility, by watching a kind of entertainment associated with aristocracy, and increased their knowledge of genteel behaviour.

Kean's purpose as manager was an avowedly philanthropic one; he evaluated the theatre in terms of its social utility as a means of improving audiences. In a letter written in 1856<sup>18</sup> he equates the "elevation" of the stage with its use as "a most valuable agent in national

17. Times, August 30th, 1859.

18. Letter dated September 10th, 1856 to Colonel C.B.Phipps, Keeper of the Privy Purse, with whom Kean had dealings in the staging of the Windsor Theatricals, in William G.B.Carson, Letters of Mr and Mrs Charles Kean relating to their American Tours (St.Louis, 1945), p.19.



instruction":

"The Stage might be rendered a most important machine, both in a political and social point of view:- no one . . . . will deny how necessary it is to guide into a wholesome channel, the minds of the middle classes, who are especially operated on by theatrical exhibitions."

To realise this aim, Kean combined the presentation of Shakespeare with historical accuracy in mise-en-scène; the audience is to be instructed by being provided with factual information about the past. In his curtain speech on the last night of his management<sup>19</sup>, he states his intention "to make the theatre a school as well as a recreation" through blending "historical accuracy" with "pictorial effect". His intentions as theatrical entrepreneur prefigure Ruskin's injunction to the manufacturer, to produce "what will educate as it adorns", as the social duty of a gentleman; the means adopted, however, accord rather with the mechanical middle-class conception of education as the assimilation of facts. Stage spectacle is thus justified if in accordance with archeological evidence, as a means of infusing "instruction" with "amusement". Kean's whole speech is directed to vindicating his employment of "ornamental introductions" on the basis of their "truth", "truth" being fidelity to factual evidence, the minute reproduction of details drawn from unimpeachable archeological authorities. In presenting Shakespeare, "every detail is studied with an eye to the truth"; in Henry VIII,

"Every incident introduced is closely adopted from the historical descriptions recording those very events as they actually occurred above 300 years ago"

The English army in Henry V were "clothed and accoutred in the exact costumes and weapons of the time". Kean asserts his integrity as a theatrical philanthropist on the grounds that

"in no single instance have I ever permitted historical truth to be sacrificed to theatrical effect."

He discounts "mere . . . . show and idle spectacle" as a worthy object of the stage, insisting instead on its educational potential.

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19. Reported in the Times, August 30th, 1859.



In the prefatory discussions printed on the fly-leaves of the playbills for each of his legitimate productions<sup>20</sup>, Kean presents Shakespeare's plays as historical narratives; the playwright's achievement is considered as proportional to the strictness with which he adheres to the truth of historical fact. Henry VIII is notably successful because it might possibly be based on eye-witness accounts:

"The poet, who came to London in very early youth, might have formed the personal acquaintance of more than one grey-headed elder, who remembered the trial.." <sup>21</sup>

The Winter's Tale is correspondingly defective, with its lack of "any specific date" and "chronological contradictions", and necessitates the selection of a specific historical period and the removal of "all prominent incongruities".<sup>22</sup> In the same way, Kean commends his employment of spectacle in production to his audience in proportion to the apparent degree of veracity of his sources; the availability of "the evidence of an eye witness" for the staging of Henry V gives it an exceptional merit.<sup>23</sup>

Kean's guiding principles are modelled on the injunctions of those critics, following on from Arnold, who assert throughout the mid-Victorian period the urgent necessity of effecting some kind of spiritual and cultural improvement on the increasingly dominant and materially-minded middle-class, to fit them for the social position that their economic strength made inevitable. In putting theory into practice, however, he recasts abstract critical recommendations in the terms of the middle-class who are his patrons; the appeal of his productions, in contrast to the failure of Anderson's, is the result of his awareness of the taste, values and attitudes of his audience. In his philanthropic attempt "to render the stage a medium of historical knowledge"<sup>24</sup> Kean adopts the techniques

20. Princess's Theatre Playbills, in the Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

21. Playbill for King Henry the Eighth, May 16th, 1855.

22. Playbill for The Winter's Tale, April 28th, 1856.

23. Playbill for King Henry the Fifth, March 28th, 1859.

24. Playbill for King Henry the Fifth, March 28th, 1859.



of the entrepreneur to make knowledge palatable to his audiences. His role as manager is to sell the "dramatic histories"<sup>25</sup> of Shakespeare to his public, to act as "a medium between our national poet and the people of England".<sup>26</sup> In his prefaces, accordingly, he is concerned throughout to point out to his prospective patrons the particular merits and attractions of what he has to offer; the underlying implication is that historical information is not, by itself, of sufficient interest to theatre audiences without additional enhancement. "Instruction" requires to be combined with "amusement", while "amusement" itself in turn acquires a new value by being pressed into the service of a higher purpose. The preface to King John thus concludes with an assurance that the entertainment offered has both a worthy purpose and a pleasing character:

"history, heightened by the charm of the most exquisite poetry, and combined with pictorial and correct embellishment, tends to promote the educational purposes for which the stage is so pre-eminently adapted...to convey information through the medium of refined amusement."<sup>27</sup>

Poetry is a form of embellishment; by converting "the histories of several of our English Kings into a series of grand dramatic poems", "Shakespeare has set history to the strains of poetic music". The suffering of the historical Constance is "adorned and enhanced by poetic imagery".<sup>28</sup> The function of the poet in relation to history is to present "retrospective truth, encircled by a halo of

25. Playbill for King Henry the Fifth, March 28th, 1859.

26. Playbill for The Merchant of Venice, June 12th, 1858.

27. Playbill for King John, October 18th, 1858.

28. Playbill for King John, October 18th, 1858.



of poetic genius", to combine "accurate statement of fact with beauty of language".<sup>29</sup> Thus in his "dramatic history", Henry V,

"Shakespeare...has closely followed Holinshed; but the light of his genius irradiates the dry pages of the chronicler."<sup>30</sup>

Truth to fact is the predominant consideration of the poet as presented by Kean; poetry, like spectacle, can only be recommended if the authenticity of what it adorns can be guaranteed. History is adorned by poetry; in turn, poetry itself can be adorned by "scenic illustration" but only "if it have the weight of authority". "Proper dramatic effect" in stage presentation requires archeological authenticity; thus Kean states that until the site of the ancient Nineveh was excavated, and accurate information obtained, Sardanapalus could not be effectively staged in the absence of knowledge of "Assyrian architecture and costume".<sup>31</sup> To give "full effect" to Henry VIII on stage,

"information has been sought from every source which could contribute to the realization of...the domestic habits of the English Court, three hundred years ago."<sup>32</sup>

Throughout his prefaces, Kean as entrepreneur is concerned to convince his patrons that his "Historical Illustration" is securely grounded on undisputable authorities; in the Richard II preface he acknowledges at length the assistance of numerous "men eminent for their antiquarian knowledge", all fellows of the Society of Antiquaries, to guarantee

29. Playbill for King Richard the Second, March 12th, 1857.

30. Playbill for King Henry the Fifth, March 28th, 1859.

31. Playbill for Sardanapalus, June 13th, 1853.

32. Playbill for King Henry the Eighth, May 16th, 1855.



"the truthfulness and fidelity of the entire picture".<sup>33</sup>

The object of the entrepreneur is to display the commodity in as attractive a light as possible to appeal to the prospective buyer; the proof that he has correctly gauged the taste of the market is the purchase of his wares. Thus Kean repeatedly refers to the commercial success of his productions:

"An increasing taste for recreation wherein instruction is blended with amusement, has for some time been conspicuous in the English public...Repeated success justifies the conviction that I am acting in accordance with the general feeling."<sup>34</sup>

In his curtain speech, he finds "conclusive evidence that his views were not altogether erroneous" in "the reception given to the plays...combined with the unprecedented number of repetitions". Where "Public Approval"<sup>35</sup> is the object, public taste must be fully understood, and the aspects of the productions Kean emphasises in his prefaces are those which he considers most likely to appeal to audiences. Shakespeare's plays are recommended as historical narratives decorated with poetry; history itself as educational fact; and spectacle as accurate historical information. Kean's conception of what "the public require[s]" in the theatre is

"scrupulous adherence to historical truth in costume, architecture, and the multiplied details of action...when employed in the service of the monarch of dramatic poetry."<sup>36</sup>

The kind of theatre he envisages to accord with the taste

33. Playbill for King Richard the Second, March 12th, 1857.

34. Playbill for King Richard the Second, March 12th, 1857.

35. Playbill for King Henry the Fifth, March 28th, 1859.

36. Playbill for King Henry the Eighth, May 16th, 1855.



of West End patrons is one relying on Shakespearean drama presented with pictorial embellishment "sanctioned by history....in every minute particular".<sup>37</sup> His productions presented a picture of the "life and manners" of the past, with an authenticity of detail which fleshed out the "illusion of the scene".

Kean, as the manager of a West End theatre, was as much dependent as Webster at the Haymarket on "the will and pleasure of our sovereign the public".<sup>38</sup> He draws on the bourgeois faith in fact and appearance. As an entrepreneur, selling Shakespeare to middle-class audiences aspiring to genteel status, he dignifies spectacle by presenting it as an integral and necessary part of a theatre directed to the serious purpose of education through staging the "dramatic histories" of Shakespeare. The entertainment provided thus capitalises on what is known to appeal to audience taste, but inflates it to the level of the more refined entertainment associated with a higher social class. The audience, assured that theatrical show is essential to genteel entertainment, can enjoy what is essentially pageantry behind a facade of Shakespeare, history and education. Kean as manager shares the attitudes of his audience; he similarly inflates his own basically mercantile role as entrepreneur to the more genteel one of philanthropist by avowing his concern with improving his audience. In the 1856 letter<sup>39</sup>, he deplores the aristocratic lack of interest in the social duty he himself is fulfilling:

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37. Speech reported in the Times, August 30th, 1859.

38. Webster's speech from the stage on relinquishing management, March 14th, 1853, quoted in W. Macqueen-Pope, Haymarket: Theatre of Perfection (London, 1948), p.281.

39. Letter to Colonel Phipps, in William G.E. Carson, Letters of Mr and Mrs Charles Kean relating to their American Tours (St. Louis, 1945), p.19.



"the Aristocracy visit the Princess's - and express their admiration at the show, but they come... unaccompanied with that respect and cordiality of feeling, which, I think, ought to wait on a great object...I cannot...understand why...interest in the Drama...is not exhibited from...influential quarters..."

At the same time, he states his personal aim as self-advancement:

"I seek reputation - I look for fame - I seek to establish a name...as having achieved something by perseverance, zeal and energy towards the elevation of an art of which I am proud..."

Philanthropy thus becomes a form of self-advertisement, an entrepreneurial technique for presenting one's self as a gentleman; Kean as manager is finally as much concerned with the elevation of his own social status as are his patrons.

Kean's productions, the commodities synthesised by the entrepreneur from his knowledge of the market, are embodiments of mid-Victorian bourgeois taste modified to accord with the conception of dignity of theatrical status. Shakespeare is adapted to harmonise with middle class standards and values while those elements of the original plays considered integral to dramatic greatness, and by extension representative of the qualities of gentility, are retained. Critics recognised the consistent contemporaneity of Kean's productions, in the employment of modern techniques to meet modern demands. The Times reviewer, throughout the eighteen fifties, emphasises the Princess's productions as particularly representative of the characteristics of the current theatre:

"That perfection of decorative art which many managers have applied now and then, [Kean] has applied always... The present age, as far as theatricals are concerned,

may be called the age of decoration, and its peculiarity has probably reached its culminating point in the Princess's Theatre."<sup>40</sup>

The "decorations" employed, in Pizarro, for example, "are in a style of splendour completely novel";<sup>41</sup> to Kean's reliance on the contemporary elements of decoration, novelty and antiquarian information is attributed his appeal to contemporary taste and consequent success in popularising Shakespeare. Thus

"Plays that had never been known to draw money within the memory of man were represented for, perhaps, a hundred successive nights at the Princess's..."<sup>42</sup>

Kean's novelty is a rejection of the past as well as a reliance on the techniques of the present:

"The audiences...at the Princess's...believe that old traditions, old exits and entrances, old methods of grouping will not be followed..."<sup>43</sup>

His responsiveness to current interests is his distinguishing characteristic as manager:

"he has sought to make his stage a vehicle of archaeological instruction, and thus keeps pace with that tendency of the day to obtain the most accurate information as to the life and habits of the past."<sup>44</sup>

The criticism of Kean's productions is, because of their peculiarly representative quality as the entertainment of a particular social class, a criticism of the attitudes and beliefs of that class itself, as reflected in their theatre. Morley, for example, readily extends his denun-

40. Times, June 16th, 1852.

41. Times, September 2nd, 1856.

42. Times, June 16th, 1859.

43. Times, February 15th, 1853.

44. Times, May 21st, 1855.



ciation of "a defect of taste" in the production of A Midsummer Night's Dream to the audience:

"It is evidence enough of the depraved taste of the audience to say that the ballet is encored."<sup>45</sup>

The critical doubts about Kean's productions as presentations of Shakespeare's plays are doubts about the taste of his audience. The debate over the place of spectacle in staging Shakespeare initiated by Macready's work at the patent theatres is continued with reference to the nature of the contemporary public. Donne, in his 1855 article "The Drama, Past and Present", states the issue for the mid-Victorian period:

"Do managers employ all this care and cost upon Shakespeare because the public regard him as the roof and crown of dramatic poets, or because, from the historical interest and amplitude of his plays, they coincide...with the present taste for scenical pomp and circumstance?"<sup>46</sup>

The hostility and partisanship of certain critics derives from social not theatrical preoccupations. The Illustrated London News, for example, which

"surpassed all rivals as a sixpenny paper for middle-class reading"

with a circulation of 110,000 in 1855, consistently supported Kean; in contrast, Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, "Radical" in its "teaching" and selling at threepence,<sup>47</sup>

45. Henry Morley, The Journal of a London Playgoer (London, 1891), pp.133-134.

46. W.B.Donne, Essays on the Drama (London, 1863), p.188.

47. H.R.Fox Bourne, English Newspapers (London, 1887), II, p.227.

under the editorship of Jerrold<sup>48</sup> denounced the primacy of spectacle in the productions:

"we think there ought to be something higher in the development of the drama, than the art of the painter, and the handiwork of mechanics...the scenery and furniture have been made of the first importance..."

Kean is labelled "the Barnum of tragedy" and his theatre a "furniture warehouse";<sup>49</sup> the criticism of Kean as an entrepreneur, turning art into a commodity, extends to the commercial values of the middle class. The estimation of Kean's achievement in turning to such effect the available resources of the stage as to win a new importance for the theatre, through his ability to gauge exactly the taste of his audience, becomes clouded in contemporary commentary through the critical tendency to turn from appreciation of what was actually placed on stage to the wider social issue.

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48. Jerrold and Kean quarrelled over the production of Jerrold's play, The Heart of Gold, in 1853. Cole attributes the vituperative criticism of Lloyd's and Punch to Jerrold's malice, and contradicts the assertion of Jerrold's son that after the production of the play "my father never wrote a line about Mr Kean or his management". The information is derived from J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859), II, pp.92-93, and Blanchard Jerrold, The Life and Remains of Douglas Jerrold (London, 1859), p.xi.
49. Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, May 27th, 1855; July 8th, 1855.



### XIII The Productions

Kean's Shakespeare presentations are adaptations of texts written for a theatre based on the spoken word, where the actor was placed in close proximity to his audience, to the requirements of the mid-Victorian period; the visual aspects are emphasised for the picture stage, and the portrayal of life and manners built up and presented with maximum care and attention to detail, to further scenic illusion. Throughout his prefaces, Kean refers to his productions as "a series of Historical Illustrations". He treats all Shakespeare's plays, whether tragedy, history or comedy, together with Sardanapalus and Pizarro, as "dramatic histories", distinguished solely by their respective "epochs"; consequently he selects plays for production on the basis of the potential stage effectiveness of the setting employed. In the preamble to Henry VIII, he makes his requirements clear:

"I have selected Shakespeare's KING HENRY THE EIGHTH, as offering a marked contrast to the remote and gorgeous antiquity of SARDANAPALUS, the barbaric wildness of MACBETH, the feudal pomp of KING JOHN..."<sup>1</sup>

Pizarro similarly is "a fresh chapter in the pages of the past" permitting "much that is novel in the accompanying arrangements".<sup>2</sup> The original Shakespearean texts are accordingly modified into the required historical narratives; the plays as staged resemble the French adaptations, The Corsican Brothers, Faust and Marguerite, and Louis XI, rather than Shakespeare.

Kean's method of preparing Shakespeare for the stage is demonstrated in his first major revival, King John (1852); the text required for performance is abstracted from the original by cutting, not alteration, in accordance with the "general conviction" acknowledged by Kean in the Richard III preface that the plays

"should be represented, as closely as possible, in

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1. Playbill for King Henry the Eighth, May 16th, 1855.

2. Playbill for Pizarro, September 1st, 1856.



conformity with the ascertained text of the Poet.."<sup>3</sup>

The published acting version, "as arranged for representation at the Royal Princess's Theatre",<sup>4</sup> omits approximately a third of the original, by the excision of everything not immediately relevant to the plot and the curtailment of the roles of Faulconbridge, Pandulph and Philip of France. The parts of King John and Constance are left relatively intact, and the play as staged becomes a series of events linked by the recurring figures of the protagonists. Lengthy stage business replaces the original dialogue; the stage directions call for processional exits and entrances wherever possible. Thus, before the first words of the play are spoken,

"Norfolk...Exits and returns immediately ushering in the French Herald, 6 French Barons and Chatillon... who all bow to the King on their entrance."

In the subsequent Shakespeare productions, the amount of original text decreases and the stage business proportionately increases; the acting version of Richard II (1857),<sup>5</sup> for example, omits nearly half of Shakespeare's play, still leaving a performance stated in the Times to have "occupied four hours with solid uninterrupted magnificence".<sup>6</sup> The principal piece of business introduced is the "Historical Episode" inserted between Acts III and IV, depicting

3. Playbill for King Richard the Third, February 20th, 1854.
4. King John, as arranged for representation at the Royal Princess's Theatre, with notes by Mr Charles Kean (London, 1858).
5. King Richard the Second, arranged for representation with historical and explanatory notes by Charles Kean, As first performed March 12th, 1857 (London, 1857).
6. Times, April 13th, 1857.



"the triumphal entry into London of the "mounting"  
Bolingbroke, followed by the deposed and captive  
King, "in grief and patience"."<sup>7</sup>

As a series, the productions show a progressive alteration  
in the balance between the verbal and the visual, between  
Shakespeare's poetry and Kean's spectacle, culminating in  
the total submergence of the original play in the 1859  
Henry V production.<sup>8</sup> Kean's emphasis on "illustration" is  
made explicit by the emendation of the Prologue to Act V,  
where

....and omit

"All the occurrences, whatever chanc'd,  
Till Harry's back return again to France"

becomes

" All the occurrences...." style="text-align: right;">....and show

Kean's Shakespeare productions take the form of  
a series of tableaux joined by a straightforward narrative  
dominated by one principal character. The Corsican Brothers  
(1852) is similarly constructed round the tableaux which  
conclude each act;<sup>9</sup> the dialogue in Act I, for example,  
serves only as preparation for the appearance of the ghost  
of one of the twin brothers who are the play's protagonists:..

"LOUIS DEI FRANCHI has gradually appeared rising  
through the floor...with blood upon his breast..."

The ghost introduces the tableaux:

7. Playbill for King Richard the Second, March 12th, 1857.

8. King Henry the Fifth, with historical and explanatory notes, by Charles Kean, F.S.A. As first performed March 28th, 1859 (London, 1972).

9. Dion Boucicault, The Corsican Brothers, in English Plays of the Nineteenth Century, II, Dramas 1850-1900, ed. Michael R. Booth (London, 1973), pp.31-70.

"the back of the scene opens and discloses a glade in the Forest of Fontainebleau. On one side is a young man wiping the blood from his sword...On the other side, LOUIS DEI FRANCHI extended on the ground, supported by his two seconds and a surgeon. Act drop slowly descends."

II.1 is conducted during a "Masked Ball at the [Paris] Opera", and closes with "Music, Gallopads and Polka..."; the final act ends with a duel and the re-appearance of the ghost:

"CHÂTEAU-RENAUD and FABIEN DEI FRANCHI close in mortal conflict...FABIEN plunges his weapon into [CHÂTEAU-RENAUD's] breast...LOUIS DEI FRANCHI appears rising gradually through the earth..."

In the same manner, the Shakespeare productions, whether historically based in the original or not, move from effect to effect, with a minimum of words. The Tempest (1857),<sup>10</sup> for example, opens with "A Ship in a storm"; during the course of the second scene

"the waters abate, the sun rises, and tides recede, leaving the yellow sands..."

Act III employs a transformation:

"The scene is gradually transformed from barrenness to luxuriant vegetation, after which, enter many strange shapes bearing fruit and flowers, with which they form a banquet and disappear."

At the end of the act the "Shapes, etc., reappear. Dance."

Act IV is chiefly occupied with the Masque of Juno; the production concludes with the departure of Prospero from the island:

"The ship gradually sails off. Island recedes from the stage, and Ariel remains alone in mid air...Distant chorus of spirits."

The dialogue of the first two scenes of Richard II is

10. The Tempest, with historical and explanatory notes by Charles Kean, as first performed July 1st, 1857 (London, 1972).



reduced to the minimum necessary to prepare for the tournament of the third; the advance of Bolingbroke's army across "The Wilds in Gloucestershire" concludes the second act; the third culminates in the "Historical Episode"; the sparse dialogue remaining in Act 5 is filled out by a protracted struggle between Richard and his eight assassins, in the course of which he kills four; and the final curtain falls on Bolingbroke and the Lords grouped round Richard's bier.

The dramatic structure of Shakespeare's plays is reduced to melodrama as defined in the preface to The Woodman's Hut (1814):<sup>11</sup>

"If it err in having too much action, it has a counterbalancing advantage in not being clogged by excess of speech...Melo-drama...places characters in striking situations, leaving the situations to tell for themselves, and carefully avoids encumbering them with language"

Kean's presentations, individually and as a series, also show the continual search for novelty in the contrivance of "striking situations" of melodrama; he is additionally encumbered, however, by his avowed allegiance to "accuracy, not show".<sup>12</sup> Spectacle requires the justification of historical truth; thus he writes to George Godwin, an architect and antiquarian, about The Winter's Tale (1856):

"I am very anxious about this said Palace of Polixenes - I should like to make a grand display in this situation but cannot find a cause - a Banquet would not do as Leontes has one in the first Act...Can you think of any reason for an effect..."<sup>13</sup>

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11. Quoted in Michael R. Booth, English Melodrama (London, 1965), pp.38-39.

12. Playbill for King Henry the Fifth, March 28th, 1859.

13. Quoted in C.J. Carlisle, Shakespeare from the Greenroom (London, 1970), p.27.

His search failed on this occasion, and he was obliged to rely on the "Festival of Dionysia" which followed two scenes later in IV.4.<sup>14</sup> "Contrast" within the "series of Historical Illustrations" is stressed in the Henry VIII preface as much as the magnificence of particular settings; by the middle of the decade, his prefaces recommend his productions to audiences as much for their novelty as for their accuracy of "scenic display". The Winter's Tale "employs many new accompaniments",<sup>15</sup> while the revival of The Tempest "impart[s] a generally new character" to the original play.<sup>16</sup>

Since Kean defines "proper dramatic effect" in "Historical Illustration" as a matter of authentic archeological information,<sup>17</sup> novelty in stage effect is proportional to the quantity of factual detail incorporated in spectacle. Historical truth is attested in Kean's productions by the accumulation of data drawn from incontestable authorities, in the same way that the truth to "everyday experience" of melodrama is a function of the quantity of concrete objects from the "real world" which surrounds it. As the spectacle introduced into the original plays grows more elaborate, so the quantity of documentation required increases; the footnotes in the acting version of King John, citing authorities for details of costume and

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14. The Winter's Tale, with Historical and Explanatory Notes by Charles Kean, As first performed April 28th, 1856 (London, 1972).

15. Playbill for The Winter's Tale, April 28th, 1856.

16. Playbill for The Tempest, July 1st, 1857.

17. Playbill for Sardanapalus, June 13th, 1853.



architecture, are expanded into the "Historical Notes" appended to each act in the later printed texts, which supply supporting evidence for whole scenes as Kean moves from depicting the events of the original play to inserting additional "episodes". The "Historical Episode" of Henry V, for example, is followed by copious extracts from a translation of

"a Latin MS., accidentally discovered in the British Museum, written by a Priest, who accompanied the English army..."<sup>18</sup>

The water colour drawing prepared from this episode as staged<sup>19</sup> bear out the minutiae of the quoted description, from the "Mayor and Aldermen in scarlet" to the

"innumerable boys representing angels, arrayed in white, and with...glittering wings, and virgin locks set with precious twigs of laurel..."

The Pizarro production (1856)<sup>20</sup> is backed by massive extracts from "Prescott's 'History of the Conquest of Peru'" and references to "Rivero and Tschudi's 'Peruvian Antiquities'". The notes to the text of The Merchant of Venice (1858)<sup>21</sup> similarly recount the entire history of Venice, drawing chiefly from an unattributed "Sketches of Venetian History", supplemented by incidental information about social customs and architecture, as corroboration for the stage production's "faithful representation of the picturesque city".<sup>22</sup>

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18. Playbill for King Henry the Fifth, March 28th, 1859.

19. Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Details of the Collection are given in the Bibliography, p307

20. Pizarro, with historical and explanatory notes by Charles Kean (London, 1856).

21. The Merchant of Venice, with historical and explanatory notes by Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1858).

22. Playbill for The Merchant of Venice, June 12th, 1858.



The process of turning Shakespeare's plays into melodrama requires the simplification of all complexities and the removal of inconsistencies; to avoid potential ambiguity the indefinite is rendered concrete, since the objective of melodrama is to confirm, not analyse, audience preconceptions. Lear (1858) thus becomes

"The story of King Lear and his three daughters...a  
...picture of filial ingratitude and paternal despair  
aggravated into madness."<sup>23</sup>

The resistance of the original text to reduction to domestic fable is evidenced by the exceptional amount of cutting and rearrangement required.<sup>24</sup> In III.4, for example, Kean follows the Shakespeare text up to the entrance of Gloucester, at which point the trial of Goneril from III.6 is inserted; Gloucester then enters and the remainder of the scene interweaves lines from III.4 and III.6. III.5 and III.7, dealing respectively with Edmund's treachery against his father and the blinding of Gloucester, are omitted, in accordance with Kean's minimalisation of the Gloucester subplot and modification of words and phrases in the interests of propriety. The quantity of excisions and reorganisation necessary to extract an acceptable acting version from the Shakespeare play results in incipient confusion; by IV.2 a footnote explaining Goneril's motives and intentions is required. The play as staged is a simple narrative of the misfortunes of Lear, enlivened by such "striking situations" as the storm on the heath and the duel between Edgar and

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23. Playbill for King Lear, April 17th, 1858.

24. King Lear, with Notes by Charles Kean, F.S.A. As first performed April 17th, 1858 (London, 1972).



Edmund in the final scene; everything not immediately germane to Lear's domestic story is excluded. The story itself is supplied with a "definite epoch as the supposed time of action" as opposed to that of "the mythical age to which Lear belongs";<sup>25</sup> the setting for IV.6 of the original text, "The Country near Dover", shows "a Roman road and an ancient obelisk" in Kean's version. Lear becomes a particular individual living in a particular place at a particular time, "the Anglo-Saxon era of the eighth century"; the indefinite is made specific, and Lear, as staged by Kean, has relevance only in individual and local terms. Particularisation of chronology and locality also ensures visual consistency; "uniformity of character in the accessories" and "regulation of the scenery and dresses" is possible in Kean's Lear but not in Shakespeare's.

The verisimilitude of melodrama results from its equation of truth with empirically verifiable fact. Kean's productions consistently assign specific locations to each of Shakespeare's scenes; the first scene of his Richard II, for example, takes place in "London - Privy Council Chamber in the Palace of Westminster", and the scenic specifications which follow give rise to a proliferation of notes documenting the archeological detail called for by the particularisation of setting. The direction that

"The walls and roof are decorated with the badges and cognisances of Richard the Second"

leads to a heraldic discussion which adduces as evidence "the wall over the door leading to the East cloisters from

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25. Playbill for King Lear, April 17th, 1858.

the South aisle of Westminster Abbey". The truth of fact which results from the substitution of spectacle for poetry, when expanded beyond its immediate frame of reference, leads only to further facts. In showing what Shakespeare omits, Kean identifies spectacle with poetry; the "Historical Episode" in Richard II, for example,

"embodies in action what Shakespeare has so beautifully described in the speech of York to his Duchess..."<sup>26</sup>

Since spectacle, like poetry, is a means of embellishing fact, Kean uses the original text to suggest tableaux. In the conclusion to IV.8 of Henry V, on Henry's words, "Do we all holy rites...",

"Curtains of the Royal Pavilion are drawn aside, and discover Altar and priests."

The scene closes with

"Organ music; all kneel, and join in song of thanksgiving."

In melodrama, the verbal is made concrete in spectacle; the literal meaning of the text is spelt out through detail, rendering it totally unambiguous. Thus the patriotic fervour of the IV.3 "St. Crispin's" speech is emphasised by the accompanying stage business; the water-colour drawing of the scene in action prepared from the production<sup>27</sup> shows Henry in the centre of an army flourishing their weapons, as the national hero, the leader and inspirer of his country's forces and the focus of English enthusiasm. Kean's tableaux embody in theatrical form Bagehot's concept of the "picturesque",<sup>28</sup> drawing on the truth of fact,

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26. Playbill for King Richard the Second, March 12th, 1857.

27. Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

28. Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning" in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D. Jones (London, 1952), pp.372-375.



Bagehot's "real world", to create a "summary scene" which is the "full development" of what is otherwise "indistinct".

The adaptation of Shakespeare for middle class audiences melodramatises the original while retaining the theatrical dignity of dramatic poetry by reinterpreting poetry as embellishment of fact; spectacle, indicative of contemporaneity in staging, is in turn dignified by being associated with historical truth, and the distinction between truth as an accumulation of factual data and truth as essence, Arnold's "general ideas which are the law of this vast multitude of facts"<sup>29</sup> is ignored. The meaning of Kean's productions for his audiences is embodied in his tableaux, the picturesque "types" which organise disparate historical facts; the tableaux reflect bourgeois attitudes to history.

In dealing with the history "drawn from our own annals"<sup>30</sup> Kean shares the bland progressivism of his contemporaries. His attitude is the simple-minded optimism of the mid-Victorian bourgeois, convinced of the superiority of the English nation, its civilizing mission, its undimmed and ever-expanding progress down the ages to the assured fulfillment of a glorious present and a yet more glorious future. His productions are redolent with the euphoric self-congratulatory patriotism of the boom years of British capitalism, exemplifying on the stage, the calm certainty

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29. Matthew Arnold, "On the Modern Element in Literature" in Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), p.59.

30. Playbill for King Richard the Second, March 12th, 1857.

enunciated by Macaulay in the opening pages of The History of England (1848):<sup>31</sup>

"the general effect of this chequered narrative will be to excite thankfulness in all religious minds, and hope in the breasts of all patriots. For the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement...no man who is correctly informed as to the past will be disposed to take a morose or desponding view of the present."

In Kean's Richard II, accordingly, contrary to his habitual practice of excising everything not directly relevant to the narrative, he permits Gaunt's "This England" speech in II.1 to remain, but in a modified form, excluding such references to present decline as

"This England, that was wont to conquer others  
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself."

Even the plays which do not employ specifically English historical settings present images gratifying to national pride. The entire production of Sardanapalus is a celebration of national achievement, Layard's excavation of Nineveh:<sup>32</sup>

"In the production of Lord Byron's Tragedy of 'Sardanapalus', I have availed myself of the wonderful discoveries made within the last few years, by Layard, Botta, and others, on the site of the ancient Nineveh... I consider myself fortunate in having been permitted to link together the momentous discoveries of one renowned Englishman with the poetic labours of another."<sup>33</sup>

The Winter's Tale and A Midsummer Night's Dream use ancient

31. T.B. Macaulay, The History of England (London, 1966), pp.1-3.

32. Sir Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894) excavated the Ninevah site in 1846, and published an account, Ninevah and its Remains, 1848-1849. Sculptures from the site were transferred to the British Museum in the early eighteen fifties.

33. Playbill for Sardanapalus, June 13th, 1853.



Athens as an image of the achievements of civilisation.

In the latter play Kean rejects the time of Theseus when

"the buildings existing in Athens...were most probably rude in construction...Such edifices could have nothing in common with the impressions of Greek civilisation that exist in every educated mind"

Instead, he chooses to represent the city

"at a time when it had attained its greatest splendour in literature and in art - when it stood in its pride and glory, ennobled by a race of illustrious men, and containing the most beautiful objects the world had ever seen"

Athens as presented on stage is specifically associated with the Christian era; in his preface Kean describes the setting used for the opening scene:

"The Acropolis, on its rocky eminence, surrounded by marble Temples, has been restored, together with the Theatre of Bacchus...near which stands that memorable hill from whence the words of sacred truth were first promulgated to the Athenian citizens by apostolic inspiration."<sup>34</sup>

The Winter's Tale production also employs the image of Greece, paralleling mid-Victorian England with Athens "at the summit of her political prosperity". "Assuming that the civilisation of Athens was reflected by Syracuse", Kean

"places before the eyes of the spectator, tableaux vivants of the private and public life of the ancient Greeks, at a time when the arts flourished to... perfection..."<sup>35</sup>

The refinement of Leontes' court is contrasted with the uncouth rusticity of the Bithynia of Asia Minor substituted by Kean for the anachronistic Bohemia of the original play. I.2 displays the festivities at Syracuse:

"Banqueting room in Palace...guests, crowned with Chaplets, discovered reclining on couches, after the

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34. Playbill for A Midsummer Night's Dream, October 15th, 1856.

35. Playbill for The Winter's Tale, April 28th, 1856.

manner of the ancient Greeks...cupbearers, slaves, female water carriers, and boys, variously employed. Musicians playing Hymn to Apollo. After which enter 36 youths in complete armour, who perform the evolutions of the Pyrrhic Dance."

The Bithynian setting provides a dance of Satyrs in IV.4:

"Re-enter shepherd with 12 rustics, habited like Satyrs; accompanied by a crowd of peasantry who dance wildly and indulge in all the extravagant merriment of a Dionysia..."

In the preface to The Tempest,<sup>36</sup> the island of the play is associated with the discovery of America,

"the first revelation of a new hemisphere to the eyes of astonished Europe..."

Macaulay, itemising the manifestations of British greatness, cites America, where

"the British colonies rapidly became far mightier and wealthier than the realms which Cortes and Pizarro had added to the dominions of Charles the Fifth"

Kean's production glorifies the Englishman as coloniser. Under Prospero's dominion, nature is subdued and turned to man's advantage; he calms the storm of the opening scene, and transforms "barrenness to luxuriant vegetation" in III.3. Harmony and order are established; the "divers Spirits" used to chastise Caliban in IV.1 are liberated, and Prospero, having civilized the barbaric, leaves the island:

"Night descends. The Spirits, released by Prospero, take their flight from the island...Morning breaks, and shows a ship in a calm..."

In the prefaces to the English historical productions, Kean calls attention to those events of the past foreshadowing the contemporary triumph of post Reform

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36. Playbill for The Tempest, July 1st, 1857.



Bill bourgeois democracy and its expanding economy. His discussion of Henry VIII focuses on the Reformation; the appeal of the play for his audience lies in its treatment of

"a period and chain of events...intimately associated with our strongest national feelings, and, above all, productive of that wonderful and controlling change in the destinies of England - THE REFORMATION."

The King John preface similarly emphasises the signing of "the Great Charter of English Freedom" "by which the liberty of England was founded". Kean's values are conspicuously part of the conventional wisdom of his age. The attitudes he brings to his theatre productions can be most fully understood as extensions of the current optimism expressed at its most typical by Macaulay - whose intention in The History is to relate

"how, from the auspicious union of order and freedom, sprang a prosperity of which the annals of human affairs had furnished no example; how our country... rose to the place of umpire among European powers; how her opulence and martial glory grew together..."

The events of the past are thus understood in terms of the standards and values of the present; the unswerving optimism of such an attitude was not, however, without its critics, and the criticism could, with equal relevance, be applied to Kean's own work. <sup>The conservatively-inclined</sup> Carlyle, for example, in Past and Present (1843) measures the degeneracy of the present by comparison with the order of the past, and Arnold urged "commerce with the ancients" to produce

"in those who constantly practise it, a steadying and composing effect upon their judgement...of men and events in general." 37

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37. Matthew Arnold, 1853 Preface to Poems, in Selected Prose, ed. P.J. Keating (London, 1970), p.52.

Arnold criticises Macaulay as "the great apostle of the Philistines", using "Philistinism" to epitomise "the genuine British narrowness" that has made them

"of all people, the most inaccessible to ideas and the most impatient of them..."

Macaulay's work, like Kean's, is popular because it presents the truth of fact that confirms preconceptions common to the author and his readers:

"beyond the apparent rhetorical truth of things he never could penetrate; for their vital truth...he had absolutely no organ...as Lord Macaulay's own generation dies out, as a new generation arrives, without those ideas and tendencies...which Lord Macaulay so deeply shared and so happily satisfied, will he give the same pleasure?"<sup>38</sup>

The bourgeois attitude to history sees it as an accumulation of indisputable facts; the historian, like the theatre manager, thus becomes an entrepreneur, concerned not with understanding historical events, since their meaning is already agreed, but with presenting them as attractively as possible, to appeal to the taste of the prospective market. Kean's preoccupation is with staging, not textual interpretation. His preface to Macbeth<sup>39</sup> focuses exclusively on the difficulties of stage presentation and makes no reference either to the play or to the historical events it depicts:

"The very uncertain information, which we possess respecting the dress worn by the inhabitants of Scotland in the eleventh century, renders any attempt to present this tragedy attired in the costume of the period a task of very great difficulty."

38. Matthew Arnold, "Essays in Criticism (1865)", in Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), pp.162-163, 173-174.

39. Playbill for Macbeth, November 1st, 1858.



Macaulay likewise in his 1835 Edinburgh Review article on Sir James Mackintosh's History of the Revolution in England, in 1688 praises the author chiefly for the "vivacity and colouring" of his style:

"A history of England, written throughout in this manner, would be the most fascinating book in the English language. It would be more in request at the circulating libraries than the last novel."<sup>40</sup>

Macaulay's proof of success, like Kean's, is public demand; in a letter of 1841 he writes, referring to The History of England:

"I shall not be satisfied unless I produce something which shall for a few days supersede the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies."<sup>41</sup>

John Morley's<sup>42</sup> analysis of Macaulay's readers in an article written in 1876<sup>43</sup> could be equally well applied to Kean's audiences:

"Macaulay came upon the world of letters, just as the middle classes...were expanding into enormous prosperity...His essays...make an incomparable manual...for a busy uneducated man who...wish[es] to know a little about the great lives and great thoughts...that have marked the journey of man through the ages."

The means adopted by Kean and Macaulay to appeal to contemporary taste correspond closely; Macaulay's style, like Kean's spectacle, made historical facts vivid. John

40. T.B. Macaulay, Critical and Historical Essays (London, 1963), I, pp. 279-280.

41. Reprinted in Sir George Otto Trevelyan, The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay (Oxford, 1961), II, p. 41.

42. John Morley (1838-1923), became editor of the Fortnightly Review, which he saw as the champion of the enlightened minority, in 1866. In 1877 he was put in charge of the English Men of Letters series. He later entered politics.

43. Reprinted in John Morley, Nineteenth Century Essays, ed. Peter Stansky (London, 1970) pp. 73-97.



Morley writes:

"whatever [Macaulay's] special subject, he contrives to pour into it...a stream of rich, graphic, and telling illustrations..."

Kean's Henry V production (1859) embodies most fully the "stock notions and beliefs" of his audience, exemplifying the bourgeois projection on to the past of their own preconceptions, and at the same time demonstrating the limitations and ultimately distortions of the "truth" compounded from factual detail. The play as presented is a series of tableaux glorifying the greatness of England, most fully represented by Henry himself, and offset by the degeneracy of the French. Kean presents his own view of the events of "a most honourable era in English history" in his preface:<sup>44</sup>

"The period...is flattering to our national pride... there are few amongst us who can be reminded...of Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt, without a glow of patriotic enthusiasm...The play is...a lay of the minstrel pouring forth a paean of victory. The gallant feats of our forefathers are brought vividly before our eyes...reminding us of the prowess of Englishmen in early days, and conveying an assurance of what they will ever be in the hour of peril."

Visually, the production emphasises the completeness of the French defeat; the siege of Harfleur concludes thus:

"Soldiers shout. Governor and others come from town and kneeling, present to Henry the keys of the city... March. The English army enter the town through the breach."

The stage direction on each appearing of the French Herald, Mountjoy, specifies that he "uncovers and kneels" before Henry. The simple piety of the English is contrasted with

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44. Playbill for King Henry the Fifth, March 28th, 1859.



the moral reprehensibility of the French; two tableaux are interpolated into the Chorus description, in the prologue to Act IV, of the armies on the night before Agincourt, showing respectively the

"interior of French tent with Dauphin, Constable, Orleans, and others playing at dice"

and the

"English camp, group of soldiery praying."

Through spectacle, Kean both underlines the original text and supplements it at those points which seem to him most significant; the tableaux embody selected facts, discarding those not in accordance with the attitude to the events presented in the production.

The acting version of the text similarly distorts Shakespeare's play; following his usual practice, Kean reduces the original to a straightforward narrative. The lines he excludes are those which detract from the depiction of Henry as hero and the campaign as glorious. Thus II.1, where Falstaff's sickness is announced and attributed to the King's rejection, is omitted. All references to the brutality of war are excised: Henry's discourse on treason in II.2 and Exeter's speech in II.4 on the effects of "hungry war" disappear; he cuts out the killing of the baggage boys and the French prisoners in IV.6 and 7. By a combination of visual emphasis and verbal suppression, Kean abstracts a play which conveys his own preconceived notions about the Agincourt of the historical past; his view is shared by Macaulay who writes of this period:

"The greatest victories recorded in the history of the middle ages were gained...Victories indeed they were

of which a nation may be justly proud; for they are to be attributed to the moral superiority of the victors." 45

The "Historical Episode" celebrates Henry's triumph as a working out of God's purpose for England; the preface describes Henry as

"the chosen instrument of heaven, crowned with imperishable glory...His bearing is invariably gallant, chivalrous, and truly devout...Ever in the true feeling of a Christian warrior, placing his trust in the one Supreme Power, the only Giver of Victory!"

The English subservience to God is rewarded by victory over the French; the "anonymous chronicler's" description of the King's entrance into London, laboriously recreated on stage by Kean, presents it in terms that would be appropriate for his entrance into heaven:

"A company of Prophets...sang with sweet harmony...a song of thanksgiving...twelve kings, martyrs and confessors...chaunted with one accord at the King's approach...round about angels shone with celestial gracefulness, chaunting sweetly..."

Kean's Henry V provided his audience with consolation for the recent humiliations of the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny; the production affirms England's martial and moral superiority, playing on chauvinistic hostility to the French, and provides the kind of "gratification" Coleridge's "Defender" found in "modern sentimental plays", the precursors of melodrama:

"Fortune is blind, but the poet has his eyes open, and is, besides, as complaisant as Fortune is capricious. He makes everything turn out exactly as we would wish it." 46

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45. J.B.Macaulay, The History of England (London, 1966), p.14

46. S.T.Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London, 1894), pp.361-362.



The truth compounded of factual detail conveyed through spectacle in Kean's productions is contradicted by events in the world outside the theatre; the picturesque "type" does not embody "reality" but distorts it. Kean's productions, grounded on melodramatic techniques, become subject to the criticisms made of melodrama, to the charge of, for example, the kind of "pernicious fallacy" George Eliot notes in Dickens, when the critic is hostile to the viewpoint presented. Kean's theatre, like that of the "Defender", evokes a "sympathy" in audiences that is, for the hostile commentator, "a gross self-delusion", directly contrary to "what experience teaches us", and based on the "confusion and subversion of the natural order of things".

Kean's theatre provides audiences with a version of "reality" preferable to that of the world outside the theatre; it is both totally consistent, and unlike "everyday experience", supports "stock notions and beliefs". Shakespeare's plays are used to vindicate the bourgeois attitudes shared by the manager and his audience; criticism of Kean's productions is thus a criticism of the standards, values and modes of perception which imbue them, and not of his stagecraft, while his treatment of the poetry of the original texts as embellishment of fact raises for critics a further issue which also divided the conservative and progressive camps, the wider question of the nature of poetry in the contemporary world.

#### XIV The Criticism

In On Heroes and Hero Worship, Carlyle sets out the notion of poetry as a means of penetrating beneath surface appearance to essential qualities; the poet reveals

"the sacred mystery of the universe...of which all Appearance...is but the vesture, the embodiment that renders it visible."<sup>1</sup>

Leigh Hunt, writing in 1844 on "What is Poetry?", similarly presents poetry as a means of reaching a higher truth than those of "fact" or "science":

"poetry begins where matter of fact or of science ceases to be merely such, and to exhibit a further truth..."<sup>2</sup>

Wordsworth in the "Preface" to the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads opposes "Poetry" to "Matter of Fact, or Science",<sup>3</sup> and his distinction is repeated by Mill in the 1833 essay "What is Poetry?"<sup>4</sup> Coleridge, criticising the defects of Wordsworth's own poetry in Biographia Literaria,<sup>5</sup> discusses its "matter-of-factness", which he defines as

"First, a laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects, and their positions... secondly, the insertion of accidental circumstances, in order to the full explanation of his living characters, their dispositions and actions..."

1. Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes and Hero Worship (London, 1959), p.313.
2. Leigh Hunt, "What is Poetry?", in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D.Jones (London, 1956), p.257.
3. William Wordsworth, "Poetry and Poetic Diction", in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D.Jones (London, 1956), p.10, n.1.
4. J.S.Mill, "What is Poetry?", Essays on Literature and Society, ed. J.B.Schneewind (London, 1955), p.104.
5. S.T.Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London, 1894), pp.214-220.



This "accidentality" is incompatible with "the essence of poetry"; "matter-of-factness" is properly the province of the historian, whose kind of truth he defines by quoting from Davenant as "that truth, narrative and past" which is "a dead thing". The poet's truth, in contrast, is

"truth operative, and by effects continually alive...  
who hath not her existence in matter, but in reason."

The conservative Coleridge's own mode of thought, as analysed by Mill<sup>6</sup>, is that of the poet, who searches for meaning by "digging down to the root"; the progressive Bentham's is that of the historian, the "method of detail":

"this practice of never reasoning about wholes till they have been resolved into their parts, nor about abstractions until they have been translated into realities..."<sup>7</sup>

Kean's production style applied the "method of detail" to poetry, in fragmenting Shakespeare's plays into a series of concrete and particular images. <sup>In Coleridge's terms,</sup> the "dead" truth of "matter-of-factness" was thus imposed on the "living" truth of reason, and his productions condemned for so doing from the conservative critical viewpoint.

Whereas Marston praises Macready's performance of Richelieu in terms of "familiar touches" and "traits", and the consequent avoidance of the "error" of "over-idealizing",<sup>8</sup> Lewes, reviewing Kean's 1852 production of King John,<sup>9</sup> condemns the application of the "method of

6. J.S.Mill, "Coleridge", Essays on Literature and Society, ed. J.B.Schneewind (London, 1965), p.292.

7. J.S.Mill, "Bentham", Essays on Literature and Society, ed. J.B.Schneewind (London, 1965), p.252.

8. Westland Marston, Our Recent Actors (London, 1888), I, pp.38-53.

9. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.177-183.

detail" to the performance of Shakespearean roles as a distortion and diminution. In Mrs Kean's portrayal of Constance

"in a domestic light, stripped of all the elevation and grandeur of poetry"

he finds an instance of the transposition of the wrong "order of truth" into tragedy. "The chasm which separates tragedy from domestic drama" is that between

"the impassioned grandeur of ideal sorrow and the prosaic truth of domestic woe [,]"

between Constance and "a widow de la rue St.Denis". Lewes contrasts the "truth" of everyday life, of "matter-of-fact", with that of poetry; he defines the debasement of tragedy into domestic drama as a process of making it middle class, of portraying a queen as a bourgeois housewife. Lewes objects likewise to Kean's "unkingly, unideal presentation" of King John and to the ignobility of his Macbeth (1853).<sup>10</sup> He admits the effectiveness of such a style of performance on audiences, but condemns the effect as one addressed not to the understanding but to the senses:

"I venture to doubt whether the effect was such as any poetic or cultivated mind can on reflection approve."

Ultimately, Lewes dismisses the Macbeth performance as falsification from the actor's inability to understand Shakespeare; he takes

"the literal and unintelligent interpretation, so that almost every phase of the character is falsified."

"Matter-of-Fact" is associated with the superficial intellect of the middle classes and the appeal to the senses;

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10. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.232-240.



Shakespeare with grandeur and nobility, and the higher truth of poetry which goes beyond surface appearance; detail thus in the end becomes deception, and the verification of the "dead" truth of fact the distortion of the "truth operative" of poetry.

In contrast, Marston writes of the detail of Kean's acting style in the 1857 Richard II as achieving "that poetic truth which is the inmost reality". Kean's performance, as described, is a portrayal of external characteristics, which Marston calls "realistic peculiarities". "Poetic truth" here is the truth of "matter-of-factness", the "perfect embodiment" of the "picturesque"; appearance is equated with essence. Character, when created from an accumulation of traits of behaviour, through "a laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation", becomes a matter of idiosyncrasies. Similarly, Marston writes of Kean's performance as Wolsey in the 1855 Henry VIII as the portrayal of an "individual" through

"the quaintest realism of detail, sometimes embracing the minutest peculiarities of a character..."<sup>11</sup>

The truth thus expressed is a particular truth, the empirical truth of factual evidence. The higher truth ascribed to poetry as opposed to history or science is claimed to be superior because of the universality of its application; Coleridge, in criticising Wordsworth, writes of the "uselessness" of introducing "minute matters of

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11. Westland Marston, Our Recent Actors (London, 1888), p.198.

fact" into

"a poem of the loftiest style, and on subjects the loftiest and of the most universal interest..."

Detail in acting style was required, like decoration in staging, to be restrained. The reviewer in the Illustrated London News, comments approvingly on Mrs Kean's performance as Katherine in Henry VIII in "the dying scene" as "the very poetry of suffering", expressed

"not by violent contortion of face or gasping spasms, but by the wandering eye and hesitating speech..."<sup>12</sup>

Poetry here is associated with the refinement of good manners, the gentility aspired to by the middle classes; it is also an attribute of emotion, a means of embellishment, and lacks any definite quality in itself. In the same way, an excess of "non-ideal elaboration" is related to the vulgarity of trade. John Oxenford, the Times dramatic critic, raises the point whether the "excessive realism" of Kean's Wolsey can be considered "'art'". The Wolsey Kean portrays through a multiplicity of detail Oxenford describes as "a parvenu", "the butcher's son" rather than "an intrinsically awful personage".<sup>13</sup> Donne, in his 1855 article on "The Drama, Past and Present",<sup>14</sup> urges that "actual truth" be kept subservient to the "imaginative" truth of "art"; in Mrs Kean's "close imitation of the presence of sickness" in her performance as Katherine, he finds "the real over-powered the ideal". The limits of art are the

12. Illustrated London News, May 19th, 1855.

13. Times, May 21st, 1855.

14. W.B. Donne, Essays on the Drama (London, 1863), pp.187-206.



limits of good taste, the class quality of gentility.

The poetry which embodies "truth operative" raises particular fact to the level of the universal; it synthesises individual details into a unity greater than the parts which compose it, and appeals to the higher faculties. The history which deals with "dead truth" sees poetry as the decoration of fact, a means of making individual details attractive to appeal to the senses. Where the function of poetry is held to be the embellishment of fact, its role can be performed equally well if not better by visual rather than verbal means, since the impact of the visual on the senses is immediate and totally excludes the intellect. The visual is free from ambiguity, whereas the verbal requires the exercise of the understanding, and permits possible misinterpretation. By employing spectacle in staging and detail in acting Kean emphasises the facts which the poetry of the original Shakespeare text synthesises and universalises into "truth operative"; poetry becomes redundant in Kean's productions because the function attributed to it is being more effectively fulfilled by alternative means. In such a style of staging, appearance is essence, in that essence is conceived of in terms of what can be conveyed visually; consequently it is particularly suited to conveying information to the "mechanical" mind of the middle classes. Detail and spectacle, however, in being governed by the requirement of restraint imposed by the audience for whom they are adopted, in fulfilling their function become obsolete; their objective is to create maximum impact on the senses, an impact which is



weakened by repetition. If further developed to increase their effect, the result is exaggeration, which is rejected by audiences. Detail and spectacle, accordingly, require to be constantly renewed to provide further stimulation. Kean's methods of presentation admirably fulfilled his objectives, blending what his audiences acknowledged as education with amusement, and avoiding the tedium of repetition through constant novelty. The criticism of his treatment of Shakespearean poetry derives not from the productions themselves, but from condemnation of the taste which applauds them; thus Ruskin characterises the restless, continual pursuit of amusement of those obsessed with "the trappings" of life as the unhealthy hunger, eternally dissatisfied, for constant novelty:

"the necessity for this amusement is fastening on us as a feverous disease of parched throat and wandering eyes - senseless, dissolute, merciless..."<sup>15</sup>

Lewes similarly cites "novelty" as one of the essentials for theatrical prosperity<sup>16</sup>, and Bagehot describes the "showy art" which appeals to the literary taste of "the middle class":

"not that which permanently relieves the eye and makes it happy whenever it looks, and as long as it looks, but glaring art which catches and arrests the eye for a moment, but which in the end fatigues it. But before...the fatigue...arrives, the hasty reader has passed on to some new excitement, which in its turn stimulates for an instant, and then is passed by for ever."<sup>17</sup>

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15. John Ruskin, "Of Kings' Treasuries", Sesame and Lilies (London, 1965), p.34.

16. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), p.80.

17. Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning" in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D.Jones (London, 1956), p.420.



The Times account of Kean's 1858 performance as Lear conveys an impression of the actor's continual pursuit of additional and fresh detail with which to embellish his performance; Kean's "elaborate delineation" of the "individual qualities" of Lear is described thus:

"not a moment's rest does he allow himself, but throughout the piece he is constantly presenting some new trait that will give additional reality to the part. Evidently considering that Lear's nature is summed up in his confession that he is a "foolish, fond old man", he works out all these adjectives in their fullest significance. All the details...he produces with the most searching minuteness...Nothing could be more powerful or intense than the curse at the end of the first act...his cursing electrifies the house."<sup>18</sup>

Where poetry is opposed to "matter-of-fact", Kean's "method of detail" in acting is found manifestly at variance with the original Shakespearean character. Alternatively, in roles in the French adaptations, the correspondence between performance style and role is praised. The "method of detail" harmonises with melodrama; the limitations and superficialities of each promote their shared objective of maximum audience effect. Thus Lewes sums up the course of Kean's acting career:

"born with a decided aptitude for melodrama, he

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18. Times, April 19th, 1858.

exercised himself as a melodramatist in Shakespeare... in The Corsican Brothers he is excellent...He has found his vein...Let him peril it no more by Shakespeare..."<sup>19</sup>

He discusses the effectiveness of the production of The Corsican Brothers (1852)<sup>20</sup> in arousing a physical reaction in the audience through the "reality" created by the use of restrained detail; Kean's performance preserves

"a gentlemanly demeanour...which intensifies the passion of the part, and gives it a terrible reality"

before which the audience sits "breath-suspended". Oxenford in the Times similarly associates "effects" and the arousal of "intense interest", praising Kean's performance as "striking".<sup>21</sup> Marston's description of Kean's performance in the title role of Louis XI (1855)<sup>22</sup> amounts to a catalogue of details; his first entrance is described thus:

"the askant and furtive look, the figure bent slightly forward, the slow and wary step, the hands closely locked..."

Such "realism of detail, sometimes embracing the minutest peculiarities of a character" is equated with "truth to nature", arousing "deep interest" in the audience. The "interest" excited, both by The Corsican Brothers and by Louis XI, is, from a hostile viewpoint, its own condemnation; it appeals to the "insane taste" to which Bagehot attributes a delight in "grotesque art",<sup>23</sup>

19; John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), p.196.

20. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.185-189.

21. Times, February 2nd, 1852.

22. Westland Marston, Our Recent Actors (London, 1888), I, pp.192-197.

23. Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning" in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century) ed. Edmund D.Jones (London, 1956), pp.406-413.



which deals

"not with normal types but with abnormal specimens... not with what nature is striving to be, but with what, by some lapse, she has happened to become."

Thus Marston comments on the "fascination" of the part of Louis:

"repulsive, but never to be forgotten, its sudden and terrible fascination for the audience was something like that felt by a wayfarer of old, when lamp or torch on the road abruptly disclosed to him the erect gibbet and its hideous burden."

Oxenford refers to the "pleasing trepidation" and "pleasing horror" induced by The Corsican Brothers, and Cole, in his biography of Kean, includes a selection of congratulatory letters written to the actor on his performance as Louis<sup>24</sup>, which uniformly describe the writers' reactions in terms of physical sensations, ranging from "cheeks burning with excitement" to the extremities detailed by Isabella Glyn, who acted with Phelps:

"I felt white with excitement...I could scarcely breathe...your entire dying scene...makes my flesh creep now only to think of it."

While praising The Corsican Brothers as a stage production, and acknowledging the effectiveness of Kean's performance, his preservation of a "gentlemanly demeanour" which intensifies the terrible, Lewes turns his review into a denunciation of the morality behind melodrama, and the society which approves it; his condemnation reiterates the

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24. J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859), II, pp.126-131.

conservative critiques of democracy. The final duel Lewes finds "shocking", although it employs techniques no different in kind from those previously praised:

"represented with minute ferocity of detail, and with a truth on the part of the actors, which enhances the terror, the effect is so intense, so horrible, so startling, that one gentleman indignantly exclaimed un-English!"

The kind of condemnation Lewes makes of Kean's "vulgar lust for the lowest sources of excitement" is similar to that which he makes of the equally "un-English" La Dame aux Camelias,<sup>25</sup> the "unhealthy idealisation" of corruption in which "Paris...delight[s]". The limit of restraint associated with good taste and gentility requires that the presentation of "reality" be pleasing and refined; the subject of La Dame aux Camelias is drawn from the "horrible realities" of the hospital, "which Art refuses to acknowledge as materials". Where the "reality" is gross,

"the banal excuse that "such things are", is no justification..."

The facts which compose "reality" are to be selected to accord with refinement.

The "gentlemanliness" of Kean's performance is a matter of "demeanour", of manners; his "vulgar lust for the lowest sources of excitement", in contrast, is a "moral mistake", and is, in the end a consequence of "the fatality of melodrama"; its "secret weakness and inevitable

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25. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.240-242.



failure" lies in its appeal

"to the lowest faculties, the avenues to which are very limited, consequently the influence is soon exhausted..."

The fascination of grotesque art Bagehot describes as "an unhealthy insane attraction". Vulgarity in art is a moral deviation characterised as disease; Ruskin similarly writes of "the necessity for...amusement" of "true inbred vulgarity" as "a feverous disease"<sup>26</sup>. Melodrama is directed to gratifying "the senses", in which it "know[s] no limit". Once beyond the bounds of "gentlemanliness", it seeks to gratify by increasingly potent "stimulants"; Lewes describes the decline of the French Théâtre Historique company<sup>27</sup> into "bankruptcy", which carries both a moral and financial implication, as a career leading "downwards" through

"scenery, dresses, acting, terrors, tears, laughter, the clash of swords, the clatter of spurs, the spasms of agony, the poinards, the poisons, the trap-doors, and moonlight effects..."

The "vulgarity" which craves sensation is Coleridge's "moral and intellectual Jacobinism"<sup>28</sup> which has "poisoned the taste, even where it [has] not directly disorganized the moral principles..."

"Vulgarity" in the mid-Victorian period signalises the parvenu, the villain of the later "drama", who represents bourgeois ambition without the dignity of gentlemanly refinement. Kean's performance as Wolsey is condemned by Oxenford as misrepresentation in its debasement of the greatness of "an intrinsically awful personage" into the parvenu vulgarity of a "butcher's son"; the parvenu becomes, for the critic hostile to bourgeois attitudes, the threat to established society. The mid-Victorian denunciation of vulgarity accordingly reiterates the changes of earlier critics

26. John Ruskin, "Of Kings' Treasuries", Sesame and Lilies (London, 1965), pp.1-47.

27. The Théâtre Historique was built and financed by Dumas père. The play from which The Corsican Brothers was translated, Les Frères Corses, was first performed there. The theatre failed in 1850.

28. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, (London, 1894), pp.259-262, 289-293.



against Jacobinism. Ruskin characterises "vulgarity" as the

"want of sensation...a deathful callousness...It is in the diseased habit, in the hardened conscience, that men become vulgar..."

"Jacobinism" leaves the feelings

"callous to all mild appeals, and craving alone for the grossest and most outrageous stimulants."

Equally Wordsworth, in the 1800 Preface,<sup>29</sup> writes of the craving for "gross and violent stimulants", "this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" consequent on the blunting of "the discriminating powers of the mind". Ruskin distinguishes between "a gentleman" and "a vulgar person" in terms of the ability to judge by reasoned principles. The feelings of a gentleman are

"constant and just, results of due contemplation, and of equal thought."

Such feelings are akin to the "culture" Arnold advocates in Culture and Anarchy:

"a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know...the best which has been thought and said in the world; and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically...."<sup>30</sup>

Wordsworth sees as the causes for "this degrading thirst"

"the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident..."

29. William Wordsworth, "Poetry and Poetic Diction" in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D. Jones (London, 1956), p.6.

30. Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Cambridge, 1966), p.6



Like Coleridge, he relates the "disease" in artistic taste to social and political discontent, which is equally considered in terms of disease by the paternalistic middle class philanthropists. The unhealthiness of melodrama is, in the end, the unhealthiness of the democratic society of the middle classes; the Jacobin desire is to confuse and subvert "the natural order of things" in the same way that for Bagehot grotesque art is a perversion of "nature":

"it is a principle that if we put down a healthy instinctive aversion, nature avenges herself by creating an unhealthy insane attraction."

Such an attraction he describes as a delusion; the basis of melodrama, of vulgarity, is finally deception, the "miserable fallacy" George Eliot finds Dickens' novels to encourage,

"that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance, and want..."<sup>31</sup>

Melodrama is fallacious because it is not, as it claims to be, grounded in everyday experience, but contrary to experience; Coleridge's "Jacobinism" represents

"the qualities of liberality, refined feeling, and a nice sense of honour (those things rather, which pass among you for such) in persons and in classes of life where experience teaches us least to expect them..."

The "reality" of melodrama, its truth of "matter-of-fact", is consistent not with the actual experience of its audiences but with their preconceptions and aspirations. The world of The Corsican Brothers, accordingly, is one ruled over by "destiny";<sup>32</sup> poetic justice is meted out in

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31. Quotation from George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life", Westminster Review (July 1856), in Dickens, The Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London, 1971), p.343.

32. Times, February 2nd, 1852.



the end, as in Louis XI. The "amusements" characteristic of Ruskin's "vulgar person" also provide confirmation of the fictions and fallacies most gratifying to him:

"The justice we do not execute, we mimic in the novel and on the stage; for the beauty we destroy in nature, we substitute the metamorphosis of the pantomime, and...for the noble grief we should have borne with our fellows...we gloat over the pathos of the police court, and gather the night-dew of the grave."<sup>33</sup>

As a theatre manager, operating a commercial venture, Kean took "public demand" as his main directive, and thereby aroused the hostility of critics antagonistic to the bourgeois attitudes his productions embodied. In taking the appeal of novelty into consideration in staging Shakespeare, he fell a victim to anti-bourgeois social criticism. Kean's criterion of selection in producing Shakespeare is the opportunity offered for novelty of staging within the "Series of Historical Illustrations"; his "endeavour" in the 1857 production of The Tempest is "to impart a generally new character" to the play.<sup>34</sup> As a series, Kean's productions provide his audiences with a theatrical equivalent of the tourism Ruskin describes as exemplifying the lack of reverence for nature of "true inbred vulgarity". Such tourism is a feverish pursuit of sensation in which nature is abused and degraded, as Shakespeare is by Kean's productions:

"You have put a railroad bridge over the fall of Schaffhausen. You have tunnelled the cliffs of Lucerne by Tell's chapel...there is not a...foreign

33. John Ruskin, "Of Kings' Treasuries", Sesame and Lilies (London, 1965), p.40.

34. Playbill for The Tempest, July 1st, 1857.



city in which the spread of your presence is not marked among its fair old streets and happy gardens by a consuming white leprosy of new hotels and perfumers' shops."

The advance of the tourist is the advance of disease, the "stimulants" he seeks grow increasingly "outrageous":

"the Alps themselves...you look upon as soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb, and slide down again, with "shrieks of delight". When you are past shrieking...you fill the quietude of their valleys with gunpowder blasts, and rush home, red with cutaneous eruption of conceit, and voluble with convulsive hiccough of self-satisfaction."<sup>35</sup>

Kean's productions show a similar feverish search for novelty, and ever-increasing ingenuity in the engineering of new stage effects. As Kean advanced from the relative restraint of the 1852 King John, where decoration was limited mainly to archeological correctness in settings and costumes, to the insertion of battles, banquets, angelic visions, tournaments, classical allegories and masques, ships sailing out to sea and "Historical Episodes",<sup>36</sup> so the tone of critical reaction grew more decided. The criticism of Kean's staging, as of his acting, divides into two opposing factions, depending ultimately on the particular estimation of the standards and values of the middle class. Praise takes the form of catalogues of the visual effects presented, accepting them with approval for their own sake; such reviews are them-

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35. John Ruskin, "Of Kings' Treasuries", Sesame and Lilies (London, 1965), pp.33-34.

36. Kean's published texts, cited in the notes to Chapters XII and XIII, give details of the stage effects employed. Descriptions are provided in J.W.Cole, The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A. (London, 1859), II.

selves accumulations of details, like the productions they describe. Critical objections employ terms similar to those used to criticise bourgeois attitudes; references to diminution and reduction, superficiality, perversion, distortion and ultimately deception recur.

Thus Lewes, writing on the Macbeth production, assigns Kean's abilities as producer to the lower level of melodrama; the manager "falls short of poetry", demonstrated particularly by his mechanical deployment of effects. The witches, for example

"Exhibit a fatiguing unanimity...one thinks they are puppets moved by mechanism - living marionettes."

Such a "mistake" is "a gross violation of the poet's meaning"; the Sardanapalus (1853)<sup>37</sup> production is also discussed as distortion, an "evading" of the poet's meaning which amounts to direct contradiction. Kean utters the words of the speeches "in tones directly contrary to the sense... as if [they] were a stolid assertion of matter of fact". Accordingly, the lower truth of fact supplants the higher truth of poetry; "truth of archeology supplants truth of human passion", "Drama" becomes "a Magic Lantern", Byron "a pretext for a panorama", and the Princess's Theatre "a Gallery of Illustration". Poetry is subordinated to spectacle; "the lower appetites" are sated rather than the "higher faculties" stimulated. The end effect is "overpowering weariness". Lewes' criticism of Kean's theatre brings into play the kind of language used by Bagehot and

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37. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), pp.250-252.



Coleridge to indicate the fundamental fallacies on which contemporary democratic society and its entertainment is based. The nature of the difference between Kean's productions and the original plays is that between the "truth operative" of the drama and the "dead" truth of the panorama; the former raises particular fact to the level of universal truth, the latter depicts factual details, and the critical reactions differ in the same way. Lewes' method is to relate the particular production to a wider context, thereby coming to a conclusion which reaches beyond the immediate point of discussion; that of, for example, the Illustrated London News reviewer is to provide a catalogue of factual details only, as in the account of the 1854 Richard III:

"the white rose and the red, the green dragon and the dun cow, offer unmistakable contrasts - red shirts and blue leggins, ecclesiastical robes, military cross-bows and long bows, leathern jerkins and blue breeches, arbalests, battle-axes, halberds, glaives.." <sup>38</sup>

The Illustrated London News shares the attitudes of Kean and his audiences; its criticism is quantitative, estimating the success of a production in terms of the amount of detail employed. Thus the reviewer praises the 1858 Lear, with its "accessories too numerous to record or to remember". <sup>39</sup> The Art Journal is similarly impressed by the "elaboration" in Richard II:

"it was difficult at the time of representation so to detach the mind, as to enable it to see how every accessory...was an historic note" <sup>40</sup>

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38. Illustrated London News, February 2nd, 1854.

39. Illustrated London News, April 24th, 1858.

40. Art Journal, N.S.III (1857), p.256.

The "accessories" are listed approvingly by the Court Journal:

"Real - all real...armour, gold, tissue, silks... banners, horses, houses."<sup>41</sup>

In such reviews, no distinction is drawn between drama and exhibition, the display of concrete objects; criticism is based on mercantile standards, and the theatre considered as a warehouse where the manager's commodities are set on show. Accordingly, public reaction is taken as the final test of success or failure; "the supreme and ultimate court of appeal in dramatic law" for the Illustrated London News is "the playgoing public".<sup>42</sup> Kean's entrepreneurial approach to the theatre is reflected in a criticism based on market appeal rather than abstract standards and social questions.

The Lloyd's articles, in contrast, condemn Kean's productions as exhibitions which obliterate Shakespeare;

The Winter's Tale production

"was Shakespeare not illustrated, but painted out. The whole thing was a moving panorama. We confess that we prefer a moving play."<sup>43</sup>

The reviewer objects to the debasement of drama into inanimate show; he gives "the highest praise of 'Henry VIII' as a piece of stage furniture":

"Mr Kean is a great, a very great, upholsterer. His Oxford Street neighbours, Messrs Jackson and Graham, had better look well to their garlands in their carpets and hearth-rugs...we would rather...have Shakespeare acted, than Shakespeare merely furnished."<sup>44</sup>

41 . Court Journal, March 4th, 1857.

42 . Illustrated London News, May 19th, 1855.

43 . Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, August 31st, 1856.

44 . Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, May 27th, 1855.



The Princess's is repeatedly referred to as "a theatrical furniture warehouse"<sup>45</sup> and Kean/<sup>denigrated</sup> as an "upholsterer", who makes "costume, scenery and mechanism paramount to poetry and action". Kean is mocked as a tradesman, who treats poetry as a commodity to be attractively decorated; his productions are falsifications of Shakespeare,

"Spurious pieces in which the whole function of the dramatist [is] to act as showman to the tailors and scene-painters."

Kean markets upholstery, not drama; he uses plays as occasions for display, and in substituting spectacle for Shakespeare "corrupts the taste of the spectators" by pandering to their lower appetites, "by satiating them with gauds". Kean is condemned as an entrepreneur concerned to gratify, not improve, his audience; the mercantile opportunism which uses Shakespeare as a "clothes-peg" devalues and degrades poetry in the eyes of the public; Kean weakens his audience's

"sense of the moral dignity and beauty of the performance by associating it with extraneous exhibitions which dazzle the eyes and lull the judgement.." <sup>46</sup>

Poetry is opposed to decoration; its debasement in the theatre debases the audience. A retrospective article on "The English Stage" in the Quarterly Review written thirty years later<sup>47</sup> likewise associates the distortion of drama through the employment of spectacle with the corruption of the audience; referring to Kean's Shakespeare productions the reviewer writes:

45. Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, June 10th, 1855.

46. Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, November 9th, 1856.

47. Quarterly Review, clv (April 1885), pp.354-388.



"Just in proportion as the scenery and the pageant became more and more splendid...the interpretation got further and further from the poet's intention and meaning...An unhealthy appetite for mere scenic display [was] created..."

The critical denunciation of Kean as entrepreneur looks forward to Ruskin's 1859 address to the manufacturer:

"your business...is to form the market as much as to supply it. If...you catch at every humour of the populace...if...you try to attract attention by singularities, novelties and gaudinesses...the whole of your life will have been spent in corrupting public taste...in retarding the arts, tarnishing the virtues and confusing the manners of your country...if...you will produce what is best...the arts of England may have, for their task, to inform the soul with truth, and touch the heart with compassion."<sup>48</sup>

Lloyd's condemns the extension of bourgeois mercantile attitudes to art, the substitution of commercial for aesthetic values which debases Shakespeare in the same way that Ruskin's tourists debase nature:

"the spread of your presence is...marked...by a consuming white leprosy of new hotels..."

Bourgeois values are seen as hostile to the development of art, distorting poetry into display; in contrast, art flourishes under the kind of approach advocated by Ruskin, based on the philanthropic concerns associated with gentility.

The criticism of Macaulay is likewise divided; The History is praised for its agreeable decoration of fact which lends "truth" the attractions of the "fictitious". An article in the Edinburgh Review, which published Macaulay's essays, discusses the "singular felicity of style" which lends novelty to his subject:

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48. John Ruskin, "Modern Manufacturers and Design", The Two Paths (London, 1965), pp.159-160.



"Even on the most beaten ground, his power of picturesque description brings out lights and shadows ...never remarked...before...We...close the volume as if a vast and glowing pageant had just passed before our eyes."<sup>49</sup>

Critical condemnation also focuses on style, and while admitting its effectiveness denounces it as rhetoric which distorts history. Arnold writes of Macaulay as

"a born rhetorician...beyond the apparent rhetorical truth of things he never could penetrate..."<sup>50</sup>

Lockhart<sup>51</sup> in an 1849 letter<sup>52</sup> criticises Macaulay as "not over honest in scope and management". He lists The History's misrepresentations, and continues:

"I own that I read the book with breathless interest... I doubt if Macaulay's book will go down as a standard addition to our historical library, though it must always keep a high place among the specimens of English rhetoric."

The criticism of Macaulay, like that of Kean, is ultimately a criticism of the bourgeois standards and values their work embodies. John Morley equates Macaulay's "predilection for strong effects" with "vulgarity" and the distortion of the "spirit of truth":

"Macaulay was so often content with an effect of an essentially vulgar kind, offensive to taste, discordant to the fastidious ear, and worst of all, at enmity with the whole spirit of truth."<sup>53</sup>

49. Quoted in the Introduction to T.B. Macaulay, The History of England (London, 1966), I, pp.vi-vii.

50. Matthew Arnold, "Essays in Criticism 1865", Selected Essays, ed. P.J. Keating (London, 1970), p.173.

51. John Gibson Lockhart (1794-1854) son-in-law of Sir Walter Scott whose biography he wrote, was concerned with the early conservative Blackwood's Magazine and subsequently became editor of the equally conservative Quarterly Review.

52. Quoted in The Croker Papers, 1808-1857, ed. Bernard Pool (London, 1967), pp.220-221.

53. John Morley, Nineteenth Century Essays, ed. Peter Stansky (London, 1970), p.94.

In literature, rhetoric is the signal characteristic of contemporaneity, as spectacle is in the theatre; the bourgeois values expressed in the "predilection for strong effects" restrict art to the level of the truth of "matter-of-fact". Coleridge's concept of poetry as "truth operative", dealing with "subjects the loftiest and of the most universal interest" is alien to contemporary democratic society, which insists that poetry has no intrinsic value, only a decorative function if allied to fact. Implicit in the criticism of Kean's productions is the question of the nature of art in the contemporary world, whether artistic greatness is possible in a society which derives its values from commerce.



XV Art and The Social and Cultural Background

The middle-class society which derived its power and prosperity from trade and industry was essentially urban in character. During the years of economic development between 1801 and 1851, the population of London, for example, increased from 957,000 to 2,362,000, and that of Manchester from 70,000 to 233,000.<sup>1</sup> Urban concentration significantly altered the theatre public. The working-class districts in the East End and South of the river expanded with the acceleration in provincial immigration; the consequently increased demand for entertainment resulted in the building of local theatres in the eighteen twenties and thirties and also affected the composition of audiences at the West End houses, where the patronage of the rising middle-class became increasingly necessary for financial viability. Macready's managements at the patent houses were the first deliberate attempts to restore the theatre to a position of social and cultural importance by attracting the fashionable and educated classes who had largely neglected the stage from the eighteen twenties, as the patent houses grew more rowdy and disreputable, together with the respectable middle-class, a potential new source of profit. Where Macready failed, however, Kean succeeded, creating a kind of entertainment which appealed sufficiently to the moneyed and educated classes to establish play-going, by the end of the eighteen fifties, as a habitual part of fashionable life.

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1. Chart of "The Growth of Towns, 1801-1931", in G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, The Common People, 1746-1946 (London, 1966), p.451.

Urban life also affected the temperament, taste and attitudes of the new middle and working-class city dwellers, and the kind of art they fostered. Wordsworth, writing in 1800, attributes the blunting of "the discriminating powers of the mind" and the consequent craving for "gross and violent stimulants" to urban growth, to

"the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incidents..."<sup>2</sup>

City life produces the taste for what Bagehot calls "grotesque art" through both its monotony and its confusion; individual powers of judgement are weakened. In The Prelude (1805)<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth describes the sense of disorientation and bewilderment induced by crowded streets, a "spectacle" that is

.....a hell  
 "For eyes and ears! what anarchy and din  
 Barbarian and infernal! 'tis a dream  
 Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound."

The imagery used derives from the theatre; in the new and spectacular productions of the enlarged patent houses, visual effect supplanted the spoken word, and "what is done on stage", according to Coleridge's "Defender", became the essence of dramatic representation. In what Wordsworth calls this "moving pageant", the individual loses his bearings:

".....all the ballast of familiar life,  
 The present, and the past; hope, fear; all stays,  
 All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man  
 Went from me....."

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2. William Wordsworth, "Poetry and Poetic Diction", in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D. Jones (London, 1956), p.6.

3. William Wordsworth, The Prelude, books vii and viii, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London, 1966).



The ultimate effect is fatigue; "the picture wear[ies] out the eye." Writing over half a century later, Arnold urges the "possession of the general ideas which are the law of this vast multitude of facts" as "deliverance" from the "immense, moving, confused spectacle".<sup>4</sup> Again, the language used suggests the theatre. Wordsworth's solution is the same; the "unmanageable sight".

".....is not wholly so to him who looks  
In steadyness, who hath among least things  
An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts  
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole"

Individual character is eroded by the dull sameness of city life, and degraded by the meanness of the pursuits of commercial existence:

"The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,  
Living amid the same perpetual flow  
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced  
To one identity...."

To the criticism of urban society, Wordsworth joins the sense of fear, inspired by the anonymous, amorphous mass of the city crowd, which was the predominant bourgeois reaction to the urban situation for half a century; potential disruption is always at hand, foreshadowed in

"....times, when half the City shall break out  
Full of one passion, vengeance, rage of fear,  
To executions, to a Street on fire,  
Mobs, riots or rejoicings."

During the years of Chartist agitation, the city crowd was seen as a potentially revolutionary mob; to the middle class, destruction of the social order seemed always imminent in the presence of the alien mass of unknown men surging through the city streets. Wordsworth

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4. Matthew Arnold, "On the Modern Element in Literature", in Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), p.59.



remarks the isolation of the individual:

"How often in the overflowing streets  
Have I gone forward with the Crowd, and said  
Unto myself, the face of every one  
That passes by me is a mystery."

Engels, writing in 1844, attributes this alienation to the stunted moral nature which results from exclusive concentration on material objectives:

"these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, to bring to pass all the marvels of civilisation which crowd their city...The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks...crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common...The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together...this narrow self-seeking is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere...the social war, the war of each against all, is here openly declared..."<sup>5</sup>

To the bourgeoisie, this "social war" was one between themselves and the working-class; in Chartism they saw a malevolent urge to overturn the established order of society and disrupt the stability on which commerce, and consequently their own continued existence as the dominant social class, depended. A writer in Blackwood's in 1839 states that

"Universal suffrage in reality means nothing else but universal pillage...What the working class understand by political power, is just the means of putting their hands in their neighbours' pockets..."<sup>6</sup>

The Annual Register of the same year defines Chartism as expressly directed against the middle classes:

5. Frederick Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England (London, 1969), pp.57-58.

6. Quoted in Class and Conflict in Nineteenth-Century England 1815-1850, ed. P.Hollis (London, 1973), pp.215-216.



"The hostility of the Chartists is directed...against the capitalists in general. The movement is...an insurrection which is expressly directed against the middle classes. A violent change in the system of government is demanded by the Chartists...For the purpose of producing a hitherto non-existent condition of society, in which wage labour and capital do not exist at all."<sup>7</sup>

With the 1848 defeat of Chartism, and the rapid expansion of the economy in the years that followed, the bourgeois attitude to the city altered. As the middle-class grew more confident of their social and economic position, a new dominance reflected in the response of the arts in general to their tastes and attitudes, so its critics became more vociferous. Ruskin, writing in 1849, takes the shoddiness and ugliness of urban building as an index of the lack of social stability and individual contentment:

"I cannot but think it an evil sign of a people when their houses are built to last for one generation only...the roots of our national greatness must be deeply cankered when they are thus loosely stuck in their native ground...those comfortless and unhonoured dwellings are the signs of a great and spreading spirit of popular discontent...they mark the time when every man's aim is to be in some more elevated sphere than his natural one..."<sup>8</sup>

Thornton, the manufacturer in Mrs Gaskell's North and South (1854-1855), in contrast, takes an inverted pride in the ugliness of the industrial city as an index of the vigour and enterprise of its commercial life:

"I don't set up Milton as a model of a town...We've been too busy to attend to mere outward appearances...we do not look upon life as a time for enjoyment, but as a time for action and exertion. Our glory and our beauty arise out of our inward strength, which makes us victorious over material resistance, and over greater difficulties still."

Thornton's vindication of the city is an enunciation of the bourgeois reverence for entrepreneurial energy, which finds

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7. Quoted in M. Beer, A History of British Socialism (London, 1940), p.45.

8. John Ruskin, The Seven Lamps of Architecture (London, 1956), pp.183-184.



value only in utility and equates material advancement with spiritual improvement. Thus he rejects the past, unless it can be shown to be relevant to the present:

"If we do not reverence the past...it is because we want something that can apply to the present more directly."

The steam-hammer, for Thornton, symbolises contemporary greatness in its "grandeur of conception"; it is the "practical realization of a gigantic thought",<sup>9</sup> a palpable vindication of bourgeois standards and values. The Economist, which propounded "safe views on financial questions and their social and political bearings",<sup>10</sup> in a series of articles at the beginning of 1851 similarly asserts the greatness of the present, a greatness which is moral as well as material; the theme is that of Macaulay and of bourgeois self-congratulation:

"We look upon the past...as a series of stepping stones to that high and advanced position which we actually hold, and from the future, we hope for the realization of those dreams, almost of perfectibility, which a comparison of the Past with the Present entitles us to indulge in."

Statistical evidence for "astounding progress", a progress which includes "the general tone of morals in the middle and higher classes", is adduced:

"In 1800 the poor man paid from 6d. to a shilling for each letter he received; it now costs him only one penny...in 1816 we had 15 steamboats...in 1848 we had 1,253...in locomotion by land...our progress has been most stupendous...in 1829 the first railway...opened at the modest speed of 20 miles an hour...in 1850, it is habitually forty miles an hour, and seventy for those who like it."<sup>11</sup>

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9. Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South (London, 1970), pp.413-414, 122.

10. H.R.Fox Bourne, English Newspapers (London, 1887), II, p.131.

11. Economist, January 18th, 1851; January 25th, 1851; February 1st, 1851.



In Culture and Anarchy, Arnold criticises this attitude, which takes as "the criterion of man's well-being" "the cities he has built, and the manufactures he has produced"; London epitomises the limitations of the mechanical pursuit of "trade, business and population":

"our city which we have builded for us to dwell in... with its unutterable external hideousness"<sup>12</sup>

For Arnold, as for Engels and Ruskin, the ugliness of the city and the meanness of city life are indicative of the spiritual malaise of urban society. To the prevalence of commercial standards and values, Arnold attributes the poverty of modern poetry; in the Preface to the 1853 edition of his Poems<sup>13</sup> he denounces the "false pretensions" of the present, which asserts "its special fitness" as

"an age commissioned to carry out the great ideas of industrial development and social amelioration"

to supply the material of poetry. Modern poetry, in contrast to that of the Greek "antients", decorates rather than develops its subject, that is, the "action" it presents; it is concerned not with "the action in itself" but with

"the separate thoughts and images which occur in the treatment of an action...with us, the expression predominates over the action."

In Greek poetic drama,

"the action itself...was to stand the central point of interest...no accessories were for a moment to distract the spectator's attention from this..."

12. Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (Cambridge, 1966), pp.186-187.

13. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), pp.41-54.

### Modern poetry and critics

"direct their attention...to the language about the action, not to the action itself."

The "truth" of contemporary poetry is that of Coleridge's "matter-of-fact", not Davenant's "truth operative", the "further truth" which for Hunt begins "where matter of fact or of science ceases."

Arnold's Preface argues against the contemporary insistence that poetry should take its subject matter from the present. He quotes from an 1853 article in the Spectator, at that time "not primarily known as a literary review" but concerned with "politics, from a radical standpoint",<sup>14</sup> as representative of

"a class of critical dicta...calculated to vitiate the judgement of readers of poetry, while they exert...a misleading influence on the practice of those who write it."

The article urges "the poet" to

"leave the exhausted past, and draw his subjects from matters of present import, and therefore both of interest and novelty."

The writer's aim is entrepreneurial, to "fix the public attention"; the techniques advocated are those which Ruskin denounces in manufacture, of

"catch[ing] at every humour in the populace... attract[ing] attention by singularities, novelties, and gaudinesses...."<sup>15</sup>

For Arnold, poetry should not only "interest, but also in spirit and rejoice the reader"; truth of "matter-of-fact" is not sufficient for poetry:

14. John Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (London, 1969), p.25.

15. John Ruskin, "Modern Manufacture and Design", The Two Paths (London, 1965), p.159.



"A poetical work is not yet justified when it has been shown to be an accurate, and therefore interesting, representation..."

The characteristics of a modern "action", as the subject of poetry, which appeal to the reader are "modern language, familiar manners, and contemporary allusions". These appeal only to "our transient feelings and interest", gratifying the "rhetorical sense" and "curiosity", while leaving "the poetical sense ungratified". The attraction of modern poetry is akin to that of melodrama as described by Lewes:

"Melodrama appeals to the lowest faculties, the avenues to which are very limited, consequently the influence is soon exhausted; whereas Drama appeals to the highest faculties, and their avenues are infinite."<sup>16</sup>

For Arnold, poetical works "conceived in the spirit of the passing time...partake of its transitoriness", and cannot attain the "grandeur" of "unity and profoundness of moral impression" of the poetry of the "ancients". This "transitoriness" is characteristic of the "showy art" which Bagehot contrasts with "pure art"; the latter "permanently relieves the eye and makes it happy whenever it looks"; the former "catches and arrests the eye for a moment...and then is passed by for ever."<sup>17</sup>

The "business" of the poet, as defined by Arnold, "is with...essentials...with [the] inward man", not with "externals". Poetry should therefore take as its subject

16. John Forster and G.H.Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed. Archer and Lowe (London, 1896), p.188.

17. Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning" in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D.Jones (London, 1956), p.420.



"great human action", which appeals to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time."

The poet should be subservient to his subject, and "permit its inherent excellencies to develop themselves", without "interruption" from the "intrusion" of "occasional bursts of fine writing". Such a poetry is alien to "the practical man" of the present, satisfied with "very inadequate ideas";<sup>18</sup> the present can neither supply nor appreciate "great actions":

"an age wanting in moral grandeur can with difficulty supply such, and an age of spiritual discomfort with difficulty be powerfully and delightfully affected by them."

Poets consequently cannot achieve the "grand results" of the "old artists"

"by inflating themselves with a belief in the pre-eminence of their own times."

In the Preface to the 1854 editions of his Poems,<sup>19</sup> Arnold attributes the "incredible vagaries in literature, in art, in religion, in morals" in the contemporary world to "the great vice of our intellect...that it is fantastic, and wants sanity". Cultural and spiritual life is permeated by the commercial spirit; it results in what Bagehot calls the "insane taste" of the "middle class" for "grotesque art", for the "dressy" and "exaggerated literature" which are the "curses" of the time.<sup>20</sup> The bourgeois preference for

18. Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" in Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), p.147.

19. Matthew Arnold, Selected Prose, ed. P.J.Keating (London, 1970), pp.55-56.

20. Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning" in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D.Jones (London, 1956), p.413.



commodity art that gratifies the "lowest faculties", indexes the moral defectiveness of the present; the "inadequate ideas" and "false pretensions", which complacently equate "industrial development" with "great human action", lead to the proposal that poetry should "draw [its] subjects from matters of present import".

For Arnold, the only resource against the "false pretensions" of the present lies in "the contemplation of some noble action of a heroic time", in the "commerce with the antients" which produces

"in those who constantly practice it, a steadying and composing effect upon their judgement, not of literary works only, but of men and events in general."

The past supplies the "general ideas" which bring "intellectual deliverance" from the "immense, moving, confused spectacle" of "our present age".<sup>21</sup> Modern poetry discounts the "exhausted past"; Elizabeth Barrett Browning, celebrating "this live, throbbing age" in the opening to Book V of Aurora Leigh (1857), refuses, like Thornton, to "reverence the past":

"I do distrust the poet who discerns  
No character or glory in his times,  
And trundles back his soul five hundred years  
...  
Nay, if there's room for poets in the world  
...  
Their sole work is to represent the age..."<sup>22</sup>

A "belief in the pre-eminent importance and greatness" of the present denies intrinsic value to the past, but finds

21. Matthew Arnold, "On the Modern Element in Literature", Selected Prose, ed. P.J. Keating (London, 1970), pp. 58-59.

22. The Penguin Book of Victorian Verse, ed. George Macbeth (London, 1969), pp. 56-57.



it useful as a point against which contemporary progress can be measured; the past is seen in terms of contemporary conventional values. The "great actions" of the past interest Macaulay and Kean as precursors of the "greatness" of the present; the factual "traits" of Kean's tableaux, Bagehot's "types", in "full development" are the "perfect embodiment" of current bourgeois attitudes. The critical responses to Arnold's Preface, in the same way, refute his rejection of the present by defining "great human action" in terms of the entrepreneurial energy which is equated with "moral grandeur".

Arnold's critique of modern poetry is, like the theatre criticism of the same period, a critique of the standards and values of the society which fosters it; the reply to his moral charges against the present is grounded in the very attitudes that he criticises. The issue is understood in material terms, as a matter purely of the external appropriateness of everyday life to poetry. The critical defense of the theatre finds proof of its achievements in its technical proficiency in embellishment; the Illustrated London News accordingly praises Kean's production of Shakespeare by listing his most striking stage effects, and ignores the question of the suitability of presentation to play. Similarly, Charles Kingsley makes no distinction between commercial progress and spiritual advancement; in a review of Arnold's Poems in Fraser's Magazine in 1854<sup>23</sup>, he proposes a poetry that celebrates the industrial achievements of the age, the very kind of poetry denounced by Arnold. Kingsley asserts the poetical potential of "the real world" as a source of "great human action":

"There are the elements of poetry around us now, if we could but see them....There is poetry in Australian emigrations, Britannia tubular bridges, Solent steam-reviews....There is poetry in nature still....the microscopist and the geognost are daily revealing wonders to which those of Ariosto and Spenser are bald and tawdry..."

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23. Reprinted in Victorian Scrutinies, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London, 1972), pp.173-185.



Like Thornton, Kingsley sees in the steamhammer a "grandeur of conception" and identifies it with moral grandeur. The present is held to be morally justified by its entrepreneurial energy; commercial values equate a commercial aptitude with moral worth. Kingsley considers that contemporary achievements deserve celebration in poetry; the facts of everyday life only require the right kind of presentation, and become "truth operative" in the hands of

"a poet who can see the present...who understands the age in which he lives."

The kind of poetry advocated is thus essentially embellishment; ordinary experience, if properly displayed, appears as "great human action". Such a poetry is exemplified in Ebenezer Elliot's<sup>24</sup> Steam at Sheffield (1840):

"Watt! and his million-feeding enginery!  
Steam-miracles of demi-deity.  
...  
Oh, there is glorious harmony in this  
Tempestuous music of the giant, steam  
...  
It stuns our wondering souls...  
Engine of Watt! unrivalled is thy sway."<sup>25</sup>

Poetry is decoration of actual experience, presenting the "real world" in an attractive light, gratifying the bourgeois reader by confirming his complacent and self-congratulatory attitude to the contemporary world.

24. Ebenezer Elliot (1781-1849), worked in the iron trade in Sheffield from 1821 to 1842. His verse attacks the Corn Laws and landed interest, praising earnest industriousness and the mechanical ingenuity of the industrial cities.

25. Quoted in The Idea of the City in Nineteenth Century Britain, ed. B.I. Coleman (London, 1973), pp.70-73.



The progressive critic starts with the practical assumption that the poet's primary objective is to be read, and that poetry should be adapted to its prospective market. Thus Clough<sup>26</sup>, reviewing Arnold's Poems in 1853<sup>27</sup> discounts "literary value" as an end in itself; he equates, in a manner familiar from the proponents of contemporaneity in the theatre, commercial and aesthetic success in assuming, with the Spectator writer, that poetry should "fix the public attention". While

"poems after classical models...have undoubtedly a great literary value...people much prefer Vanity Fair and Bleak House."

The popularity of the novelist results from his treatment of

"those positive matters of fact, which people, who are not verse-writers, are obliged to have to do with."

He contrasts the poet who rejects the present with the novelist in terms similar to those later employed by Bagehot, in his poetical hierarchy of "the greatest artists" concerned with "the real world" and "the artistic mind of secondary excellence" which "cares for ideas"<sup>28</sup>:

"while the poets...are...studying ancient art, comparing, thinking, theorizing, the common novelist tells a plain tale, often trivial enough...and obtains one reading at any rate..."

For Clough, poetry, "to be widely popular", should be the novel decorated; its subject matter should be

"general wants, ordinary feelings, the obvious rather than the rare facts of nature...the actual, palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned."

26. Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861) was a friend of Arnold at Rugby and Oxford. His review continues his private debate with Arnold on the nature of poetry, evident in the Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. H.F. Lowry (London, 1968).

27. Reprinted in Victorian Scrutinies, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London, 1972), pp.173-185.

28. Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning", in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D. Jones (London, 1956), p.374.



Poetry can display "obvious facts" more attractively than they are found in "every-day life"; it can convert them "into beauty and thankfulness, or at least into... some feeling...of content" and "console us with a sense of significance". Such a consolation is Coleridge's "Defender's" "gratification"; Clough's proposed poetry, like melodrama, falsifies the "facts of nature" by embellishing them so that they accord with preconceived aspirations. Lewis Carroll's description of his reaction to the "vision" of Queen Katherine in III.1 of Kean's Henry VIII production<sup>29</sup> similarly assigns to poetry, and to the spectacle which replaces poetry in the theatre, the purpose of transforming reality into something more pleasant:

"I felt as if in a dream...It was like a delicious reverie, or the most beautiful poetry. This is the true end and object of acting - to raise the mind above itself, and out of its petty cares."<sup>30</sup>

Where poetry is embellishment, "elevation" is evasion; Clough's poetry, like Kean's theatre, is ultimately a distortion of the "palpable things" it takes as subject, in competition with the novel.

Kean's success in the theatre resulted from his ability to create a stage equivalent of the popular art envisaged by the progressive critic. The kind of poetry advocated by Kingsley and Clough employs Bagshot's "types" to express a "further truth" by transmuting factual data from "the real world". "Obvious...facts" are made into poetry by being attractively presented; this enhancement of the "palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned" is claimed

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29. King Henry the Eighth, arranged for representation by Charles Kean, First performed Wednesday, May 16th, 1855. (London, 1972).

30. The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll, ed. Stuart Dodgson Collingwood (London, 1889), p.60.



to be the discovery of "general ideas". For Kingsley and Clough, therefore, truth of "matter of fact", if suitably presented, becomes "truth operative". Such a poetic theory equates external characteristics with essential qualities, in contrast to that of Arnold, for example, for whom the two are in opposition; "attractive accessories" only obscure "the action itself", according to Arnold, whereas for Kingsley and Clough "attractive accessories" are identified with "the action itself". The antithesis between the two poetic modes is representative of that between Mill's "conservative" and "progressive", exemplified respectively in Coleridge and Bentham; the former is concerned with understanding phenomena by "digging down to the root", and the latter with establishing truth or falsity by the "method of detail".<sup>31</sup> The 'progressive' attitude is that of the middle-class, who equate the signal characteristic of the present, industrial achievement, with the inner quality of moral excellence; the critics of this attitude are "conservative" in looking to the past not for anticipations of the present but for standards by which to judge it.

The equation of essential worth with apparent worth derives from a commercial standard of evaluation, where market price depends on appearance. The commercial spirit results in an art employing all available devices to catch the public attention; the "types" which appeal to the public are those which accord with public taste, and

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31. J.S. Mill, "Bentham" and "Coleridge" in Essays on Literature and Society, ed. J.B. Schneewind (New York, 1965), pp. 240-348.



the "type" therefore distorts what it presents, to match public preconceptions, and celebrates bourgeois commonplaces by falsifying reality, in the same way that Kean's tableaux distort Shakespeare through selection and suppression in the preparation of the text for production. Commercial life is consequently hostile to an art which aims to present "truth operative", not because trade is prosaic, but because its ethos exacts from art a compliance with its own values, requiring not essential truth but confirmation of preconceptions.

The criticism of Thackeray's Vanity Fair, one of Clough's prototypes of popularity, attacks the novel for its refusal to comply with the bourgeois demand that reality in art should be pleasing; facts unadorned are not attractive. In an 1848 article in the Quarterly Review,<sup>32</sup> which at this period had no noticeable political bias but was hallowed with the respectability of time,<sup>33</sup> the writer calls for relief from "that humdrum course of daily monotony" which Thackeray portrays:

"We almost long for a little exaggeration and improbability to relieve us of that sense of dead truthfulness which weighs down our hearts."

The "reality" of the novel is also required to be refined. A reviewer in Fraser's Magazine<sup>34</sup> praises Thackeray's truth to "every-day life", conveyed through factual detail: "he

32. Reprinted in Thackeray, The Critical Heritage, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson and Donald Hawes (London, 1968), pp.77-86.

33. John Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (London, 1969), p.7.

34. Reprinted in Thackeray, The Critical Heritage, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson and Donald Hawes (London, 1968), pp.62-67.



seizes upon the small details...with a minuteness, precision and certainty"; in its depiction of "egotism, faithlessness, and low depravities", however, the novel shows a "defect...in the artistical management of the subject":

"we pant for a little clear air in this pestiferous region...More light and air would have rendered it more agreeable..."

Bleak House, in contrast, is condemned for excessive embellishment of reality, a lack of restraint which is associated by reviewers with vulgarity. Thus the reviewer in the Athenaeum,<sup>35</sup> a periodical directed to a Saturday Review readership,<sup>36</sup> charges Dickens with "exaggeration", a predilection for "coarse devices" which leads him to portray "eccentrics, Bedlamites, ill-directed and disproportioned people."

Aesthetic merit, according to bourgeois standards, is dependant on observance of the rules it prescribes; the rejection of the limitations imposed implies a rejection of the bourgeois values which dictate them. The Times denunciation of the Pre-Raphaelites' refusal to comply with the "known laws" of art<sup>37</sup> is a defense of the class conventions jeopardised by a kind of painting which overturns the established prescriptions:

"Their faith seems to consist in an absolute contempt for perspective and the known laws of light and shade, an aversion to beauty in every shape....seeking out every excess of sharpness or deformity."

35. Reprinted in Dickens, The Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London, 1971), pp.276-279.

36. John Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (London, 1969), p.25.

37. Times, May 7th, 1851.



Pre-Raphaelite painting is neither refined nor restrained; the reviewer employs the metaphor of disease, used to characterise social disorder, to express his sense of outrage. A "strange disorder of the mind or the eyes" leads the Pre-Raphaelites to waste "their talents on ugliness and conceit...offensive jests"; their "morbid infatuation" is a sacrifice of "truth, beauty, and genuine feeling to mere eccentricity". Such an art, for the Atheneum reviewer,<sup>38</sup> is "perversion"; his criticism echoes Coleridge's denunciation of the "Jacobinism" which in its "confusion and subversion of the natural order of things" craves for "the grossest and most outrageous stimulants";<sup>39</sup>

"Their ambition is an unhealthy thirst which seeks notoriety by means of mere conceit. Abruptness, singularity, uncouthness, are the counters by which they play for game. Their trick is to defy the principles of beauty and the recognised axioms of taste..."

This "uncouthness" appeals only to the vulgar, Bagehot's "half educated" whose natural predilection is for "showy art", the "insane taste" which is gratified by "grotesque art";<sup>40</sup>

"Eccentricities of any kind have a sort of seduction for minds that are intellectual without belonging to the better orders of intellect."

In rejecting refinement, the Pre-Raphaelites debase the gentility aspired to by the middle classes; the

38. Atheneum, May, 1850. Reprinted in Pre-Raphaelite Writing, ed. Derek Stanford (London, 1973), pp.29-30.

39. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London, 1894), pp.262, 289.

40. Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning" in English Critical Essays (Nineteenth Century), ed. Edmund D. Jones (London, 1956), pp.419-420.



Atheneum writer objects to Millais' Christ in the house of His parents for its lack of dignity;

"Mr Millais...has been most successful in giving the least dignified features of his presentment, and in giving to the higher forms characters and meanings, a circumstantial Art language from which we recoil with loathing and disgust."

Dickens' criticism of the same painting<sup>41</sup> also decries its degradation of nobility; Christ's mother is

"so horrible in her ugliness that...she would stand out from the rest of the company as a monster in the vilest cabaret in France or the lowest gin-shop in England."

The virulence of the critical reaction to the Pre-Raphaelites derives from the perception of an implicit threat to the conventional social order in their refusal to conform with the principles of bourgeois art; Pre-Raphaelite painting presents the same kind of threat to the stability of bourgeois society as Chartism. The popular painting of the eighteen fifties, in contrast, subjects itself totally to middle class prescriptions. Firth's<sup>42</sup> Ramsgate Sands (1854), bought by Queen Victoria, and Derby Day (1858) celebrate bourgeois society by selecting from "every-day life" the "obvious...facts" which can be displayed attractively; like Kean's "Historical Episodes", such painting employs "types" to embody contemporary commonplaces without analysing them.

The method of the "picturesque" is common to all

41. Household Words, May, 1856. Reprinted in Pre-Raphaelite Writing, ed. Derek Stanford (London, 1973), p.29.

42. William Powell Firth (1819-1909) studied at the Royal Academy Schools, and was highly successful in his career as artist.



forms of popular art in the mid-Victorian period, in poetry, painting, the theatre and in the novel; Dickens' "intellectual daguerrotypes" as described in an 1853 review in the Illustrated London News<sup>43</sup> of Bleak House, are Bagehot's "types":

"in society, a person might be at a loss to convey his impressions about an individual, whose dispositions, habits, and peculiarities he wanted to describe... Now... a word bears the significance of half a dozen hours' delineations - you mean that the fellow is a sort of Harold Skimpole."

The "type" conveys immediate conviction of what it presents because it accords with preconceived notions; its method is that of melodrama, relying on what Jerrold calls "telling situations"<sup>44</sup> to create an immediate effect on the senses which precludes the intellect. An art employing such a technique affirms rather than analyses contemporary notions and beliefs, and bourgeois art thus becomes a kind of class propaganda; the public pageantry of the mid-Victorian period accordingly employs the same method to assert national greatness and achievement.

The funeral of the Duke of Wellington in 1852, which celebrated the patriotic virtue of the dead hero and the society which mourned him, expressed the divinely-sanctioned nationalist fervour subsequently embodied in Kean's Henry V episode. The Illustrated London News account of the "obsequies" of "the greatest man of our age"<sup>45</sup> could

43. Reprinted in Dickens, The Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London, 1971), pp.280-282.

44. Quoted in Michael Booth, English Melodrama, (London, 1965), p.38.

45. Illustrated London News, November 11th, 1852; December 11th, 1852.



equally well be a description of a stage production, in the cataloguing of affects and emphasis on novelty:

"All that ingenuity could suggest in the funeral trappings, all that imagination and fancy could devise to surround the ceremony with accessories that most forcibly impress the minds of a multitude...all the imposing circumstances derivable from the assemblage of great masses of men arrayed with military splendour.."

The final impression is one of "sanctity and awe",

"inspired by the grandest of religious services in the grandest Protestant temple in the world."

Mechanical "ingenuity" of contrivance is seen as expressing moral grandeur. The fallaciousness of the "further truth" derived from the factual basis of the "type" is epitomised in the funeral car itself, constructed only of "real" materials; everything about it was to be as it appeared, a superficial integrity which was, as Sir Henry Cole<sup>46</sup> pointed out, essentially spurious. Although the car was

"a reality in its materials, it was perhaps, less a reality viewed on true aesthetic principles, than a simple bier borne by soldiers would have been... Triumphant cars belong to a past age..."<sup>47</sup>

The "truth" of the funeral car is the "dead truth" of commercial values.

As a "type" of national self-glorification, the funeral echoed on a small scale the Great Exhibition's celebration of English progress in the preceding year, when the display of commodities assumed, for contemporaries, a

46. Sir Henry Cole (1808-1852) began his career in the Public Record Office, and from there was seconded to promote a variety of projects, including the penny post, the Great Exhibition, and the Albert Hall.

47. Reported in the Illustrated London News, November 27th, 1852.



spiritual significance. To the awed and exultant bourgeois, the Exhibition seemed to verify the "progressive" equation of commercial with moral and cultural advancement; Dickens, writing in collaboration with R.H.Horne in a Household Words article, "The Great Exhibition and the Little One",<sup>48</sup> contrasts the Exhibition with the Chinese Gallery in Hyde Park Place as symbols of "Liberal" and "Tory" principles and their effects. His theme is the continued and continuing progress of bourgeois society:

"our present period recognises the progress of humanity...towards a social condition in which nobler feelings, thoughts and actions...may be the common inheritance...we are moving in a right direction towards some superior condition of society - politically, morally, intellectually, and religiously..."

This spiritual improvement is attested by the objects on show in the Crystal Palace; directly contrary is the Chinese "Little Exhibition", "the Exhibition of a people who came to a dead stop", an indictment of the "true Tory spirit" which "would have made a China of England, if it could":

"It is worthwhile to contemplate the Chinese lady with her lotus foot, and to consider how many other things are crippled by conceited absolutism and distrust... in the comparison between the Great and Little Exhibition, you have the comparison between Stoppage and Progress, between the exclusive principle and all other principles..."

The Crystal Palace itself symbolised progress; the Illustrated London News, detailing its ingenious construction, remarks

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48. The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens Household Words 1850-1859, ed. Harry Stone (London, 1969), I, pp.319-329.



"Only a few years ago, the erection of such a building ...would have involved a fearful amount of expense; but the rapid advance made in this country during the last forty years...render [it], in point of expense, quite on a level with those constructed of much more substantial materials."

Its merit is economic; at the same time, it is a "noble building destined to be the shrine of industry."<sup>49</sup>

Commentators on the opening ceremony slide easily into religious terms; the Illustrated London News writes of "that solemn consecration of industry"<sup>50</sup> while the Times is more explicit:

"They who were so fortunate as to see it hardly know what most to admire, or in what form to clothe the sense of wonder and even of mystery which struggled within them. The edifice, the treasures of art collected therein, the assemblage and solemnity of the occasion, all conspired to suggest something more than even sense could scan...Around them, amidst them, and over their heads was displayed all that is useful or beautiful in nature or in art. Above them rose a glittering arch far more lofty and spacious than the vault of even our noblest cathedrals...some saw in it ....a solemn dedication of art and its stores; some were reminded of that day when all ages and climes shall be gathered round the Throne of their Maker."<sup>51</sup>

The Exhibition appeared not only to vindicate the commercial ethic but also to prove its supremacy and security. The working class visitors to the Exhibition were not the chaotic, potentially disruptive mob of The Prelude, but purposeful toilers in the service of industry. The Illustrated London News describes the "one shilling day" as "the day of resolute examining and frank amazement":

"the aisles and galleries crowded...people who push along...intent upon going somewhere, determination in

49. Illustrated London News, October 10th, 1850; January 11th, 1851.

50. Illustrated London News, May 10th, 1851.

51. Times, May 2nd, 1851.



their muscles and purpose in their eyes - the energetic business-like march of this energetic business-like people."

The working class entitle themselves to praise in commercial terms by taking the exhibition seriously and paying homage to bourgeois values, in contrast to the fashionable "great folks", the discredited aristocracy, on "five shilling days",

"the day of languid lounging and chatting...the Nave crowded in such fashion as opera corridors and Belgravian saloons are crowded, and the aisles and galleries empty." 52

The Great Exhibition celebrated the complete dominance of the middle class spirit; the working-class hostility which had previously threatened to end in social disruption was no longer in evidence, while the "languor" of the aristocracy disqualified them as serious competitors for leadership. Such social order gave assurance of the continued economic progress and prosperity which attested the efficacy of commercial standards. The arts equally showed subservience to bourgeois requirements; the theatre, literature, and painting alike subjected themselves to contemporary convention and confirmed conventional values. In the eighteen fifties, the actual world largely supported bourgeois aspirations and preconceptions, and promoted the belief that the particular attitudes derived from an urban industrial democracy were absolute principles.

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52. Illustrated London News, July 19th, 1851.

## CONCLUSION

Towards the end of the eighteen fifties, the middle-classes began to lose confidence in the commercial ethic which was their raison d'être. Mill's influential On Liberty (1859) warned against the innate tendency of democratic society to general mediocrity, when nourished by a tyrannical public opinion inhibiting individual development; the result predicted is an intellectually stagnant society, like that of Dickens' Chinese, who "came to a dead stop". The very homogeneity of support for the bourgeois ethic induced the Illustrated London News itself to denounce consensus reassurance and its "evil influence":

"All the voices which have any real influence with an Englishman in easy circumstances combine to stimulate a low form of energy which stifles every higher one. The newspapers extol his wisdom by assuming that the average intelligence which he represents is, under the name of public opinion, the ultimate and irresponsible ruler of the nation. The novels which he and his family devour, have no tendency to rouse his imagination, to say nothing of his mind...Any doctrine now is given up if it either seems uncomfortable or likely to make a disturbance. It is almost universally assumed that the truth of an opinion is tested by its consistency with cheerful views of life and nature."<sup>1</sup>

In Our Mutual Friend (1864-5), Dickens presented a critique of "Society", with its Veneerings and Podsnaps, condemning the social ambitions, vulgarity, complacency and hypocrisy of the middle classes; the Saturday Review objected strongly to such "caricatures":

"They are not very witty or humorous, and we are unable to recognise their truth and purpose. Nothing...can be more dismal in the way of parody or satire than the episode of the Veneerings and their friends.

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1. Illustrated London News, September 29, 1860.



Where is either the humour or the truth of the caricature? The execution is coarse and clumsy, and the whole picture is redolent of ill-temper and fractiousness...The odious vulgarity and malevolence which Mr Dickens has put into the mouth of Society are mere moonshine, and not creditable to the author's insight or shrewdness... we cannot but think the vocation of making spiteful and clumsy attacks on Society is an uncommonly poor one."<sup>2</sup>

The genteel middle-classes similarly refused to accept such criticism and applied it instead to the parvenu class, that section of the bourgeoisie who lacked the fashionable veneer of refined manners and mores. In the early years of the nineteenth century the upholders of the traditional social order had incarnated the threat of embourgeoisement in the figure of the Jacobin, bent on the disruption of "the natural order of things"; the mid-Victorian middle-classes in their turn vindicated their entitlement to social dominance by dissociating themselves from the parvenu whose crassness contradicted and threatened to undermine the delicate order founded on the hegemony of upper middle-class gentility. The parvenu, like the Jacobin, embodied the social anxieties of a class who saw its power challenged; at the same time, this type of vulgarity masked the more real and immediate obstacle to the continued proselytising on behalf of the bourgeois ethic presented by an active and expanding working-class. The "Englishman in easy circumstances" thus ignored the impending rivalry of the lower social classes, substituting for a real potential enemy a more comfortable kind of opponent, who provoked

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2. Saturday Review, November 11, 1865 in Dickens. The Critical Heritage, ed. Phillip Collins (London, 1971), pp.461-463.

mockery without disturbance.

The effect on the "drama" was to divorce it even more completely from the real world, by the exclusion of the contemporary social problems which had lent it an appearance of relevance to actual life, despite the perfunctory and reassuring treatment. From expressing the attitudes and aspirations of an expanding social group in the eighteen thirties, progressively defining its own characteristics in opposition to the rest of society, the theatre moved to the limited and constrained kind of coterie entertainment offered by the plays of Robertson, adapted to only one, and that the most exclusive, section of the original group. The foregoing discussion of the mid-Victorian theatre has traced its evolution as the product of a particular social class, showing the necessary dominance in the theatre of the dominant section of society for purely economic reasons, where the theatre must necessarily take financial viability as its primary objective. Kean, by synthesising a theatrical mode supremely adapted to a mercantile bourgeoisie with genteel aspirations, established the West End as the entertainment centre for the fashionable; this pattern was reproduced readily by subsequent managers, and proved remarkably durable as the mainstream of the commercial theatre.

Throughout the latter half of the century, the West End theatre remained unchanged, despite the damning contrast the plays of Ibsen offered to those of Pinero; the criticism of Shaw in the eighteen nineties makes the same kind of objections to the theatre and its patrons as



had that of Lewes, nearly half a century previously. After the First World War, a new kind of theatre, with "Art" rather than "Amusement" as its aim, gained a foothold, but it is still, at the present day, the West End play, elaborately staged and grounded in conventional platitudes, that audiences are most willing to pay for. The commercial theatre in the main, in response to its patrons, still is and always has been conservative.

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