

The Challenge of Nineteenth Century Theatre in Sheffield

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Abstract

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

This thesis evaluates the status and significance of theatrical performance in Sheffield during the nineteenth century, through an examination of its challenges: those it faced, and those it presented. It investigates the ways producers tackled and often overcame obstacles, which were both practical (arising mainly from economic and political instability) and ideological (moral or aesthetic disapproval). Three case studies document and analyse specific provocative or innovative plays within the contexts of their productions, and assess their contribution to the cultural landscape.

My reading of the texts and associated archival research is interdisciplinary and draws on a range of analytical tools. The concept of 'challenge' connects material with method: questions are raised by the subject matter of the plays, the circumstances of their creation and reception, and by my historiographical approach. I ask why they have never received any critical attention since their first production, and have all but disappeared from the records - a fate shared by much popular entertainment. Provincial theatre histories are especially vulnerable; there is an urgent need to record and evaluate the available material before it disappears.

Theatre was at the centre of an exuberant, and rapidly changing, panorama; Sheffield grew beyond all recognition from the beginning of the century to its end. My narrative positions its creative life in relation to its civic evolution, and considers the dynamic relationship between both kinds of development. It traces the cultural history of a place, from the years when one theatre served its inhabitants, through the competitive advent of music hall and circus, to those of a busy city full of entertainment venues. Whilst challenging prejudices about provincial, popular theatre and the role of women, I demonstrate the special qualities and identity of Sheffield, and reclaim its position as a significant city in nineteenth century theatrical history.

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This Thesis is dedicated to Dr. Raymond Wilson (1926-1988), who was an inspirational model as an ambitious, organised, and hard-working mature student, as well as all-round great Dad, and to

Professor Jane Moody (1967-2011), who conceived this project and acquired the funding, was a wonderful teacher, and whose knowledge, energy, enthusiasm, intelligence, generosity of spirit, and joie de vivre will always be very sadly missed.

Abbreviations used throughout this Thesis and Appendices

Collections

PB	Playbill Original playbills I have consulted are archived usually within two main collections: those held at the Local Studies Library in Sheffield, and those held as part of the Hudson Collection at the University of Sheffield
PB LSL M.P. ... V.L. PB HC	Playbill, Local Studies Library, Miscellaneous Papers (very large) Playbill, Hudson Collection
B.L. L.C.P.	British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Play Collection Manuscripts of plays submitted to the Office of the Lord Chamberlain for Licence, held at the British Library
P.R.O. P.R.O. / L.C.1 /232	Public Record Office Lord Chamberlain's papers and correspondence held at the P.R.O.
SA	Sheffield Archives
S-LSL	Sheffield Local Studies Library (the Library maintains its own archive collection, separate from the above)

Newspapers

SI	<i>Sheffield Independent</i> Although the title <i>Sheffield Independent</i> is normally used in the body of the thesis, the newspaper had several changes of name over its lifetime. Full titles and approximate dates are listed in the bibliography. <i>Sheffield Independent</i> or SI thus refers to: <i>Sheffield Independent and Commercial Register</i> <i>Sheffield Independent and Yorkshire and Derbyshire Advertiser</i> <i>Sheffield and Rotherham Independent</i>
SLR	Sheffield Local Register An annual publication chronicling the noteworthy events of the year, this was published by R. Leader and Sons who were also responsible for the <i>Sheffield Independent</i> .

Introduction

Scope, aims and methodologies

This thesis evaluates the status and significance of theatrical performance in Sheffield during the nineteenth century, through an examination of its challenges: those it faced, and those it presented. Although social and economic historians have acknowledged the substantial contribution of the region to the Victorian industrial revolution, its cultural history has been somewhat overlooked.¹ Kathleen Barker was an early champion of theatre history outside London, and even though a number of scholars over the last twenty years have produced notable studies of regional performance, her unpublished PhD thesis 'The Performing Arts in Five Provincial Towns 1840-1870', is still the foremost one to focus on Sheffield.² Compared with her four other chosen locations of Bristol, Brighton, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Nottingham, her conclusion is that the Yorkshire town was rather slow to develop any notable artistic activity; and appears to have faced the greatest struggle.

The scope of my research extends her period of study, and examines theatrical activity across the century; but my focus on only one location allows for a consideration of the nature of the obstacles, alongside a thorough investigation of the ways that producers tackled and often overcame their difficulties; and it also demonstrates that theatre-makers were proactive, and established co-operative and productive relationships where possible. The nature of the challenges changed as the century progressed, and these

¹ For more on the industrial history of Sheffield, see particularly Clyde Binfield and others (eds.), *The History of the City of Sheffield 1843-1993*, in 3 volumes (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Dennis Smith, *Conflict and Compromise: Class Formation in English Society 1830-1914* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Sidney Pollard, *The Sheffield Outrages: Report presented to the Trades Unions Commissioners in 1867* (Bath: Adams and Dart, 1971).

² Kathleen M. D. Barker, *The Performing Arts in Five Provincial Towns 1840-1870* (PhD, University of Warwick, 1982).

developments can be traced through the first chapter. From the 1850s onwards, there was an increase in the number of original plays which premiered in Sheffield, and some of these feature throughout my account. Three extended case studies form the subsequent chapters, which document and analyse specific provocative or innovative texts within the contexts of their production and reception, and assess their contribution to the cultural landscape.

My reading of these plays and the associated archival research is interdisciplinary and draws on a range of analytical tools and methodological approaches. The concept of 'challenge' is used as a framework for my analysis, and is also fundamental to my rationale and academic approach. Encouragement for this endeavour has come from recent historiographical studies, published by self-aware and critical scholars who have re-invigorated the study of theatre and its histories. My use of the term 'self-aware' recalls the comments of Richard J. Evans, when he introduced a new collection of essays in 2002 to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of E. H. Carr's groundbreaking 'What is History?'. He asserts that 'one result of Carr's influence was to persuade many historians to reflect on their own biases and preconceptions, to articulate the purpose for which they wrote, and to lay bare to the reader the assumptions on which their work rested'.³ Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait, editors of *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* (published in 2010), remind us of the progress that has been made in the field, particularly over the last two decades. They chart the ways in which new theoretical methods and perspectives from feminism, gender studies, cultural materialism and new historicism have had

³ Richard J. Evans, 'What is History? – Now', in David Cannadine (ed.) *What is History Now* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 15-16.

far-reaching effects on the study of theatre history; yet they note that there are still substantial omissions and more work to be done.⁴

Peter Holland, the general editor of the five-volume series 'Redefining British Theatre History' (first volume 2003), agrees that there is still a need to re-evaluate method and material, and states that a main aim of the series is to 'establish ways in which previous assumptions need fundamental questioning and to initiate new directions for the field'.⁵ In his introductory note, Holland does not explicitly state the exact nature of the 'previous assumptions', but my thesis contends with several, which often overlap, but could be grouped together under the alliterative headings of genre, gender and geography.

Each of these areas has its own set of issues, but the overarching prejudice concerns the quality of nineteenth century theatre, which was commonly dismissed by scholars for much of the twentieth because it was deemed populist, commercial, and unworthy of serious critical attention. It is therefore necessary for anyone entering this field of study to revisit source material, and to interrogate the criteria used to determine its value. My starting point for the research for this thesis began with plays that received their premiere in Sheffield, and given the range of productions over several decades, there is an inevitable variation in their textual merits. As Jacky Bratton explains in *New Readings in Theatre History*, it was necessary for her to revisit 'copious first-hand materials' in order to attempt her 'first revisionist reading of nineteenth-century theatre history'⁶, and, in a similar manner, this

⁴ Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, 'An introduction on five themes', in Canning and Postlewait (eds.), *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), p. 4.

⁵ Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland (eds.), *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Frontispiece.

⁶ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 133.

thesis examines plays which have never received any critical attention since their first production, and which have all but disappeared from the records.

Despite recent innovative projects, such as the 'Lord Chamberlain's Plays Project' and the 'Victorian Plays Project', initiated by performance historians and archivists, and intended to make a wider range of material more readily available, it is still the familiar names (such as Buckstone, Boucicault, and Robertson) which feature in critical anthologies and theatre histories, and the hundreds of other playwrights who wrote thousands of plays are mostly ignored.⁷ Quantity of course is not the same as quality but the supposition that plays lack value because they were not published or did not have a long production history should be challenged.

It may be easy to surmise why certain texts failed on stage; but it is harder to understand why others, which read as imaginative, accomplished pieces, were short-lived, especially when compared with those which achieved immense success; therefore it has been important to question the evidence a little more deeply and resist generalisations and misguided conclusions. A musical comedy, titled *Hans the Boatman*, by the American playwright Clay M. Greene (1850-1933), does not immediately impress the reader, yet an article about its lead actor Mr. Arnold confirmed its enormous popularity:

This was produced at Sheffield in 1887, and since then has had an extraordinary career of popular success. *Hans* has returned to Sheffield again and again, and has been performed times out of number in all the great cities of Great Britain.⁸

⁷ 'The Lord Chamberlain's Plays Project' was a recent AHRC-funded collaborative project with Royal Holloway and the British Library which has provided a complete catalogue of plays submitted for license from 1852 to 1863, and has also made fully edited playtexts available digitally. <<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/dramaandtheatre/research/researchprojects/lordchamberlainsplays/electroniceditionsofthelordchamberlainsplays1852-1863.aspx>>.

'The Victorian Plays Project' is an initiative of the University of Worcester and is a digital archive of selected plays from T. H. Lacy's Acting Edition of Victorian Plays 1848-1873. <<http://victorian.worc.ac.uk/modx/>>.

⁸ *Era*, 4 March 1893.

The Bootblack by Arthur Jefferson played at Sheffield in 1896 and was a commercial triumph. Although it increased its appeal by the tried and tested method of casting a woman in the main part of the young boy; and involved local children as extras in each town it visited, its popularity is still surprising, given the quality of the script. An advertisement a year later hinted at the reasons for its longevity, 'the *Bootblack* is an institution rather than a theatrical piece'.⁹ This comment suggests that, like the annual pantomime, certain plays became part of a shared public consciousness and were regarded with affection and treated with loyalty. Despite their enormous popularity, plays like these do not form part of the canon, indeed they are often omitted from theatre histories, and one of the questions that motivated me is why so many productions have failed to achieve lasting recognition and have, in effect, vanished.

The term 'melodrama' was often used interchangeably with 'drama' in the nineteenth century, as Elaine Hadley explains: 'by mid-century ... stage melodrama and its distinctive style of presentation had become so common in most London theaters that plays of a melodramatic cast no longer identified themselves as such; in most respects melodrama was drama'.¹⁰ However, the name gathered a pejorative meaning which became very difficult to shed. Although the belittling of melodrama is a specific problem which will subsequently be examined in more detail, it is important to note here that the disparagement of the genre was a significant feature of the dogmatic way that theatre history has been constructed, which Jacky Bratton alleges began as early as the 1830s. She believes that a damaging 'system of difference' was established between 'text and context, high and low, the written drama and

⁹ *Era*, 18 December 1897.

¹⁰ Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace 1800-1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 1.

the materiality of the stage'.¹¹ This refusal to treat theatre in a holistic manner is illustrated by the tendency to classify scripts as literary works, and judge them to be deficient, rather than fully acknowledging that the text is only one element in a collaborative creative process. Theatre is artifice, and as Bratton asserts, 'melodrama is the play not disguised as literature; theatre allowing its falsity and allure to show'.¹²

In order to assess a play accurately, it is necessary to consider it as part of its imaginative and material environment. This entails a close examination of the processes of production (the details of staging, acting styles, the development of repertoire, the management of theatres, the theatrical economy), alongside analysis of theatrical ephemera (such as playbills, reviews and anecdotes), and these considerations form the basis of my inclusive methodological approach. Material generated from this research supports my close reading of the texts, and enables me to gain a better understanding of the trajectory of certain productions, and the reasons for their particular course.

In his extended survey, *The Victorian Theatre 1792-1914*, George Rowell reminds us of the 'sustained effort of historical imagination' that is needed to understand the drama of the period and its audience.¹³ Despite the difficulties of wholly comprehending productions from the past, it is crucial to recognise the complexities of the development of theatre in the nineteenth century rather than reducing it, as some theatre historians are wont to do, to a simplistic, linear story of progress, from the allegedly 'crude, embarrassing, primitive' melodramas of the early decades to the respectable, intellectual,

¹¹ Jacky Bratton, 'The birth of our grand narrative', in Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, pp. 10-12.

¹² Bratton, p. 12.

¹³ George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre 1792-1914: A Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, 2nd Edition 1978), p. 149.

middle-class drama of later years.¹⁴ Bratton criticises this construction of a 'grand narrative' as a deliberate process of classification and valuation, which created a biased version of theatre history.

Flawed processes of evaluation have also affected the way that the contribution of women has been perceived. In her enlightening survey, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain*, Kate Newey explains how and why women's creative work in the Victorian period has often been disregarded, and she connects the material conditions that women playwrights in particular had to struggle against with an ongoing marginalisation by theatre historians and scholars. She states in the introduction that she will make visible those female playwrights whose work has become invisible:

whose work has been shrouded by a combination of factors: the material practices of the London theatre industry which presented a misogynist obstacle course, Victorian gender ideology which theorized the public nature of the playwright's task to be unfeminine, a practice of theatre historiography which has consistently converted partisan aesthetic judgements into universal statements of fact, and the scholarly discipline of Victorian Studies which has consistently ignored the theatre as a significant element of nineteenth-century culture.¹⁵

Although the project to reclaim theatre as a 'significant element of nineteenth-century culture' has made notable progress in recent years, the role of women still needs to be fully recovered.

In her critique, 'Decomposing History (Why are there so few women in theater history?)', Susan Bennett suggests that changes to the ways in which materials are organised, valued and archived will reinstate women to their

¹⁴ Nina Auerbach, 'Before the curtain', in Kerry Powell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 3-14, (p. 3). For another account of the development of Victorian drama which emphasises its alleged journey from rowdy spectacle to middle-class gravitas, see Anthony Jenkins, *The Making of Victorian Drama* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Katherine Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 1.

rightful place.¹⁶ However Bratton believes their absence is not simply due to oversight or underestimation, and she develops a provocative argument. Her contention is that the deliberate process which separated theatre into two categories, and labelled them either 'art' or 'entertainment', was deep-rooted, gender specific and politically motivated:

And it was a necessary condition of the successful hegemonic control of the theatre that there was a binary division set up between 'the popular' and the theatre of art; that women's work within the public space should be disguised, discounted or appropriated to male control; and therefore entertainment, embodied as female, became the Other of the 'National Drama' of male genius.¹⁷

Her purpose is to 'challenge and deconstruct' this version of theatre history, and towards the end of her book she expresses the hope that others will 'undertake similar work', to investigate 'provincial companies beyond the construction of the conventional story of the stage'¹⁸. My project responds to her appeal, and my narrative will more fully represent the contribution made by women and those employed in popular, commercial theatre.

As I have already indicated, this area of performance was dominated by melodrama, and the genre has been much maligned and often misunderstood, although it seems fair to suggest that a rehabilitation project begun in the 1960s by theatre historians such as Michael R. Booth and George Rowell is now (in 2013) well advanced. Booth's seminal *English Melodrama* provided a comprehensive review, and was one of the first serious attempts to study the genre, from its origins in the late eighteenth century, to its decline in the early years of the twentieth century, by which time some of its features had been appropriated by film (as they would be later by

¹⁶ Susan Bennett, 'Decomposing History (Why are there so few women in theatre history?)' in W. B. Worthen with Peter Holland (eds.), *Theorising Practice: Redefining Theatre History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp 71-87.

¹⁷ Bratton, *New Readings*, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.170.

television).¹⁹ Booth's approach both celebrates and censures melodrama: he vividly reconstructs the theatrical and thrilling elements of it, whilst at the same time concluding that the plays pandered to the conservative nature of audiences, and ultimately did not challenge the status quo.

The definition of melodrama remains unstable, and arguments about its value and impact continue. The plays featured in my case studies certainly employ melodramatic conventions: they are designed to appeal to a wide audience of all classes and are indubitably theatrical, rather than literary works. Rather than attempt a definitive explanation of the term, or indeed offer a detailed defence of the genre, my case studies highlight its salient features, particularly those that enable it to successfully communicate with an audience (such as the use of music and how this underscores its emotionality; its ability to create suspense and dramatic tension, as well as providing a satisfying sense of relief, and humour). My chosen plays sometimes have convoluted plots and always have elements of excitement; visual and aural effects are of central importance; and they illustrate how playwrights used the visceral qualities of the genre to arouse the passions of their audience and, simultaneously, to confront hegemony and suggest alternative models.

Fresh insights have been offered about the pervasive reach of melodrama both within and outside of theatre by Elaine Hadley in her stimulating book *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace 1800-1885*. She contends that its features were endemic in public discourse:

Melodrama's familial narratives of dispersal and reunion, its emphatically visual renderings of bodily torture and criminal conduct, its atmospheric menace and providential plotting, its expressions of highly charged emotion, and its tendency to personify absolutes like good and evil were represented in a wide variety of social settings, not just on the stage.²⁰

¹⁹ Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd, 1965).

²⁰ Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, p. 3.

The 'social settings' to which Hadley refers include judicial courtrooms, Parliament, and the pages of newspapers. Her ideas about what she terms a 'melodramatic mode' have influenced my thinking in terms of the place of theatre within a broader social sphere; and I apply her theories particularly to an examination of the ways in which discourse was formulated about the value of theatre and the suitability of its subject matter.

Hadley makes the bold claim that 'a version of the "melodramatic"' seems to have served as a behavioural and expressive model for several generations of English people', and her contention is a useful one.²¹ She suggests that features of melodrama, such as 'highly charged emotion' and the personification of 'good and evil' enabled those who employed them (on stage or elsewhere) to exert an influence over large numbers of people. Although my research is primarily about theatrical endeavour, my definition of 'theatre' encompasses several meanings which overlap: it is a concept, framed by ideological and aesthetic considerations; it is the ephemeral experience of a production; and it is a material edifice. Persuasive communication is a feature which is common to all these permutations, whether this pertains to the plays themselves; or wider discussions about their subject matter; or conflicting notions about the function of theatre; and it extends to peripheral activities such as public lectures and debates which occur within its walls. My investigation considers theatre as a broadly-defined phenomenon, and notes the recurrence of the 'melodramatic mode' across all its aspects.

In addition to a consideration of forgotten plays, the thesis examines the lives of unknown, yet competent and experienced theatre professionals. In *Women's Theatre Writing* Newey argues that it is essential to pay attention to

²¹ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, p. 3.

the work of these individuals, as much as to those of 'exceptional' artists.²² It is sometimes difficult to properly acknowledge the scope of their careers because traditional terminology can be unsatisfactory. 'Theatre practitioner' is a term from the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but it could be used for many of these women and men, who had multiple skills as actors, writers, managers, and producers. The term 'artisan' can be helpful, even though it often suggests a separate (and subordinate) role to that of 'artist'. Debates about the definition and cultural value of theatrical artists, and artisans, are not new and are still unresolved. Given that Sheffield is famous for its crafts of tool-making and silverware, I have chosen to use the term 'artisan' for those individuals who understood (and demonstrated) the practical techniques necessary for successful theatrical production. My research has uncovered the creative work of numerous playwrights and producers, and I acknowledge the contribution that they made to the provision of local culture. Moreover, Sheffield was part of a large, thriving provincial theatre network, and retrieving information about their careers helps us to understand more fully the history and development of theatre outside London.

Whilst appreciating that the sheer volume of material may have delayed a comprehensive analysis of regional theatre, it could be that this research has been overlooked because theatre historians consider theatre outside the metropolis to be of less importance or interest than that of the capital. This prejudice is the third one that my thesis challenges. Critics and scholars sometimes slip into using 'Britain' and 'British' as terms to describe 'London' drama and performance, and this narrow focus is apparent in many accounts of nineteenth-century theatre; for example the seemingly all-embracing phrase in the title of Anthony Jenkins *The Making of Victorian*

²² Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing*, p. 11.

Drama belies its content, which is essentially about the West End stage.²³ Indeed, it has become almost impossible to use the term 'provincial' in its original sense of 'concerning the regions outside the capital city of a country', so thoroughly has it assumed the pejorative secondary meaning of 'especially when regarded as unsophisticated or narrow-minded'.²⁴

In her essay 'History Plays (in) Britain', Loren Kruger calls attention to the vulnerability of regional theatre histories when she describes 'the faintness of the archival record of theater in the margins of the metropolitan repertoire'.²⁵ There is an urgent need to record and evaluate the available material before it simply disappears, thus I have compiled a list (at Appendix A0) of many of the plays which premiered in Sheffield during the century, with brief summaries of their subject matter and production histories, and information (where available) about the playwrights.²⁶ In addition, I have transcribed and edited three of the plays which feature in the case studies: *Naomi's Sin; or, Where are you going to my pretty maid?* by Kate (Pitt) Bright; *The Union Wheel* by Joseph Fox; and *Keen Blades; or, The Straight Tip* by James Fyfe Elliston and A. F. Cross. These transcriptions are from the manuscript or unpublished typescript copies held at the British Library as part of the Lord Chamberlain's Collection.²⁷ This work contributes to the ongoing

²³ Anthony Jenkins, *The Making of Victorian Drama*, op. cit.

²⁴ "Provincial", adj. and n." *OED Online*, December 2012. Oxford University Press <<http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk>> [accessed 8 February 2013].

Whilst I acknowledge this deprecatory meaning, my use of the word throughout this thesis is normally used without a particular value judgement.

²⁵ Loren Kruger, 'History Plays (in) Britain: Dramas, Nations and Inventing the Present' in Worthen and Holland, *Theorising Practice*, pp.151-176 (p. 167).

²⁶ I am indebted to Allardyce Nicoll and Kathleen Barker for their meticulous research which has greatly assisted me with this project. Allardyce Nicoll, *Nineteenth Century Drama 1800-1850 Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930) and Nicoll, *Nineteenth Century Drama 1850-1900, Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946); Kathleen Barker, Appendix to Unpublished PhD Thesis.

²⁷ Joseph Fox, *The Union Wheel*, Add. MS. 53084H; Kate Bright, *Naomi's Sin; or, where are you going to my pretty maid?* Add. MS. 53217K; A. F. Cross and J. F. Elliston *Keen Blades or, The Straight Tip*, Add. MS. 53524F (all B.L. L.C.P.).

project to make a wider range of texts more easily accessible; and it also provides an opportunity for these particular plays to be reconsidered in terms of their merits. They can be read in conjunction with my contextual account of their production, and thus afforded holistic consideration.

In addition to the texts and their authors, my thesis reclaims a neglected aspect of theatre history by refocusing attention on this region of Yorkshire as an important component of the inter-connected performance network across the United Kingdom which supported a vast array of places of entertainment: commodious theatres and numerous music halls which hosted home-grown talent, and travelling shows such as circuses, fairs, menageries, and panoramas - a list of local venues is provided in Appendix C. It is crucial to acknowledge the ways in which these 'illegitimate' forms of entertainment impacted on scripted dramas; indeed academics such as Jacky Bratton, Ann Featherstone and Jane Moody have carried out extensive research in this field and have demonstrated that it is impossible to consider theatre as a separate, exclusive genre.

One of the central arguments of Jane Moody's seminal book, *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1770-1840* (2000), concerns the way in which the physicality of the actors began to take precedence:

The primacy of rhetoric and the spoken word in legitimate drama gave way in melodrama and pantomime to a corporeal dramaturgy which privileged the galvanic, affective capacity of the human body as a vehicle of dramatic expression.²⁸

This 'corporeal dramaturgy' affected all theatrical production, and strategies which were initially employed to evade licensing laws profoundly influenced dramatic style across a range of genres. Although a detailed analysis of travelling shows and seasonal spectaculars is beyond the reach of this thesis, their influence nevertheless permeates my narrative.

²⁸ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 86.

Material relating to visual and physical 'illegitimate' forms of entertainment is even more likely to disappear than that of 'the Drama', which was allegedly a superior form of theatre.²⁹ This is partly a result of its ephemeral nature but also indicates the hierarchical and exclusive way that history is constructed. As Loren Kruger, Susan Bennett and others note, it is vital to seek out 'lost' material' which may not have been properly catalogued and evaluated, or which has been judged of little value and discarded. Bennett (quoting Voss and Werner), draws attention to the fragility of records and the ambiguous role of documentation: 'The history of the archive, on the one hand a history of conservation, is, on the other hand, a history of loss'.³⁰ Although it has not been possible to include details of all this recovered material, new information about Sheffield could build on recent academic research projects which have begun to trace the histories of provincial pantomime, circus and music hall. In *The Politics of the Pantomime: Regional Identity in the Theatre 1860-1900*, Jill A. Sullivan examines productions from a range of regional theatres; and the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts at the University of Birmingham has also recently undertaken a major study, 'The cultural politics of English pantomime, 1837-1901', which focuses on provincial productions in the north west of the country and has generated influential conferences and symposia.³¹ The National Fairground Archive at the University of Sheffield is a specialist collection and holds many

²⁹ The OED notes that 'with "the", drama means 'the dramatic branch of literature; the dramatic art'. "Drama, n.". OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/view/Entry/57475> > [accessed 11 April 2013].

³⁰ Susan Bennett, 'The Making of Theatre History', in Canning and Postlewait (eds.) *Representing the Past*, pp. 63-83 (p. 63).

³¹ Jill A. Sullivan, *The Politics of the Pantomime: Regional Identity in the Theatre 1860-1900* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press/The Society for Theatre Research, 2011).

'The cultural politics of English pantomime, 1837-1901', University of Birmingham <www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/edacs/departments/drama/research/pantomime>.

publications and ephemera relating to circuses and fairground entertainment which has been helpful; also much enlightening information has been provided by *The Victorian Clown* by Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone.³² The work on regional music hall begun by Peter Bailey, Jacky Bratton, and their contributing authors in the 1980s, which resulted in two publications, *Music Hall: the Business of Pleasure* and *Music Hall: Performance and Style*, was followed in 1996 by that of Dagmar Kift, who also focused attention on how the phenomenon operated outside the metropolis in *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict*, and contains an insightful chapter on Sheffield.³³

My account ensures that proper attention is paid to these 'illegitimate' forms of theatre, and although it is necessarily selective, it includes a variety of performative activity in order to ensure a broadly representative history. It seeks to demonstrate that venues functioned as multi-purpose meeting places, which helped to place theatre at the heart of community life. **Chapter One** charts the performance history of Sheffield between 1810-1870, and is shaped by an examination of the processes of theatrical production and their ideological and material determinants. This approach has been informed particularly by the work of Tracy C. Davis, whose research methodology adheres to the fundamental principle that 'artistic activity takes place within the constraints of historical materialism and ... conditions of production and consumption affect both the art practice and the practitioner'.³⁴

³² Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone, *The Victorian Clown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See also Jacky Bratton, 'What is a Play? Drama and the Victorian Circus', in Davis and Holland (eds.), *The Performing Century*, pp. 250-262.

³³ Peter Bailey (ed.) *Music Hall: the Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); Jacky Bratton (ed.) *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); Dagmar Kift, 'Sheffield 1850-1865 Theatres & Music Halls' in *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 88-98.

³⁴ Tracy Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. xii. Although in this book Davis is

In order to understand the 'conditions of production and consumption' it is necessary to appreciate the particular characteristics of this northern industrial town, which had a reputation for political radicalism and whose artisans in the tool-making industry were famous for their craft skills and their independent spirit.³⁵ By mid-century, observers and social reformers like Harriet Martineau were concerned that the fierce self-determination of the working classes verged on nihilism, partly caused by their harsh living conditions:

The mere mention of Sheffield brings up the image of much recklessness in the minds of those who hear the name. The low regard of human life, and the propensity to violence, for which the working population of Sheffield are notorious, must have some explanation; and the explanation is easily found in the excessive sickness and mortality of the place... For the deeper cause, we may look to the depraved state of bodily health and the self-imposed doom of death under which a certain proportion of the citizens pass what they choose to call "a short life and a merry one".³⁶

Economic and physical hardships were everyday facts of life for many, although the difference between rich and poor was not as extreme as in some other towns, and the general story is one of growth and overall prosperity. However, social and political conflict together with financial constraints and a demand for easy pleasures inevitably had an effect on theatrical activity and must be included in the narrative of its development. In addition to these challenges, anti-theatrical hostility motivated by religious ideology threatened the very existence of the performing arts. This antagonism was evident throughout the country but was particularly notable in Sheffield. Fundamental

particularly interested in women and theatre, the approach can be applied to a more general study of the profession.

³⁵ For more information about the origins and development of political radicalism in Sheffield see David Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers: Rebels and Radicals in Sheffield History* (West Sussex: Phillimore & Company Ltd., 2008). He explores the 'rational dissent' of the middle classes and also a more direct form of rebelliousness which the cutlery artisans demonstrated.

³⁶ Harriet Martineau 'The Steel Grinders', *Once a Week*, 21 July 1860, quoted in Sylvia Pybus, *Damned Bad Place, Sheffield: an Anthology of Writing about Sheffield Through the Ages* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 134-135.

questions about the purpose, value, intended audience, and effect of theatre recur frequently in articles, pamphlets, reviews, and letters, and express conflicting opinions as to whether it is a useful instrument of social control or an encouragement for licentious behaviour. Thus the concept of 'disputed territory', first used by the cultural historian Peter Bailey to describe leisure in the nineteenth century, has proved an essential framework for my analysis: the battles that the playwrights and producers fought in Sheffield were about principles as much as practicalities.³⁷

The arguments about the worth of theatre continue through the extended case studies which form the basis of the subsequent three chapters. **Chapters Two, Three and Four** continue the narrative of the chronological development of theatre in Sheffield from the 1860s to the 1890s, but they focus on specific texts and their writers. The plays share common themes, although their subject matter is ostensibly quite different. Plays about unconventional women, trade unions, popular sport and gambling all pose challenging questions, and their productions illustrate the power of theatre to stimulate debate. Moreover, the chosen plays and/or their authors all have a close connection with Sheffield, and this enables me to further demonstrate aspects of the dynamic relationship between the industrial town and its theatre. As both became more stable and confident, it was easier for playwrights to forge careers there; the Theatre Royal and the Alexandra were venues where fledgling artists could learn their craft. Provincial theatres provided training for actors and writers, and Sheffield offered valuable opportunities in this respect. It was described in 1846 in the *Era* as a 'nursery of actors for the metropolitan stage',³⁸ and an article in the same publication

³⁷ Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 5.

³⁸ *Era*, 9 August 1846. J. D. Leader, writing in the local paper in 1891, concurred with this opinion: 'Yorkshire was in those days the nursery for the London stage'. *Sheffield Independent*, 6 April 1891.

several decades later about the actor Gustavus Vaughan Brooke (1818-1866) confirmed that working at the Theatre Royal was indeed like an apprenticeship. According to the report, Brooke was 'for some years a member of its stock company ... he may, in fact, be almost said to have matriculated there'.³⁹

The professional development of an actress-playwright is investigated in **Chapter Two**, alongside detailed analysis of her creative output. Kate Pitt (later Bright) could be categorised as a theatrical artisan, given that she wrote several dramas, short stories and a novel; produced her own plays and those of others; managed touring companies and theatres, and worked as an actress for most of her life. Her career spans forty years, from 1860-1906, and her family heritage and descendants connect the theatre of Sheffield's past with that of its future. She is a valuable example of one of the many forgotten women who not only made a significant contribution to theatre across the United Kingdom, but who were also instrumental in effecting more general and widespread revolutionary changes which affected women and their role in society.

My focus on one woman's occupation as a writer and actress provides an illuminating insight into the perception (and formation) of female identity on and off stage during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and my analysis benefits from a theoretical approach suggested by Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin in *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth Century Britain*. Their method takes into account the 'conditions of production and consumption' in relation to creative artists, but also allows that the relationship between culture and its context is not static. Their aim is thus to 'reconceptualise theatre and drama not as a product of culture but as social processes dynamically interacting

³⁹ *Era*, 31 October 1880.

with culture'.⁴⁰ The life of Kate Pitt and her oeuvre offer examples of this interactive process, and also demonstrate the ways in which theatre can operate as a forum. Her plays confront inequality and bigotry, so although they conform to a familiar pattern in some respects, they also challenge the belief that melodrama is essentially conservative. It may be axiomatic to note that social change is a process, but as Davis and Donkin cogently suggest, it is crucial to 'make a case for the multivocality of history and the importance of staging emergent debates'.⁴¹

The capacity of theatre to provoke discussion is evident in **Chapter Three**, which examines the furore caused by the dramatic depiction of the so-called 'Outrages' of the 1860s. These were long-running trade disputes which had descended into intimidation and violence, and brought nationwide notoriety to Sheffield. *The Union Wheel*, written by Joseph Fox and produced at the Theatre Royal in 1870, and *Put Yourself in His Place* by Charles Reade (which was also performed there, as well as in Leeds, London, and other provincial towns) were fictionalised versions of the actual events, and my analysis of their productions is driven by a consideration of the dynamic interaction between reality and its representation. The 'Outrages' themselves, and their dramatisation, had a significant and enduring effect on those who lived in the town and on those who passed judgement from a distance. The productions attracted nationwide attention, which was an unusual occurrence, and an examination of their reception exposes prejudice on the part of the metropolitan critics, as well as revealing pride and a sense of identity from those who were based in the region.

The final section of Chapter Three shifts the focus from the Outrages to consider some of the other themes raised by *The Union Wheel*, and it

⁴⁰ Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin (eds.), *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Frontispiece.

⁴¹ Davis and Donkin, *Women and Playwriting*, p. 5.

reprises some of my earlier investigations, particularly the arguments about the value of the theatrical form itself. It reminds us of the conflicting ideas of the function of theatre, in the context of the ever-increasing anxieties about music hall and working class recreations, and provides a thematic and chronological segue to **Chapter Four**. *Keen Blades; or The Straight Tip* by James Fyfe Elliston and A. F. Cross, produced at the Theatre Royal in 1893, is concerned with late-nineteenth century debates about sport, class and the commercialisation of leisure. It is described on the title page as ‘a great sporting melo-drama’, and it is a mystery thriller, which culminates in the exciting spectacle of a running race. It features a clash of cultures through its story of Harry, a talented athlete from the landed gentry, and his adventures in Sheffield’s urban working-class milieu of the public house and race track. The play and its production suggest that sport (and implicitly theatre) can bring together disparate elements of society; and affirms them as worthwhile leisure activities. It can be interpreted as a defence of working-class culture, and it also celebrates the fact that local pride can overcome class differences. These were notable aims, given the increasing segregation in Sheffield occasioned by alterations to its social structures, as its industries continued to change and develop during the latter part of the century.

Even though *Keen Blades* and *The Union Wheel* were written two decades apart, they both suggest that harmony can be fostered across the classes, and indeed that the working-classes can feel proud about their identity. Class is also an important factor in the creative work and career of Kate Pitt, particularly when it intersects with gender. Through an examination of aspects of the lives of these playwrights, it is possible to evaluate the extent to which women and those from poor backgrounds achieved social mobility whilst continuing to work as artists. Those employed in the theatre were treated with more tolerance later in the century, but there were still many

prejudices to be overcome. The concept of challenge connects these later playwrights with the theatrical professionals from earlier decades discussed in Chapter One; and provides the underlying motivation for, and theoretical premise of this thesis.

Practical methodologies have supported my philosophical concepts, and I have conducted a close examination of theatrical ephemera in public record archives. Jacky Bratton and Jane Moody both emphasise what playbills can reveal, and their significance; Bratton writes of the importance of closely reading this kind of document 'whole', in order to understand that 'every element on it is a signifier which, like all signifiers, has a meaning only as part of a system of relationships'.⁴² Analysis of available playbills has enabled me to understand the development of the repertoire, and I have made use of several collections of playbills held at the Sheffield Archives and Local Studies Library, and the Hudson Collection at the University of Sheffield. This latter collection is one that was put together by father and son, namely John Dungworth Hudson (1803-1875) and John Hudson (1836-1911), and the playbills date from 1832-1858. John Hudson was such an avid collector seemingly because as a young man he could not afford to attend the theatre: it seems that once he was able to go to performances, he ceased to collect, as the archive stops abruptly in 1858, although according to a manuscript note in the front of the album, he continued to attend the theatre for another forty years. There is little additional information available and the collection is personal and particular. Ultimately, the collection perhaps tells us more about the particular interests of one father and son, rather than providing a comprehensive picture of theatre in Sheffield.

The Hudson collection, however, is a useful resource: not only because it supplies evidence about the repertoire; but it also provides a

⁴² Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, pp. 154-7. Bratton, *New Readings*, pp. 39-40.

tantalising glimpse of an audience that we as researchers must make every effort to comprehend, despite the difficulties. As Bratton suggests, evidence from playbills can be used to understand more fully how audiences related to what they were seeing on stage. Audiences brought knowledge, experience and opinions with them into auditoria and this information is likely to have affected their spectatorial experience. Bratton calls this method 'intertheatricality':

This is my field of study, the intertheatrical, so-called by analogy to the intertextual, in which no writing or reading is isolated from the other writing and reading within its culture. An intertheatrical reading goes beyond the written. It seeks to articulate the mesh of connections between all kinds of theatre texts, and between texts and their users. It posits that all entertainments, including the dramas, that are performed within a single theatrical tradition are more or less interdependent. They are uttered in a language, shared by successive generations, which includes not only speech and the systems of the stage – scenery, costume, lighting and so forth – but also genres, conventions and, very importantly, memory. The fabric of that memory, shared by audience and players, is made up of dances, spectacles, plays and songs, experienced as particular performances – a different selection, of course, for each individual – woven upon knowledge of the performers' other current and previous roles, and their personae on and off the stage.⁴³

One of the underlying aims of my research has been to untangle the 'mesh of connections', as they were manifest in Sheffield, in order to understand theatre texts in conjunction with their 'users' - in other words theatrical producers and consumers.

George Rowell reiterates the necessity of understanding the audience in order to understand the theatrical product. He reminds us that 'the Victorian theatre was entirely dependent on its public, and Victorian drama is now only intelligible through an understanding of that public'. However, he also recognises the difficulties of obtaining the information which would enable us to fully comprehend the constitution, sensibility, and

⁴³ Bratton, *New Readings*, p. 38.

experience of spectators.⁴⁴ Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow rose to the challenge in their ambitious study, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840-1880* (2001).⁴⁵ They ascertain that audiences were specific to particular venues, and demonstrate how this composition of audiences affected the reception of particular plays. The two main theatres in Sheffield were located in different areas, and Chapter One will examine the history of these venues, their locales, and the competition and collaboration between them. In addition to dramatic texts, Davis and Emeljanow examine maps, census returns, transport data, playbills, government papers, local and national newspapers, memoirs, journals, diaries and letters. I have employed similar methods wherever possible in order to try to understand the nature of the Sheffield audience, which was, like that of most Victorian theatre, drawn from all sectors of society.

A recent web-based project at the University of Nottingham, 'Mapping performance culture: Nottingham 1857-1867', led by Dr. Jo Robinson from the School of English and Dr. Gary Priestnall from the School of Geography is particularly relevant in this respect, and it would be worthwhile to conduct the same kind of in-depth survey and method of presentation in Sheffield.⁴⁶ Researchers used historical material in order to 'create an interactive map connecting each performance event with the landscape and society of the town' during the chosen decade, to try to discover more about audiences, and the relationships between different forms of entertainment. Although it has not been possible to document every performance that took place during my period of study, I have used a similar process of 'mapping' to chart, and

⁴⁴ Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre*, p. 149.

⁴⁵ Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840-1880* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ University of Nottingham, 'Mapping Performance Culture: Nottingham 1857-1867' <<http://nottingham.ac.uk/mapmoment>>.

understand, productions in relation to participants, potential spectators, and contemporaneous events.

Archival research has provided information about likely audiences but also biographical details about those who worked in, or supported, the performance industry. Thomas Postlewait offers informed guidance for ways to use this kind of material in order to examine cultural and social conditions, and in his essay 'Micro-history and the Writing of Theatre History Today' (2003), he states:

the aim in microhistory is not simply to offer a biographical investigation of a particular person, but to probe the definitive features of the life in order to see what the case study reveals about the time and place. Even when the microhistorian focuses on a specific individual, there is no imperative that the life needs to be covered chronologically, birth to death. Instead, the aim is to discover the special aspects of the individual, whose situation, actions and beliefs provide the telling traces of cultural, social, moral, and political conditions.⁴⁷

My task has been to probe the 'definitive features' of the lives of the playwrights, performers and other personalities featured in this thesis in order to comprehend their 'situation, actions and beliefs', and thus excavate the relevant 'cultural, social, moral and political conditions' which determined the progress of theatre in Sheffield.

If we accept that theatre is not a 'product of culture', but rather a social process 'dynamically interacting with culture', then strategies and insights from those working in the fields of cultural, social and political history are useful.⁴⁸ Although academics such as John Hargreaves, Sidney Pollard and Dennis Smith are not theatre historians, their research has enabled me to understand some of the social and political dynamics of a region which grew beyond all recognition from the beginning of the century to its end, and thus to

⁴⁷ Thomas Postlewait, 'Micro-history and the Writing of Theatre History Today' (unpublished paper for the Historiography Working Group: IFTR/FIRT: Worcester, England, June 2003, quoted in *The Victorian Clown*, Bratton & Featherstone, p. 32.

⁴⁸ Davis and Donkin, *Women and Playwriting*, Frontispiece.

place its theatre in a wider context.⁴⁹ In addition, local historians have provided valuable information about the many different aspects of the town and its development, as it changed from a relatively small municipality to a major urban centre.

My thesis considers the part that theatre played in the evolution of Sheffield (the town was awarded city status in 1893), and investigates the extent to which its performance culture contributed to a sense of community and civic pride, despite the opposition of those who considered it to be detrimental to the interests of its residents. It traces the cultural history of a town from a time when it had one theatre, which hosted occasional productions, and was part of the 'circuit system'; through the years of stock companies, who performed more regularly.⁵⁰ Alongside the competitive advent of music hall, playwrights and producers gained more confidence, and some of their projects and achievements are documented through the case studies. By the end of Chapter Four, my story is about a busy, populous city, full of venues for art and entertainment; and the short concluding chapter briefly surveys the theatrical landscape in the final decade of the nineteenth century, and anticipates the developments of the twentieth. It suggests the directions in which further research could be taken, and considers whether this project has achieved its objectives, which are: to challenge prejudices about provincial, popular theatre and the role of women; to demonstrate the

⁴⁹ John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986); Sidney Pollard and Colin Holmes (eds.), *Essays in the Economic and Social History of South Yorkshire* (Barnsley: South Yorkshire County Council, 1976).

⁵⁰ 'As more companies came into the field at the beginning of the eighteenth century they gradually adopted a number of towns in their district which they visited regularly. These formed what was known as their 'circuit'. ... The establishment of regular circuits naturally led to the building of the first provincial playhouses', 'The Circuit System and the First Theatres' Phyllis Hartnoll (ed), *Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 638.

A 'stock company' was a theatrical troupe which was regularly attached to a particular theatre or group of theatres, operating on a true repertory basis with a nightly change of bill'. Hartnoll (ed), *Oxford Companion*, p. 771.

special performance culture and identity of Sheffield; and to reclaim its position as a significant city in nineteenth century theatrical history.

Chapter One

Contested sites 1810-1870

'The management certainly deserves credit for the display of continued energy and spirit under untoward circumstances'.¹

Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis examines the growth of theatre in Sheffield, from the early decades of the century to the end of the 1860s, in relation to the particular challenges that it faced during those years. It struggled to survive against religious intolerance, political instability, and financial hardship, but its personnel were tenacious, astute and creative. The rapid growth in population indicated a potential increase in audience numbers, but theatre had to compete with many other forms of entertainment. The spread of many of these venues is illustrated on the maps at Appendix C4, and Appendix C 1-3 documents their chronological development (including many changes of name), but my narrative account will focus mainly on three geographical areas.

Each locale had its particular characteristics, even though there was not much physical distance between them. (The maps, which form part of Appendix D, show these different areas and are marked with the many performance venues which I was able to trace.) The first has retained its cultural character and is, in 2013, the home of the Crucible and Lyceum Theatres, which jointly provide a critically-acclaimed repertoire for the region.² This is where two of the buildings central to my investigation were situated (although both have now been demolished). The first, originally named simply the Theatre, was a constant fixture on the performance map throughout the period, and continued to operate during the first decades of the twentieth

¹ Review of the season 1847-48, *Sheffield Independent*, 11 March 1848.

² The organisation titled 'Sheffield Theatres' combines the Crucible and Lyceum Theatres and was awarded Regional Theatre of the Year by the *Stage* newspaper on 3 January 2013, in recognition of its creative work during 2012.

century until it was destroyed by fire in 1935. From about 1845 the building was usually referred to as the Theatre Royal, although there is no record that its 'royal' status was ever officially conferred, (throughout the thesis I refer to the name of the building in accordance with this approximate chronology).³ The Surrey Street Music Hall (which also disappeared in the 1930s to make way for the Central Library and Graves Art Gallery) was built very close by in 1823 and opened a year later. This Music Hall was very different from the usual image that its name might suggest: it was intended for the performance of classical concerts (thus literally a hall for music) and the first part of its name was conferred due to its location at 79 Surrey Street. This elegant, well-appointed building was the home of the Literary and Philosophical Society (from 1824) and the main Subscription Library (from at least 1839). The second area was a bustling hub around West Bar, where many small, sometimes rowdy, music halls were located, as well as the confusingly-named Surrey Theatre. These streets have changed beyond all recognition, a transformation which is also true of the third site, around Blonk Street on the north-eastern fringe of the city centre. Near the intersection of the Don and Sheaf rivers and home to the cattle market, this prime location became the home of a venue, originally called the Circus, which went on to have many different names and a wide repertoire. A place for trade usually attracts people with money to spend, so it is not surprising that popular entertainment such as equestrian shows and travelling fairs had taken place in the vicinity since at least 1790.⁴ After the permanent circus building was constructed in 1837 there was increased competition between venues, and the three-way

³ The Minute and Account Books lodged in Sheffield Archives (CA373 1-4) always refer to the building as 'The Sheffield Theatre', although playbills regularly use the title 'Theatre Royal' from about 1845 onwards. A chronological account of the venue is provided in Appendix C1.

⁴ 'Equestrian performances on Monday evening ... will be performed ... in the Wicker ... Wonderful feats of horsemanship, dancing, tumbling, still vaulting trampoline tricks...' *Sheffield Register*, 9 July 1790.

symbiotic relationship between modes of performance, their sites, and their spectators, became more complicated.

This (necessarily selective) narrative is shaped by a consideration of the 'conditions of production and consumption' which affected artistic practice, or in other words, the process by which theatre is produced and consumed, and there are three interrelated aspects to this investigation.⁵ Firstly, my definition of 'process' encompasses the practical elements necessary for the operation of performance culture within nineteenth century British capitalism, and therefore my account includes the management of theatres, the theatrical economy, and the development of repertoire. Secondly, the concept is a helpful one for an exploration of performance aesthetics (in terms of the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation and thus in the formation of genre), and my study includes analyses of staging, technical details and modes of performance. Thirdly, it facilitates an examination of the shifting position and status of theatre in relation to the changing composition of the society of Sheffield.

These three elements are connected by the premise that Victorian theatre was a communal, civic institution with moral responsibilities, yet simultaneously it was a commercial enterprise; and I examine the ways in which these sometimes conflicting functions affected the ways in which it operated. The success of theatre is dependent on its producers and its consumers, and thus the individuals who engineered its progression play a crucial role in my investigation. My findings concur with those of Kathleen Barker, who broke new ground with her early and perceptive research into provincial theatre. She notes that 'mid-Victorian Sheffield was full of "characters"', and although it has only been possible for me to include a

⁵ Tracy Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. xii - see my Introduction.

selection, it is important to acknowledge the notable contribution that these bold entrepreneurs made to the cultural development and economic success of Sheffield, and the ways they helped to shape its identity.⁶

The first purpose-built playhouse, the Theatre, opened in the eighteenth century, and is central to my investigation of some of these enterprising and determined individuals. A self-selected group of Sheffielders (mostly men, but some women) financed the construction of the building, and there were originally 34 subscribers (or share-holders). Located at the intersection of Norfolk Street / Tudor Street / Arundel Street (the building occupied virtually the same spatial position as the present-day Crucible), the Theatre was built back-to-back with the new Assembly Rooms and rising costs meant delays to the original plans and further fund-raising. The number of shares in 1776 (the foundation stone was laid on 6 August 1777) is recorded in official documentation as 36, and although ownership of the shares changed over the years, the number remained constant.⁷ For a period of over 100 years (until 1897), the Theatre was jointly owned: during that time a total of 123 men and 31 women owned one or more shares.⁸ The management of the Theatre and its repertoire was affected by the mutual possession of the building and the co-dependent nature of the relationship between proprietors and lessees, and the impact of these circumstances will be examined later in this chapter.

The proprietors of the Theatre - about 150 people over approximately 100 years - came from a variety of backgrounds and professions (although in

⁶ '...the wealth of individual "characters" in Sheffield's civic and artistic life, and the continuous sense of activity and endeavour, gives the history of the performing arts there... something of the flavour of a serialised Dickens novel', Kathleen M. D. Barker, *The Performing Arts in Five Provincial Towns 1840-1870* (PhD, University of Warwick, 1982), p. 334.

⁷ The Minute Book of the Theatre commences in 1795, but it contains signed documents relating to these earlier years, SA CA373/1.

⁸ 'Register of Proprietors', SA CA373/4.

order to invest they must have achieved a certain level of financial security). They inevitably had interests which sometimes overlapped and sometimes conflicted. The Theatre never generated great wealth, certainly in the early days, so although investors may have been initially motivated by the promise of financial gain, and indeed regularly collected small dividends; it was likely that other factors encouraged some of them to continue their commitment. Each share allegedly cost £100, and given the annual profits for each shareholder (which varied between the lowest amount, 10s 6d in 1809 and the highest, £16 10s in 1866), it would have taken some time to recoup the initial outlay.⁹ It is impossible to assign motives to individual proprietors, but given the available evidence it seems fair to suggest that the impetus came from a mixture of interest in, and enjoyment of, artistic endeavour, together with a degree of altruism and a sense of civic responsibility. Each shareholder was allocated a 'Silver Ticket', which enabled them (and their friends and relatives) to attend almost all performances free of charge, and each year they collectively commissioned a 'Bespeak' performance.

Perhaps some shareholders were more philanthropic than others (there was some abuse of the 'Silver Ticket' scheme), but it was through this group of individuals that performance culture became part of the small, interconnected network of voluntary associations and public bodies which managed local affairs for most of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ For example a published obituary for Dr. Edwin Unwin (1805-1870), who was the longest-serving Treasurer of the Theatre (from 1838 to 1865), noted that 'for many years he took a prominent part in the management of the town'. He was one

⁹ A short document was printed in 1866, entitled 'Extracts from the Minute Book', which summarised Committee proceedings and listed the dividends paid to the Proprietors each year from 1795 to 1866. This was probably to be circulated only to those who were proprietors at that time, and a copy was pasted into the official Minute Book, SA CA373/1. See also unattributed newscutting, S-LSL 942.74 SQ, Vol. 27, p. 50.

¹⁰ 'Special Meeting of the Proprietors', 17 October 1845, SA CA373/1.

of the directors of the Sheffield Gas and Light Company, a sometime police commissioner, and an Alderman on the town council.¹¹ Unwin appeared to embody the combination of personal interest and municipal power that characterised local politics and sometimes caused controversy.

The public discourse about theatre, which typically consisted of conflicting attempts to define, classify and judge it, tended to categorise it as a civic institution which had a moral responsibility to the local inhabitants. However those who worked in it, or financially supported it, were acutely aware that it was predominantly a business; and in order to survive in an increasingly competitive capitalist environment, it was bound by commercial imperatives. It was extremely difficult to achieve a satisfactory balance between the often divergent financial and moral obligations, and this not only caused friction between the lessees and the proprietors but also exercised patrons of the Theatre who believed that their support conferred entitlement and a degree of authority. In addition, advocates and employees had to contend with the damaging activities of those who thought the Theatre (and theatre more generally) should not exist at all. The increasing interest in (and access to) print media (playbills, newspapers, and pamphlets) stimulated and prolonged contentious debates and it is this public dialogue which fuelled such a challenging and dynamic relationship between those who initiated and engineered the processes of theatrical production, and those who responded to their efforts.

Section One of this Chapter documents and analyses some of the challenges to theatre in Sheffield between 1810-1850, which generally came from economic and political instability and more specifically from moral disapproval on religious grounds. **Section Two** focuses on 1850-1870, as the town began to prosper, and new buildings, institutions and monuments

¹¹ S-LSL Newscuttings, 942.74 SF, vol. 13, pp. 48-50.

demonstrated increasing wealth and confidence - Sheffield was incorporated as a Borough in 1843, and officially became a city in 1893. This part investigates the ways in which relationships between producers, critics and audiences shifted, as theatrical enterprise assumed a more significant role in the commercial evolution of the town and its changing social milieu.

Section 1: Culture and ideology 1810-1850

1.1 Principles, purity and pleasure

Confidence and courage were necessary qualities for anyone who took on the challenge of managing the Theatre in the early decades of the century. Although the influential presence of the proprietors and their colleagues may have compromised their independence, lessees also benefited from their encouragement and assistance when threatened by fervent ideological opposition. It is not unusual for theatres to be criticised on moral grounds, particularly by religious bodies, but the venue in Sheffield came under particularly persistent attack from a minister of the Anglican Church, the Reverend Thomas Best (1788-1865). Armed with the unshakeable belief that any form of theatre was incompatible with Christianity, the new incumbent of St. James's began his denunciations as soon as he arrived, in 1817.¹² He continued to preach an annual sermon against 'theatrical amusements' for forty-seven years, each lecture scheduled to coincide with the opening of the venue for the autumn season,

¹² St James' in St James' Street, a little distance from the Theatre, 'was built on the parish glebe in 1789 as a chapel-at-ease to the Parish Church'. John Taylor (ed.), *The Illustrated Guide to Sheffield and Surrounding District* (Sheffield: Pawson and Brailsford, 1879), p. 69.

and his sermons were regularly published in pamphlet form.¹³ His diatribes provoked an indignant response, not only from those who worked in the profession, but also from those who enjoyed dramatic performance in the town, and supported the Theatre by attendance at plays and public advocacy. Apparently Reverend Thomas Sutton of the Parish Church was more tolerant than Reverend Best, and parishioners allegedly joked that his church bells rang out the refrain, 'go-to-the-the-a-tre, go-to-the-the-a-tre'.¹⁴

A group of local enthusiasts established the Sheffield Shakspeare [sic] Club in 1819 as a form of resistance.¹⁵ There were common interests, and intersections of personnel, between the members of the Club and the proprietors of the Theatre. John Favell is acknowledged at the first anniversary meeting on 4 November 1819 (at which approximately 70 gentlemen were in attendance), as a person 'to whom we are greatly indebted for the existence of this Club'.¹⁶ He was also Treasurer of the Theatre in 1821, 1822, 1828, and 1829.¹⁷ The Proceedings of the Club were published at the end of its first decade (1819-1829), and the preface explains the rationale behind its foundation:

That a Minister of the Established Church brought this society into existence need not be concealed; that he will be able to destroy the work he has created, is extremely doubtful. Some time in the year 1818, when the opening of the Sheffield Theatre for the season was

¹³ There are at least thirty sermons accessible in Sheffield's Local Studies Library. Two collected volumes were published: *Sermons on the Amusements of the Stage, Preached at St James's Church, Sheffield*, First Series (Sheffield: George Ridge, 1831, London: Hamilton and Adams, 1831) and *Sermons on Theatrical Amusements*, Second Series (Sheffield: Pawson and Brailsford, 1865, London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1865). Others are to be found in the compilations of miscellaneous local pamphlets, for example 'The Love of Pleasure: a Sermon Preached at St. James's Church Sheffield, on Sunday Morning, November 2nd' (Sheffield: Pearce, 1862).

¹⁴ William Smith Porter, *Sheffield Literary and Philosophical Society: a centenary retrospect 1822-1922* (Sheffield: J. W. Northend Ltd.), p. 3.

¹⁵ I have followed the spelling of 'Shakspeare' as it is spelt in the published records of the Club, and written it this way each time the Club is referenced.

¹⁶ Anon., *Proceedings of the Sheffield Shakspeare Club* (Sheffield: H. & G. Crookes, 1829), p. 4-5.

¹⁷ Minute Book CA373/1.

announced, he commenced a series of philippics, not of the most liberal kind, against stage representations of every description ... a few individuals, not altogether satisfied with the way in which they had been disposed of... and who thought themselves somewhat harshly and uncharitably condemned, felt themselves called upon, either to abandon the Theatre altogether, or to avow and defend their reasons for a different line of conduct.¹⁸

This published defence focused on the suitability of theatre as a tool for moral improvement, in direct opposition to Best's repeated declarations about its negative effect on human behaviour. Each side drew on writings which supported their belief and value system in order to strengthen their case. Not surprisingly, Reverend Best quoted liberally from the Bible, whereas the anonymous editor of the *Proceedings of the Shakspeare Club* relied on Alexander Pope and his poetic definition of the purpose of drama:

To wake the soul by tender strokes of art,
To rouse the genius, and to mend the heart,
To make mankind in conscious virtue bold,
Live o'er each scene, and be what they behold, -
For this the Tragic Muse first trod the Stage.¹⁹

This claim, that spectatorship of theatre stimulates and encourages virtuous action, that it makes 'mankind in conscious virtue bold' was reiterated by writers and critics in Sheffield through the century. However the counter-accusation was asserted just as frequently, that theatre caused the moral degeneration of its audience:

It is a fact, then, Sir, that Theatrical Representations are in their nature, and their effects, throughout, opposed to purity of heart and life ... they must be, generally, legitimate objects of animadversion and condemnation from the pulpit.²⁰

The problem at the heart of the unresolved and often vitriolic debate about moral worth lay in theatre's inconsistent blend of edification and entertainment. At the first anniversary dinner of the Sheffield Shakspeare

¹⁸ *Proceedings*, p. v.

¹⁹ Alexander Pope, quoted on the Frontispiece in the *Proceedings*.

²⁰ 'A Layman', *Facts, but not Comments; being Strictures on the Stage: in a letter to Robert Mansel, Esq. on his attempt to represent the SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD as an Approver of Theatrical Exhibitions* (Sheffield: J. Montgomery, 1819), p. 1.

Club on 4 November 1819, Mr. Rimington (the Chair) proposed a toast to 'The Drama: may it long continue a source of rational recreation'.²¹ The use of this phrase 'rational recreation' is an early example of what would become a familiar and oft-repeated mantra, used to justify and promote a range of attitudes to morality and pleasure. An increasing number of public figures throughout the period believed that moral education was more effective when the recipient was engaged in a pleasurable occupation, but differences surfaced when determining the ratio of instruction to enjoyment. The discourse of rational recreation and its relationship with performance is a major theme of Chapter Four, but the debate about theatre and morality permeates the history of nineteenth century performance in Sheffield (and indeed throughout the country) and is thus an important connecting element.

All factions usually concurred that the desire for pleasure was a fundamental human stimulus, but paths diverged when deciding how the individual should respond to that desire: Reverend Best advocated denial and abstinence, whereas Mr. Rimington and his fellow members of the Shakspeare Club embraced drama as a source of both pleasure and education - it was quite acceptable to enjoy music and comedy alongside the nobler lessons taught by the 'Tragic Muse', provided that the humour was not malicious. A report of the twelfth anniversary dinner published in the *Sheffield Independent* in 1830 illustrates this point of view. After the manager of the Theatre (Mr. Beverly) had entertained his audience with the song 'Shakespeare's Seven Ages', Mr. Palfreyman, the Chair, addressed them:

I love plays, and delight in music, when I can enjoy a laugh I get one, and I am sure that the present manager of the theatre has afforded numerous opportunities for enjoying the latter. During my recollection of the performances on the Sheffield stage, I can say that I never before saw more comic action, and so much "wit without scurrility." Mr. Beverly seems to have come amongst us upon his own merits, without being previously known to us. I can say that if any one will visit the theatre he will soon become acquainted with him. And if any person

²¹ *Proceedings of the Sheffield Shakspeare Club*, p. 4.

wishes to enjoy a good laugh, he must pay him a visit. In the characters represented by Mr. H. Beverly, he will find as much gratification as in him whom many of us have frequently been led to visit – the celebrated Liston...²²

Palfreyman's appreciation of the talents of a comic actor and the flattering comparison of Beverly with the well-known Liston inform us that he was familiar with contemporary performers and keen to maintain a harmonious relationship with the manager of the Theatre. However, he also indicated that the relationship between Club members and managers was not always so cordial, particularly if disagreements arose about the repertoire. He claimed that every member should take his duty seriously, 'to show that the Sheffield Shakspeare Club has a good object in view – that of preserving the purity of the drama while engaged in gratifying the taste'.²³ This deceptively simple yet revealing statement encapsulates several problems. His wish to preserve 'the purity of the Drama while engaged in gratifying the taste' infers a balance between two complementary elements. However there is more than one definition of 'taste' and these definitions are open to interpretation.

'Taste' was as slippery a term in the early nineteenth century as it is today, and this is evident from its etymology, documented in the Oxford English Dictionary. It could mean

The sense of what is appropriate, harmonious, or beautiful; especially discernment and appreciation of the beautiful in nature or art; specially the faculty of perceiving and enjoying what is excellent in art, literature, and the like.²⁴

²² *Sheffield Independent*, 20 November 1830.

John Liston was born in London, made his debut at the Haymarket and was engaged at Covent Garden for many years. By 1822 he had become well-known in many roles as a low comedian, and had also become a popular attraction in the provinces. According to Jim Davis he 'was undoubtedly the greatest comic actor of his generation'. Jim Davis, 'Liston, John (c.1776–1846)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16770>> [accessed 10 April 2013]

²³ *Sheffield Independent*, 20 November 1830.

²⁴ "Taste, n.1". OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press <<http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk>> [accessed 13 February 2013].

Yet it could also denote the rather more simple 'fact or condition of liking or preferring something'.²⁵ Indeed the element of pleasure inherent in the word is suggested by the quote (from Alexander Pope) used by the compilers of the dictionary to define the word, 'Every opportunity for the indulgence of his favourite tastes'.²⁶ However, luminaries such as Congreve, Addison and Reynolds set a precedent for using the term to indicate discernment and fine sensibilities.²⁷ Meanings overlap, depending on the particular predisposition of the speaker or writer, and objective application is extremely difficult.

The degree of personal bias together with unstable definitions of aesthetics, quality and propriety has profoundly affected the material conditions for performance practice, as well as its classification, analysis, and history. If some plays are labelled 'excellent' and 'appropriate', and conversely others deemed offensive or of low aesthetic standard, then there must be someone responsible for pronouncing judgement. Mr. Palfreyman's opinion was not necessarily the same as that held by Mr. Beverly, so the question is not only which of them should have had the priority vote, but which opinion should have been accorded cultural value. The advertisement for the Bespeak Performance for the Shakspeare Club in 1833 illustrates the then-common combination of Shakespeare, music and comedy, which would probably be considered 'in poor taste' by most twenty-first century critics. 'By desire and under the immediate patronage of the Gentlemen of the Sheffield Shakspeare Club, the first part of *King Henry the Fourth*; a variety of singing; to conclude with *Captain Stevens*' (the popular farce by Charles Selby).²⁸

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Leslie Stephen, *Alexander Pope*, 1st edition (London: Macmillan, 1880), noted in OED online, op. cit.

²⁷ OED online, op. cit.

²⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 7 December 1833.

The intimate conversations in the dining room of the Tontine Inn in Sheffield reflected public attempts to defend and define drama in the 1830s, and these definitions had enduring consequences. The distinction between 'art' and 'entertainment' that Jacky Bratton criticises is evident from the use of the phrase 'the Drama', which differentiates the subject from, and elevates it above, other kinds of theatrical performance, such as burlesque and melodrama.²⁹ Other phrases which inferred the same supposition of quality were 'legitimate drama', or 'regular drama'.³⁰ In 1832, the novelist, playwright and Radical politician Edward Bulwer Lytton was successful in his bid to be appointed Chair of a new parliamentary Select Committee on 'Dramatic Literature'.³¹ This taxonomical decision highlights an enduring problematic issue, perpetuated by theatre historians and cultural commentators, namely that theatre texts are often considered as literature, rather than one element of a complex creative process. Although there is no evidence that anyone from Sheffield was involved with this committee, its formation would have been public knowledge, and individuals such as the proprietors of the Theatre and/or the members of the Shakspeare Club who were concerned with the quality and status of drama, are sure to have been aware of its existence. The Committee was charged with investigating the state of dramatic performance in England, including an examination of the implications of the patent house monopoly.

The effect of restrictive legislation (in place since 1737) on theatre genres; and the battles for theatre reform in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have been the subject of astute critical commentary over

²⁹ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Bratton resists this restricting division, as discussed in my Introduction.

³⁰ The OED notes that 'with "the", drama means 'the dramatic branch of literature; the dramatic art'. "Drama, n.". OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/view/Entry/57475>> [accessed 11 April 2013].

³¹ Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer Lytton, first Baron Lytton (1803–1873).

the past decade, and two books in particular, Jane Moody's *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1780-1840*, and Jacky Bratton's *New Readings in Theatre History* radically re-evaluate the theatrical landscape. Bratton claims that the rhetoric of the 1832 Select Committee had a crucial influence on the manner in which all subsequent theatre history has been written.³² Jane Moody's influential study of performance outside those few theatres licensed by the Lord Chamberlain describes and analyses the tactics employed by successive generations of writers, managers and performers who exercised their creativity in order to produce theatrical work which evaded penalty. Moody illustrates how this strategy irrevocably influenced the texture of theatrical productions.³³ The appeal of melodrama and spectacle for an audience could not be ignored by the legitimate theatres, and this affected the choice and style of productions staged, resulting in richly varied programmes and the development of what may be termed hybrid genres.

The available evidence suggests that theatrical activity in Sheffield in the early years of the nineteenth century followed a similar pattern to the playhouses in most provincial towns, and the Theatre presented limited seasons of mixed bills. Kathleen Barker notes that because the Theatre in Sheffield did not hold a Royal Patent, seasons were 'restricted to the legal limit of sixty nights set down in the 1788 Act'.³⁴ Playbills and newspaper advertisements indicate that productions of Shakespeare were frequent but his plays would often have been drastically cut or embellished with songs and

³² Bratton, 'The Select Committee and the Definition of Theatre History' in *New Readings*, pp. 79-83.

³³ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 8.

³⁴ Barker, Unpublished Thesis, p. 11.

dances.³⁵ For example, it is likely that the version of *Richard III* produced at the Theatre on Monday 25 November 1833 was a shortened adaptation, given that the programme also included *Evil Eye* (listed on the playbill as a romantic musical drama and probably by R. B. Peake).³⁶ The advertisement for the production of *King Lear* on Monday 11 November 1833 enticed its audience with the promise of an entertaining conclusion to the evening in the form of ‘a new Burlesque Burletta, entitled “Cupid” with splendid New Scenery and Dresses’.³⁷ This country-wide practice of mixing up tragedy with music, spectacle and farce may have attracted audiences but it had many critics, as the documentation from the Select Committee and elsewhere details. Local theatre enthusiasts made their views heard; the reporter for the *Sheffield Independent* in 1831 looked forward to the forthcoming season in the Theatre:

This place of amusement opens for a very short campaign on Monday. ... It is understood that the performances will be varied, and for the most part consist of the regular drama, which has latterly, on the Sheffield boards, been too little regarded.³⁸

The meetings of the members of the Shakspeare Club with successive theatre managers as reported in the *Proceedings* and articles in the *Sheffield Independent* indicate the delicate balance between patrons and licensees which had to be maintained. Managers were under pressure to produce ‘regular drama’, whilst at the same time to ensure their repertoire was popular and made enough money. Mr. Butler struggled to defend his choice of play against an angry Mr. Palfreyman during the December dinner of 1828:

I consider it a debasement of the profession, and a degradation to the talent of the actors, to bring before the public the semi-blasphemies of a Don Giovanni, or the blackguardism of a Tom and Jerry... if the

³⁵ For more on the relationship between Shakespeare and burlesque see Richard W. Schoch, *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁶ Playbill, Monday 25 November 1833, Hudson Collection.

³⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 9 November 1830.

³⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 19 November 1831.

stage should ever entirely fall, which good taste forbid, it will be by thus prostituting it to these unworthy purposes.³⁹

Tom and Jerry had a notorious reputation. The original text (also commonly referred to as *Life in London*) was by Pierce Egan; Jacky Bratton describes how Egan's evocation of the street life of the capital had been strongly criticised for 'vulgarity and for glamorising reprehensible behaviour', and notes that the 'condemnation ... was ... very violent and extraordinarily emotional'.⁴⁰ Although a stage adaptation by William Thomas Moncrieff had been licensed by the Lord Chamberlain and produced in London in 1821, the play was received with similar hostility.⁴¹ It is not clear who authored Butler's production (there were several theatrical adaptations in circulation), but it is likely that the flavour of the original was retained. An earlier production of the same play in 1823 had occasioned the *Sheffield Independent* to despair of the unruly behaviour of the audience, spurred on (in his opinion) by the irreverence of the performance. He rhetorically asked the question 'are there not blackguards enough in the town, that he must set up a school for the production of more?'⁴² Even though Butler claimed that 'many of the condemned, yet popular pieces, inculcated sound morality', his defence of *Tom and Jerry* was rather weak. The only 'admirable piece of advice' he could quote from the play was:

Never forget the character of a friend in the house where you are introduced as a friend; let the title of husband and father be held inviolable; and never let the once friendly door be shut upon you as a villain or a seducer.⁴³

³⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 20 December 1828.

⁴⁰ The full title of the original text was *Life in London; or, the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq., and his elegant friend Corinthian Tom, accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis*. Noted in Bratton, *New Readings*, pp. 156-7.

⁴¹ Moncrieff, *Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London*, (based on Egan's sketches), Adelphi, 26 November 1821, listed in Allardyce Nicoll, *Nineteenth Century Drama 1800-1850 Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), p. 349.

⁴² *Sheffield Independent*, 29 November 1823.

⁴³ *Sheffield Independent*, 20 December 1828.

These somewhat ambiguous instructions could be construed as guidance for virtuous behaviour, but they could also be simply interpreted as suggestions for greater discretion. In any case, it is probable that Butler's assertion that this particular play afforded moral education would not have entirely convinced the members of the Shakspeare Club, and perhaps there was even an element of ironic humour in his claim.⁴⁴ His other excuse was more credible: that he was bound to respond to the demands of the public, who wanted to see fresh material.

This anecdote is another example of the ongoing argument about theatre and its effectiveness as a method of moral instruction, and it also specifically highlights the problem that managers faced of how to balance the popular demand for transgressive plays like *Tom and Jerry* against the pressures from their patrons and other influential members of Sheffield society. Those responsible for the programme could not ignore the increasing competition for audiences. If the Theatre was not prepared to produce *Tom and Jerry*, then there were plenty of entrepreneurs who would step into the breach. An advertisement on Saturday 3 July 1830 informed the public that a 'Grand Pony Race' would take place at the Royal Arena (possibly Adams' Royal Arena, located at the New Fair Ground of Sheaf Island, near the Canal Warehouse). It also announced that 'the Intervals will be enlivened by Favourite Scenes from Pierce Egan's *Life in London* assisted by Amateurs of the first celebrity'.⁴⁵ The organisers of this event had cleverly capitalised on an opportunity to appeal to different sectors of a potential audience: the race would attract those who liked exciting sports (and who perhaps did not usually go to the theatre), whilst the extracts from the play would interest lovers of drama, and its notoriety might attract curious or prurient spectators. In

⁴⁴ *Proceedings of the Sheffield Shakespeare Club*, p. 147.

⁴⁵ *Sheffield Independent*, 3 July 1830.

addition, the use of amateur performers would save on wages. It was little wonder that managers of the Theatre were worried.

The winter and spring fairs in Sheffield, normally held in November/December and May/June were a long-established part of the entertainment calendar, and usually coincided with the theatrical season. An advertisement announced that Mr. Adams would be at the Royal Arena during the fair, before returning to Ireland. He proclaimed that his unique performance genre was 'Histrionic Adamonian Equestrian Art ... invented by himself and produced with a degree of splendour which bears no competition'.⁴⁶ Several circus proprietors appropriated the title of Royal Arena: for example Ducrow used it for his venue at South Street and Moffatt & Harmston employed it for theirs at the Cattle Market, as reported in the *Sheffield Independent* on 12 November 1836 and 30 November 1844 respectively. Titles were neither fixed nor exclusive: 'Royal' conferred status and legitimacy and thus was used, at will, to entice an audience.

Circuses were clearly prepared to encroach onto theatrical territory as well as using grand titles, and this would become a major source of contention in later decades. The problems and possibilities caused by the appropriation of dramatic material by circuses are analysed and discussed by Jacky Bratton. She notes the ways in which traditional equestrian acts were enhanced by the addition of dramatic scenes, and why managers continued to utilise plays, even though they were often at risk of prosecution: 'Circus proprietors who included drama in their repertoire of performance knew that they were offering something that would draw audiences back in the successive weeks of their stay in town.'⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 13 June 1829.

⁴⁷ Bratton, 'What is a Play? Drama and the Victorian Circus' in *The Performing Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 250-262 (p. 255).

Further evidence that this practice was rife in Sheffield is illustrated by a production of *Paul Pry* (originally written by Jerrold), which took place in May 1838 at the Royal Amphitheatre (another name for The Sheffield Circus and Theatre), on horseback, with Mr. Ryan in the lead role. This brought the threat of legal action from the proprietors of the Theatre - Mr. Pierson was instructed 'forthwith to institute proceedings against the occupants of the New Circus in the event of their not immediately ceasing to perform plays'.⁴⁸ Indeed the proprietors even discussed the possibility of converting the Theatre to a circus, and although the idea was abandoned, the renowned circus performer and manager Andrew Ducrow (1793-1842) applied to lease the building in 1836.⁴⁹

This interest resulted in an ambitious project, which began a year later, in 1837, to construct a permanent Circus on Blonk Street, opposite the Cattle Market, despite the economic difficulties facing the populace. The *Sheffield Local Register* (an annual publication which summarised the noteworthy events of the year) reported on 15 April that 'commercial difficulties [are] intensely severe' and on 22nd that the 'trade of the town [is] much depressed'.⁵⁰ Like the Theatre on Tudor Street, this new building was financed through the sale of shares and leased to managers on short-term contracts. The *Sheffield Directory* of 1849 recorded that 'the Circus and Adelphi Theatre, a substantial stone fabric ... built in 1836 and '7, at the cost of £6,000, raised in £25 shares'.⁵¹ The Blonk Street venue set itself up as a rival to Tudor Street, and even called itself by the same name. This deliberate

⁴⁸ Committee meeting 4 December 1838, Minute Book CA373/1; noted in Sheffield Theatre History Research Group, *Georgian Theatre in Sheffield* (Sheffield: Pickard Communication, 2003), p. 115.

⁴⁹ Minute Book, 29 January 1836, and noted in *Georgian Theatre in Sheffield*, p. 112.

⁵⁰ *Sheffield Local Register* (Sheffield: R. Leader and Sons, 1837), p. 294.

⁵¹ *General Directory of the Town and Borough of Sheffield* (Sheffield: Robert Leader, for William White, 1849) p. 17.

intention to compete is confirmed by an advertisement for an auction to re-sell four of its shares:

The Theatre is on the point of being let upon advantageous terms, and as it will be opened in the course of a few weeks, a handsome Dividend will no doubt be made in a short time.⁵²

Regardless of these claims for the profitable potential of the venue, the necessary finance was slow to arrive and the building did not finally open until 23 April 1838, with Mr. Ryan's troupe. The new Lessee boasted about the capability of his troupe in all aspects of their performance:

the reception which Mr. Ryan's Dramatic, as well as Equestrian Company, have received, is a sufficient voucher for the talent they possess.⁵³

The Circus on Blonk Street would indeed become a persistent competitor to the Theatre and continue to cause rancour and legal actions, particularly during the 1850s and 1860s.

For now, the managers of the Tudor Street Theatre were mainly preoccupied with defending the repertoire against charges that it corrupted their audiences. Butler tried to placate his critics in the Shakspeare Club, but he admitted that the stage was limited in its ability to exert a righteous influence:

If the law, with all its terrors of various punishment, cannot *force* men from committing evil, how can the stage? Our duty is to *insinuate* good in a pleasing form; and by holding up vice to abhorrence, endeavour to wean the heart from error. [Emphasis/italics are in original text.]⁵⁴

This rather vague aim to 'insinuate good in a pleasing form' would not only have been considered inadequate but also deeply suspect by Reverend Thomas Best. He believed that theatre was dangerous precisely because of its 'mixture of a little good with much evil, the interspersing of a few correct

⁵² The shares belonged to James Levick (who had been declared bankrupt), *Sheffield Independent*, 29 April 1837.

⁵³ *Sheffield Independent*, 28 April 1838.

⁵⁴ *Proceedings of the Sheffield Shakspeare Club*, p. 147.

sentiments with that mass of moral poison whose only effect can be to deprave the heart'.⁵⁵ Best's contention was that productions deliberately misled an audience: they were lulled into a false sense of innocent security, whilst being unwittingly seduced into immorality and vice. A complementary anxiety, which became a moot point with *The Union Wheel* (the case study in Chapter Three), was that an audience would, despite the writer's best intentions, misunderstand the moral of a play and interpret it in ways that suited them.

This concern was part of a patronising yet fearful attitude to audiences, which emerged from, and often confirmed, the entrenched patriarchal nature of the class structure. Best, in his role as spiritual leader of the populace of Sheffield, may have been concerned about how the 'moral poison' of theatre would affect the literate gentlemen of the Shakspeare Club, but his zealous crusade was mainly directed at the working classes. The range of prices for theatre tickets allowed most people in Sheffield an opportunity to attend, at least occasionally. As the population increased exponentially throughout the century,⁵⁶ so too did its number of performance venues, and although the voices of those who opposed all forms of theatre were never completely silenced, they were overcome by those who wanted to harness the magnetism of theatre to promote their own agendas, as will be further demonstrated in Section Two of this chapter.

It is difficult to ascertain whether managers in Sheffield deliberately chose plays for their moral message, or intended to target particular sectors of the population with the plays they chose. A critic for the *Sheffield*

⁵⁵ Reverend Thomas Best, 'Two Sermons on the Subject of Theatrical Amusements' (Sheffield: James Montgomery, 1823) p.12. S-LSL, Local Pamphlets, Vol. 37, No. 9.

⁵⁶ In 1801 the population of Sheffield was about 31,000, in the early 1830s it tripled to more than 91,000; in 1841 it was 111,000 and between 1851 and 1891 it tripled again, from 132,000 to 324,000. Melvyn Jones, *The Making of Sheffield* (Sheffield: Wharnccliffe Books, 2004), p. 59; Pat Dallman, *The Story of Sheffield High Street* (Sheffield: ALD Design & Print, 2002), p. 80.

Independent took issue with what he felt had been a misguided programming decision, and his review is telling about how discrete sectors of an audience might relate differently to the same play, and it also reveals his assumption of superiority.

After watching a production of *George Barnwell* in December 1826, this local critic was unimpressed, although he acknowledged its potential value:

The play is a dull sermon throughout, and we think it as dolorous as a condemned one; but we know that it has made many sensible people think that the stage may teach useful lessons.⁵⁷

This popular morality tale was written in 1731 by George Lillo (1693-1739) and was originally titled *The London Merchant*.⁵⁸ It was extremely successful from the first production onwards (there were many authorised editions within its first ten years of existence, and several pirated ones), and it continued to be much revived in the early years of the nineteenth century, by which time it was more usually known by the name of its central character.⁵⁹ The play tells the story of a young apprentice (Barnwell) who goes to London and is seduced by Millwood, a courtesan. She encourages him to steal from his employer and murder his uncle, for which crime both are brought to execution. Although the Sheffield critic concurred that an audience from 'the trading population' might beneficially 'supply a moral' while they watched the play, he carefully distinguished himself from this different, and by implication inferior class:

⁵⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 9 December 1826.

⁵⁸ William H. McBurney informs us that the plot has even earlier origins, being taken from a ballad about George Barnwell and Sarah Millwood, which was printed as early as 1650. Introduction to *The London Merchant* by George Lillo, edited by William H. McBurney (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), ix-xxvi (xv).

⁵⁹ A new version by an unknown playwright was produced on 29 May 1811, Nicoll, *Nineteenth Century Drama 1800-1850 Vol. II*, p. 456.

It was also the subject of burlesque, as was the case with many plays which had become over-familiar. For example *George Barnwell; and Harlequin Pedlar* advertised in the *Sheffield Independent*, 9 November 1833.

Now, some of us who are in no danger of being drawn from a counter, by the tawdry Millwoods of the streets, or who happily have neither uncle nor aunt to assassinate, think that the theatre might use its machinery more agreeably to our taste and attainments, without adding anything to its supposed virtuousness.⁶⁰

His statement raised the important issue of the correlation between the characters onstage and the members of the audience. The play did not suit this critic's 'taste', mainly because he considered himself immune from ever experiencing a similar fate to the apprentice. Barnwell's temptation and fall and their wretched consequences had no personal resonance for him and therefore he did not see the point of watching the performance.

The critic used both meanings of 'taste' in his review: he wanted something more to his personal liking; and he also criticised the production for its inclusion of what he deemed inappropriate and offensive material. He was particularly incensed when he realised that he was to witness the representation of Barnwell's execution. He was 'lost in astonishment'; he could not understand why the actor would 'permit himself to be the degraded instrument of exhibiting the execrable taste of the management'. However he praised the actor who took the role, and in an interesting turn of phrase, noted that Mr. King 'fairly challenges our admiration'.⁶¹ There is perhaps a suggestion here that through his performance, an actor can still connect with a spectator who initially feels little empathy with a character's plight. The communicative power of theatrical performance in broader contexts, and attempts to exploit this potential will be considered in the next section.

1.2 Politics, religion and the art of communication

At a recent conference at the University of Lancaster, several presenters made specific connections between political speaking and

⁶⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 9 December 1826.

⁶¹ *Sheffield Independent* 9 December 1826.

performance in the nineteenth century, and indeed parliamentarians, revolutionaries and religious preachers all learned from the theatrical profession in their use of expressive gestures and the art of rhetoric.⁶² They recognised the potential of theatre spaces to effectively address and influence large numbers of people, and public meetings were held at the Theatre and the Circus as well as the popular outdoor location of Paradise Square. Lectures by radical speakers were one element of the groundswell of political agitation which troubled Sheffield in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: protests ranged from law-abiding movements focused on constitutional reform to direct action which sometimes had violent outcomes. Although demands for social and political change were part of nationwide campaigns, Sheffield became a particular and notable centre for revolutionary activity.

In his informative account of local subversion, David Price suggests that a long tradition of religious dissent among the populace generated favourable conditions for the development of radical politics inspired by the French Revolution. Sheffield's predilection for non-conformity had already been established since its support for Parliament in the Civil War: when the puritan vicar James Fisher was imprisoned at the Restoration, his followers 'ceased to worship at the Parish Church and instead formed a substantial body of Presbyterians and Independents'. When these ideologies encountered the independent and militant spirit of the artisans of the tool-making industry, rebels with distinctive characteristics were created.⁶³ David Fine also notes the important connection between religious and political

⁶² Richard Gaunt, 'Sir Robert Peel as Actor Dramatist'; Michael Sanders, 'The Platform and the Stage: Correspondences, Metaphors and Structures of Feeling', papers presented as part of 'Politics, Performance and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain', University of Lancaster, July 2011.

⁶³ David Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers: Rebels and Radicals In Sheffield History* (West Sussex: Phillimore Press, 2008), p. 4.

philosophy: 'If radicalism is questioning the status quo, the town's strong tradition from the mid-seventeenth century of religious dissent would have emphasised the rights of independent thought and belief, regardless of means'.⁶⁴

Local newspapers were a source of radical ideas and Price documents their significant contribution.⁶⁵ However, he omits to mention that theatre spaces also had a role to play in the distribution of information and the communication of political ideas; they were more than just 'places of amusement', and had a specific function as a public forum.⁶⁶ Furthermore, a theatre space was not simply a platform for a speaker (or indeed a playwright) to express themselves; it could also be an opportunity for the audience to voice their opinions, and it is this unpredictable relationship between stage and spectator that gives theatre its vitality, and sometimes, its danger.

Spontaneous protest could erupt at any time without a prompt from an impassioned speech or the incendiary content of a play, as an example from November 1812 illustrates. John Blackwell, also known as Jackey Blacker, (1786-1839), was a tailor and political activist who vociferously objected when officers from the local garrison requested that the audience sing 'God Save the King'. Blackwell was not just an anti-royalist; he was also an avid theatregoer who publicly judged actors, both in terms of their performance and their adherence to a script. W. T. Moncrieff (1794-1857) writes humorously about him and his confrontation with the actor Robert William Elliston in an article 'Ellistoniana' in the *Dublin Saturday Magazine*.⁶⁷ His

⁶⁴ David Fine, *A History and Guide to Sheffield* (Sheffield: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1992, Revised edition Tempus Publishing 2003), p. 78.

⁶⁵ David Price, 'The Newspaper Editors and the French Revolution', in *Sheffield Troublemakers*, pp. 10-22.

⁶⁶ Theatre spaces are commonly referred to as 'places of amusement'; see for example *Sheffield Independent*, 19 November 1831.

⁶⁷ *Dublin Saturday Magazine*, 1 Feb 1867; 2, 78, p. 304.

insubordination and irreverence were highlighted and celebrated through his popular nickname of 'King of the Gallery'.⁶⁸ The pit and gallery offered the cheapest seats and location became a shorthand method of audience categorisation. The prevailing assumption that there was a rigid correlation between where an audience member sat and their likely character foregrounds inherent class divisions and will be the subject of further analysis later in this chapter, and also in Chapter Three.

In addition to anxieties about the possibility of spontaneous protest, lessees had to be mindful of the possibility of legal action if any event were considered seditious. Licences could be easily revoked and it is understandable if lessees were reluctant to host potentially problematic speakers, particularly during volatile and dangerous periods. On the other hand, controversy was likely to attract a crowd which might have offered a financial incentive. In the first few decades of the century venues in Sheffield were only intermittently open (the usual pattern was for an autumn and summer season each lasting 60 days, or 2 months), and hiring the Theatre to local or travelling orators may have gone some way to keep the business active and solvent.

The 1830s and 1840s were periods of great economic hardship and there was a concomitant intensification of political agitation: it must have been even more difficult for lessees to manage in this unpredictable climate. For example an advertisement in the *Sheffield Independent* on Saturday 17

⁶⁸ Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 30.

Blackwell's vocal interruptions of performances do not appear to have done the Theatre any harm and his activities in this area seem to have been tolerated for some of the time, although he was jailed twice, in 1817 and 1820. One of these committals was due to a protest with a performative element: in a demonstration about unaffordable bread prices he marched around Sheffield carrying a loaf smeared with blood on a pole. This incident was documented in the *SLR* on Blackwell's death, 14 April 1839, at the height of Chartist activity in the town. He may have garnered some support for his political agitation but his fight for greater equality did not bring him material comfort, when he died at the age of 53 he had spent the last eight years of his life in the Sheffield Poorhouse.

November 1832 proclaimed that the Theatre had been 'splendidly painted' and would open for the new season on the following Monday. Although Mr. Burrows, the new lessee, announced future productions and potential guest artistes there was no further promotion in the newspaper until Saturday 29 December, and the production was advertised for just one evening.⁶⁹ According to the end-of-year report in the *Sheffield Local Register* in the 5 January edition of the paper, the season had not been of the usual length, and it simply noted that the Theatre opened on 19 November and 'closed a few weeks afterwards'.⁷⁰ The poor material condition of the Theatre during this period is illustrated by a letter published the following autumn. The correspondent had wandered around the theatre one day and 'beheld a most appalling picture of the sublime of filthy desolation and infernal gloom', and he suggests that the only course of action is to 'convert this temple of sin into an amphitheatre of science and morality'.⁷¹

Documentation is sparse so it is difficult to find conclusive evidence but decisions may have been influenced by external events, given that 1832 was an eventful year in Sheffield. There were great celebrations in June because the Reform Bill had, for the first time, given the town the opportunity to elect two Members of Parliament. Pat Dallman paints a vivid picture of the celebrations on 18 June of that year, there was a huge procession, including decorative carriages of the Printers' Union, with printing presses actually in operation and the oldest printer in Sheffield dressed as William Caxton.⁷² However, during the summer there was a severe outbreak of cholera, over

⁶⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 29 December 1832.

⁷⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 28 September 1833.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Pat Dallman, *The Story of Sheffield High Street*, p. 61.

400 people died and many more were affected by the disease.)⁷³ Despite the success of the Reform Bill there had been a tense atmosphere leading up to the first elections in December. After a vigorous campaign, the two candidates chosen were Parker, a moderate liberal and Buckingham, one of two radical representatives. The other militant was Bailey, who came last in the contest. This caused anger amongst some of the populace, and the unrest spilled over into violence – there was some stone-throwing and vandalism. The military were summoned and the crowd was fired upon, resulting in 6 deaths, and many casualties.⁷⁴ The reports do not specifically mention the Theatre, but the worst of the violence took place in the yard of the Tontine Inn (the venue for many of the share-holders' meetings and home of the Shakspeare Club), and Mr. Palfreyman's house was attacked. The local newspaper reported that Palfreyman vigorously defended himself – he fired a blunderbuss over the heads of the crowd and threatened that 'the second discharge would take a different direction.' On hearing this threat, the rioters duly dispersed.⁷⁵

Lessees and theatre managers had to be tough to survive in this kind of hostile environment. When Thomas Hailes Lacy became lessee in 1839 (jointly at first with Mr. Gedge, and then sole manager from 1840-1842) he was the seventh lessee in nine years.⁷⁶ Lacy has become better-known in theatre history for his legacy of published playtexts, but his earlier stewardship of the Theatre was relatively successful, despite his working

⁷³ The Cholera Monument, designed by M. E. Hadfield, was erected in the district of Norfolk Park in 1834-5 as a memorial to those who died. See Ruth Harman and John Minnis (eds.), *Sheffield: Pevsner Architectural Guide* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 214.

⁷⁴ Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, pp. 35-36.

⁷⁵ *Sheffield Independent*, 15 December 1832.

⁷⁶ Extracts from the Minute Book, Sheffield Theatre CA373/1; Hudson Playbills.

conditions.⁷⁷ Gedge and Lacy were granted a licence for the Theatre on 22 October 1839, after the usual long seasonal closure.⁷⁸ That summer had seen a particularly intense period of Chartist activity in Sheffield: the National Petition to Parliament was rejected in July and drove supporters in Sheffield to take confrontational action.⁷⁹ Not only did Lacy have to contend with the violent clashes but he was also assailed by Reverend Best who relentlessly pursued his anti-theatrical campaign. The theatre manager certainly demonstrated that he was prepared to fight back against Best and his aggressive campaign. He published *The Theatre Defended* in December 1840; and a year later published 'six letters in reply to the Reverend Best's last two sermons against theatrical amusements'.⁸⁰ In addition, Lacy's stewardship of the Theatre followed that of William Hammond, who had become embroiled in a legal battle with the Proprietors when each party accused the other of renegeing on the terms of their contract.⁸¹

Perhaps Lacy felt he had enough challenges without hiring his venue to Chartist speakers - prominent radicals James Bronterre O'Brien, Henry Vincent and Fergus O'Connor held public meetings in the Circus during this period, but there is no evidence that they spoke at the Theatre.⁸² After the

⁷⁷ 'The Victorian Plays Project' is an initiative of the University of Worcester and is a digital archive of selected plays from T. H. Lacy's Acting Edition of Victorian Plays 1848-1873.

⁷⁸ *Sheffield Local Register*, 1839, p. 331.

⁷⁹ For an account of Sheffield and Chartism see David Price, 'The Age of the Chartists' in *Sheffield Troublemakers*, pp. 37-51.

⁸⁰ Playbills: Monday 14 December 1840; Tuesday 14 December 1841, Hudson Collection. T. H. Lacy, 'The Theatre Defended, Chiefly in Reference to the Last Annual Sermon of the Rev. Thomas Best Against Theatrical Amusements' (Sheffield: Whitaker & Co., 1840). S-LSL, Local Pamphlets, Vol. 11, No. 6.

⁸¹ See Proceedings, Pierson vs. Hammond, 1839, MD5181, Sheffield Archives.

⁸² The Circus hosted James Bronterre O'Brien *SLR*, 18 October 1841; Henry Vincent (lecture on complete suffrage) *SLR*, 5 September 1842; Fergus O'Connor 20 December 1842 and again on 4 August 1845, reported in the *Sheffield Independent* 24 December 1842, 9 August 1845.

rejection of the national petition, the movement was in crisis. Many of its leaders had been arrested, and it was struggling with internal divisions between those who advocated peaceful protest and those prepared to use physical force.⁸³ A young Samuel Holberry planned to mount an uprising in the West Riding of Yorkshire which would begin in Sheffield and plans were laid for January 1840.⁸⁴ The conspirators were betrayed by a spy who infiltrated the group, and Holberry's arrest and subsequent death in prison aged only 27 made him a potent martyr: on 27 June 1842 he was given a public funeral which was attended by an estimated 30-40,000 people.⁸⁵

The failed uprising and the strength of feeling for its new martyr was bound to create an atmosphere of wariness and tension, and there is some evidence that this affected the Theatre and its repertoire. A few weeks after Holberry had been tried and convicted for 'seditious conspiracy' (reported on Saturday 28 March 1840) four advertised evenings in April starring Mr. Braham were curtailed. The playbill stated: 'In deference to the authorities of Sheffield Mr. Lacy respectfully announces that the theatre will be opened on only one night'.⁸⁶

The programme as announced on this playbill was *Love in a Village* (a comic opera written by Isaac Bickerstaffe in 1762) and *Guy Mannering* (a romantic melodrama from Sir Walter Scott and D. Terry). However, the *Sheffield Independent* had previously announced that the play for that week

Bronterre O'Brien had been arrested and imprisoned for eighteen months after a lecture at Batty's Circus in Manchester on 23 April 1839. He was charged with: 'unlawfully assembling, seditious conspiracy and seditious speeches', reported in the *Sheffield Independent*, 18 April 1840.

⁸³ Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 43.

⁸⁴ The West Riding of Yorkshire was one of the three historic subdivisions of Yorkshire and Sheffield was situated near its southern boundary.

⁸⁵ Newspaper cuttings relating to the history of the Chartist Movement, S-LSL 942.74 SF, Vol. 2, pp 49-51; Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 46.

⁸⁶ Playbill, Monday 13 April 1840, Hudson Collection.

would be *The Slave* (probably the musical drama by Thomas Morton, also known as *Freedom and Slavery*). It is difficult to exactly ascertain the chain of events, but the local magistrates may well have decided to take preventative action, and not only reduced opening times but also persuaded Lacy to change his programme.

Just a week later, on Easter Monday, 21 April, the Theatre re-opened and again, perhaps his choice of plays (about Wat Tyler and Jack Sheppard) was not arbitrary, indeed they could both be seen as provocative. The playbill announced *Richard Plantagenet; or, the Death of Wat Tyler*, but no playwright was credited.⁸⁷ John Thomas Haines had recently (1836) written a play called *Richard Plantagenet; or, a Legend of Walworth*, so the Sheffield production could have been a version of this, or a new piece entirely. Nothing by the former name is traceable in the Lord Chamberlain's Play Collection. Wat Tyler, the early working-class leader of the English peasants' revolt in 1381 was a powerful emblem of rebellion against tyranny. The character of Tyler was played by Lacy himself, and the details given on the playbill indicate that he is presented as a heroic figure: although he kills a Poll Tax collector it is in order to preserve the virtue of the heroine Effie. Tyler has been assassinated by the end of the play, and the remorseful King abolishes the hated Poll Tax and abdicates his throne in favour of the Duke of Lancaster who becomes Henry IV. The message is a powerful one: personal heroism and collective power can change the mind of a King.

The depiction of Wat Tyler as hero may have worried some onlookers; certainly its companion piece (titled on the bill as *Jack Sheppard; or, the Housebreaker of 1703*) had already caused great alarm, due to its infamous central character.⁸⁸ This historical burglar and ingenious prison escapee had

⁸⁷ Playbill, Easter Monday, 21 April 1840, Hudson Playbill Collection.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

inspired many fictional representations of his life. Although the playbill notes that the play was 'adapted expressly for this theatre, from the popular and well-known Novel, by Mr. Ainsworth', no playwright is credited. A version by John Thomas Haines had been produced at the Surrey (in London) in October 1839, and one by Thomas H. Higgin appeared at Nottingham in October 1840.⁸⁹ The playbill for the production at Sheffield attempted to allay fears that Ainsworth's portrayal of Sheppard made him an attractive character and thus promoted criminality and disregard for authority. Its long statement claimed to be in response to an article in the *Literary Gazette*, and defended 'this most extraordinary drama', through a question-and-answer format: it asked whether all productions should be 'framed for the express purpose of pointing a moral', whether *Jack Sheppard* succeeded or failed in this object, and whether 'such subjects offer fair materials to exercise the talent of authors, and afford public gratification, without injury, to the public mind'.⁹⁰

The statement of defence argued that it was acceptable to present a villainous character onstage, provided that 'the invincible principles of conscience and retribution' are upheld. Indeed, the depiction may assist the audience to be 'on their guard against the seduction of common vice and the invasion of bold brutality'. This defence is similar to that expressed by Butler about *Tom and Jerry* a decade earlier: namely that it is acceptable to depict vice on stage, as long as the villain is eventually punished. Although this reasoning was often used to endorse controversial presentations, perhaps the statement on Lacy's playbill includes a rather more honest view about why this type of story is attractive:

...much as we value moral inculcation, to adhere to it as *sine qua non* would be to exclude a multitude of amusing, playful, imaginative, and

⁸⁹ Noted in Kathleen Barker, Unpublished Thesis (Appendix).

⁹⁰ PB HC, 21 April 1840.

innocent productions, which have ever been the enjoyment of cultivated society...⁹¹

It is very probable that there were many audience members in Sheffield on that Easter Monday who would have relished the 'amusing, playful' spectacle of the resourceful anti-hero and the audacious ways in which he outwitted his captors.

This published plea for *Jack Sheppard* provides useful evidence of the ways in which Lacy anticipated criticism and his strategy for answering it, and is further proof that theatrical productions existed as part of a broader public discourse. Given the ephemeral nature of performance, information from playbills, pamphlets and newspapers not only supplies background and context but also provides crucial evidence of the complex interactive relationship between productions and their reception. All those involved (critics and commentators, playwrights and producers) had their own agendas and subjective opinions. In some respects, newspaper editors and publishers inhabited a similar territory to theatrical producers in that all were subject to government censorship and public opinion. Indeed many playwrights conducted parallel careers as journalists and editors, and although those who chose to work in either field may often have been public-spirited with high ideals, they needed to stay within the law and remain solvent in order to survive.

There are several examples of Sheffield-based dramatists who were also employed as journalists. For example George Lemon Saunders (1817-1870) was a long-term resident with many talents and interests: he wrote several plays which were produced at the Theatre Royal, and he was also a theatre critic for the *Sheffield Free Press* (under the pen-name of Veritas).⁹² Joseph Fox (1833-1906), writer of *The Union Wheel* and several other plays,

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Noted in Barker, PhD Thesis, p. 164.

worked as a newspaper editor; George Walter Browne (1856-1911), writer of farcical comedy *Helter Skelter* (Alexandra Theatre, 1886), was one of the founders of a satirical weekly paper, *The Yorkshireman*, and for three years was drama critic for the *London Evening Echo*.⁹³ Two writers who apparently only had one play produced had longer careers in newspapers: John E. Bloomer was employed on the *Sheffield Evening Post* (published 1873-1887) and wrote *The Squire's Daughter*, a comic opera which premiered at the Alexandra in 1879; George Booth was the author of the burlesque of *Hamlet, Whether He Will or No* (Alexandra Theatre, 1879). According to the *Era*, after his play had been produced, he was employed by 'a Manchester newspaper'. The article noted that he was 'formerly a resident in Sheffield, and was not only known as a good all-round journalist, but had acquired the reputation of being an exceptionally able dramatic critic'.⁹⁴ This combination of careers can be partly attributed to the unpredictable and low-paid nature of theatrical employment, but it also suggests that writers with ideas were prepared to utilise both media as a means of communication.⁹⁵

Newspapers in Sheffield had played an important role in the radical movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and dissident writers and editors had often paid for their commitment to freedom of speech with imprisonment and exile.⁹⁶ The *Sheffield Independent* was founded in 1819 and its first leader column reminded readers of the

⁹³ *New York Times*, 1 September 1906; David Stone, the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company <<http://diamond.boisestate.edu/gas/whowaswho>> [accessed 11 April 2013].

⁹⁴ *Era*, 8 June 1879. Booth worked for the *Sheffield Independent*, article 3 June 1879.

⁹⁵ Thomas Frost, an author and journalist who maintained a keen interest in the theatre, drew analogies between actors, authors and journalists, noting that they mostly toiled in obscurity for little pay, but nevertheless their work had value. Thomas Frost, *Reminiscences of a Country Journalist* (London: Ward and Downey, 1886), Preface, p. v.

⁹⁶ Joseph Gales (1761-1841), the founding editor of the radical newspaper, the *Sheffield Register*, had to flee to America to escape 'the malice, enmity and power of an unjust Aristocracy'. Gales' farewell address, reproduced in the *Sheffield Register*, 26 June 1794, and quoted in *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 18.

'hazardous adventure' on which the editors were embarked, due to the fact that the ethos of the newspaper was not 'exactly in unison with the principles upon which the existing government appears disposed to act'. The article further asserted that if 'the public writer' wished to advocate the cause of Liberty:

He must be bold, yet cautious, ardent, yet temperate; prompt to expose oppression and injustice, yet critically careful in the choice of his expressions.⁹⁷

This measured and rather wary approach was a necessary precaution but provoked criticism, particularly in later years. Its longest-serving editor, Robert Leader Junior, is a good example of the particular blend of non-conformist radicalism which distinguished many rebellious individuals in Sheffield. He was from a Congregationalist family; took over the paper from his father in 1833 and remained at its head for forty-two years. Although Price asserts that the *Independent* 'continued to provide a strong radical voice', Leader's paper reflected his individual blend of liberalism and Christianity.⁹⁸

Despite his dissident credentials, atheism, or 'infidelity' was still an ideological impasse for Leader, and it seemed, for many inhabitants of Sheffield. When the radical speaker Richard Carlile (1790–1843) hired the Theatre for a series of lectures 'On Religion' in 1833, he was subjected to a storm of invective. Carlile was infamous due to his scepticism and his spells of imprisonment for seditious libel, but as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* notes, he actually declared a revised and rather more moderate position in Sheffield, focusing on theological reform rather than a doctrine of disbelief. He styled himself a 'new Christian', while retaining his earlier allegorical interpretation of the Bible which combined the moral legitimacy of

⁹⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 11 December 1819.

⁹⁸ Leader became a leading figure of the Liberal party at a local level.

the gospels with the truth of reason and rational enquiry, yet this was not enough to save him from those who branded him an 'infidel'.⁹⁹ The *Sheffield Independent* demonstrated a reluctance to support his freedom to speak, despite its commitment to 'the cause of Liberty'.¹⁰⁰ Its rather ambiguous editorial seemed to suggest that the best course of action was to ignore him:

It was not our intention in any way to have noticed the lectures which have this week been delivered at the Theatre, because we were unwilling to give notoriety to that which in itself could gain none.¹⁰¹


This statement could arguably indicate that the editor believed that there was nothing 'notorious' about the material delivered in the lecture, but rather it was the public reaction which caused the problem. However, it is difficult to make a case for the *Independent* as Carlile's champion. It reprinted a vehemently condemnatory article from the *Leeds Mercury* with no comment, as it did a similarly furious letter to which the Editor added a note:

The above has been handed to us by an industrious honest mechanic, and we trust there are many in Sheffield and the manufacturing villages around, who participate in his sentiments.¹⁰²

Although the *Independent* published these condemnatory missives, anger was directed at Carlile himself, and neither the Theatre nor its managers were criticised (in public at least) for allowing the event to take place.

The local newspapers were broadly supportive of the efforts of those involved in performance in the town. The *Sheffield Free Press* was a short-lived publication (1851-57) which published drama reviews (often by 'Veritas', also known as George Lemon Saunders), and Kathleen Barker notes that the

⁹⁹ Philip W. Martin, 'Richard Carlile', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, May 2005.

<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4685>> [accessed  11 Feb 2012].

'Carlile the Infidel' article headline from *The Leeds Mercury* (26 October), reprinted in *The Sheffield Independent*, 2 November 1833.

¹⁰⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 11 December 1819.

¹⁰¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 5 October 1833.

¹⁰² *Sheffield Independent*, 2 November 1833.

Sheffield Iris (1794-1848) 'gave consistent support to the drama'.¹⁰³ According to Price, although the *Iris* had been established by James Montgomery as a successor to the radical *Sheffield Register* (1787-94), it had lost its edge as early as 1819 and had become 'liberal/conservative with tepid and colourless opinions'; and it finally folded in the late 1840s.¹⁰⁴ It was bought by an entrepreneur who had just established a new publication, the *Sheffield Times* (1846-1874), and who, at about the same time, acquired the *Sheffield Mercury*.¹⁰⁵ This integration of these two newspapers was somewhat ironic, considering that the *Mercury* had been set up in 1807 as a Tory opponent to the Radical *Iris*.¹⁰⁶ The new editor of the *Sheffield Times* was Samuel Harrison, who would later become its sole proprietor. Like J. D. Leader of the *Independent*, he was from a modest, nonconformist background, the youngest son of a Wesleyan minister. He was energetically committed to Sheffield and its people - his obituary paid tribute to his 'indomitable vigour and perseverance'.¹⁰⁷ A similar vitality characterised the 'evangelical Anglican' editor of the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, Sir William Robert Leng (1825-1902), a Tory stalwart to whom Price attributes a 'crusading zeal'.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Barker, PhD Thesis, p. 58. According to Price the *Sheffield Free Press* came to be dominated by Isaac Ironside (1808-70) a campaigning Chartist who was elected to the town council as a 'Democrat' in 1846. Price, op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁰⁴ Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 32.

¹⁰⁵ There are significant omissions in the published history of newspapers in Sheffield and it is difficult to establish an exact chronology. The *SLR* reports that Mr. W. Willott (the founder of the *Sheffield Times*) bought the copyright of the *Iris* in 1848, *Sheffield Local Register* 6 July 1848, p. 455. Andrew Parks writes that the *Mercury* 'was absorbed into the *Sheffield Times* in 1848', Andrew Parks, 'Newsplan Project in Yorkshire & Humberside' (London: British Library, 1990), p. 244.

¹⁰⁶ Parks, 'Newsplan Project', op. cit.

¹⁰⁷ Samuel Harrison, unattributed obituary, S-LSL Newscuttings, 942.74 SF, vol. 13, p. 74-75.

¹⁰⁸ The *Telegraph* was Sheffield's first daily newspaper, established in 1855. When Leng took on its management in 1864 he built up a larger circulation than that of the *Independent* and was knighted in 1887. He was a Wesleyan Methodist and Liberal from Hull, who turned to Conservatism apparently because of his 'love of order and

Perhaps the active, committed individuals who managed the business of newspaper publishing had sympathy for the efforts of theatre managers. They would certainly have shared a knowledge and understanding of the difficulties of combining political principles and high standards with commercial demands and legal restrictions.

It was understandable that editors of local newspapers demonstrated a strong commitment to the economic and cultural development of Sheffield, and advocated that a well-managed and respectable theatre could aid this project and prove an asset, but it was rather more surprising that, from mid-century, ministers of the church began to alter their attitude towards the purveyor of 'moral poison' and see its potential.¹⁰⁹ This was partly to do with the arrival of new personnel - Reverend Best died in 1865 and younger ministers such as Reverend Samuel Earnshaw demonstrated a rather more conciliatory approach - and partly to do with a shift in attitudes more generally.¹¹⁰ Christianity was under attack on several fronts: developments in science had shaken its foundations and led many to question the truth of the Bible;¹¹¹ ministry through the traditional parish structures was overwhelmed by the densely populated new urban conglomerations. Congregations were enticed away from churches by the plethora of temptations offered by public houses and the later phenomena of music halls. Clerics re-considered their

stability', Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 59. See also K. G. March, 'Life and career of W. C. Leng', MA dissertation, University of Sheffield (1972), p. 131.

¹⁰⁹ Best, 'Two Sermons on the Subject of Theatrical Amusements', p.12.

¹¹⁰ Earnshaw delivered a sermon in Sheffield in 1860 which, according to Peter Bailey 'appealed for a more charitable attitude towards the theatre and other public amusements'. Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 80.

¹¹¹ For example the work of Charles Lyell particularly in *Principles of Geology* (1833) had begun to interrogate the Biblical narrative of Creation. Alfred, Lord Tennyson reflected on religious doubt in his long poem *In Memoriam*, in 1850. The publication of *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* by Charles Darwin in 1859 had substantial theological repercussions.

position: perhaps theatre could be an ally rather than an enemy in this spiritual battle.

Not every religious minister was persuaded by this line of reasoning, and hostility towards theatre continued through the century.¹¹² Opposition stemmed from practical as well as spiritual concerns: if those with limited incomes spent their money on entertainment, there was a danger they would become destitute and thus likely to become a drain on the local economy. An anonymous, self-titled 'Layman' felt so strongly about this threat that he published a diatribe against Mr. Mansel, manager of the Theatre from 1818-1821. Mansel had objected to Best's sermons in print and declared that he was minded to 'bring an action for damages'.¹¹³ This attempt at self-defence provoked the 'Layman' to fury and he castigated the hapless Lessee using a series of rhetorical questions. In his opinion Mansel had morally compromised the inhabitants of Sheffield, been unjustly hostile to Best, and moreover, made a profit from his heinous activities:

Was it then, Sir, I ask, either decorous or allowable in you to drag him, for "*conscientiously discharging his duty*", before the tribunal of the public, and threaten him, for having so done, with legal prosecution for damages? Was this decent? Was this sufferable, Sir, from any man? If not, much less was it to be borne from one who had come amongst us, to carry away out of the town a sum of money, which we could ill spare, and which, if properly applied, would have gone far towards maintaining our industrious but labour-wanting poor through the winter? Is such treatment to be endured from one, who for this great sum, leaves us nothing in return but more corrupted morals, and more profligate and debauched people? Was it not enough for you to administer poison, without your endeavouring to prevent the antidote from being offered?¹¹⁴

¹¹² Heated correspondence signed variously by a 'Spectator', 'Constant Reader' and 'Churchman' in the local press demonstrate that the debate about whether a 'theatre-goer' can be a Christian was still active in the 1890s, *Sheffield Independent*, 16 January 1896.

¹¹³ Robert Mansel, 'A short struggle for Stage or No Stage, originating in a sermon preached by the Reverend T. Best' (Sheffield: W. Todd, 1818). S-LSL Local Pamphlets, Vol. 46, No. 5.

¹¹⁴ 'A Layman', 'Facts, but not Comments; being Strictures on the Stage: in a Letter to Robert Mansel, Esq. on his Attempt to Represent the SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD as an Approver of Theatrical Exhibitions' (Sheffield: J. Montgomery, 1819), p. 1.

The 'Layman' judged that the transaction made between Mr. Mansel and his audience had severely disadvantaged them: they paid a 'great sum' and all they had to show for it was 'more corrupted morals'. He assumed the superior position of a concerned and outraged commentator, and he also drew a distinction between the 'profligate and debauched people' who spent their money at the Theatre, and the 'industrious but labour-wanting poor' who had better priorities. This uncompromising distinction made between those who deserved support and those who did not was a familiar judgement about those in poverty and was replicated endlessly across the spectrum of political and social discourse.¹¹⁵

The anonymous critic may have been concerned about the 'great sum' that Mansel appropriated from the deserving poor but given the inconsistent and sporadic programming it is unlikely that managers made much profit. They not only had to bring in enough money to cover production and general building costs but they were also under pressure to provide the proprietors with an annual dividend.¹¹⁶ The rapid turnover of lessees at the Theatre, particularly in the early years, can partly be attributed to the residual practices of the circuit system (managers had responsibility for more than one theatre and they toured their companies between several different venues in rotation), but it was also indicative of the difficulties of successful financial administration. However, the public perception of those in the theatrical profession as itinerant, profiteering 'rogues and vagabonds', which had been ingrained in the cultural consciousness for many years, may have been

¹¹⁵ See for example an article which compares the 'industrious and provident' poor man with 'one who earns well, but is profligate' *Sheffield Independent* 19 January 1867, and discussed more fully in Chapters Three and Four.

¹¹⁶ The role of Treasurer at the Theatre was a consistent one: whilst there were at least 44 Lessees between 1830 and 1897 only five men held the financial reins during the same period.

strengthened by the short periods of time managers spent in Sheffield, and so the cycle of suspicion and hostility was perpetuated.¹¹⁷

One way of counteracting the accusations of greed and selfishness was for lessees to make charitable donations. Arranging benefit nights for local good causes was a way of attracting positive publicity and there is plenty of evidence to indicate that managers took this course of action, particularly from the 1840s onwards. For example T. H. Lacy generously donated the proceeds of one night's performance (£16-0-0) on Saturday August 7 1841 to the 'relief of distressed families'.¹¹⁸ Despite the relative prosperity of the artisans in Sheffield, its industry was still subject to fluctuations in demand and periods of prosperity were followed by the misery of mass unemployment. The terrible hardships caused by economic depression and food shortages in the 1840s have been thoroughly documented by social historians and were of grave concern to writers at the time.¹¹⁹ *The History of the City of Sheffield* notes that 1843 was a particularly significant year for the developing town as it looked forward to its new incarnation as a borough but struggled with the economic realities:

The year 1843, when Sheffield was incorporated, was a year of great hardship for all workers... it was the last year of what was undoubtedly the most severe depression of the century which had begun in 1837 and reached its nadir in 1842.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Act of Parliament, 1713 Common players of Interludes' were deemed ... to be rogues and vagabonds'. Phyllis Hartnoll (ed.) *Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951, 2nd edition, 1957), p. 194.

¹¹⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 7 August 1841. The landowner Lord Mowbray in Disraeli's novel *Sybil* (1845) thinks that his tenants should be able to live on seven or eight shillings a week and this probably reflected an average working class wage, so nearly 200 shillings would have been a welcome donation.

¹¹⁹ The decade is often referred to as the 'hungry forties', see for example Charlotte Boyce, 'Representing the "hungry forties" in image and verse: the politics of hunger in early Victorian illustrated periodicals', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 40, Issue 2, (2012), 421-449.

¹²⁰ *History of the City of Sheffield: Vol. II Society*, p. 265. *Sheffield Local Register* also noted that this was a time of 'great distress', *SLR*, 2 May 1840.

The bitterly disputed Corn Laws were only finally repealed in 1846, and from 1845 a catastrophic famine in Ireland decimated its population either through death or emigration, and consequently affected food prices more generally. Although the situation in Sheffield never became as desperate as elsewhere, this was a period when many northern mechanics departed for the promised abundance of the new worlds of America and Australia.¹²¹

In addition to philanthropic donations, theatre managers had an additional strategy for combating the misery of economic depression: they produced plays which addressed difficult circumstances in a humorous manner and thus provided their audiences with much-needed comic relief. *Voyage to California; or Sheffield in 1849* was a burlesque written by Thomas Rolfe in which both Mrs. Lacy and Mrs. Saville performed.¹²² The play tells the story of a local lad, Will Brightblade, who is tempted by the prospect of foreign travel but who eventually returns to the comforts and familiarity of home. Alongside topical burlesques, the lessee Mr. J. F. Saville continued the practice of mixed bills of Shakespeare, popular playwrights and pantomime: the season offered *Macbeth*, *The Lady of Lyons* by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Aladdin*, and (given the rumours about her sexuality) a rather risqué production of *Romeo and Juliet* with the celebrated actress Charlotte Cushman as Romeo and Matilda Hays as Juliet.¹²³

¹²¹ *Sheffield Local Register*, 11 September 1841.

¹²² Kathleen Barker credits him as Fourness Rolfe, although he is named as Thomas on the playbill, Hudson Collection, 2 March 1849. Fourness Rolfe was an actor at the Theatre Royal and later possibly became the manager of the Pavilion Music Hall, so it is likely that Thomas simply changed his name for something more exotic.

Nicoll lists *A Voyage to California; or, the True Test of Gold*, unknown author, produced at the Victoria Theatre, 5 February 1849, and there is a copy in the L.C. collection as *A Trip to California*, 3 February 1849, but this play has no connection to Sheffield. Nicoll, *Nineteenth Century Drama 1800-1850 Vol II*, p. 540.

¹²³ Hudson Playbills: Monday 8 January 1849; Friday 23 February 1849; Monday 26 February 1849; Friday 2 March 1849.

Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876) and Matilda Hays (c. 1820-1897) lived together as 'romantic partners in what Browning called a "female marriage"' (Browning to A. Moulton-Barrett, 22 Oct 1852, Berg Collection). Quoted in Lisa Merrill, 'Hays, Matilda Mary, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University

One of the special qualities of dramatic performance is that it is a communal experience, both in terms of productions (which tend to involve more than one person), and their reception (a performance needs an audience, which is usually plural), and these shared pleasures can create surprising alliances. In 1831, the Chairman and President of the Shakspeare Club had celebrated that the members were able to

...set aside all invidious distinctions of party and opinions. They met together, without asperity, and whatever differences might exist amongst them on other matters, they united to render unanimous homage to the great dramatic bard of England.¹²⁴

The membership of this Club was not very diverse (all male and mainly middle-class), but this suggestion that theatre could override divisions in a community could be applied to other initiatives.¹²⁵ For example the use of troops by local (and national) governments in the 1830s and 1840s to crush popular demonstrations is likely to have dismayed some inhabitants of Sheffield and caused a certain amount of distrust and hostility.¹²⁶ It may well have been in the interests of public relations that the Squadron of West Riding of Yorkshire Yeomanry gave their patronage to the programme on Friday 17 December 1841 (*Single Life*, *The Neighbour's Wife* and *Frederick the Great*),

Press, 2004, online edn, Oct 2005 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/57829>> [accessed 10 April 2013].

¹²⁴ Michael Ellison Esq., reported in the *Sheffield Independent*, 10 December 1831.

¹²⁵ The Shakspeare Club was a Gentleman's Club: there is no record of any women present at any of the Annual Dinners. 'The Ladies' are toasted occasionally and members are concerned that their modesty is protected, but they are not treated as active lovers of drama. William Smith Porter concurs that it was 'a masculine institution', *Sheffield Literary and Philosophical Society*, p. 3.

¹²⁶ For example on 12 August 1839 the Dragoons were called in to clear the streets when a crowd assembled outside the Town Hall to protest at the arrest of Chartist leaders. The following year, the planned uprising led by Holberry was foiled, and eight men tried for 'seditious conspiracy'. Yet, on the Friday following the trial, (Friday 18 December 1840) the performances at the Theatre Royal were under the patronage of Jeffcock, Cobbett and Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Privates of the Sheffield Troop of Yeomanry Cavalry, *Sheffield Independent* 12 December 1840; Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 43 and p. 46.

and the Yeomanry Cavalry Band also performed various musical numbers.¹²⁷ Perhaps a desire to foster amicable relations also motivated the soldiers to perform onstage: during the same season officers of The Queen's Bays presented an amateur charitable performance which raised the impressive sum of £100 to be 'distributed among 700 poor artisans'.¹²⁸

Whether welcome or not, the presence of the militia in Sheffield was a constant for many years, and there was a continued and mutually beneficial association with the Theatre. The new barracks was completed in 1850 and provided a steady supply of willing patrons, actors and musicians and occasionally playwrights.¹²⁹ As the frequency and regularity of productions at the Theatre increased from the beginning of the 1850s, and newer venues provided more diversity, performance culture assumed a more central role in public life, and these professional-amateur collaborations were another indication of the gradual acceptance of 'theatricals' into society.¹³⁰ Conditions were changing for the profession, and the next section examines the nature of these alterations over the following two decades.

Section Two: Culture and industry 1850-1870

My findings, as detailed in the first section of this chapter, demonstrate that theatre in Sheffield through the first half of the nineteenth century was beset by contradictory definitions and judgements: it was a

¹²⁷ PB HC, Friday 17 December 1841.

¹²⁸ *Sheffield Local Register*, 12 November 1841.

¹²⁹ The Regimental Band of the Hallamshire Rifle Corps played a piece especially composed by Maurice de Lara Bright during the evening's performance of *Macbeth*, reviewed in the *Sheffield Independent* 13 April 1861; 'Amateur Theatrical Performances' at the Theatre Royal displayed 'the histrionic talent of our gallant riflemen'. *Sheffield Independent*, 9 April 1869.

¹³⁰ 'Theatrical' was the term often used in Census returns, and although it tended to mean 'professional actor' it usefully indicates that most people who worked in the theatre had more than one talent, and were usually flexible and multi-skilled.

place of corruption and depravity; a place for artistic excellence and noble sentiments; an educative tool; a source of harmless pleasure; a forum for contentious political and religious debate; a communal space which fostered social cohesion and philanthropy. Yet whilst successive managers attempted to satisfy those who regarded it as a public institution, they were also bound to run their venues as competitive businesses.¹³¹ This second section examines the relationship between culture and commerce during the middle decades of the century, during these years of consolidation, when the population continued to expand (between 1851 and 1871 it almost doubled), and Sheffield established itself as a major urban conglomeration.¹³²

Trade and industry were vital to its identity and to its economic development, yet as one of many evolving regions of England which were in competition with each other for political influence and municipal status it would also be judged on its social progress and cultural provision by those in positions of power and influence (such as Members of Parliament and contributors to the national press). Civic ambitions were reflected in a flurry of innovations in the late 1850s: large factories such as John Brown's impressive Atlas Steel Works proclaimed industrial dominance, and were supported by new organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce; the establishment of Sheffield Football Club demonstrated an eager (and prescient) commitment to competitive sport; and the free Central Library and the new Temperance Hall represented municipal and charitable investment in education and public health.¹³³ Promoters of theatrical performance had

¹³¹ For a detailed analysis of the place of theatre in the commercial landscape of the nineteenth century, see Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹³² See Sidney Pollard, 'Labour', in *The History of the City of Sheffield 1843-1993, Vol. II: Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 260-278.

¹³³ For illustrations of the Central Library, Temperance Hall and 'the Atlas Works of Messrs. John Brown and Co. Ltd' which are 'among the largest iron and steel works in the world', see *Illustrated Guide to Sheffield*, p. 120, 110; 232.

equivalent aspirations, and a multiplicity of new venues strove to provide the fast-growing populace with a variety of entertainments. The Theatre was once again under threat, but this time it came from competitive capitalism as much as from religious ideology. In order to understand the specific nature of the cultural contest it is necessary to know more about the competitors and their audience, critics and opponents; thus we need to further investigate the distinguishing characteristics of the place and its people.

2.1 The inhabitants of Sheffield at work and leisure

The region had been a centre for the manufacture of cutlery and tools since the middle ages,¹³⁴ but as Melvyn Jones in *The Making of Sheffield* notes, it was the development of crucible steel in the 1740s by Benjamin Huntsman that provided the main impetus for its rapid industrial growth in the nineteenth century:

...by about 1850 ninety per cent of the country's steel (crucible steel) ... and nearly fifty per cent of all the steel made in Europe was Sheffield made.¹³⁵

The huge output denoted by these statistics necessitated a noisy, smoky environment. Large new factories were quickly built to satisfy the growing demand, adding to the already-existing proliferation of grinding wheels and workshops. The moves towards mechanisation and large-scale operations threatened the existing employment structures and were met with resistance from the long-established and powerful trade organisations. Industrial relations were often discordant in the manufacturing centres of all the northern towns, but those in Sheffield took on a particular character.

¹³⁴ In one of the Canterbury Tales, told by the Reeve about the Miller of Trumpington, Chaucer wrote that 'A Sheffield thwitel baar he in his hose'. According to Mary Walton, a 'thwitel' is 'the handy knife of ordinary folk ... a short blade in a haft which served both as table knife and general purposes tool'. Mary Walton, *Sheffield: its story and its achievements* (Sheffield: Sheffield Telegraph and Star Ltd., 1948), p. 36.

¹³⁵ Melvyn Jones, *The Making of Sheffield*, p. 77.

Labour historians Sidney Pollard and Dennis Smith stress the distinctiveness of manufacturing in Sheffield, and analyse how the nature of industry and employment affected the material conditions of the artisans and the broader social structure. Pollard notes that:

the making of cutlery, of edge tools, of silver and silver-plated goods, of saws and files ... were industries of a peculiar type, and were instrumental in forming the special character of the local working class.¹³⁶

Both writers agree that Sheffield was very different from other urban conglomerations such as Leeds or Manchester, as Pollard explains:

There was no factory proletariat crowding into large, capital-intensive, steam-driven establishments obeying a single master. Instead, capital requirements were low; the typical workman rented room and power and decided for himself how long he would work and often also for whom ... The difference between 'worker' and 'employer' was small in consequence, both socially and economically, and while there were few large fortunes in the city, there were also few who were grossly underpaid. Sheffield workers in the 1840s were described as well-fed and well-housed in comparison with other industrial cities; there were no cellar dwellings and few shared tenements; few of their wives had to go out to work; and it was their independence at work which made them independent also in politics and in religion.¹³⁷

Pollard notes that there was more common ground between 'worker' and 'employer' than was usually apparent in the discourse of capital and labour.

This difference, and the modest means of most inhabitants, is also acknowledged by the eminent local physician and theatrephile Dr. G. C.

Holland in his 1843 publication, *Vital Statistics of Sheffield*:

The labouring classes are higher in intelligence, morality and physical condition than where machinery is extensively used as in Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham or Stockport. The middle classes are a greater proportion of the population than in these towns. The merchants and manufacturers among us are not men of large capital, exercising

¹³⁶ Pollard, 'Labour' in *The History of the City of Sheffield*, p. 260.

¹³⁷ Pollard, 'Labour' p. 260-1.

Dennis Smith compares Sheffield with Birmingham, because of the similar concentration of manufacturing in small workshops by skilled craftsmen. Dennis Smith, *Conflict and Compromise: Class Formation in English Society 1830-1914, a Comparative Study of Birmingham and Sheffield* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

immense influence. They are far from treading on the heels of the aristocracy.¹³⁸

Jelinger Symonds agreed with Dr. Holland in the same year:

it is scarcely possible to conceive a state in which the relations of industry to capital are more anomalous or disjointed ... it is not easy to draw the line in Sheffield between men and masters.

A similar remark had been made by John Parker in 1830:

there is not that marked line of difference between the rich man and the poor man which is becoming annually more observable in other places. The middle classes are nearer both to the upper and the lower.¹³⁹

This unusual situation, where a greater proportion of the population occupied a middle ground, and where there was not such a distance between those with power and those without, allowed for a degree of egalitarianism. Dennis Smith notes that local affairs were managed by

Shopkeepers, petty traders, agents and dealers of various kinds... political influence was exercised...through networks of family and friends but ... they ran through local taverns, parish vestries and bodies ... such as highway boards, improvement commissioners and overseers of the poor.¹⁴⁰

Smith does not include any local theatrical personnel in his list, but the example of Unwin and other proprietors such as the jeweller Maurice Bright, who was a Special Constable and the first Town Councillor of Jewish descent (from 1845), as well as Theatre Treasurer for a year, demonstrates their contribution to these networks.¹⁴¹ Smith is rather disparaging about this

¹³⁸ G. C. Holland, *Vital Statistics of Sheffield*, 1843, quoted in Sheffield Troublemakers, p. 38.

Dr. Holland (1801-1865) was a local doctor, respected for his work on 'grinders' disease', and he was also President of the Shakespeare Club in 1833, noted in *Sheffield Independent*, 14 December 1833.

¹³⁹ Jelinger Symonds, *Report on the Trades of Sheffield and the Moral and Physical Conditions of the Young Persons Employed in Them* (Sheffield, 1843), p. 3; John Parker, *A Statement of the Population etc. of the Town of Sheffield* (Sheffield, 1830), p. 18, both quoted in Caroline Reid, 'Middle-class values and working-class culture in nineteenth century Sheffield – the pursuit of respectability', in Sidney Pollard and Colin Holmes (ed.) *Essays in the Economic and Social History of South Yorkshire* (Barnsley: South Yorkshire County Council, 1976), pp. 275-295 (p. 276).

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *Conflict and Compromise*, p. 8.

¹⁴¹ Binfield et al., *History of the City of Sheffield*, p. 428.

method of municipal management and it does seem that the operation of self-interest alongside more altruistic concerns could sometimes inhibit progress.¹⁴² He criticises the informal and partisan nature of local politics and the ways in which influence was exercised through personal contacts; deals were concluded over refreshments at 'local taverns'. Dagmar Kift reaches a similar conclusion, but she describes the process rather more positively as 'grass-roots suburban democracy'.¹⁴³ Indeed, she reports that the first attempt to incorporate Sheffield in 1838 had failed 'because of its egalitarian social and political structure. Many people disliked the idea of creating an official elite and a great deal of workers were against such a move because it would probably result in an increase in taxes'.¹⁴⁴ She explains that Sheffield was 'in the 1860s, still essentially little more than a collection of villages, each branch of production being largely situated in its own close-knit community, whose workers were organised in trade societies offering comprehensive patterns of welfare and support'; and that, 'within this culture the workers' social, political and leisure activities were centred on the local tavern'.¹⁴⁵

These hostelries provided warmth and a convivial atmosphere, and as Kift asserts, all manner of 'social, political and leisure activities', but they also provided alcohol. The public house and the associated discourse about drinking and drunkenness were almost obsessive preoccupations during the nineteenth century, and have provided much material for social historians since.¹⁴⁶ Beer was the chosen beverage for the labouring population of Sheffield and it is not surprising that many artisans enjoyed a drink: they

¹⁴² Smith, *Conflict and Compromise*, p. 8.

¹⁴³ Dagmar Kift translated by Roy Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 94.

¹⁴⁴ Kift, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ This topic will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

were comparatively well-paid but their work was physically demanding and dirty, and their life expectancy was significantly shortened by all manner of painful lung diseases. Harriet Martineau's reflection in *Once a Week* on the 'recklessness' of those in Sheffield is pertinent here. However, Caroline Reid notes that 'in practice, most men drank regularly, but not necessarily heavily, and in the absence of pure cheap alternatives, alcohol was valuable for its nutritional and restorative qualities, especially for men engaged in heavy labour'.¹⁴⁷ Although there was some local support for the arguments put forward by temperance movements, there were many people in the town who wholeheartedly supported drinking (mostly they conceded that moderation was preferable). The citizens of Sheffield demanded the freedom to make their own minds up about whether or not to drink alcohol, and the strength of feeling is demonstrated in a report of a public meeting about the possible legislation which would close public houses on a Sunday. The crowd were warned: 'Englishmen, your liberty is in danger! No tyranny, no despotism!'¹⁴⁸ The combination of alcohol and entertainment was certainly not a novel concept, but it took on specific permutations during this period.

There is a long tradition of self-made musical entertainment amongst the working classes. The term 'glee', meaning a song for men's voices in three or more parts, also has the Old English meaning of 'entertainment, music, fun'. This sense of the word eventually generated the term 'glee-club', which is defined as 'a society formed for the practice and performance of glee and part-songs', which became very popular in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴⁹ Confirmation that this definition was applied locally comes from an advertisement in the *Sheffield Independent* in August 1839 for an evening at

¹⁴⁷ Reid, 'Middle-class values', p. 278.

¹⁴⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 24 February 1855.

¹⁴⁹ J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 568.

the Three Cranes public house in Queen Street with the United Concert Band and their 'excellent Glees and Songs'.¹⁵⁰ These popular informal gatherings which were a combination of presentation and participation would gradually assume the name of singing saloons (in Sheffield and across the country), or sometimes they were known as 'free and easies', and eventually, some of these venues evolved into establishments to which the new term 'music hall' was applied. Peter Bailey summarises the evolution process:

The origins of music hall are to be found in a closely related yet diverse cluster of institutions providing popular entertainment in the rapidly expanding towns and cities of the 1830s and 1840s. By then, the traditional localised amateur entertainment of the pub, the 'free and easy' was becoming a more specialised function catering to a wider public. The back-room get-together gave way to the 'singing saloon' concert with its expanded premises and professional performers.¹⁵¹

As Bailey documents, these places offered a wider variety of performers: song and dance acts, comedians, impersonators and (if possible) dramatic interludes and sometimes full-length dramas. Dagmar Kift acknowledges the controversy which surrounded this fast-growing phenomenon, by using '*Culture, Class and Conflict*' as the subtitle of her book. Her study is useful because although she examines halls in London she also includes those in northern towns, and in her chapter on Sheffield she selects 1850-1865 as a particular period of competition.¹⁵²

The inventiveness displayed in the efforts of publicans and managers to evade licensing restrictions is reminiscent of earlier battles about theatrical legitimacy, and this new upsurge of competition resulted in part from revised legislation. The year 1843 was significant in two ways for Sheffield: it was the year of its incorporation and the year of the second Theatre Regulation Act of

¹⁵⁰ *Sheffield Independent* 24 August 1839.

¹⁵¹ Peter Bailey, Introduction 'Making sense of music hall', in Bailey (ed), *Music Hall: the Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. viii-xxiii (ix).

¹⁵² Dagmar Kift, 'Sheffield 1850-1865: Theatres & Music Halls', in *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict*, pp. 88-98.

the century, following that of 1832.¹⁵³ This legislation 'repealed all previous acts relevant to the control of the stage and consolidated the law on the whole subject'.¹⁵⁴ There were now three ways that a venue could obtain a licence for the public performance of stage plays: via the Royal Patent; directly from the Lord Chamberlain (this applied mainly to London and some parts of the Home Counties); or from the local Justices of the Peace who were authorised to act on his behalf, which covered the rest of the country. Although the terms of the Act did not expressly forbid the combination of drama and drinking, local licensing authorities effectively separated them: saloons in Sheffield had to apply either for a theatrical licence or one for alcohol. It was a difficult choice: beer was very profitable, but publicans and managers also wanted to exploit the appeal of popular theatre: they knew that gripping and sensational narratives coupled with spectacular scenic effect had the potential to attract huge audiences.

In her comprehensive and perceptive study of the relationship between culture and commerce, *The Economics of the British Stage 1800-1914*, Tracy Davis draws attention to the consequences of replacing one strategy for the regulation of theatres by another. She criticises the 'increasingly odious' alignment 'between private interests and state control' and notes how the new legislation created a 'new set of bureaucratic responsibilities for the Lord Chamberlain, who changed overnight from a defender of monopolistic rights to the instrument of free market competition'.¹⁵⁵ This competitive environment became more fierce, as music hall joined the panoply of pleasures already on offer, not only from the Theatre in Tudor Street and the Circus in Blomk Street and the musical

¹⁵³ Important dates in 1843 were: 22 August Theatre Regulation Act; 24 August Royal Charter and Incorporation of Sheffield; 1 November first municipal election.

¹⁵⁴ An Act for Regulating Theatres, C. A. P. LXVIII, 22nd August 1843, p. 678.

¹⁵⁵ Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage*, p. 8.

evenings in the local taverns, but also from portable theatres and temporary circus structures, panoramas, menageries, choral concerts, recitals, poetry and literature readings, and all manner of physical activities and blood sports.

2.2 Popular culture I: competition and criticism

The myriad entertainments on offer by the mid-nineteenth century not only offered a bewildering array of choices but also complicated the old moral arguments about theatre: it was now compared to and contrasted with other potentially demoralising activities. The insights of Peter Bailey, one of the earliest cultural historians not only to examine this subject but also to focus on northern manufacturing towns, have been particularly pertinent for my analysis of the increasingly competitive and conflicted situation in Sheffield. His pioneering critical research, evident in *Leisure and Class in Victorian England* was further developed in a later collection of essays, in which he describes popular culture as

...a sprawling hybrid, a generically eclectic ensemble or repertoire of texts, sites and practices that constitute a widely shared social and symbolic resource.¹⁵⁶

According to Bailey this 'sprawling hybrid' was 'increasingly colonised by emergent culture industries'. This conception of culture as an industry may now be customary within contemporary discourse but Bailey was one of a group of innovative performance historians who were first to use it as a way to analyse material conditions and ideological attitudes during this period.¹⁵⁷

History teaches that attempts at colonisation are often met with resistance and this was the case when the 'culture industries' attempted to dominate popular culture. Bailey contends that consumers were wholly

¹⁵⁶ Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 10-11.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: the Business of Pleasure*.

persuaded neither by the purveyors of these new commercial 'confections' nor by those who criticised them:

These industries – the new pub, the music hall, the theatre, and the popular press – compete with each other, territorially and rhetorically, as also with the state and other respectable fractions of the social order. The constituency for popular culture fluctuates and recomposes; while not coterminous with any single class it is broadly democratic, answering both to the ritual promptings of an indigenous custom, old and newly forged, and the slicker formulations of mass or middlebrow commercial confection. It generates its own initiatives while readily appropriating from other sources, including 'high' or elite culture. Its materials are put to specific and selective use by its consumers, who variously embrace, modify or resist its meanings under the particular conditions and relationships of its reception.¹⁵⁸

This assessment of consumers as free-thinkers, willing to sample the proffered wares but still determined to assert their own character and independence through their choice of pleasures, is borne out by the results of my research into the reception of popular entertainment in Sheffield.

There is much evidence that new cultural entrepreneurs were constantly alert to opportunities, and they needed to understand their audience. For example, a new circus venue was erected in Duke Street (which was close to the city centre but in the opposite direction from the long-established circus on Blonk Street near the Cattle Market). An advert in the *Sheffield Independent* on Wednesday 31 December 1859 proudly noted the list of titled ladies and gentlemen, a 'celebrity crowd' who attended the demonstration by Mr. Rarey, the horse-tamer. Mr. Rarey had provided a winning combination of spectacle and practical instruction, which encouraged both the gentry and the working classes to fraternise in the same space and to pay for the experience. However, another attempt to exploit the visceral thrill of physical combat failed at the same venue the following summer. The two prize-fighters Sayers and Heenan exhibited themselves in a re-creation of

¹⁵⁸ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, pp. 10-11.

their notorious encounter.¹⁵⁹ The *Sheffield Independent* noted that although the two contenders were cheered and applauded by the crowds in the streets, not many actually paid for admission, and the writer suggests the reason:

The fact is that after the almost romantic bravery and skill shown by Sayers in the late unequal fight, this tour of the country, for the sake of cash, is felt to be rather ignoble.¹⁶⁰

Audiences were prepared to pay for their entertainment but they would exercise their discrimination, and managers had to be shrewd.

2.3 Popular culture II: opportunities and restrictions

The decisions about programming were often driven by financial considerations, and a short hire to an outside organisation was a simple way of earning money. This is an understandable strategy, but it is still a little surprising that so many theatres let their venues to Christian ministers for their outreach missions, given the long-standing (and ongoing) slanderous accusations about those in the theatrical profession.¹⁶¹ It is even more remarkable that clerics felt able to exploit buildings they had so recently reviled, but a new wave of crusaders was determined to have a physical presence in popular places. Their rationale was that if their potential congregations were reluctant to come to church, then the ministry had to reach out to the places they frequented. There are several advertisements for

¹⁵⁹ Bare-knuckle fighting was one of a range of blood sports that the authorities were attempting to repress. J. P. Bean writes that 'Tom Sayers ... was ... one of the great bareknuckle fighters. His later fight with the American Tom Heenan – styled as the first 'world championship' and for a £5,000 purse – would be the last gasp of a dying prize ring.' J. P. Bean, *Bold as a Lion: the Life of Bendigo – Champion of England* (Sheffield: D&D Publications, 2002), p. 170.

¹⁶⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 9 June 1860. The writer for the *Independent* appears to be of the opinion that fighting for money is acceptable, but a performative re-creation is not.

¹⁶¹ The *Era* (10 February 1861) reported that the branch of the Society of Friends in Sheffield had written an open address about 'the evil of plays' and it published an angry rejoinder under the headline 'Disgraceful Libel on the Theatre', alongside a defence from 'A Member of the Society of (Dramatic) Friends', which had been published in the *Sheffield Telegraph* on 26 January 1861.

religious services in the Duke Street Circus, and they became a regular event at the Theatre Royal. Preachers who had come from the metropolis were promoted as a special attraction: for example it was announced in March 1860 'to the working classes of Sheffield', that Mr. Weaver had come from London and the service had been 'especially designed for those who do not regularly attend Divine Worship, and they are earnestly and affectionately invited'.¹⁶²

Incumbents of Sheffield also took advantage of this new opportunity. Reverend Stainton (who not only became a prominent member of the clergy, but also a influential voice of conciliation during periods of troubled industrial relations) delivered a series of sermons at the Theatre Royal. One of his sermons in 1866 'The Unpardonable Sin', which firmly reiterated the inescapable consequences of atheism, was published. The prefatory note explains for whom the sermon was intended, although the tone of his introduction indicated that he expected his readership to be different from his theatrical audience:

The following discourse was prepared for those who were the specially invited auditory – the Working Classes. The line of thought therefore pursued is one best adapted to win their attention and promote their instruction – the only objects sought on the occasion.¹⁶³

Despite Stainton's claim that he had specifically adapted his approach to 'win their attention', the prose that follows is turgid and difficult to understand. Perhaps he dramatically transformed the text through his performance: if not, his effort to communicate must be judged a failure.

These forays by missionaries into the territory of popular theatre were satirised by Dickens in the persona of 'The Uncommercial Traveller'. He wryly

¹⁶² *Sheffield Independent*, 10 March 1860. A further advertisement noted that 'special religious services in the Theatre, for the working classes, commenced and continued for several weeks'. *Sheffield Independent*, 11 March 1860.

¹⁶³ Reverend R. Stainton, *The Unpardonable Sin* (Sheffield: Leader & Sons, 1866), Local Pamphlets Vol. 213, No. 16.

criticised the Sunday night sermons at the Britannia in London in 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre' in 1860:

I could not possibly say to myself as the discourse proceeded, that the minister was a good speaker. I could not possibly say to myself that he expressed an understanding of the general mind and character of his audience.¹⁶⁴

Dickens does not object to the use of theatre as a means of moral education, rather he chides the preacher for wasting a valuable opportunity because of his weak communication skills. He contrasts the lack of success achieved by the minister with the way in which he and his fellow audience members had eagerly participated in the righteous judgements encouraged by the Saturday-night melodrama:

Throughout the evening I was pleased to observe Virtue quite as triumphant as she usually is out of doors, and indeed I thought rather more so. We all agreed (for the time) that honesty was the best policy, and we were as hard as iron upon Vice, and we wouldn't hear of Villainy getting on in the world – no, not on any consideration whatever.¹⁶⁵

His experience at the Britannia prompted him to offer two concluding pieces of advice to the evangelists who organised these Sunday meetings (which would surely have been applauded by the members of the Sheffield Shakspeare Club):

...firstly, not to disparage the places in which they speak, or the intelligence of their hearers; secondly, not to set themselves in antagonism to the natural inborn desire of the mass of mankind to recreate themselves and be amused.¹⁶⁶

Part of the argument put forward by those in the Shakspeare Club that theatre should happily co-exist with religious faith was their claim that it could foster and promote moral principles, and this viewpoint was supported by writers such as Dickens. The members of the Club were prepared to

¹⁶⁴ The Uncommercial Traveller, 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre', reprinted in *All the Year Round*, Vol. II (25 February 1860), 416-421 (p. 419).

¹⁶⁵ 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre', p. 418.

¹⁶⁶ 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre', p. 420.

reproach Reverend Best for his attack on theatre, but this did not mean that theatrephiles and playwrights turned the tables and condemned religion. In any case, plays which undermined the authority of the church would simply not have been allowed by the Lord Chamberlain, so even if writers had doubts or were actively hostile they had to either censor themselves or be subtle and creatively dexterous. Usually when playwrights advocated religious reform they tended to fight battles over interpretation rather than abandoning the Bible and its teachings. Consequently there is a strong Christian element inherent in nineteenth century popular theatre which can often have an alienating effect for a twenty-first century reader, particularly for those with feminist sensibilities. For example the subject of my case study in Chapter Two is the actress and playwright Kate Pitt, whose plays draw attention to the unequal treatment of men and women, particularly in terms of sexual behaviour. Although she makes a convincing case for her flawed heroines to be treated with compassion, they are still trapped within a moral Christian framework, and they seem to accept the promise of eternal happiness as sufficient consolation for earthly misery.¹⁶⁷ Although this kind of resolution could signal a tacit acceptance of the status quo, women in theatre were beginning to challenge patriarchal privilege in a number of ways.

Since the first female actresses of the Restoration, women had occupied an ambiguous position, sometimes able to achieve wealth and fame but unable to escape the social stigma which arose from the generally-accepted definition of actress as synonymous with prostitute.¹⁶⁸ A new generation of women challenged these constricting judgements: actresses and theatre managers Madge Kendal, nee Robertson (1848-1935) and Marie Wilton (1839-1921) became influential role models, and they both

¹⁶⁷ See particularly Kate Pitt (Bright), *Naomi's Sin; or, Where are you going to, my pretty maid?* B. L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53217K (transcribed text at Appendix A1).

¹⁶⁸ This problem will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

demonstrated successful marital and professional partnerships. Not only did they prove that it was possible for women to lead a public life on stage and have a stable marriage, but through their venue management and choice of repertoire they also left a significant legacy to theatrical practice and its status. The Kendals' work at the St. James; and the Bancrofts at the Prince of Wales and later at the Haymarket have been credited with introducing a new respectability to theatre; and it is significant that women were at the head of this new movement. It was not just in the West End of London that women made progress. In *The Economics of the British Stage* Davis celebrates the contribution of many women across the country:

Whereas eighteenth-century women managers were extremely unusual, the emergence of hundreds of women in the administration of Victorian theatre created a whole new challenge to the practices of 'gentlemanly capitalism' – the gendered image and class-inflected conduct of business - for women were able to give real input to cultural representation and aesthetic traditions, sometimes to great effect.¹⁶⁹

Sheffield had several female theatre and music hall managers, who are credited in the lists of venues at Appendix C.

However, despite these significant advances, female performers and theatre managers still faced an uphill struggle, as my history of the women in the Pitt family demonstrates in Chapter Two. Although from mid-century onwards there was an increase in the number of middle-class women who entered the theatrical profession, most families still reacted with horror if this event occurred, and conversely, if actresses married middle-class men from outside the profession they were usually obliged to forsake their careers.¹⁷⁰ Even public appearances in amateur theatricals were out of bounds for most middle-class women. Appearing in these productions (normally fundraising events for charity) was a popular pastime, and participants included men like Dickens, who were thus enabled to pursue their love of performing whilst

¹⁶⁹ Davis, *Economics of the British Stage*, p. 10.

¹⁷⁰ Davis, 'The social dynamic and "respectability"', in *Actresses as Working Women*, pp. 69-101.

following more conventional careers, but the female parts were usually taken by professional actresses. Dickens had an ambiguous attitude to female performers - he was at once fascinated and yet rather scandalised. There is convincing evidence that he had a long-term affair with the actress Nelly Ternan (whose father had once managed the Theatre Royal in Sheffield) but he went to extraordinary lengths to keep the exact nature of this relationship secret.¹⁷¹

Dickens not only revealed his ambiguity towards women in theatre, but he also betrayed ambivalence towards theatre itself. Although he visited Sheffield with a celebrity company (including Wilkie Collins) in 1852 to raise funds for the Guild of Literature and the Arts, and the programme included *Not as Bad as We Seem* by Bulwer-Lytton, and *Mr Nightingale's Diary*, a farce co-written by himself with Mark Lemon (then editor of *Punch*), it is noteworthy that on this, and several other visits to Sheffield, he did not perform at the Theatre Royal or at the Adelphi (formerly known as the Circus) but he chose the Surrey Street Music Hall, considered to be a respectable and cultured venue.

The theatrical production by Dickens and his company was an unusual occurrence - although the hall at Surrey Street occasionally presented panoramas and other visual novelties such as the 'Spectroscope', it remained principally a lecture and concert venue.¹⁷² In the mid-1860s it was considered to be rather small for its purpose, and a decision was made not to enlarge the building but rather to raise funds for a new building. When this new and impressive venue, named the Albert Hall, finally opened in nearby Barkers'

¹⁷¹ See Claire Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman: the story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (London: Penguin, 1991). Nelly came from a theatrical family, her father Thomas Lawless Ternan (1790-1846) was briefly Lessee and Actor-Manager of the Theatre in Sheffield (1842-3). Her sister Fanny had performed at the Theatre in November 1842 (PB HC, 15 November 1842) and returned to Sheffield to the Surrey Street Music Hall twelve years later (*Sheffield Independent* 4 & 11 March 1854).

¹⁷² Mr. Gompertz and his 'Spectroscope' had a very popular run at the Surrey Street Music Hall, advertisement in the *Sheffield Telegraph*, 1 June 1866.

Pool in 1874, the smaller place lost its *raison d'être* and its upper rooms became a school for girls.¹⁷³ The locality of the Surrey Street Music Hall could be described as the territory of the aspiring middle and working classes, who sought cultural and educational activities for their leisure time. In addition to the library and the Literary and Philosophical Society, the neighbouring Athenaeum and Mechanics' Institute had opened with teaching facilities in 1845, and the Assembly Rooms had been a popular venue for lectures during the 1830s and 1840s.¹⁷⁴ There was a major commitment to education from public and charitable organisations in Sheffield (the People's College had been established in 1842 and the Workers' Educational Institute at the Hall of Science in 1847, which were both slightly further away but still in the centre of town). However, the advocates of self-improvement for local artisans were divided in their opinion of appropriate material for study. In the 1830s there was anxiety that even reading drama, never mind attending the theatre, would taint their impressionable minds: the *Sheffield Local Register* for 1839 noted that the committee of the Mechanics' Library had been censured for 'having admitted books subversive of the principles of the Christian religion', and re-stated that 'the exclusion of novels, romances and plays was a fundamental principal of the Institution'.¹⁷⁵

By 1862 however, the Mechanics' Institute was prepared to accept money generated from an amateur theatrical production: the Theatre Royal produced *The Rent Day* by Douglas Jerrold on Wednesday 26 February for their benefit, for which Edwin Young wrote an original prologue. The rather

¹⁷³ The new building was originally to be named the Wesleyan Mission Hall, and its foundation stone was laid by the Duke of Norfolk on 1 September 1870 (SLR). It was referred to as a new 'Music Hall' by the *Era*, 8 January 1871.

¹⁷⁴ J. Sheridan Knowles lectured at the Assembly Rooms in 1843, he gave six lectures 'on dramatic literature' in May, *SLR*, 4 May 1843 and in November, four on oratory and dramatic poetry, *SLR*, 20 November 1843.

¹⁷⁵ *Sheffield Local Register*, 8 July 1839.

trite rhyming couplets began with an apology for the quality of what was about to take place on stage and asked the audience to be forgiving, in the interests of the beneficiaries:

The cause of education bids us seek
Once more the public favour, and though weak
May be our efforts in the play, "to hold
The mirror up to nature," we are bold
Enough to screen both great and minor flaws
Behind the excellence of such a cause.

The middle lines extol the advantages of education, particularly for the working man: 'It makes the man a better artisan / It makes the artisan a better man'. In the final two lines of the poem, Young made a direct connection between the aims of education and the enjoyment of theatrical performance when he expressed the hope that the audience would approve 'our endeavours to diffuse / the power of knowledge, whilst we would amuse'.¹⁷⁶

Advocates of rational recreation enthusiastically promoted the use of 'amusement' for the diffusion of knowledge and there were a host of improving leisure activities on offer in Sheffield in the 1860s. Advertisements for penny readings, lectures, debates and concerts fill the pages of the *Sheffield Independent* and other publications, and many individuals and organisations recognised the attraction of dramatic presentation. The Mechanics' Institute hosted a reading of Dickens' works by Mr. Jeremiah Robertshaw on 28 January 1867, and when Harvey Teasdale, former actor and reformed alcoholic, delivered a talk at the Temperance Hall the following month about his life experiences, tickets quickly sold out and he had to repeat his performance.¹⁷⁷ It was a small step from an animated lecture to a 'dramatic illustration' and thence to a full theatrical performance and venue

¹⁷⁶ Playbill, *The Rent Day*, Wednesday 26 February 1862. Microfilm, S-LSL 942.74S, Vol. 9, p. 132.

¹⁷⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 22 February 1867 (Teasdale made his two presentations on 4 and 26 February).

managers were alert to any hint of unfair competition.¹⁷⁸ It was questionable whether some performances were deliberate attempts to manipulate or evade the licensing restrictions but magistrates were fairly tough on offenders, as they feared that to set a precedent would inspire a surge of excited opportunists.

The Temperance Hall caused a commotion early in 1869 when some of their members staged an amateur production of a play without permission. When they were summoned to explain their actions, their solicitor implied that it had been a small informal project that had mushroomed:

Some time ago a number of young men performed for their own amusement and that of their friends, a sacred drama called "Joseph and his Brethren". They afterwards performed it at the Temperance Hall, where the performances were witnessed by a large number of persons, indeed he believed that they had been witnessed by at least 50,000.¹⁷⁹

Mr. W. J. Clegg, their advocate, submitted that the organisers had retrospectively applied for a licence so that they would not be in contravention of regulations, but Mr. Vernon Blackburn, who opposed the licence on behalf of the lessee of the Theatre Royal, was suspicious of their real motives. He contended that:

If the Bench granted the applicants the licence asked for, they might play "Joseph and his Brethren" on one night, and on the next "Blue Beard", or "Bombastes Furioso," or anything else they pleased.¹⁸⁰

The Mayor agreed with Mr. Blackburn and concluded:

If the Temperance Hall were licensed for such performances as had been mentioned, a door would be opened to applications being made

¹⁷⁸ An advertisement for the People's College announced that 'The Committee have made arrangements with Mr. Augustine Davis (Elocutionist, Edinburgh), and his Sisters, the Misses Shudymore and Lavinia Davis, to give their celebrated DRAMATIC ILLUSTRATIONS and HUMOROUS RECITALS, on Tuesday Evening, next, April 2nd, at Eight, in the Lecture-room. Students Free; the Public 1s each', *Sheffield Independent*, 30 March 1867.

¹⁷⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 6 February 1869.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. *Bombastes Furioso* was later described in a review of an amateur production at the Theatre Royal as 'the old, but always fresh burlesque-tragedy', *Sheffield Independent*, 9 April 1869.

for licences for singing rooms and perhaps for Sabbath schools. The Bench did not think this was at all desirable, and, therefore, would refuse the application.¹⁸¹

In court cases throughout the 1850s and 1860s this fear was often expressed - that 'a door would be opened' and even more theatrical promoters admitted. Managers and magistrates alike were worried that Sheffield could not support the amount of entertainment on offer. The Theatre Royal no longer suffered from the relentless ideological attacks of Reverend Best; instead it was under threat from new entrepreneurs who had big commercial ambitions and the dogged determination to fulfil them.

2.4 The new entrepreneurs and their theatrical battles

Those who make a living from entertainment have usually occupied an ambivalent position in terms of social inclusion and acceptance. In the early decades of the nineteenth century some inhabitants had been suspicious and resentful of 'theatricals' because of the itinerant nature of their employment, but by the 1850s, residents of Sheffield had become accustomed to more visitors and a changing population. A study of the demography of the town in mid-century reveals a contradiction: due to its industrial expansion it received a constant stream of new people in search of employment, despite its comparative isolation caused by the slow development of its railways and other communication networks.¹⁸² Caroline Reid notes that 'in 1851, half the adult population of Sheffield had been born elsewhere'.¹⁸³ The incomers were not always welcomed, particularly in times of economic hardship, but many talented and resolute individuals prospered and integrated well into Sheffield society.

¹⁸¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 6 February 1869.

¹⁸² Harold Perkin, *The Age of the Railway* (Devon: David & Charles, 1970).

¹⁸³ Reid, 'Middle class values and working class culture', p. 280.

Pablo Fanque (real name William Darby 1796-1871) was one such personality who does not appear to have suffered from prejudice. He was an equestrian performer and circus proprietor of African descent, and was Lessee and Manager of the Adelphi Theatre for a short time in the late 1840s and 1850s.¹⁸⁴ Surviving playbills attest to the varied nature of his repertoire, and although he produced traditional circus with equestrian performers and clowns, he also produced dramas such as *The Thirteenth Chime; or, The Monk, the Mask, and the Murderer!*, *Chamber Practice* and *The Mysteries of Paris or the Orphan Street Singer*.¹⁸⁵ His repertoire is further evidence of the way that flexible entrepreneurs combined the attractions of spectacle and drama in order to entertain a wide spectrum of audience.

Given the particular distinctiveness of Sheffield as a hub of independent small businesses, it is likely that it welcomed entrepreneurs of all classes provided they made a positive impact on its economic health. Thomas Youdan (1816-1876) is a valuable example of an enterprising and determined individual who came from an impoverished background and not only successfully transformed his life through his involvement in theatre but made a significant contribution to the economy of Sheffield and the welfare of its inhabitants. His career trajectory demonstrates the possibility of financial success and even the potential of social mobility, which was offered by the rapidly-expanding performance industries. Moreover, an examination of the clashes that he had with the authorities and other managers reveals the nature of the challenges for theatrical endeavour in mid-century Sheffield. Entrepreneurs like Youdan fought to attract audiences and make money, but they also breached the division between theatres and music halls. It is

¹⁸⁴ John M. Turner, 'Fanque, Pablo (1796–1871)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2009 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53827>> [accessed 11 April 2013].

¹⁸⁵ Undated Playbill, Hudson Collection; Playbills in LS Collection M.P. 85 VL.

therefore useful to consider some of the problems he faced and the strategies he (and his competitors) followed.

Kathleen Barker provides illuminating details of his life and career, and she notes that he was the tenth child of a village labourer, born in Streetthorpe, 'a now-vanished hamlet in the parish of Kirk Sandal near Doncaster'.¹⁸⁶ He came to Sheffield in 1834 when he was eighteen and worked as a silver stamper and in the construction industry; he then moved into the licensed trade, he is listed in the 1845 *Trade Directory* as a Beerhouse Keeper at 28 Broad Street. At some point between 1845 and 1849 he moved into premises at 66 Westbar previously owned by J. Spinks, a pawnbroker, and thus popularly known as 'Spinks Nest'.

By contrast to the affluent area of Surrey Street, West Bar was one of the working-class strongholds: a busy and crowded hotchpotch of artisans' homes and workplaces, with shops and taverns providing necessities and pleasures. There are at least nine public houses listed in the *Sheffield Directory* of 1841, with seven in nearby West Bar Green, in addition to numerous small traders, such as grocers, hatters, confectioners, hairdressers and basket makers.¹⁸⁷ Although Youdan began with a modest establishment he had enough capital to make extensive alterations and enlarge the premises, and on 17 March 1849 an advertisement in the *Sheffield Independent* announced the opening of Youdan's New Royal Casino, with free admission and the promise of musical entertainment.¹⁸⁸

Youdan had great ambition, and although his venture was located in an insalubrious area he clearly felt that it was important to bestow it with a

¹⁸⁶ Kathleen Barker, 'Thomas Youdan of Sheffield' *Theatrephile*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (Spring 1985), 9-12. Dagmar Kift also includes much information about Youdan in *The Victorian Music Hall*, particularly in Chapter 4, 'Rivalry in Leisure', pp. 77-98.

¹⁸⁷ *Sheffield Directory*, 1841. This area of Sheffield has been completely transformed now, by new roads and buildings. It is hard to imagine the tightly-packed, noisy, pleasure-filled streets of this period.

¹⁸⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 17 March 1849.

name which would attract audiences and suggest a commitment to high artistic standards. It is unlikely that the public believed that their local music halls had the patronage of Queen Victoria, yet the adjective 'royal' was often applied. (Although it never officially had a patent, the Theatre was referred to as the Theatre Royal from the mid-1840s onwards.)

Youdan's first attempt to raise the status of his hall was not successful, as demonstrated by his hearing at the Brewster Sessions the following September. Despite his lawyer providing a spirited defence, the magistrates refused his application for a licence after the opposing counsel Mr. Eyre alleged that his establishment 'was a great nuisance, and engendered much vice and immorality'. Eyre concluded with the pejorative remark that 'the character of the house was also seen in the name it bore – "Casino."¹⁸⁹ When Youdan tried again a year later in August 1850, his lawyer Mr. Gainsford attempted to convince the court that they should not be influenced by the name, but rather the evidence of a well-run house:

He was aware that a prejudice must be created against Mr. Youdan from the circumstances of his place being called the Casino. ... Mr. Youdan's place differed most materially from the casinos of London. Its proper designation was a concert room.¹⁹⁰

Gainsford's defence inadvertently confirmed the magistrates' suspicions: they knew that Youdan wanted to bend the rules and have the best of both worlds. He wanted a wine and spirits licence, but he also wanted more than an upmarket tavern, singing saloon or even a concert room. In 1849, Mr. Eyre had commented that Youdan's Casino 'partook more of the

¹⁸⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 1 September 1849.

The original meaning of 'casino' means small building, usually a summer- or pleasure- house and is a diminutive of the Italian 'casa'. From about 1789 the word was used for a public room for social meetings; a club house or music and dancing saloon. From the mid-nineteenth century it began to be used to describe a venue for gambling, often with other amenities, and thus had somewhat disreputable connotations. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, 1989, pp. 940-1.

¹⁹⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 31 August 1850.

character of a theatre, to which class he showed it was nearly allied, by the nature of the performances which were held there'.¹⁹¹

Although magistrates recognised that dramatic interludes often improved the programmes in halls, they nevertheless kept the allocation of theatrical licences under strict control. At the hearing in 1850, Mr. Branson expressed his concern that by granting a licence to Youdan they would set a dangerous precedent, that 'if the door was once opened', every singing room would make a similar application. The temptation to offer alcohol as an accompaniment to drama would be too great to resist, and even the Theatre 'would have sherry-cobblers and straws handed out among the audience'.¹⁹² Youdan was not easily deterred; he already had a beer licence, so he could continue trading. However he took note of the comments about the name, and a week later an advertisement announced:

Surrey Music Hall (late Casino)

The Public are respectfully informed that this popular place of Amusement, after undergoing great Alterations, and a splendid tier of Private Boxes having been Erected, will be re-opened on Monday evening next, September 9th, 1850 with a New and Talented Company. Private Family Boxes may be had on application at the Bar.¹⁹³

Given the genteel repertoire and consequently somewhat exclusive clientele of the Surrey Street Music Hall this rather provocative challenge must have rankled its proprietors and managers. Even if Youdan did not deliberately intend to cause mischief (perhaps he wanted to suggest a favourable association with the well-known theatre of the metropolis), he must surely have known that the similarity of the two names would cause confusion and consternation.¹⁹⁴ Neither venue gave any ground for as long

¹⁹¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 1 September 1849.

¹⁹² *Sheffield Independent*, 31 August 1850.

¹⁹³ *Sheffield Independent*, 7 September 1850.

¹⁹⁴ The Surrey Theatre was popular venue on Blackfriars Road, in use as a venue for entertainment since the late eighteenth century. The Surrey Music Hall was

as they both existed: Youdan did not relinquish 'Surrey' although he made minor changes and sometimes added 'Royal' and sometimes 'Theatre'; and the Surrey Street Music Hall retained its name until it closed in 1902. Other new halls in the 1860s drew on the supposed sophistication of southern entertainment with names such as the Old London Apprentice and the New Canterbury Hall.¹⁹⁵

As demonstrated by the case of Youdan and the magistrates, proprietors and managers might attempt eminence by association but their efforts were not always successful. The Circus in Blonk Street had used the 'royal' tag in the first decade of its existence (Royal Amphitheatre, Royal Arena), and in 1848 its managers indicated that they planned to broaden its scope by re-titling it the Adelphi. When the enterprising and inventive James Scott took on the lease in 1851, he embellished it with Continental glamour as the 'Royal Adelphi and Parisian Promenade Concert Hall'. Given his financial circumstances, Scott was rather reckless: he was already lessee of the Queen's Theatre, Hull, and he took on the Barrack Tavern in Sheffield at about the same time as the Adelphi, although by April the following year he was attempting to relinquish the Queen's, and a 'to let' advertisement appeared.¹⁹⁶ Like Youdan, he found that the exotic name of his venue did not guarantee a corresponding refinement in the character of its clientele. A report from the *Sheffield Independent* in May 1851 detailed a serious assault on police officers by 'disorderly' audience members. Mr. Raynor (the magistrate) reported that 'the place was filled to overflowing every night,

established on Southwark Bridge Road in South London in 1848, Nigel Fountain, *Lost Empires: the Phenomenon of Theatres Past, Present and Future* (London: Cassell, 2005), p. 43.

¹⁹⁵ The Canterbury Music Hall in Upper Marsh, off Westminster Bridge Road, was opened by the entrepreneur Charles Morton on 17 May 1852 and was a huge success, Fountain, *Lost Empires*, p. 43.

¹⁹⁶ *Era*, 19 October 1851; *Era*, 4 April 1852.

including among the visitants, all the scum of the town'. Although Scott paid for two officers to regularly be in attendance, this incident had convinced the magistrate that he could no longer 'allow the lives of the police to be jeopardized by attending among such lawless fellows, who had such missiles as pots and bottles always at hand,' and the men should be withdrawn.¹⁹⁷

Despite these kinds of violent incidents, together with unscrupulous business practices, bankruptcy, numerous appearances in court and time in prison, Scott persevered at the Adelphi until 1855.¹⁹⁸ After his imprisonment for bankruptcy he attempted to use other people to apply for the lease in his stead: his mother Mrs Scott (September 1854); Mr. Wilson (September 1854), accused in court by John Coleman (at the Theatre Royal) of being 'a tailor'; Mr. Nortou Ford, an actor (January 1855). He brazenly held his nerve, and continued to attract a range of talented and popular performers and often had full houses:

The immense size of this establishment allows the proprietors to concentrate a great amount of talent. They have done so, and crowded houses every night have been their reward.¹⁹⁹

An advertisement in the *Era* in August 1854 indicated that he had ambitions beyond song and dance acts:

Wanted – Leading Gentleman, Low Comedian, Old Woman, First Class Walking Gentleman, Several Ladies and Gentlemen, Scenic Artists, Stage Carpenter. J. Scott, Adelphi Theatre, Sheffield.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 17 May 1851.

¹⁹⁸ There are numerous examples of the conflicts between the Surrey, the Adelphi and the Theatre Royal during the first half of the 1850s. For example Mr. Scott (Adelphi) brought a complaint against Mr. Youdan (Surrey); 'an information' had earlier been brought against Scott by Charles Dillon (Theatre Royal). This particular legal action was reported in the *Sheffield Independent*, 9 October 1852. See *Sheffield Independent*, 2, 9, 16 September; 21 October 1854, 20 January 1855.

¹⁹⁹ *Era*, 27 April 1851.

²⁰⁰ *Era*, 6 August 1854.

The list of requirements suggests that he planned to produce plays as well, and in any case he had already been producing 'selections from the pantomime of *Don Juan*', as advertised in the *Era*, 17 August 1851.

Youdan, too, seized an opportunity to extend his theatrical ambitions in 1853 when he took over the lease of the Theatre Royal after the lessee unexpectedly departed. Unfortunately he was thwarted because although the lease was valid the theatrical licence had already expired, and he was summoned to court and fined £5.00.²⁰¹ In preparation for the competition, Scott attempted to gain an advantage by purloining the title of the Tudor Street venue:

In order, we suppose, more directly to oppose Mr. Youdan, Mr. Scott has named his place of amusement "The Theatre Royal, Cattle Market." There is no lack of effort to obtain the patronage of the public at either of these establishments.²⁰²

Despite mounting the successful pantomime *Cinderella, or the Crystal Slipper* in spring 1853, Youdan's tenure at the Theatre Royal was short-lived and he re-focused his energies on the Surrey.

The range and depth of the intrigues between managers is revealed through the many reports of the magistrates' proceedings. Apparently Scott had been writing to Youdan accusing him of playing without a licence - even when he was doing so legally - so it was not surprising that Youdan had ignored his most recent threats.²⁰³ Newspaper reports of the lengths to which all the lessees were prepared to go are entertaining and sometimes comical, but they also demonstrate increasingly acrimonious rivalry, and an ugly incident with tragic outcomes led to accusations of deliberate and reckless sabotage. During a performance at the Surrey Theatre (in September 1858) a sound like a pistol shot was heard, followed by a false call of 'fire'. Five people

²⁰¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 7 May 1853.

²⁰² *Sheffield Independent*, 2 April 1853.

²⁰³ *Sheffield Independent*, 7 May 1853.

died in the ensuing stampede, but the truth of the matter was never completely established, and those responsible never identified.²⁰⁴

Probably in response to the escalation of rivalry, the magistrates seemed to take licensing issues more seriously in the 1850s than in the 1840s; an example from the earlier decade demonstrates the change. At the magistrates' session in January 1840, Mr. Wortley noted that a licence had been granted to Mr. Parish for the New Circus at the same time as one had been granted to Gedge and Lacy (for the Theatre), and according to the *Sheffield Independent* 'he read a clause in the statute, to show that two licenses could not exist together'. The Chairman's response was dismissive and revealed his laissez-faire attitude: 'Well, we will take no further part in this matter. The parties may fight it out among themselves.'²⁰⁵

Although the magistrates were more vigilant in the 1850s, their predilection for awarding short licences (the usual terms were three or six months), together with the relentless competition, created a chaotic atmosphere for the performing arts. Managers found it difficult to establish themselves, develop a consistent repertoire, and build a reliable audience. The public had so many venues and locations to choose from, and the intense battles and underhand tactics provided a kind of meta-drama, as managers from all establishments used spies to attend the entertainments and testify in court if anyone breached the rules. Even the well-known and extremely popular Charles Dillon had a troubled time in Sheffield when he attempted management.

Charles Dillon (1819-1881), actor, playwright and manager, is one of the characters associated with Sheffield who has received a degree of

²⁰⁴ Barker, 'Thomas Youdan of Sheffield', p. 10; the case was extensively reported in the local press.

²⁰⁵ *Sheffield Independent*, 11 January 1840.

historical and academic attention.²⁰⁶ He was a regular visitor to Sheffield in the 1850s and 1860s and Coleman described him as ‘the idol of the Sheffield “grinders”’.²⁰⁷ When he made a return appearance after a period of time away, the *Sheffield Independent* noted that ‘Mr Dillon is the most popular actor Sheffield has ever had, and in our judgement he is by far the best’.²⁰⁸ He was closely associated with Joseph Fox, a fellow actor and playwright who wrote *The Union Wheel*, the case study in Chapter Three, and both performers were in Sheffield in 1856.

Over seven months of that year, Dillon was briefly Acting Manager at the Theatre Royal (April), switched to Lessee at the Adelphi Theatre (end April), then returned to the Theatre Royal (October).²⁰⁹ Despite his successful association with the Theatre Royal as an actor, he attempted to mount a production at the rival Surrey Music Hall the following year. This may have been simply a case of an actor and director taking work wherever it was offered, but the perceived lack of loyalty and the devious behaviour between colleagues and associates inevitably soured relationships and introduced a note of personal vendetta into the legal proceedings.

Alderman Edwin Unwin was still Treasurer of the Theatre Royal (he was a consistently solid presence during his thirty-year tenure) and he strongly objected when Dillon and his company planned to produce *Othello*. He issued a notice because the Surrey was not licensed, and threatened legal proceedings; the production was cancelled, although as the *Sheffield*

²⁰⁶ See, for example, Victor Emeljanow, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Kathleen Barker ‘Charles Dillon: a Provincial Tragedian’ in Richard Foulkes (ed.), *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*; John Coleman, *Plays and Playwrights I have known: a review of the English Stage from 1840-1880*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Gebbie, 1890), Vol. 2, pp. 248-94.

²⁰⁷ Coleman, *Fifty Years of an Actor’s Life*, Two Volumes (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1904).

²⁰⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 26 January 1867.

²⁰⁹ Playbills, Hudson Collection.

Telegraph reports, Dillon agreed to read the play 'to his Sheffield friends' instead.²¹⁰ The following month, on Saturday 6 June, the actor and manager John Coleman was obliged to apply on a Saturday for a special temporary licence for the Adelphi because the regular one had expired and he was due to produce *The Lady of Lyons* that evening. The magistrates refused, and informed him that he must apply in the normal way, the following Monday, but he defiantly went ahead and opened his venue anyway. Youdan seized the opportunity to turn the tables and served Coleman with a notice, forcing him to cancel at the last minute and refund the audience. When the application for the Adelphi was heard in due course, Alderman Unwin was present once again to give evidence against the prospective lessee.

Unwin's statement in court vividly illustrates the fraught relationship between proprietors and lessees, and betrays his frustration that his sensible advice went unheeded, even though it had been gleaned from years of experience. He contended that audiences were limited; they regarded a visit to the theatre as a seasonal indulgence, but ambitious managers were not prepared to compromise. Instead, they audaciously and determinedly continued to conspire and compete, even when faced with financial ruin and the collapse of their professional reputation:

I have a strong objection to urge, not only against the licensing of the Adelphi at all, but against the person who is now applying for a licence. Mr Coleman was lessee of the Theatre Royal for more than two years, and at last left it in debt to the proprietors to the extent of £116. After that he came back to the town, and obtained a licence from the Adelphi, which he opened simultaneously with the Theatre Royal, at half the prices. The consequence was that he got into debt and ruined himself, and he half ruined the other place as well. I brought an action against him for the money owing to the proprietors of the Theatre Royal, and obtained a verdict for £100. Within two days he made himself a bankrupt, and his affairs are now pending before the bankruptcy court. On the present occasion I have no objection to a licence being granted for this week. I shall never object to both

²¹⁰ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 5 May 1857. The extracts from this newspaper and others were collected together and pasted into the Minute Book of the Theatre Royal, as part of the proceedings of the committee meetings in 1857, Sheffield Archives, CA 373/1. One of the sections in the newspaper report is headed 'The Surrey Music Hall Again', which indicates the repetitive nature of the problem.

theatres being opened for the Christmas week, the Whit week, and the Easter week; but if they are both to be open throughout the winter season the consequence must necessarily be that one or both will get into difficulties. The public will suffer by it also because it prevents stars from being brought down. No stars were brought down last season, when this competition was going on between the Theatre Royal and the Adelphi, because neither of them could afford it. Each of them was trying how they could carry on cheapest, and the performances at both were worth nothing. Mr. Coleman has come here, as he told me in court, with the determination to oppose me in every way possible. He has a perfect right to do that if he has money to pay his debts. But he has no right to get into debt when he knows that he has no means of meeting his liabilities... I say he has not the means of conducting the Adelphi as it ought to be conducted.²¹¹

In his defence, Coleman made an acerbic counter-claim for the artistic superiority of the Adelphi and implied that the Theatre Royal had resorted to sensation and lotteries in its desperation for audiences:

Many of the magistrates and most influential persons in the town were present at the Adelphi to witness the Shaksperian [sic] pieces which I presented, and my house was crowded to suffocation, whilst at the Theatre Royal they were acting such disreputable rubbish as “Jack Long, or Fifteen Shots in the Eye” – (a laugh) – and giving away each night ten prizes of 10s. each.²¹²

The outcome was only partially successful for Coleman: he was granted a licence for Whit Week only. Cases like this plainly illustrate that theatre depended on people as much as product, and often personal animosities and conflicting motives affected artistic and commercial success.

Coleman and other theatrical artisans may sometimes have been guilty of sharp practices, but this did not preclude them from having high standards. The type of venue did not always determine quality, and surprises could be found in unlikely locations. The mixed bills and hybrid genres that so exercised Bulwer-Lytton and his cohorts still dominated the programmes at the Theatre Royal, the Surrey and the Adelphi, and the attendant arguments about repertoire, which had been evident at the meetings of the Shakespeare

²¹¹ *Sheffield Times*, 6 June 1857.

Coleman had made a very early appearance as an actor at the Theatre Royal in Sheffield, the experience of which he details in *Fifty Years of an Actor's Life*.

²¹² *Sheffield Times*, 6 June 1857.

Club and in the submissions to the 1832 Select Committee had not ceased. Jacky Bratton has perceptively deconstructed the tendency to venerate 'the Drama' at the expense of popular theatre; and rather than position the two phenomena at opposite ends of a judgemental scale, it is more accurate to acknowledge the variable quality of theatrical production across all genres during the period.²¹³

Whatever faults Youdan possessed, he should be given credit for his impressive development of the Surrey: he spared no expense, and it became an extremely attractive and comfortable centre for the arts. He added a museum, picture gallery and ballroom as well as extending the stage and audience areas; he even constructed a second, small-scale hall on the premises. After vacillating for several years between obtaining permission for dramatic performances, or for the consumption of wine and spirits, he eventually settled on a theatrical licence in 1865, and definitively called his venue the Surrey Theatre. Audiences were drawn to the variety and quality of the programme and Youdan finally began to achieve respectability and status, as well as financial success.²¹⁴ The *Era* notes that it 'was enlarged to the proportions of a first-class Theatre ... and was re-opened with great *éclat*, the entire construction of the interior eliciting the encomiums of the thousands who entered its walls'.²¹⁵

The Surrey would have remained a strong rival to the Theatre Royal, had not a fire destroyed it on 25 March 1865. With terrible irony, the theatre caught fire after a dramatic reconstruction of the Great Fire as part of a performance of Boucicault's *The Streets of London*.²¹⁶ It was a huge loss; a

²¹³ Bratton, *New Readings*.

²¹⁴ Barker, Unpublished Thesis, p. 274.

²¹⁵ *Era*, 2 April 1865.

²¹⁶ Bryen Hillerby, *The Lost Theatres of Sheffield* (Barnsley: Wharncliffe Publishing, 1999), p. 31. According to Kathleen Barker, Pitt had let pass the opportunity to

photograph of Youdan and his colleagues the morning after clearly illustrates their deep shock.²¹⁷ Barker reports that the fire destroyed more than Youdan's beloved building and its contents: the company lost their wardrobe and properties, the band lost their music and instruments and about a hundred people were deprived of their employment.²¹⁸ The public rallied to their support and a relief fund was organised; Youdan must have been extremely relieved that he was insured for £13,000, and so he had the means to start again. He had, rather astutely, six years earlier in December 1859 taken a long lease on the Adelphi Theatre. It had been used for storage, but now he carried out some refurbishments and quickly re-opened in the autumn of 1865. Its official name, the Alexandra Opera House and Music Hall once again displayed Youdan's penchant for grandeur, although it was rarely given its full title in reviews or even in advertisements, and was usually referred to as the Alexandra Music Hall (and sometimes just Youdan's). The first two events at the venue demonstrated his policy of eclecticism: he hosted a conference for the National Association for the Promotion of Social Sciences on 23 September and a full-scale oratorio performance of *Judas Maccabeus* performed by the Sheffield Choral Union on 12 October, although the repertoire through 1866-67 was mostly standard music hall fare.²¹⁹

produce this play by Boucicault. He had unsuccessfully mounted it the previous season under its original title *The Poor of New York* (*Sheffield Telegraph* 6 February 1865). Moreover Pitt had been sued by Boucicault in 1862 because he owed him money. Barker cites R. Fawkes, *Dion Boucicault* (London: Quartet, 1979, p. 133). Barker, Unpublished Thesis, p. 275.

²¹⁷ Photograph, Sheffield City Council, s09222, <http://picturesheffield.com>. Also reproduced in Hillerby, *Lost Theatres of Sheffield*, p. 33.

²¹⁸ Barker, Unpublished Thesis, p. 275.

²¹⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 September 1865. Ever the entrepreneur, Youdan seized an opportunity when Sheffield Choral Union had a dispute with H. J. Freemantle, a manager and concert promoter. The concert was supposed to be at the Surrey Street Music Hall, but their loss was Youdan's gain, reported in Barker, Unpublished Thesis, p. 278.

Thomas Youdan and his skirmishes with the law may have confirmed the 'rogue and vagabond' stereotype, but his later position as theatrical elder statesman, town councillor and generous benefactor conferred a degree of respectability and status. His obituary reports that he stood as Town Councillor for St. Philip's Ward for six years (from 1858), and was elected to the Board of Guardians for the Sheffield Union.²²⁰ He often made grand charitable gestures, such as distributing 2,000 half-pounds of tea to the 'needy poor', reported in the *Sheffield Independent* on 22 December 1869. The Alexandra was his swansong, he managed it until he retired as a wealthy man in 1874, at which time his joint manager Mr. Brittlebank assumed sole control and continued at its head until 1894. Under Brittlebank's stewardship it established a reputation for sensational melodrama and pantomime (it consistently had a theatrical licence from 1868) and from 1874 it was mainly known as the Alexandra Theatre. It was visited by generations of Sheffielders, who often referred to the venue as 'Tommy's' and although it closed in 1914, newspaper articles from the 1930s illustrate that it was regarded with affection in the collective cultural memory.²²¹

2.5 Respectability, social inclusion and the rise of the playwright

Even though he was born outside of the area, Youdan demonstrated a life-long allegiance to his adopted home of Sheffield. The development of his career and his eventual social acceptance illustrated that it was possible to be a theatrical entrepreneur and become a significant member of the community. The organisation of provincial theatre continued to change: the old circuits had given way to the stock system, and by the 1860s theatres

²²⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 2 December 1876

²²¹ Although there is only anecdotal evidence, it appears that the colloquial name for the venue was 'the Blood Tub' because of its penchant for bloodthirsty melodramas, noted in Hillerby, *Lost Theatres*, p. 37.

hosted a mixture of resident and touring companies. Actors still led peripatetic lives but managers could establish a long-term relationship with a region and this increasingly became the case in Sheffield.²²² London remained a magnet for many of those with theatrical ambitions, but some individuals recognised the potential that the commodious and well-equipped Theatre Royal had to offer. In addition to its technical facilities, it had the possibility of a regular clientele from amongst the sizeable population, who were mostly reaping the financial benefits of their ever-expanding trades and industry.

Aged about forty, after years of touring, with a family of five children and an ageing father-in-law, the actor Charles Dibdin Pitt would surely have welcomed the opportunity to become established in one place.²²³ He assumed the management of the Theatre Royal in the autumn of 1860, with plenty of experience and connections to enable him to choose a reliable acting company: his brother W. H. Pitt was lessee of the Queen's Theatre, Hull; his wife Ellen Coveney was an actress and her sisters Harriet and Jane were regular performers at London theatres such as the Grecian.²²⁴ Although

²²² The nineteenth century is often thought of as the era of the 'Actor-Manager', and provincial theatres tended to be run by these kinds of individuals. Hesketh Pearson claimed that this practice ceased at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hesketh Pearson, *The Last Actor Managers* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1950).

²²³ It is highly likely that Charles Pitt was the son of the prolific playwright George Dibdin Pitt (1795-1855) but I have been unable to absolutely verify the details of his parentage. The obituary of his daughter Kate Pitt Bright states that she was 'the granddaughter of the veteran dramatist and actor, Dibdin Pitt' (*Stage*, 11 January 1906), and there is evidence of other family connections, for example that his brother was Cecil Pitt (died 1879), see his obituary, *Era*, 16 February 1879.

There is much of interest in the history of this branch of the Pitt family, who joined the Coveney family through marriage and later merged with the Brights. The subject offers further research potential, and their activities deserve wider dissemination. A brief summary of their family connections and career trajectories is included in Appendix B and their creative and professional contributions will be further examined in Chapter Two.

²²⁴ Pitt's acting company included (James) Edmonstone Shirra (who became Acting Manager at the Theatre Royal, *Era*, 27 February 1897) and Wybert Reeve (1839-1906), who would later have a successful career as a playwright, and have plays produced there.

theatre management could be an insecure way to earn a living, if business went well, it could provide employment for the whole family.²²⁵ All of Charles and Ellen's children remained within the theatrical profession and developed successful careers: their eldest daughter Kate is the subject of my case study in Chapter Two. Although Charles continued to tour (which assisted his financial situation), he demonstrated his determination to build a stable and mutually beneficial relationship with his audience and patrons.

The proprietors must have been relieved, after all the unpredictable behaviour of the various managers in the 1850s.²²⁶ However, Pitt could not afford to be complacent, and when he held a masked ball in the Theatre to celebrate the Shakespeare tercentenary, he incurred the wrath of the authorities. It is not clear exactly what occurred, but an apparent lack of decorum was deemed unacceptable. When his licence came up for renewal in July 1864, it was refused. Thomas Dunn was the principal sitting magistrate and he delivered his somewhat unexpected verdict, that

the Bench very much regretted that... a person who held such a responsible position as Mr. Pitt should have suffered such proceedings as had been detailed ... They regarded it as a disgrace to morality ... the Bench had but one duty to perform, and that was, to decline the license.²²⁷

There were local protests about this harsh decision and when Pitt reapplied six months later with apologies and solemn promises to ensure this would not happen again, he got a six months' renewal.²²⁸ In April 1865 his lease was

²²⁵ There are many examples of this. The Leclercq family were contemporaneous with the Pitts; sisters Carlotta (1838-1893) and Rose (1843-1899) both had successful theatrical careers and they feature in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. An advertisement in the *Sheffield Independent* announces that the performers at the Theatre Royal include Mr., Mrs., and Miss Leclercq, *Sheffield Independent*, 30 January 1836.

²²⁶ There were still actions brought to the magistrates because of unfair competition. In April 1861 Mr. C. Hengler, proprietor of the Circus in Duke Street was summoned by Mr. Pitt, for performing stage plays, *Sheffield Independent*, 13 April 1861.

²²⁷ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 30 July 1864. The case was documented by Barker, Unpublished Thesis, p. 274.

²²⁸ Barker, p. 274 and *Era*, 4 September 1864.

again renewed, this time for a further three years, and it seemed that all were pleased with the new, settled state of affairs. Indeed, if the actor-manager had not died prematurely aged only 44, in 1866, it is possible that he would have remained at the helm for many years.

The problem of audiences at the Theatre Royal had been a cause for concern through the century: given that the venue could accommodate 1,500 it had always been a challenge not only to attract enough people, but also to ensure that all those who attended had a pleasant experience, and would therefore be likely to return. After the Theatre had been newly painted in 1832 a playbill warned that constables would be in attendance to curb ‘the throwing of nutshells and smoking’.²²⁹ There were habitual complaints from managers that there was not consistent support from the middle classes and this is confirmed by reviews which often comment that the more expensive seats are sparsely populated. This was particularly the case during the 1840s and 1850s, and the situation moved the *Sheffield Independent* to make the rather sweeping complaint in 1843 that ‘the theatre is almost deserted by men and women of experience and intelligence’.²³⁰ The disinclination of the gentry to attend may partly have been the fault of the occupants of the gallery, who had acquired (and sustained) a reputation for rowdiness and bad behaviour. The *Sheffield Independent* protested in 1851 that ‘of late, the vicious behaviour and the vile language of the frequenters of the gallery of this Theatre, have frequently shocked the ears of the more decent portions of the audience’.²³¹

Ten years later, the situation had apparently improved, and an air of mutual congratulation permeated the customary end-of-season speech that Pitt made at his benefit performance in June 1861. This address was an

²²⁹ Playbill for *Aladdin* and *The Castle Spectre*, PB HC, 14 December 1836.

²³⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 18 February 1843.

²³¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 1 November 1851.

opportunity for the manager to communicate directly with all sectors of the audience and encourage them to continue to support the theatre and its programme. However, Pitt praised their manners in a grateful speech, which although it probably included an element of flattery, indicated a genuine improvement:

When I took the theatre, I appealed to a portion of the audience that was very low in popular estimation, the occupants of the gallery. Both boxes and pit told me I should never be able to endure with such a gallery, but in speaking to them I knew I was speaking to a rather superior class of mechanics, and I at once addressed myself to them in a manner which they could understand. I told them to be their own police, and they have been ever since. (Applause.) They have guarded their mothers, daughters, wives and children from all insult, and the gallery has been well regulated throughout the season.²³²

Pitt particularly drew attention to the ‘rather superior class of mechanics’ in the audience. It is difficult to know exactly what distinction he intended to make: whether he meant that the artisans who attended the Theatre were a ‘superior class’ to those who did not, or if his compliment embraced all the mechanics of Sheffield. There could be truth in both senses of the phrase that Pitt used. Drawing on testimonies from Victorian writers and subsequent research by historians, I have suggested that there was a ‘special character of the local working class’, but attributes such as independence and a dislike of authority could mean a level of disorderliness, and be interpreted as insolence.²³³ Perhaps his flattery was directed at aspirational workers who had chosen the theatre over other possible leisure pursuits; perhaps making a conscious decision to select an activity which gave them ‘superior’ status. Compared with the temptations offered by most of the ‘eclectic ensemble’ that constituted popular culture, theatre increasingly assumed the mantle of propriety.²³⁴ Advocates reaffirmed it as a ‘rational recreation’, and as such, it

²³² *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 1 June 1861.

²³³ Pollard, ‘Labour’ in *The History of the City of Sheffield*, p. 260.

²³⁴ Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance*, p. 10.

was generally approved of by moral guardians and campaigners for self-improvement. Although the growing acceptance of theatre as a respectable pastime vindicated those who had argued its case for many years, there was also the attendant risk that it would become an exclusive activity; that the boisterous enthusiasm of the working classes would no longer be welcome, and that leisure activities, and ultimately society, become even more divided.

For the moment, Pitt was simply pleased that he had successfully completed his first season, and that he had remained financially solvent. After commending the audience, he declared that by taking a lease on the theatre for three years, he had established himself 'a member of the town, and a thorough Sheffielder, intimate with all your institutions.'²³⁵ The *Sheffield Independent* joined in with praise for his artistic accomplishments and also his honourable employment practices, together with his participation in the commercial life of the town:

...he had brought before them the best company of any provincial theatre in the country. He had paid higher salaries than had been paid at Sheffield under any preceding management; every salary was paid, and there was not a tradesman in the town to whom he owed a penny – (Cheers) – notwithstanding that he had had to contend against unprecedentedly bad trade.²³⁶

The tenor of Pitt's speech (his accordance of merit to prudent management and an acknowledgment of the vagaries of 'trade'), together with the positive response ('cheers'), suggested that he and his auditors shared certain values and faced similar problems. If Pitt wished for loyalty from his public, it was helpful to intimate this sense of a mutual project; but the responsibility for building a relationship between a theatre and its audience did not lie only with the theatre manager. Audiences responded to the material which was presented onstage, and thus playwrights (and performers) were crucial. The detailed case studies in the following chapters evaluate the degree to which

²³⁵ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 1 June 1861.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

writers instilled a sense of solidarity - between the theatres and their public, and the disparate elements within their audiences.

As theatrical production in Sheffield became more regular, and managers more established, there was an increase in the number of original plays which premiered in Sheffield. Texts included in this category are by different varieties of writer: some were at the beginning of their career, who occasionally went on to develop a special relationship with the town; some were established playwrights who wanted to use a provincial theatre to test their play before venturing to expose it to London critics; and there were a few local amateurs. There was a steady trickle of non-professional work which was performed at different venues, although it is difficult to discover much information about its creators. Even if documentary evidence of the production exists, the term of attribution is usually the vague 'A Gentleman of Sheffield', and very occasionally 'A Young Lady of Sheffield'. This was the case with *Rose Smith*, a fairly successful drama which ran for about five weeks in 1846.²³⁷ The playbill details that the action takes place at the turn of the century (1795-1805) and entices the potential audience member with the promise that they will see local scenes (presumably painted backdrops) such as a 'view of the old church of Sheffield' and 'the old Wicker Bridge'. The promotional description also draws attention to the play's combination of 'London impudence and Sheffield wit'.²³⁸

A desire for anonymity is understandable for a novice: it offered some protection if critics pronounced a harsh verdict. Sergeant James Twigg put his name to *The Ruined Merchant* for the Theatre Royal and it was produced in January 1851. If he read the review in the *Era* he probably wished that he had remained unknown:

²³⁷ *Rose Smith, the Warehouse Girl of Sheffield*, 'Drama by a Gentleman of Sheffield', *Sheffield Independent*, 7 February 1846.

²³⁸ Playbill, S-LSL, M.P. 53 V.L., 1846.

On Monday last the theatre was opened for the benefit of Mr. J. Twigg (late sergeant in the Third Dragoons), and a very sorry affair it was. The house was bad, and the performances wretched. Criticism is useless. No words can describe the miserable hotch-potch that was presented. We hope never to see the like again.²³⁹

This appears to have been his only attempt at playwriting and he apparently disappeared without trace.²⁴⁰

George Lemon Saunders (1817-1870) serves as a rather happier example of a theatrical dilettante. He was a long-term resident with many talents and interests: he had originally appeared on stage as 'a very good harlequin'; he taught music as well as selling it, promoted concerts; worked as an accountant and insurance agent; was a theatre critic for the *Sheffield Free Press* (under the pen-name of Veritas); and held a variety of public offices, culminating in several years as an Alderman on the Town Council.²⁴¹ He was fortunate to have patronage (a published edition of his comedy *Three Hundred Pounds a Year* is dedicated to Alderman Matthews, 'the constant and liberal encourager of literature and the fine arts').²⁴² Allardyce Nicoll lists his play as *Three Hundred a Year*, in the section of 'Unknown Authors', noting that it received a licence from the Lord Chamberlain, dated 26 September 1863. It has not been possible to trace an actual review, but in its obituary of Saunders the *Era* states that the play 'some time ago was played with considerable success in Sheffield'.²⁴³ The published version of his earlier

²³⁹ *Era*, 8 June 1851.

²⁴⁰ A 'J. Twigg' is listed as co-author (with W. M. Akhurst) of *Deadly Sampson; or Death before Dishonour*, in 1876 (B. L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53171J), but there is no evidence that this is the same person.

²⁴¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 'Death of Alderman Saunders', 1 August 1870. Although the article mentions his early performances, it neglects his playwriting achievements. The *Era* lists all three of his plays, 'The Late Mr. Alderman Saunders, of Sheffield', 7 August 1870.

²⁴² George L. Saunders, *Three Hundred Pounds a Year: a comedy in three acts* (Sheffield: J. Pearce, 1863), frontispiece, Listed in Allardyce Nicoll (Unknown Authors), *Nineteenth Century Drama 1850-1900, Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), p. 758.

²⁴³ *Era*, 7 August 1870.

play, *Elise; or a Tale of the Isle of St. Lucia*, includes reviews of its production at the Theatre Royal from the *Sheffield Telegraph* and the *Sheffield Independent* (both dated 18 February 1862).²⁴⁴ His third play, *Honour and Arms: a Tale of 1745* was dedicated to John Brown Esq., the Mayor of Sheffield, and Nicoll notes the date as 19 March 1863.²⁴⁵

Playwriting had finally joined a list of respectable middle-class occupations, significantly one of the few that were also open to women. It was still practised by those whose families had been theatre professionals for generations, and those from less-privileged backgrounds, who began to benefit from its financial rewards, as well as its greater recognition and status.²⁴⁶ The mirror that these writers held up to nature reflected their own concerns and perspectives, and this premise, together with their special relationship to Sheffield, underscores the consideration of the plays which form the rest of this thesis.²⁴⁷ The selected texts received their theatrical premieres at Sheffield; they were part of a group of 'very few new plays' which were produced outside London. At the Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations in 1866, the Examiner of Plays, William Bodham Donne is questioned:

²⁴⁴ George L. Saunders, *Elise; or a Tale of the Isle of St. Lucia* (Sheffield: J. Pearce, 1862); Listed in Nicoll (Unknown Authors), op. cit., p. 672, B. L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53012C.

²⁴⁵ George L. Saunders, *Honour and Arms: a Tale of 1745*, a Drama in Three Acts (Sheffield: Pawson and Brailsford, 1863); Listed in Nicoll (Unknown Authors), op. cit., p. 693.

²⁴⁶ John Russell Stephens charts the increasing improvement in the status of the writer throughout the nineteenth century in *The Profession of the Playwright* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²⁴⁷ In Act 3, scene 2 of *Hamlet*, the eponymous hero pronounces his definition of theatre, which has since become very well-known and often quoted, (see for example the specially-written prologue to *The Rent Day*, discussed earlier in this chapter): 'the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature ...', William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. by Stanley Wells and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 653-690 (p. 671).

But there are very few new plays brought out anywhere, except in London?

Very few.

Where are they?

At Liverpool, Manchester, Edinburgh, Sheffield, and Bradford occasionally.²⁴⁸

My case studies rigorously analyse some of these original texts in performance, and therefore the role of the writer and actor assumes a greater significance.

The intention behind this first chapter was to investigate the state of the performance culture in Sheffield during the first seventy years of the nineteenth century; to discover the nature of the challenges it faced, and to evaluate the efforts of those who contributed to its development. The narrative has been shaped by the words and deeds of the individuals who facilitated theatrical productions such as managers and proprietors; those who commented on their attempts, such as newspaper critics; and those who supported or opposed them, such as the local literati or religious leaders.

The evidence has revealed that, despite the many difficulties, Sheffield had an active theatrical life: it was an important part of the interconnected network of provincial theatres; it hosted many fairs and circuses on a regular basis; and supported an extremely lively culture of music halls, taverns and other places of entertainment. It was a place where new writers and aspiring performers could hone their craft, and its venues produced varied repertoires of long-standing popular favourites and some original plays. Women were involved in performance culture at all levels: they had careers as actresses, as venue managers and as investors, and were beginning to be visible as

²⁴⁸ Minutes of Evidence, 20 April 1866, 2120-2121.

playwrights. Although the 'conditions of production and consumption'²⁴⁹ inevitably had an effect on theatrical programming, financial pressures did not necessarily preclude artistic ambition, and entrepreneurs worked hard to mount productions that were both commercially and critically successful. By the 1860s, theatre and other venue managers could hope for a little more reward than they had been used to, in return for their 'continued energy and spirit'.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. xii.

²⁵⁰ Review of the season 1847-48, *Sheffield Independent*, 11 March 1848.

Chapter Two

Challenging roles for women in provincial theatre: Kate Pitt Bright (1844-1906) - actress, playwright, producer

'Under any conditions I find the transcribing of actions feminine to possess a certain interest lacking to those of the harder, if grander sex.'¹

Introduction

In the metaphorical mirror held up by female playwrights there is sometimes a mutinous glimmer that 'nature' is a patriarchal construct which underpins society and its theatre.² Although these insubordinate voices were heard before, (and have been since), the nineteenth century, they can be considered as part of a demand for change which gathered momentum from the 1850s, would eventually be termed feminism, and lead to such events as the production of *Votes for Women* by Elizabeth Robins at the Court Theatre in 1907 and the formation of organisations such as the Actresses' Franchise League in 1908. The fight for women's rights was a crucial and vigorous element in the transformation of society during the Victorian period, and this chapter examines the challenges that came from women in the theatrical profession and also those that they faced, through a close analysis of the professional life and work of Catherine (Kate) Coveney Bright, nee Pitt, who was an actress and producer as well as a writer, and whose work has never received any critical attention since it was originally produced.

Although my case study is specific and focused in the sense that it concentrates on one individual, it also operates paradigmatically, illuminating the ways that creative women negotiated the material and ideological conditions which governed theatrical production. At the same time, it

¹ Kate Bright, *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* (London: Samuel Tinsley and Company, 1881), Book II, Chapter VII, p. 112.

² I refer to the speech that Hamlet makes in Act 3 scene 2, which was cited in the previous chapter (footnote 247). William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. by Stanley Wells and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 653-690 (p. 671).

continues the story, begun in Chapter One, of the ways that the theatre in Sheffield was connected to a wider professional network, and moves forward chronologically into the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. Women had earned money from playwriting since the time of Aphra Behn (1640-89), but the numbers of women entering this public domain significantly increased during the second half of the nineteenth century. Kate Pitt is an excellent example of the many female theatre practitioners (or artisans), who made notable contributions to theatrical practice, but whose work has often been overlooked, or 'shrouded', to borrow a term used by Kate Newey.³ She traces many forgotten playwrights in *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain*, and the omission of Kate Pitt from her survey merely serves as a reminder that many more stories of talent, dedication and versatility remain as yet untold.

Another actress and playwright, whose work premiered in Sheffield, was variously described as 'the great Miss Eliza Thorne' (*Era*, 11 June 1865), and a 'celebrated tragedienne' (*Era*, 4 October 1874); she had a long theatrical career, but she has been very difficult to trace. She wrote an adaptation of Dickens' *Bleak House*, sub-titled *Poor Jo, the crossing-sweeper* (Alexandra, February 1876), but her endeavours were mostly as a performer. It is possible that she was related to Sarah Thorne (1836-1899) who has left more of an archival record, but I have found no definitive proof.⁴

Newey draws attention to the way that women often 'disappeared' behind pseudonyms or married names and this phenomenon, encountered in my own research, is an important point to address. The subject of my case study used, and was referred to as, Catherine, Katherine, or Kate, and

³ Kate Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 1. I discussed the difficulties of finding a suitable term to use for these multi-skilled professionals in the Introduction, and suggested that 'artisan' is helpful.

⁴ C. M. P. Taylor, 'Thorne, Sarah (1836–1899)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004
<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/51460>> [accessed 8 Jan 2013].

although she assumed the name of her husband when she married in 1861, she reverted to her maiden name in later life. Women's names are meaningful, and so I refer to her as Kate Pitt – Mrs. Bright - Kate Bright – Kate Pitt, at the different stages of her career, to reflect her own practice and to acknowledge the wider issue of identity and self-determination.

Although Newey notes the 'misogynist obstacle course' that the industry presented, she also celebrates women's active role 'in one of the principal mass media of the nineteenth century' and their participation 'in the public sphere of a democratizing and modernizing culture'.⁵ The special qualities of theatre (which was indeed the 'mass media' of the nineteenth century), not least the subversive possibilities offered by performance, are at the heart of my analysis. Kate Pitt created female characters in her dramatic fiction, and as an actress and artistic producer she also had an influence on how those women were represented on stage. Furthermore, her fictional depictions of life in the theatre enable us to better understand its history; and her actual, embodied presence within the profession helped to determine, and shape, its future.

My study focuses on the experiences of a woman, who was based in Sheffield for a substantial part of her life, from which we can glean information about this specific town; and it also illustrates the more general social mores that those in provincial theatre had to contend with.⁶ As a child of an extended theatrical family, she would have been keenly aware not only of the practical barriers to success, but also of the ideological prejudices arising from rigidly stratified class and gender hierarchies. This societal order may have taken a distinctive form in Sheffield (as explained in Chapter One), but the hegemonic rules were not easy to break. My assessment of the

⁵ Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing*, p. 67.

⁶ A résumé of her career is at Appendix B1.

career of Kate Pitt is located within this context, and considers her position in a town which was an integral part of a network of provincial theatres. This chapter affirms the significance of these many venues across the United Kingdom, which provided creative employment opportunities for women in the latter half of the century, and whose histories are too often neglected.

The chapter begins with an examination of the changing status of the provincial actress, before moving on to the ways that women were represented within the text and the embodied production of the plays written by Mrs. Bright. I am particularly concerned with the ways in which, as a playwright, she challenged the stereotyped manner in which women were portrayed, and I select instances of this across her dramatic oeuvre. The final two sections briefly consider the later years of her career, in order to provide an insight into the talent and versatility demonstrated by female performers during the latter half of the century. This account also reminds us of the challenges which a mature actress faced, and the way in which many theatre practitioners are simply written out of its history.

Part One

Kate Pitt, the aspiring actress (1859-1861)

The status of those in the theatrical profession was changing, in Sheffield and elsewhere, and from the 1850s onward, those who made a living from the stage could sometimes aspire to respectability and social acceptance. Michael Baker asserts in the introduction to his book *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* that his aim is to 'trace the gradual emergence of acting as an accepted professional occupation in England'.⁷ Although this aspiration was increasingly successful, in many cases it was an unrealistic hope, particularly in the case of women. The assumption that actresses were

⁷ Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 13.

sexually licentious (and dangerous, because they could lead men astray), persisted for many years; and although women sometimes prospered, they often suffered moral approbation, in addition to financial difficulties and a lack of stability. Fictional portrayals of actresses both reflected and perpetuated the prevailing attitudes. Clara Hewett, a character in the novel *The Nether World* by George Gissing (published in 1889) runs away to become an actress and her illicit sexual relationship with Scawthorne (who promises to introduce her to the theatrical life) is presented as an inevitable consequence of her new career.⁸ Her occupation brings unspeakable shame to her family, and it is impossible for her to maintain contact with them whilst she is working as a performer. In her meticulously researched book, *Actresses as Working Women*, Tracy Davis provides a comprehensive account of their actual status through the century, and reminds us that 'actresses' stigma' should be 'understood as a socially produced meaning that served the interests of particular social groups to the disadvantage of female performers themselves'.⁹ Kerry Powell, in *Women and Victorian Theatre* asserts that the ways women were portrayed on stage conspired in the production of repressive codes of gender.¹⁰ Nevertheless, actresses had opportunities which were denied to other women, and the profession was still an attractive one in many ways. Through the arc of her career, Kate Pitt illustrates the exciting, yet still precarious, position of women in the business, as she moved from itinerant young actress, to middle-class married mother and published playwright, to impoverished widow, trudging between performances at small theatres and music halls, dependent on charity from benevolent colleagues.

⁸ Gissing, George, *The Nether World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, first published 1889).

⁹ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women* (Routledge: London & New York, 1991), p. xvi.

¹⁰ Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

1.1 Apprenticeship, family, and the 'extraordinary amount of labour' undertaken by provincial actors¹¹

The adolescent Kate Pitt appeared to have a bright future. Her early work augured well, and illustrates that the craft of performance during this period tended to be taught through families and practised on-stage in front of an audience. There was little formal training for actors, writers, or theatre managers - when the actress and theatre manager Sarah Thorne (1836-1899) opened her School of Acting in Margate in 1885 she was something of a pioneer.¹² Several decades earlier Frances Maria (Fanny) Kelly had ambitions to set up a 'Dramatic School'¹³ but the usual method of training (as Jacky Bratton and Kate Newey have documented) was practical, and family networks were crucial for personal and professional development.¹⁴ Kate was the second child and eldest daughter of Charles Dibdin Pitt (1819-1866) and Ellen Coveney (c.1819-1897).¹⁵ She was born in about 1844 in Manchester and baptised in Liverpool in August of that year. After two years' education in France she toured with her father at a young age, mainly in the north-west of England.¹⁶ In a retrospective review some years later, the *Era* noted that she

¹¹ Catherine C. Bright, 'Grandfather's Little Actress', *Era Almanack* (London: January 1879), pp. 46-48. The Almanack was an annual publication by the same company who published the weekly newspaper. It was advertised as 'the most complete dramatic dictionary of dates and theatrical treasury of knowledge ever brought before the public' *Era*, 12 January 1879.

¹² Taylor, 'Thorne, Sarah', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹³ Bush-Bailey, Gilli, *Performing Herself: AutoBiography and Fanny Kelly's Dramatic Recollections* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Kate Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain*, p. 72; Jacky Bratton, 'Claiming kin: an experiment in genealogical research', in *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 171-199.

¹⁵ There is some uncertainty about Ellen Coveney's birth date and her age when she died. Her obituary in *The Era* on Saturday 20 November 1897, reported that 'She was, with the exception of Mrs Keeley, the oldest living actress' at age 78. This would make her birth date 1819. However in the census of 1861 she is listed as 37 years old, which would make her birth date 1824. It is probable that the pressures on actresses to remain youthful motivated a certain amount of deliberate obfuscation about age.

¹⁶ *Era*, 4 September 1859.

had, 'at the early age of fifteen ... proved so apt a scholar that we find her playing Ophelia to her father's Hamlet'.¹⁷ I have been unable to trace any further details about this performance, although she toured with her father in 1859 and 1860 in various productions; she even appeared at the City of London Theatre.¹⁸ Certainly on 6 May 1860 the *Era* reported that she 'recently made a most successful debut at the Queens Theatre Manchester' and she and Charles appeared together at the Theatres Royal in Warrington, Accrington, Hanley and Derby during that summer, when she would have been about sixteen.¹⁹ Although such travelling and performing is likely to have been exciting for a young woman, it would also have been tiring and disorienting, and both she and her father were probably relieved when the opportunity arose for him to manage the Theatre Royal in Sheffield.

Charles Pitt had a family who depended on him, and thus he would have needed secure employment - the Census of April 1861 notes that he resided at 17 Howard Street, in the parish of St Paul (a rather poor area of the city), and the house was occupied by three adults (Charles, his wife Ellen, and her father Henry Coveney) as well as five children. When he became Lessee in the autumn of 1860 his acting company included his daughter and his wife, as well as himself. Harry M. Pitt (the eldest son) developed a close relationship with Sheffield, writing burlesques and pantomimes for the Theatre Royal over a number of years, and he also had comedies and dramas produced at the Surrey Theatre in London.²⁰ Kate's sisters Fanny

¹⁷ *Era*, 11 May 1879.

¹⁸ 'Miss Kate Pitt... and others ... in addition to the established company, for the benefit of Miss A. Clifton and Miss B. Hughes', *Era*, 4 September 1859.

¹⁹ See *Era* editions: 6, 13, 20 May 1860.

²⁰ For example, Harry M. Pitt, *How we spent Christmas Day in 1869*, Surrey, 31 January 1870, Nicoll, *Nineteenth Century Drama 1850-1900, Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), p. 526.

and Charlotte both went on to act, as did her other brothers Felix and Arthur, and Fanny became a successful producer of Kate's plays.²¹

Kate's involvement in theatre from an early age is likely to have given her an advantage over those who were not so exposed, and would have been beneficial for her understanding and successful use of contemporary stage conventions. The patriarch of the family received variable reviews from the Sheffield critics, but even if he was not the finest actor, his experience would still have been useful. Charles Pitt was certainly well-known: his early death in 1866 was reported in newspapers from Dundee to Derby, and most articles described him as a tragedian who 'enjoyed a considerable reputation in the provinces'.²² Her mother Ellen occupied a 'foremost position under her maiden name', and she continued to perform during her marriage to Charles and long after it.²³ Given that there were many performers and playwrights among their relations, there would have been no shortage of adults to consult for advice and guidance. Their knowledge of the circuits and their wide and varied theatrical connections are also likely to have proved helpful to the young actress in her formative years.

When Charles took on the Theatre Royal, Kate had the security of a familiar venue in which to continue her apprenticeship, and the *Sheffield Independent* reported in November 1860:

The comedy of "London Assurance," which was put up for the Licensed Victuallers' benefit, on Thursday, was throughout very well played ... Miss Kate Pitt pleased us by her performance of Grace

²¹ Arthur was sometimes referred to by the grand title of 'Mr E. Bulwer Arthur Pitt', presumably in tribute to the rather more famous actor and author, *Era*, 2 January 1886.

²² *Derby Mercury*, 28 February 1866. See also *Leeds Mercury*, 22 February 1866; *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 February 1866; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 26 February 1866.

Despite his reputation as a tragic actor, the profession of Charles Pitt is noted on Kate's birth record as 'Comedian'.

²³ *Era*, 11 May 1879.

Harkaway, and the audience frequently expressed their approval of her efforts.²⁴

Local critics were generally positive about her performances: she played Maria in *The School for Scandal* 'very satisfactorily'; the *Sheffield Independent* wrote that she 'promises to become a valuable addition to the profession she has chosen'; and the *Era* agreed that she 'will no doubt soon assume a prominent position'.²⁵ However, when she undertook the role of Eily O'Connor in Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*, the *Sheffield Independent* was of the opinion that she was not mature enough for the role, and wrote a rather ambivalent review:

Eily O'Connor ... is a character in which there is fine scope for acting; Miss Kate Pitt endowed it with interest, and she made a pretty little peasant girl. With greater experience it may become lastingly associated with her name, but as yet Miss Pitt lacks somewhat the necessary feeling, and emotion.²⁶

The casually patronising tone of the critic expressed through the phrase 'pretty little peasant girl', is but one small example of the importance of physical attractiveness for women in theatre, and this has proved a persistent and enduring problem.²⁷

Actresses were caught in a judgemental trap: beauty was a necessary asset, but the stage was often considered to be merely a showcase for beautiful women, which led to routine accusations that female performers were little better than prostitutes. They were certainly treated as public property, to be admired and desired, and attitudes towards them fluctuated between fascination and condemnation. Men were happy to enter into sexual relationships with them, but were usually reluctant to follow this with

²⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 24 November 1860.

²⁵ *Era*, 13 January 1861.

²⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 February 1861.

²⁷ Even when Kate Pitt was an established playwright, critics still remarked on her appearance. For example a review of *Bracken Hollow* notes that the play reveals 'no little skill on the part of the fair adaptor', *Era* 1 December 1878.

marriage, and thus their position was precarious. A poignant example of this tendency is demonstrated by the case of the celebrated actress Dorothy Jordan (1761-1816). She had a lengthy relationship, and many children, with the Duke of Clarence, yet she was unceremoniously discarded when she got a little older and it seemed likely that he would ascend the throne.²⁸ Actresses did marry, but usually to a fellow actor, rather than to someone outside the profession. Tracy Davis has carried out painstaking and detailed research on census data and she suggests that during the mid Victorian period

The vast majority of 25- to 29- year old married actresses (71.43 per cent) had a spouse in some branch of theatrical or musical employment, and only 8.34 per cent of married actresses aged 30 or over had spouses who were not connected with the performing arts.²⁹

Given the ambivalence expressed towards women on stage, together with the general pressure on middle-class women to embrace a life of domesticity, it was likely that if an actress married outside the profession she would relinquish her career on stage.

Kate appeared to conform to this pattern when she met her future husband, most likely when she was performing at the Theatre Royal. Augustus Bright was a local cutlery merchant and part-time ensign in Sheffield's volunteer army corps, the Hallamshire Rifles. The army band often played music to accompany performances or their members took part in amateur productions, sometimes acting alongside professional actresses.³⁰

²⁸ Claire Tomalin, *Mrs Jordan's Profession: the story of a great actress and a future King* (London: Penguin, 1994).

²⁹ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. 43.

³⁰ Buckstone's Fashionable Comedy, 'Married Life'; and the beautiful Domestic Drama (by Tom Taylor Esq.) 'Payable on Demand' (Never before Performed in Sheffield). The whole of the MALE CHARACTERS (in both pieces) will be sustained by GENTLEMEN AMATEURS, who will be supported by Mrs. Georgiana Pauncefort, Miss Seaman, Miss Kate Pitt, Miss Jane Elton, and Mrs. Gates. The BAND of the HALLAMSHIRE RIFLE VOLUNTEER CORPS have kindly tendered their valuable services, and will perform some of the most choice Operatic and other Music. *Sheffield Independent supplement* 16 March 1861 [capital letters in the original].

Their marriage took place when she was seventeen and he twenty-nine. They were either impatient or there was some degree of secrecy involved, because they were married in Cardiff, while she was performing there with some of the acting company from her home town (not however her mother or father).³¹ Although the wedding was announced in the local press back at home, it may not necessarily have been an occasion for the families to celebrate, although their misgivings may have been for differing reasons. The merging of these two dynasties provides an opportunity for further investigation of the status of theatre and its uneasy relationship with the society of Sheffield.

1.2 Respectability and social inclusion

Charles Pitt was doubtless proud of his talented daughter and also seemingly content for the family to settle at the Theatre Royal and thus gain a level of stability and propriety. Although he did not attend the wedding of his daughter he was described as a 'Gentleman' on her marriage certificate (in June 1861), and at the end of his first season a few weeks' later the *Sheffield Independent* praised him for 'the respectability with which he has held the reins of management'.³² As noted at the end of Chapter One, these kinds of reports suggest that a well-managed Theatre Royal with a repertoire performed by prestigious companies was now more generally accepted as an asset to the town, rather than a haunt of 'rogues and vagabonds', as was formerly the case.

The influx of newcomers to Sheffield posed challenges for its established hierarchies, but successful integration was often possible (for

³¹ We are given some clues about the relationships between theatre managements, in terms of touring companies, from these circumstances: Mr. Wybert Reeve was at this time the lessee and manager of the Theatre in Cardiff. He had been appearing with the company at Sheffield, and seemingly transferred the actors to his theatre in Wales for a short run. Their efforts are reviewed in the *Era*, 30 June 1861.

³² *Sheffield Independent* 1 June 1861.

example in the case of Thomas Youdan, previously discussed). The Pitts and the Brights had likewise both come from elsewhere, although the latter family could argue that they were the more strongly rooted, because they had been resident in Sheffield since the 1780s. Wealthy silver manufacturers and merchants, they belonged to a class of new entrepreneurs who made their money from industrialisation and the expanding population of the northern cities. They may have had genteel aspirations but they were neither long-established nor aristocratic. Business, as a means of making money, was perhaps more acceptable in Sheffield than in some other environments, but the Brights were of Jewish origin, and given the racism and prejudice against Jews which was prevalent in public discourse at this time, their respectable status may have been susceptible to criticism and gossip.³³

A concern for propriety and social acceptance may have influenced the behaviour of Horatio Bright (c.1827-1905), who was elder brother to Augustus. According to local historian Neville Ballin, Horatio deeply disapproved when Samuel, his only son, married the actress Josephine Corri in 1878, and he was apparently never reconciled to his daughter-in-law.³⁴ However, a little more investigation into biographic detail reveals the dual nature of his attitude towards women in the theatre: when the allegedly anti-theatrical father re-married years later, it was to an actress, Clara Minnie Hart, 42 years his junior.³⁵ Other members of the family were publicly connected with theatre in general and the Theatre Royal in particular.

³³ The eponymous hero of *Daniel Deronda* by George Eliot (published 1876) is given up by his mother to be raised as an English gentleman, so that he will not be damaged by any association with her, because she is not only an actress and singer, but also Jewish.

³⁴ The Corris were another theatrical family: sisters Kathleen and Josephine both performed at the Theatre Royal, for example in *Little Bo Peep*, the pantomime of 1878.

³⁵ Neville Ballin, 'The Story of the Bright Family' in *A Sheffield Lucky Bag: A Collection of Sheffield Memorabilia* (Sheffield: ALD Print, 2008).

Augustus' brother Maurice played regularly in the orchestra, and their uncle (also called Maurice), a High Street jeweller, was its Treasurer as early as 1833.³⁶ Ambivalent attitudes towards the theatre recur throughout the written work of Kate Pitt (or Mrs. Augustus Bright, as she was named once she married).

Although the available evidence suggests that her work did not begin to be published until 1878, almost twenty years after her marriage, she drew on her early experiences in her fiction. She depicted the conflict between a theatrical career and a desire for security and respectability in a short story which appeared in the *Era Almanack*. 'Grandfather's Little Actress' is the tale of talented juvenile performer Miss Maggie Stewart, who is performing with her relative in an unnamed provincial town at the beginning of the narrative. Like her mother before her, Maggie struggles to reconcile her desire for wealth and status with her life in the profession, and although she knows that it will deeply upset her Grandfather, she runs away and secretly marries Lord Penwether, who had admired her from the audience. When she finally returns to make peace with her aged relative, dressed in 'silk and fur, velvet and diamonds', she is too late - he has already died.³⁷ 'Maggie Stewart' has to make a difficult choice and her authentic dilemma would seem to parallel that of her creator.³⁸ The life of a provincial performer was certainly not an easy one, and although the writer wryly acknowledges the clichéd and somewhat nostalgic tone of her opening phrase 'Some years ago' with her parenthetical comment '(this is almost as bad as "once upon a time")', the description of the arduous work-load and small salaries concurs with what we have learnt from

³⁶ Advertisement in *Sheffield Independent*, 25 May 1833.

³⁷ Bright, 'Grandfather's Little Actress', p. 48.

³⁸ Henry Coveney, Kate's grandfather had a theatrical career; he is described as 'a popular actor at the East-end' by John Coleman, writing in the *Stage*, 20 March 1902.

the meticulous work of theatre historians such as Tracy C. Davis.³⁹ Given that Kate Pitt's story was published in the *Era Almanack*, its readership (mainly those who worked in the entertainment industry) would have been all too aware of the realities of the life she describes:

...managers of country theatres and circuits were wont to engage "stock" companies, who, in consideration of modest stipends, got through an extraordinary amount of labour. The younger members studied hard, graduated in their art, and hoped for future greatness.⁴⁰

'Future greatness' however was not guaranteed, and given the many privations of life as an actress, perhaps it was understandable that instead of continuing to struggle, the young Kate Pitt chose marriage at seventeen, which gave her a new and different opportunity - to write.

Part Two

Mrs. Augustus Bright, respectable middle-class writer (1861-1880)

2.1 Family, stability, and creativity

Evidence suggests that Kate Pitt successfully achieved a level of respectability and social status through her marriage in 1861, and she moved from the smoky centre of town to Olinda Cottage in Ashdell Road, Broomhill, a salubrious and fashionable residential suburb. Augustus Bright became not only a very successful cutlery manufacturer and merchant, but later Vice Consul for Brazil.⁴¹ Conforming to the behaviour expected of a Victorian wife, Mrs. Bright appeared to focus on her family, and she gave birth to two daughters, Dora Estella in August 1862 and Georgina in March 1873. During this period she is absent from theatrical advertisements and reviews, so it

³⁹ Davis, *Actresses as working women*.

Mrs. Bright is often dismissive of her own writing within her texts, for example she calls this story a 'little ditty', on p. 1.

⁴⁰ Bright, 'Grandfather's Little Actress', p. 46.

⁴¹ There is frustratingly little information available about what this role entailed, for example how much overseas travel Augustus was obliged to undertake. There is no evidence that Mrs. Bright accompanied her husband to Brazil.

would seem that she withdrew from the professional stage, although she did appear very occasionally in productions at the Theatre Royal.⁴² For example she appeared there with her sister Fanny in December 1867, for her mother Ellen's benefit (after Charles Pitt's death in 1866, his widow took over the management of the venue for about three years). In contrast to the review published at the time of the original production, the *Sheffield Independent* now wrote with reflective praise of Kate's part in the play:

The remarkably successful drama of "The Colleen Bawn" is to be revived for this night only, and in it Mrs. Augustus Bright and Mrs. Pitman, two married daughters of Mrs. Pitt, are announced to take part in the performance. Mrs. Bright, when Miss Kate Pitt sustained the part of Eily O'Connor, now nearly seven years ago, and that lady contributed her quota to the marked success which attended the production of the drama on our stage, and which ran uninterruptedly for 51 nights.⁴³

She also performed as part of an evening of military amateur theatricals during the next decade, on Friday 15 December 1876, where she again repeated one of her early acting successes, the part of Kate O'Brien in *Perfection*.⁴⁴ This time she was described as a 'Lady Amateur', which she may have found rather irritating. However, the *Sheffield Independent* remembered her former professional work, and reminded the company of their good fortune that she was in the cast:

...they had the advantage of having a charming actress in Mrs. Augustus Bright, who as *Kate O'Brien* renewed some of her former triumphs... Pressure on our space compels us only to add that Mrs. Bright met with a most cordial reception from all parts of the house, and that she acted and sang with very much of the old effect.⁴⁵

⁴² It is possible that Mrs. Bright continued to perform occasionally under her maiden name. An advert in the *Era* on Sunday 10 May 1874 notes that the Sheridan London Comedy Company is performing in Ryde, and 'Miss Kate Pitt' is in the cast.

⁴³ *Sheffield Independent*, 9 December 1867.

⁴⁴ This is probably *Perfection; or, the Lady of Munster*, a light comedy by T. H. Bayly, written in 1830 and often revived. A play by the same name (by an unknown author) was written in 1839, Allardyce Nicoll, *Nineteenth Century Drama 1800-1850 Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), p. 252, p. 508.

⁴⁵ *Sheffield Independent*, 16 December 1876.

There is no obvious note of disapproval in this review, but her continued connection with the theatre may have caused disquiet in some quarters.

Women were under pressure to remain privately at home once married: *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore (1854) is perhaps the most well-known example of the plethora of writing about their proper place and appropriate behaviour.⁴⁶ However, Mrs. Bright maintained a degree of independence: she travelled to London, and spent time without her husband and children. The Census records of April 1871 (when she was 27) reveal that her eight year old daughter Dora was at boarding school in Wath-upon-Dearne, not far from Sheffield, whilst she spent time in the capital, in the parish of St George Bloomsbury with her sister Charlotte. It is possible that she was helping her younger sibling to find work as an actress - her aunts, Harriet and Jane Coveney, had long-term relationships with the Grecian and other London venues and had well-established acting careers. By this time her mother Ellen had left Sheffield and had been lessee of the Surrey Theatre in London for a brief period.⁴⁷ Whatever the particular circumstances of her visit, it seems fair to suggest that she had not completely retired.

It was a few years later, between 1878 and 1881 when a burst of productive activity revealed that her period out of the public eye had been one of imaginative, as well as reproductive, gestation. The following list is testament to the extraordinary amount of material which appeared during these three years: four full-length plays, a one-act play, a novel and at least one short story were either published, received a theatrical production, or

⁴⁶ Coventry Patmore (1823-1894), 'The Angel in the House' is a sequence of poems which celebrate married love. Virginia Woolf, in a lecture on 'Professions for Women' (1931), spoke of the need for women writers to 'kill the Angel in the House'. (Quoted in Drabble, *Oxford Companion*, pp. 28-29.)

⁴⁷ Ellen Pitt became Lessee of the Surrey Theatre in the autumn of 1869, 'Dramatic and Musical Chronology for 1869', Issue supplement to *The Era*, 2 January 1870.

both.⁴⁸ Her first known play, a one act 'comedy-drama'⁴⁹ *Not False but Fickle* was issued by Pawson and Brailsford, a local company, in 1878. *Noblesse Oblige*, although licensed by the Lord Chamberlain for the Alexandra Theatre received its first production at the Theatre Royal Exeter in October before transferring to Sheffield a month later (Samuel French published acting editions of both plays by June 1880).⁵⁰ Her short story, 'Grandfather's Little Actress' was published in the *Era Almanack* of 1878, followed by two productions also at the Alexandra: *Bracken Hollow*, her theatrical adaptation of two novels by May Agnes Fleming (November 1878) and *Naomi's Sin; or, Where are you going to, my pretty maid?* (May 1879). In December 1880 Samuel Tinsley published her novel *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* (it was first serialised weekly in *The Barnsley Times* from February 1880); and her own theatrical adaptation of this work, renamed *Dane's Dyke*, opened at Sheffield's Theatre Royal in August 1881. In a slightly wayward paean of praise for her sister, Fanny Pitt announced to the audience at the first performance of *Naomi's Sin*:

Where writing is a labour of love, we may feel assured that her pen will not long be idle. You may not be aware that this amount of literary work has never been excelled, not even by that most prolific of play writers Mr. Byron.⁵¹

⁴⁸ The main repository of material is the Lord Chamberlain's play collection at the British Library, and full reference details are given in the Bibliography. The text of *Naomi's Sin* (transcribed from the MS) is at Appendix A1, and all page numbers cited refer to this transcript, not the original MS.

⁴⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 21 November 1878.

⁵⁰ An advert in *The Era* on Sunday June 27 1880 notes that *Noblesse Oblige* and *Not False but Fickle*, 'Mrs Bright's Successful Comedies are now published by Mr. French, 89 Strand'. See *French's Acting Edition of Plays* (London & New York, 1880).

There is evidence that she wrote other stories: for example the *Isle of Man Times and General Advertiser* notes that one of her 'charming stories, "The Days when we went Gipsying" appeared in our last issue' (15 November 1879).

⁵¹ The newspaper which featured this review is not named, it is part of a personal collection of articles (the collection is signed by E. W. Rodgers, Reporter, 9 August 1879, and held by Sheffield Local Studies Library), but this particular review is dated 7 May 1879.

Whether or not the comparison to Byron was appropriate, this period was undoubtedly an extremely productive one.

Mrs. Bright was fortunate in that she seemingly had a stable period of married life in Sheffield which facilitated this flood of creativity, yet her situation in later life (as we shall see) indicated that her prosperous stability was vulnerable. Her plays and prose fiction not only foregrounded the experience of women but often dealt with the limitations caused by class, gender and economic circumstances. Women still had very little financial, legal or political power and before considering her plays in detail it is apposite to think about the context in which she wrote them. Like the feminist theatre historians Mary Jane Corbett, Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin, I believe that it is crucial to investigate the material conditions in which female theatre practitioners operated, and the ways in which their artistic output was affected by hegemonic ideology. Women were challenging the dominant discourse of patriarchy, and although it is unlikely that Mrs. Bright would have described her own consciousness as 'feminist', my contention is that she demonstrated a female-centred sensibility, and a subtle critique of male privilege, throughout all of her creative work.

Each of her four full-length plays has a lively cast of female characters, with a strong woman at the centre of the action: Helen Armytage in *Bracken Hollow*, who is thought dead but who secretly recovers and travels to America to become a successful actress; Haydée in *Noblesse Oblige*, who escapes from her criminal husband and attempts a fresh start with a new lover; the eponymous heroine of *Naomi's Sin*, who although a 'fallen woman' demonstrates resourcefulness and self-sacrifice; and Hortense Mervyn in *Dane's Dyke*, who achieves a high rank through marriage and risks everything to ensure her granddaughter's inheritance. The stories of other female characters are woven into the complex and sensational plots and it

can be argued that the playwright provides them with psychological as well as practical motives, thus challenging the familiar stereotypes of, for example, the villainess, and the woman with a shameful past. Moreover, because Mrs. Bright eventually returned to the theatre and was instrumental in the staging of her plays (often taking on the roles herself), she was able to exert an influence on the way these characters were portrayed. She had agency through her assumption of the roles of writer, actress and producer, which enabled her to create characters, and then to determine how they were represented.

The interventions made by Mrs. Bright justify the application of the epithet 'feminist' to her theatrical career, indeed it is the dynamic and interactive relationship between the representation of women on stage, together with their material presence in the theatrical profession that makes her contribution not simply challenging, but revolutionary. It is useful here to revisit Davis and Donkin and their concept of theatre and drama as 'social processes'.⁵² They assert that theatre is not a fixed product of the dominant culture but is in flux, and this sense of movement and change can be applied to attitudes about morality, religion, and the role of women. In her essay 'Performing identities' Mary Jane Corbett suggests something similar, that 'feminist consciousness is something made – or performed – both in and out of the theatre', and thus we can 'conceive a more fluid relationship between theatre and politics, rather than assigning a wholly determining power to one or the other'.⁵³ Kate Pitt and many other women like her, who wrote for, and performed in, nineteenth century theatres, determined how women were

⁵² Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin (eds.), *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth Century Britain*, Frontispiece.

⁵³ Mary Jean Corbett, 'Performing identities: actresses and autobiography', in Kerry Powell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 109-126 (p. 110).

characterised on-stage; and also challenged the proscriptive boundaries that curtailed their opportunities.

2.2 The political context: the beginnings of feminism

Although the plays written by Mrs. Bright deal with issues of class and gender, she addresses these issues obliquely through her characters and their stories, and does not make overt suggestions about political or legal improvements to the position of women. However, she was writing at a time when women were organising themselves in formal groups to campaign for their rights as citizens, and it is highly probable that she would have been aware of these new developments, particularly those that were taking place in her own habitat. In *Sheffield Troublemakers*, David Price documents how local women were actively involved in nineteenth century radical politics, particularly in the anti-slavery movement, which led to the formation of the 'Sheffield Ladies' Association for the Universal Abolition of Slavery' on 16 Oct 1837 by Mary Anne Rawson (1801-1887). The wider international movement for this cause held a convention in London in 1840 but the women who attended were not permitted to speak. Angered by this exclusion, some of them realised that if their voices were to be heard, they had to achieve human rights for themselves, and on 26 February 1851 the inaugural meeting of the 'Sheffield Female Political Association' took place and Britain's first organisation for female suffrage was born. David Price describes this as a 'mysterious emergence', although the mystery lies rather in its demise than in its auspicious beginnings. It had the support of local radical Isaac Ironside (1808-70) and connections with the National Charter Association, and in 1852 resolved to set up a National Women's Rights Association with the Quaker campaigner Anne Knight (1786-1862) as president, yet evidence suggests

that it disbanded shortly afterwards (for no obvious reason), and no further information can be traced about its members and their activities.⁵⁴

The credit for mobilising the fight for women's rights is instead usually awarded to women in Manchester, who fifteen years later in 1867, brought together various groups to form the National Society for Women's Suffrage. During the 1870s and 1880s women in Sheffield once again became involved in direct action, for example on 16 January 1874 a meeting 'in promotion of woman suffrage was addressed by Miss Becker, Mrs Butler, Miss Sturge, and others'.⁵⁵ There was evidently a steady stream of initiatives by women and their supporters, and David Price notes that some of them focused on sexual double-standards and the problem of prostitution.⁵⁶ Local radical politician H. J. Wilson (whose aunt, Mary Anne Rawson had been an influential female role model) and his wife Charlotte 'became major allies of Josephine Butler in the fight against the Contagious Diseases Act'.⁵⁷ This controversial Act, first passed in 1864, with further Acts in 1866 and 1869, sanctioned the forced medical and police inspection of supposed prostitutes, and was opposed by many campaigners. Court and newspaper reports indicate that Sheffield was not exempt from the sex trade, and there is also evidence that organisations tried to offer assistance to the women involved. Attempts were made in 1861 to set up a Female Refuge, and an article which appealed for financial assistance stated that it acted 'on behalf of a class the most debased, and frequently the most wronged – the unfortunate young females who are nightly

⁵⁴ Richard J. Hoare, *Suffragists and suffragettes: Sheffield women campaign for the vote, 1851-1914* (Sheffield: photocopied pamphlet, 2007).

⁵⁵ *Sheffield Local Register*, 16 January 1874.

⁵⁶ Price, p. 107.

⁵⁷ Henry Joseph Wilson (1833-1914) was an energetic Member of Parliament who Price describes as 'a true troublemaker who possessed an unrelenting nonconformist conscience', Price, p. 64.

Charlotte Wilson (née Cowan) 1833-1921 was a daughter of the Liberal M.P. for Edinburgh and mother of at least five children.

on our streets.’⁵⁸ Price documents that ‘although it was a taboo subject for respectable ladies, Charlotte courageously formed a ‘Sheffield Ladies Association’ to spearhead opposition in the North of England’.⁵⁹ Education was a crucial element in the struggle for change, and there was a meeting in the Cutlers’ Hall in 1872 to ‘bring the objects of the National Union for improving the education of women before the people of Sheffield’.⁶⁰ It was also notable, as Helen Mathers informs us, that the ‘major new civic college and precursor of the University of Sheffield, Firth College, admitted women on a par with men from its opening day in 1879’ and that the new university would be open to men and women on equal terms.⁶¹ One early female student described the possibility of attending university as ‘a gift from Heaven’.⁶²

2.3 The potential of melodrama as a form of resistance and challenge

It is evident from her creative writing that Mrs. Augustus Bright was an educated woman, able to speak French and conversant with art and literature, but she did not choose to pursue formal education, rather she began her second career as a novelist and playwright in this rapidly-changing political and cultural landscape. Her fiction includes scenes in France and is scattered with French phrases, and this demonstration of her linguistic ability annoyed a reviewer of *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*. He declared that ‘these trifles must be mentioned because they are obtrusive, and because Mrs

⁵⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 29 June 1861.

⁵⁹ Price, pp. 30-31. Also see W. S. Fowler, *A study in radicalism and dissent: the life and times of H J Wilson* (1961).

⁶⁰ *Sheffield Local Register*, 21 March 1872.

⁶¹ Helen Mathers, *Steel City Scholars: the Centenary History of the University of Sheffield* (London: James and James, 2005), pp. 3, 7.

⁶² Mathers, p. 227.

Bright seems to think that English equivalents of foreign words are few'.⁶³ Her fiction exhibited more than just her knowledge of language and culture; she was one of an increasing number of married women who wrote stories which tackled the inequalities of society from a distinctly female perspective. Women were writing and reading novels like never before, and the 1860s, when Kate Pitt retired from the stage, was a decade dominated by sensation fiction. There are certain similarities between Kate Bright and the doyenne of the genre, Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1837-1915).⁶⁴ They were both former actresses and their fiction was adapted for the stage, and they both depicted strong yet flawed heroines. Although Mrs. Bright was a little younger, and her first (known) fiction was not published until some years after Braddon's rise to prominence, it is likely that she was influenced by the dominant style of writing for women, which remained popular for many years. The new phenomenon had caused alarm, as an influential article by H. L. Mansel in the *Quarterly Review* demonstrates. The critic was provoked by the publication of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and he complained that the books were

indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply.⁶⁵

There is palpable fear in his use of the language of illness and addiction, and although his criticism is ostensibly about the way the genre employs plot twists and shocking incidents to stimulate the reader into a sense of nervous

⁶³ *Graphic*, 19 March 1881.

⁶⁴ Braddon was a prolific novelist: she published 75 novels, and edited several magazines (Drabble, *Oxford Companion*, p. 125.) Both writers cited Edward Bulwer-Lytton as friend and mentor.

⁶⁵ H. L. Mansel, 'Lady Audley's Secret', *Quarterly Review*, 113:226 (1863:April) 481-514 (pp. 482-3).

excitement, it could be argued that he had deeper anxieties about the more subversive aspects of these novels.

In his introduction to the 1998 reissue of *Lady Audley's Secret*, David Skilton notes that such novels not only took 'crime and sin as subjects' but also that these vices 'threatened the apparently "respectable" world usually met with in the mid-Victorian middle-class novel'.⁶⁶ Given the vivid depictions of criminal and/or immoral pursuits, there was perceived to be a danger that the thrills and excitement experienced by the reader could lead to identification with the 'wicked women' who perpetrated them.⁶⁷ Public interest in those individuals responsible for such deeds was fuelled by the inexorable increase in newssheets specialising in crime, and the publication of court reports and coroners' inquests. After the first Divorce Court was established in 1858, following the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act in 1857, marital strife became headline news.

Female suffering not only became a subject of prurient fascination in the pages of cheap newspapers but also one of the major components of mid-century domestic melodrama in theatre. Elaine Hadley once again provides a timely reminder of the inextricable connection between stage and society. She notes the predominance of female characters in plays at this time:

By the mid-nineteenth century ... melodrama on and off the stage seemed to narrow its range, becoming less politically partisan and more domestic and gendered. In these plays, the curtain often fell on the solitary woman in a flood of light. Melodrama became the ideal genre for the narration of a woman's personal story and therefore the perfect vehicle for a popular actress. On stage, "domestic melodrama,"

⁶⁶ David Skilton, Introduction, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, World Classics series, 1998, first published 1861-2), vi-xxiii (xxi).

⁶⁷ See, for example, Lyn Pykett, *The "Improper" Feminine: the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), and Sally Mitchell, *Chastity, Class and Women's Reading 1835-1880* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981).

a subgenre that focused on the trials and tribulations of women both good and bad, dominated the English theatrical venue.⁶⁸

Hadley cites the immense success of Mrs. Henry Wood's novel *East Lynne*, adaptations of which played for many decades in England and America, and whose tormented central character Lady Isabel ends the play with nothing but bitter regrets for her adultery and abandonment of her family.⁶⁹ This focus on the 'trials and tribulations of women both good and bad' was not coincidental, but rather was intimately connected, through the 'melodramatic mode', to the situations of women in daily life:

The emergence of this domestic melodrama on stage parallels the melodramatic mode's offstage emergence as a rhetorical form of specifically domestic resistance during the middle decades of Victoria's reign. While *East Lynne* played to sell-out audiences, real families acted variations on its melodramatic narrative of fallen women and predatory men. And at least one wife expressed in public and in print its melodramatic sentiments of alienation and remorse.⁷⁰

Hadley's concept of the melodramatic mode as 'domestic resistance' can be applied to the plays of Mrs. Bright. The women in her plays 'resist' condemnation not simply because of the quality of her writing, but because of the theatrical strategies that she employs. When melodramas from the period are read as texts, they can often appear to be conservative, conforming to the status quo, but as I shall argue, it is important not to underestimate the subversive possibilities offered by performance.

⁶⁸ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, p. 133.

⁶⁹ T. A. Palmer, *East Lynne* a dramatisation (1874) from Mrs. Henry Wood's novel of the same name (published 1861), in Adrienne Scullion, (ed.), *Female Playwrights of the Nineteenth Century* (London: J. M. Dent (Everyman Series), 1996).

⁷⁰ Hadley's chapter examines the case of Mrs. Caroline Norton, who publicly fought against the abusive treatment of her husband George and published *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854). Norton's passionate polemic was instrumental in improving the position of women through such legislation as the Infants and Child Custody Bill in 1839 and the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857. Elaine Hadley, 'Melodramatic Rhetoric in Victoria's England', *Melodramatic Tactics*, pp. 133-179 (p. 134).

2.4 Early challenges and emerging themes

Not False but Fickle, Mrs. Bright's first play, a one-act comedy-drama about love and relationships, reveals her use of the sub-textual possibilities of the mise-en-scene. Somewhat surprisingly, the play was not produced at the Theatre Royal, where she had established her reputation as an actress, but rather at the Alexandra, then under the stewardship of Mr. Brittlebank.⁷¹ It was licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's office on 8 April 1878, but the first night pre-dated official authorisation, and took place on 22 March.⁷² The 'Sheffield Correspondent' for the *Era* reports that the production was under the patronage of the Earl of Wharnccliffe and that the house was 'unusually crowded'. Carlotta Leclercq (1838-1893) and John Nelson were the well-known managers of the production company and they would go on to produce her next play *Noblesse Oblige*.⁷³ The review was generally favourable: 'the little piece was a decided success', and the audience showed their approval - 'there were loud cries for the author'. Mrs Bright was present at the performance, and she 'bowed from the dress circle amidst loud applause'.⁷⁴

It is in the portrayal of the maligned Mrs. Travers that the playwright demonstrates her skilful handling of visual, sub-textual effect. The character is a widowed woman, who is travelling in Europe with her fiancé Sir George Crossley when he meets an old sweetheart, Mrs. Gerard, also a widow. Sir

⁷¹ Mr. William Brittlebank had succeeded Thomas Youdan, who died in 1876. Brittlebank was Manager for 20 years, and during this time the Alexandra was allegedly well-known for 'sensation melodramas'.

⁷² *Era*, 31 March 1878.

⁷³ Several likenesses of Carlotta Leclercq are among the collections at the National Portrait Gallery in London <<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/>>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* Mrs. Bright also undertook the role of Mrs. Travers for a benefit performance (for her mother, Mrs. Ellen Pitt) of *Not False but Fickle*, in November 1878. The *Sheffield Independent* noted that she 'sustained' the character 'very charmingly', 21 November 1878.

George and Mrs. Gerard rekindle their affection for each other, and when Mrs Travers realises the strength of their feelings, she pretends she no longer cares for her lover, in order to release him from his obligation. His pride is stung by her supposed fickleness, and he complains bitterly about her treatment of him. The stage directions help to draw attention to the injustice of Sir George's judgement, and the visual image is enhanced by the music. The suggested melody is called 'Estranged' and the instruction is that it should be 'low, as before... but worked up' as Mrs Travers takes her position at the back of the stage (and is thus unseen by the other characters):

[Mrs Travers] ...with a pathetic gesture of her hands, and a look of unutterable affection towards Sir George, silently takes farewell. The music, which has been very slow and piano during this last, gradually dies away.

(*Not False but Fickle* p. 19)

The review in the *Era* of the first night of the production acknowledged that the playwright had done something unusual:

The *denouement* is scarcely in accord with the generally received ideas, inasmuch as it is the lively, coquettish Mrs. Travers who secures the sympathy of the audience.⁷⁵

Mrs. Bright repeats this achievement, and 'secures the sympathy of the audience' for a succession of misunderstood and maligned women throughout her dramatic career.

In her next play, *Noblesse Oblige*, her central character Haydée could have been condemned as a latent bigamist, but she is portrayed with sympathy and compassion, indeed it is her dignity and strength of character which are emphasised. Haydée has suffered for a long time from the behaviour of her wayward husband, Gustave. Not only is he a thief, but their marriage has been 'marked ... by neglect, drunkenness, and cruelty' (*Noblesse Oblige* Prologue, p. 4). When she escapes to England and falls in

⁷⁵ *Era*, 31 March 1878.

love with the aristocratic Cecil Mainwaring, her passion wrestles with her conscience in an agonised monologue:

Haydée ...for now I know I never loved before. If I marry him the sin is mine, not his! The temptation well-nigh overpowers me! ... Send me poverty, contumely, the hard world's scorn, but leave me my love! – oh, leave me my love!

(*Noblesse Oblige*, Act I, p. 16)

Her passionate desires are unfulfilled, because when her husband eventually tracks her down and begs her forgiveness, she feels bound by her duty as his wife, and renounces Cecil. The rejected and deceived lover reacts with scorn at first, but later there is an affecting scene between the two of them, when he realises, and acknowledges, what her sacrifice has cost. At the end of the play Haydée and Gustave slip away quietly, while the family gather together. Although the other characters do not notice them, the stage directions suggest that the playwright intended this to be a visually poignant moment:

Haydée recedes up and places her hand in that of Gustave, who appears, remaining always in the shadow – centre; Cecil turns down as Dr. Lennard re-enters with Minnie and Mr Grayson from one side; Charley and Victoria coming on from the other in animated converse; none of them observe the retreating figures of Gustave and Haydée, but form an easy, natural picture to the front of the stage as curtain falls.

(*Noblesse Oblige*, Act III, p. 34)

It may be argued that Mrs. Bright's portrayals of women as self-sacrificing conforms to the hegemonic Victorian belief that women are by nature nobler, if weaker creatures, and that it is a fulfilment of their womanly duty to suppress their own needs in favour of others. A review of *Naomi's Sin* approved of its depiction of the 'devotion and forgiving spirit with which every true woman is imbued'.⁷⁶ Religious education stressed that the will of God provided the ultimate guidance, and that the love of the Heavenly Father was far more important than earthly desires. The plays do indeed include references to Christianity and characters express their faith in life after death.

⁷⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 8 May 1879.

On the other hand, the female characters are vibrant, and women like Haydée have strong and passionate natures ('oh, leave me my love!') as well as a code of ethics and a spiritual sensibility. The playwright highlights the emotional intensity of her characters by her assemblage of affecting stage tableaux.

Erroneous and unfair assumptions by men about the character and motives of women are a common feature across Mrs. Bright's dramas, as demonstrated by Cecil Mainwaring in *Noblesse Oblige* and Sir George Crossley in *Not False but Fickle*. It was not easy to challenge these 'generally received ideas' (as these prejudices are described by the critic in the *Era*), when deep-rooted chauvinism often precluded women from even entering the public arena. The *Sheffield Independent* featured a regular column, 'On Men and Things', written by 'Le Flâneur'. He began his column on Thursday 28 November 1878 with an acknowledgement that although society may be changing, he does not subscribe to these new ideas:

I entertain the old-fashioned notion that women are at their best when they are at home, and that the work of the world had better be left to men.

Even though he described himself as 'old-fashioned', he appeared to contradict himself further down the same article, to make an allowance for female participation in theatrical endeavour. He noted:

Mrs. Augustus Bright deserves to be congratulated on her great success. Less than a year has elapsed since she commenced to write for the stage. She has written three dramas, each succeeding one more ambitious than its predecessor, has had them produced, and has witnessed their popular acceptance. This is surely a good year's work, and yet I hear of another literary effort on her part, made and satisfactorily launched on the way to success.⁷⁷

Two years later, in a report about the possibility that her play *Bracken Hollow* will receive a production at the Elephant and Castle theatre, the same writer

⁷⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 28 November 1878.

drew a distinction between success in a provincial theatre, and recognition in the metropolis:

The London production of a play means, of course, a good deal. It is the one golden opportunity which thousands of playwrights sigh for in vain. Mrs. Augustus Bright is therefore, to be congratulated upon her success – a congratulation in which I heartily join. Let me express a hope that “Bracken Hollow” will prove anything but a “hollow” thing in the estimation of those very severe gentlemen – the critics.⁷⁸

It is significant that ‘Le Flâneur’ made the seemingly unconscious acknowledgment that any judgement of theatrical productions would be carried out by an all-male jury. However, his rather avuncular, almost affectionate tone suggests that Mrs. Bright’s success as a dramatist was a matter for celebration rather than censure. Perhaps his pride that a local writer was proving to be a success overrode his myopic opinions on the appropriate conduct for women.

2.5 Local appeal and questions of class

Unlike the playwrights at the centre of my other two case studies, Mrs. Bright did not specifically use Sheffield as a setting for her plays, nevertheless analysis of her dramas, as well as aspects of her career, can provide illuminating information about the relationship between its inhabitants and their theatre. Her backdrops are various: country houses (*Bracken Hollow*, *Dane’s Dyke*,⁷⁹ *Noblesse Oblige*, Act III of *Naomi’s Sin*), capital cities (London in Act II of *Naomi’s Sin*, Paris in the Prologue of *Noblesse Oblige*), or fashionable European resorts (*Not False but Fickle*), but their subject matter and themes had plenty to interest a local audience of all classes. Sometimes

⁷⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 19 February 1880.

⁷⁹ Inspiration perhaps came from a real ‘Dane’s Dyke’, a place near Sewerby in East Yorkshire. An information board there reads: ‘The trees give away its secret history. The monkey puzzle and other trees seen here were much loved by the Victorians who would have known a very different Dane’s Dyke to that we see today. The car park is now situated on the former site of a grand house built in 1873 for Frances Elizabeth Cotterell-Dormer, Lady of the Manor of Flamborough’. The house was demolished in 1953 and the site declared a local nature reserve in 2002.

she used specific settings in the north of England, and the *Sheffield Independent* was pleased by her affection for the area. Its review of her novel, *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* (1881) notes that

The back-ground of Mrs. Bright's story is a lovely Derbyshire landscape, with which our readers are all familiar, and of which, when she writes, she displays her great and loving appreciation.⁸⁰

The newspaper was, in any case, convinced that its readers would welcome whatever Mrs. Bright wrote, and it asserted that 'anything from the pen of Mrs. Bright is interesting to Sheffield readers'.⁸¹

Although a love story is at the heart of *Noblesse Oblige*, its theme of conflict between the old established landed gentry and the newly prosperous industrial entrepreneurs is one that may have been of interest to both groups. The Alexandra Theatre was in a different, perhaps less fashionable, locale to the Theatre Royal, but its appeal was broad: the Earl of Wharnccliffe had been the patron of her earlier play there, and it was regularly visited by middle-class members of the Town Council.⁸² The production opened on Friday 6 December 1878, produced by Carlotta Leclercq and John Nelson. Although Haydée is a poor governess (who escapes from her convicted and imprisoned husband in France, to Worcestershire in England), her mother-in-law explains that she is 'descended from one of the grandest families of our old "Noblesse" (*Noblesse Oblige*, Prologue, p. 4). In a telling phrase, the family who employ her are described as 'nouveaux riches, *but* kind-hearted, generous people' (*Noblesse Oblige*, Prologue, p. 9, my emphasis).

⁸⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 December 1880.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² The Alexandra often hosted benefit nights for local charities, and representatives from municipal life were involved in the events. The British Order of Oddfellows Friendly Society held their annual benefit for the Widows and Orphans fund, 'under the patronage and presence of the Mayor of Sheffield (Michael Hunter, Jnr. Esq.)', *Sheffield Independent*, 25 February 1882. We can surmise that middle-class patrons chose to attend plays and other performances too. When the Carl Rosa Opera Company performed, it was 'under the patronage of the Mayor', *Sheffield Independent*, 30 November 1882, and there are many other examples.

Mr Grayson, the head of the household, is proud of his achievement as a self-made man. He hopes that his daughter Minnie will marry Charley, but she objects to this idea because of what he does for a living. Her father rises to the defence of his prospective son-in-law:

And what have I been? A tradesman, too! How have I accumulated the vast wealth which helps so largely to make our lives enjoyable and happy? Why, by work – hard work and trade!

(*Noblesse Oblige*, Act 1, p. 13)

Although he defends his profession, his 'trade', and does not want his daughter to be 'patronised or slighted by anyone', Mr Grayson also strongly believes that the social division of society will endure, and that this is an acceptable state of affairs:

... it is my rooted conviction that so long as the world shall last there will be classes and classes, sets and sets, the barrier fine as a hair, but palpable as a rod of iron, separating the aristocrat from the parvenu; and, I for one, am perfectly satisfied that it should be so.

(*Noblesse Oblige*, Act III, p. 27)

However, the implication by the end of the play is that nobility, as a character trait, does not belong to one class only. In the impassioned farewell scene between Cecil and Haydée, she expresses her belief that true gentlemanly behaviour transcends class. When Cecil forgives her for becoming romantically involved with him, and promises that he will not remain bitter, she expresses her admiration:

There spoke the hero I have worshipped – the true descendant of a race claiming as watchword the motto, pure and bright, "Noblesse Oblige". Oh, Cecil, yours is the *real* nobility, not the mere accident of birth and heritage, but that patent which emanates only from the soul, and stamps its wearer with the proudest and rarest of all earth's titles – the grand old name of gentleman!

(*Noblesse Oblige*, Act III, p. 33)

He responds to her praise and declares that, because of her self-sacrifice, she too is 'a noble woman'. Position and wealth alone cannot command true respect and status. Hard work, compassionate friendship, and a sense of

purpose and duty are crucial in order for both men and women to be honoured and valued. This message may have been reassuring to those audience members in Sheffield who had aristocratic lineage (like the Wharnclyffes), and also to the cutlers and factory-owners who had acquired success and prestige by their own efforts. It is also possible that the female members of the audience found her representations of women both plausible and stimulating.

Part Three

Generating empathy for women across genres:

Mrs. Bright as successful creative writer and theatrical artist

The compelling female characters who inhabit Mrs. Bright's prose fiction and dramas are flawed heroines. They are placed in difficult situations where they must make moral or ethical choices and suffer the consequences of their actions. The writer robustly defended her interest in the experience of women in her novel *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*. As the narrator, she makes one of her frequent direct addresses to the reader in Book II, Chapter VII:

Reader, are you tired of this 'tabby' business? In other parlance, are you weary of this predominance of the female element? If you are, then close the book at once, for I warn you that it will prevail to the end. Under any conditions I find the transcribing of actions feminine to possess a certain interest lacking to those of the harder, if grander sex.

(*Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*, Book II, Chapter VII, p. 112)

Telling a story, or, as the narrator terms it, the 'transcribing of actions', is of course never objective - novelists and dramatists often assign motives to their characters and also pronounce judgement on their behaviour. Although readers can ultimately make up their own minds, their reactions are guided by the writer, either transparently, or with a degree of subtlety.⁸³

⁸³ George Eliot is an obvious contemporary example. Her frequent direct addresses to the reader carefully explain why a character may be behaving in a particular manner. It is worth noting that in its review of *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* the

Mrs. Bright indicates the ways in which the choices made by her protagonists are influenced and limited by their heritage, economic circumstances, and by hierarchies of class and gender. The background to the main story of her novel lays the foundations of these themes, as well as revealing the specific traits of her characters. The narrative begins with a marital union of money and status between Lady Norah O'Shea (an impecunious aristocrat) and Samuel Mervyn (a former cotton-spinner who has attained great wealth). Both parties have motives other than romantic love: she needs financial support and he desires the position in society that marriage to her will provide. He wants to be part of 'a lineage whose escutcheon should be undefiled by mark of trade, no matter how bare might be the rent-roll or tattered the banner of the much-coveted patrician'.⁸⁴ Samuel has been successful in business, but he considers his success to be a disadvantage; money is not as important to him as aristocratic prestige.

However, the nobility that Samuel values, and hopes to find in the upper class, is not evident from the conduct of his young Irish wife. Just after she is widowed, the following description indicates her untidiness, vanity, and amorous inclinations:

Up jumped her ladyship, conscious of appearing, with bedabbled locks and gown awry, at a disadvantage, a circumstance she would fain avoid in the presence of a stranger possessing such outward attributes as pertained to Geoffrey Hunter. For Lady Mervyn (though discreet) had an eye for these trivialities, and her anguish of the preceding day had not incapacitated her from noting the comeliness of Geoffrey's *tournure*...

(*Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*, Book I, Chapter V, p. 30)

Mrs. Bright maintains this lightly ironic, often humorous tone throughout her novel, and although readers might smile at the machinations of Lady Norah

Sheffield Independent compares Mrs. Bright favourably to the rather more well-known author: 'She does not treat her readers to philosophical dissertations like those of George Eliot ...' *Sheffield Independent*, 23 December 1880.

⁸⁴ *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*, Book I, Chapter II, p. 6.

O'Shea they may also sympathise with her predicament. They are certainly likely to be moved by the parts of the story which involve later generations of the family (particularly the grandchildren of Samuel Mervyn). The critic for the *Morning Post* acknowledged the sensitive touch of the author in the narrative:

The love stories of Honoria and Antoinette are not only told with grace and pathos, but with a certain artistic subtlety which makes the climax of their mournful career a genuine surprise.⁸⁵

A novelist requires different skills to a playwright, but Mrs. Bright was able to operate within both genres. A strong narrative is a feature in all her work, and she successfully adapted prose fiction (both her own and that of other authors) for the stage. Three of her full-length plays (*Bracken Hollow*, *Naomi's Sin*, and *Dane's Dyke*) began as novels, and a review of an early production of *Bracken Hollow* noted that:

There was an immense audience ... she has embarked upon the career of a dramatic author, and so far her efforts have achieved the most unqualified success... The incidents in the novel have been skilfully seized upon and made subservient to dramatic purposes, and the result is a well-constructed and powerful drama.⁸⁶

It is testament to the powerful attraction of *Bracken Hollow* that it achieved an 'immense audience' when it was in competition with Henry Irving, who opened in the lead role of Hamlet at the Theatre Royal on the same evening.⁸⁷

After the successful publication of *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation*, Mrs. Bright quickly rewrote it for the theatre under the new title *Dane's Dyke*, and the review in the *Sheffield Independent* noted that adaptation was not an easy process, and praised her skill in both forms:

Dramatised novels are not invariably a success; the rule, indeed, is all the other way. A novel that has numbered its readers by thousands, becomes the most conspicuous of failures when the attempt is made to pourtray [sic] its plot and to reproduce its leading incidents upon the stage. "Unto the Third and Fourth Generation" is, however, in a very

⁸⁵ *Morning Post*, 7 June 1881.

⁸⁶ Extract from unnamed newspaper, collection E. W. Rodgers op. cit., 27 November 1878.

⁸⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 28 November 1878.

special sense a novel that well bears dramatic reconstruction: for the dialogue is sparkling, the incidents and situations are powerfully drawn, and the story is skilfully told.⁸⁸

Elsewhere, critics noted that her plots were 'full of incident', and the *Era* wrote that *Noblesse Oblige* was 'striking and original'.⁸⁹ Her plays were collectively described as 'Society Dramas', or as presentations of 'Modern Life', and her copyright was protected by the Dramatic Authors' Society.⁹⁰ She never received much attention from the metropolitan critics, but provincial reviews were generally fulsome in their praise: 'The press generally speaks in very high terms of Mrs. Bright's works, which are throughout of sterling worth, and deserving the greatest esteem in which they are held'.⁹¹ The combination of genteel country houses and spirited women seems to have found an appreciative audience, and afforded her a reasonable level of success.

3.1 Representation of the theatrical world

The narrative of *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* not only explores the issues of class, gender and inheritance, but it particularly examines the social position of those who laboured in the theatre. Given the large numbers of people employed in the 'mass media' of the nineteenth century, and the public fascination with its celebrities and scandals, this milieu would have appealed both to interested spectators and to those whose personal experience made it familiar. An advertisement announcing the serialisation of this novel in the *Era* in February 1880 asserted that 'this work

⁸⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 August 1881.

⁸⁹ *Era*, 18 June 1881, 11 May 1879.

⁹⁰ See for example an advertisement in the *Era*, 23 April 1881.

Unto the Third and Fourth Generation was reissued 'in the shape of a much cheaper edition' (*Era*, 27 August 1881). Also, she had already been approached by European agents who wanted to translate her dramas: 'Mrs Katherine C. Bright has received an urgent request for permission to adapt her dramatic works *Noblesse Oblige*, *Bracken Hollow*, *Not False but Fickle* and *Naomi's Sin* for the French and Flemish stage'. *Era*, 16 November 1879.

⁹¹ *Isle of Man Times and General Advertiser*, 15 November 1879.

will be especially interesting to professional readers, being an amalgamation of scenes, Social and Theatrical'.⁹² The phrase 'professional readers' seems to indicate readers who work in the business of theatre, rather than those who read books for a living. It is likely that these individuals would have found authenticity in its depiction of an insecure career choice which often caused social exclusion. The novel features performers who struggle to survive, and even the male actors in her book are not considered to be appropriate as suitors.

A major part of the novel tells the story of young aspiring actor Noel Austyn and his courtship of Antoinette (Toney) Mervyn. This relationship is between individuals descended from the original mismatched couple, Samuel and Lady Norah. Toney is their grandchild, her mother is Hortense, widow of Lieutenant George Mervyn, their son. Although Mrs. Mervyn's background was also theatrical (in her youth as Mlle. Hortense Gresier she performed as an opera singer, or cantatrice, in Paris), she is opposed to the marriage. Her opposition stems from her own bitter experience of the vagaries of the entertainment world: her father Antoine had produced an opera which was a resounding failure; he never recovered from the humiliation, and spent the rest of his life in an asylum. As a widow in reduced circumstances (her husband George Mervyn was a drinker and gambler), Hortense has a single-minded aim - to obtain a secure and respectable life for herself and her two daughters, and her plan does not include marriage to a struggling actor. Noel Austyn finally performs on the London stage almost at the end of the novel, in Book V, when we eventually learn that he had already clandestinely married Toney.

Mrs. Bright had to decide which elements of her novel it was appropriate to include in her theatrical version (*Unto the Third and Fourth*

⁹² *Era*, 1 February 1880.

Generation has almost 300 pages over three volumes). Her decision was to omit the long explanatory prelude and to begin her play mid-way through the story. Although the opening scene provides elements of exposition, she seizes the attention of the audience immediately. Hortense is installed as mother-in-law at Dane's Dyke, the ancestral home of the Trent family; her eldest daughter Gertrude newly married to the mature head of the household, Sir Archibald Trent, and her second child Lily the secret wife of Noel Austyn, the actor. The house is old and atmospheric, the family are gathered together, listening to stories of their almost mythological history, and there is a mood of superstition and mystery. The carefully-timed entrance of Hortense creates both an immediate thrill and suspense for the audience. Lily (the character of Toney was re-named for the play) recounts the tale of the long-dead former matriarch of Dane's Dyke and tells the assembled company of her prophetic ghostly re-appearances:

Lily It has been hinted that whenever danger menaces the ruler of our House, a tall stately figure clad in dark raiment will traverse the old corridors and take its once-accustomed place within this very room.

(Enter Hortense. She wears a long, clinging dark dress – panic, and general surprise.)

(*Dane's Dyke*, Act 1, scene 1, p. 20)

The stage is a popular place to evocatively convey the sense of the past haunting the present (or indeed the present influencing the future) and melodramas featuring ghosts were very prevalent in the mid-Victorian period.⁹³ Those who have committed misdeeds are often troubled by them and *Dane's Dyke* makes full use of the dramatic possibilities offered by a character's guilty conscience. Hortense has much to cause anxiety: she

⁹³ Dion Boucicault had an enormous success with *The Corsican Brothers*, first produced at the Princess's Theatre in London on 24 February 1852. It told the story of the close connection between twin brothers Fabien and Louis Dei Franchi (both originally played by Charles Kean), with the help of a specially constructed 'ghost trap' and a dream sequence played out behind a gauze.

persuades her daughter not to go with her beloved husband to Australia, and after his departure, Lily dies in childbirth. In order to guarantee the status and financial security of this new baby, and to protect it from a presumed unstable life with a theatrical parent, Hortense substitutes it for the newborn infant belonging to her elder daughter Gertrude, whose own has just (rather conveniently) died. Although Hortense knows that Noel Austyn is the father, she refuses to contact him, but instead allows Sir Archibald Trent to believe that the child is his. Later in the play she sleepwalks, and reveals her crime by unconsciously re-enacting it. This scene is reminiscent of that featuring the murderer Lady Macbeth, when she unconsciously goes through the motions of washing her hands to remove the blood of Duncan, the King she has helped her husband to kill.⁹⁴

This recycling of recognisable stage business suggests familiarity with iconic visual images and is an example of what Jacky Bratton terms 'intertheatricality'. The potential effectiveness of such actions is partly because of the cultural memory and understanding of the audience.⁹⁵ Like Lady Macbeth, Hortense is unable to bear the weight of her guilt and the final scene of the play ends with her confession and death. Even though she has privileged her aspirations for her family over her morality, her crime is not as great as that of Shakespeare's anti-heroine, and before she dies, she restores the child to its father and receives his forgiveness. The *Sheffield Independent* recognised that Hortense is fundamentally an honourable character who does wrong, and describes her as 'an example of how a fine and upright disposition may become warped by circumstances and one

⁹⁴ Lady Macbeth mimes the process of hand-washing in Act V scene 1 of the play. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. by Stanley Wells and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 975-999 (p. 996).

⁹⁵ Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, pp. 37-38.

predominant ambition'.⁹⁶ Although being governed by a single objective could have led to a simplistic characterisation, this does not seem to have been the case. Indeed the reviewer in the *Era* praised the nuanced way the character was performed (by the writer herself) in the premiere production:

Mrs. Augustus Bright as Hortense delighted her audience with the wonderful way in which she depicted the many lights and shades in the character of Hortense, the loving and ambitious mother.⁹⁷

Although Hortense is portrayed as a 'loving and ambitious mother', and appears on stage as an adult woman, there are indications that her character has been shaped by her past life, including her childhood. These 'lights and shades' can be suggested by the way the playwright constructs her text (and the way that the actress plays the part) but Mrs. Bright had more opportunity in the novel to explain the background of the characters and to examine the consequences of their upbringing. Indeed, the title of the book indicates that it is about the effect that each generation has on the next, and the damage that parents can, even unwittingly or involuntarily, do to their children.⁹⁸ This theme of heritage, in both a material and psychological sense, is common to Mrs. Bright's plays and her prose fiction. For example, the character of Naomi in *Naomi's Sin* is left friendless and economically dependent because her father's family disapprove of his marriage to a singer and disinherit him. This leaves her vulnerable to a predatory man and ultimately leads to her tragic death. In *Noblesse Oblige* the main character Haydée is ostensibly just a poor governess, but it transpires that she is

⁹⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 August 1881.

⁹⁷ *Era*, 27 August 1881. At the time of this production in August 1881 Mrs. Bright had been widowed for almost a year, following the sudden and premature death of her husband. Her later acting career will be further discussed in Section Four.

⁹⁸ The phrase is biblical and makes clear that although the 'Lord God' is merciful, those who transgress cannot escape punishment. The verses read: 'Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.' Authorised, King James version of *The Holy Bible*, the Book of Exodus, Chapter 34, v. 7 (London: Cambridge University Press).

descended from a noble family. Helen Armytage in *Bracken Hollow* almost has her life ruined by the machinations of Mrs Adair, who behaves as she does because of the way she was treated by Helen's mother. Although Helen experiences tribulations, she ultimately emerges a stronger character, and her journey takes her from a privileged childhood to exile in America, where she has a successful career in the theatre. Her professional life is a part of the plot, but it also provides an opportunity for the actress who played the role to give a bravura performance.

3.2 Representation of 'the Actress'

In *Dane's Dyke* the theatrical profession is depicted as an uncertain career and a dangerous place, where it is difficult to make a living and where criticism can lead to public humiliation and tragedy. Theatre pervades the story of *Bracken Hollow*, and the main character Helen Armytage spends a period of time as a professional actress. Moreover, the playwright uses her knowledge of acting techniques and theatrical effects to create an atmospheric piece of drama in this, her first full-length play. Credit should be given to the novelist Agnes May Fleming (who wrote the stories which Mrs. Bright adapted for the stage), for her creation of the character of Helen Armytage, but Mrs. Bright constructed a striking role for an actress in this spirited woman with a fiery temper, who dominates much of the stage action.⁹⁹

Helen's situation in the first act of the play becomes increasingly difficult, and offers plenty of scope for an expressive performance. She is jilted on the morning of her wedding by her fortune-hunting fiancé, Gaston

⁹⁹ Mrs. Maude (May) Agnes Fleming, *A Wonderful Woman* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1873); *The Mystery of Bracken Hollow* (New York: Street and Smith, 1915, originally published 1878). *The Mystery of Bracken Hollow* is described on the front inside page as a sequel to *A Wonderful Woman*. Although the novels were first published in America they are set in rural England. Mrs. Bright put the two stories together and constructed the drama from the combination of both narratives.

Chevalier Dawtree, when it is revealed that she is not, after all, the wealthy heiress he was expecting. A malevolent stranger (Mrs. Adair) mysteriously appears and makes the shocking announcement that Helen was sold as a baby to Sir John Armytage (the kindly gentleman she thinks is her father), after his own daughter was killed in a train crash. Sir John is so angered by Dawtree's desertion that after a heated confrontation he suffers some kind of a fit, (probably a heart attack), and dies. Helen's illegitimacy means that Richard Armytage, her supposed cousin, (whose proposal of marriage she had earlier rejected), supplants her as heir to the family estate and fortune. He not only gloats over the downfall of his proud relative, but makes the offensive suggestion that she should become his mistress. At the end of an emotional scene during which she furiously refuses, and curses, him, she collapses, exhausted, and when her lifeless body is discovered, it is assumed that she has died.

The plot, like much mid-century melodrama, is a complex and startling one, and at two points in the script, after a shocking revelation, the stage direction simply states 'Sensation' (Part I, page 47 and Part II, page 76). Presumably this suggests that the actors should hold their poses for a moment whilst the assembled characters, and the audience, absorb this new information. By the end of Act One Sir John and Helen Armytage have died, and the audience has learned that she was sold as an infant, and in Act Two there are more revelations - false accusations of infidelity, kidnap, the theft of the baby, and a gruesome riding accident. The two aspects to extricate from this action-packed narrative are the ways that strong women are portrayed (particularly through the figure of 'the actress' and 'the villainess') and the strategies that the playwright employed to provide powerful roles for women.

The first act contains several scenes which allowed the actress who played the part to demonstrate her skills as a performer. There is a

metatheatrical element within the play: an actress (Miss Eva Ross Church in the first production) is playing the part of Helen, who has talent as an actor, and is accused by her adversary Richard Armytage of exploiting her gifts for emotional effect. In an early scene, he reprimands her:

Oh you needn't trouble yourself to be indignant - You're not acting in private theatricals now. By the way, how well you did that sleep-walking scene from "Macbeth" the other night at the Merediths. If you had not been born Miss Armytage, you'd have made your fortune on the stage, Cousin.

(*Bracken Hollow*, Part 1, Tableau I, p. 10)

Not only does Richard offer her condescending praise, but he reminds us that acting, other than in 'private theatricals' is taboo for those of genteel birth.

Helen has a commanding presence but she is also impetuous and not always kind. When Richard Armytage first proposes marriage to her, she reacts with contemptuous (and rather unpleasant) anger when she rebukes him: '... to think that I, I could condescend to marry you – a miserable book-worm, a little sickly dwarf...' (*Bracken Hollow* Part 1, Tableau 1, p. 12). When Helen is disinherited, she is disempowered by her lack of fortune, and Richard no longer offers marriage, but instead he suggests that she become his mistress. This demeaning proposal offers her another opportunity to vent her fire and passion:

Helen (Over music) This is your hour, but mine will come – and here – before Heaven, and by the memory of all I have loved and lost, I swear to be revenged – for every word that you have just uttered, you shall endure hours – days of torture. – If I live, the end and aim of my existence will be to pursue and punish you – If I die, I will come back from my grave to haunt and terrify you –

Richard Helen – Mercy – mercy –

Helen Miserable cur! You have crushed for ever each softer impulse of my heart, and nothing now remains by hate and fury!

(*Bracken Hollow*, Part 1, Tableau III, p. 33)

After this outburst, Helen becomes withdrawn, the stage directions note that she 'has a peculiar, repressed manner' (p. 34). She demands to be left alone,

and in a scene lit by moonlight and accompanied by atmospheric music, she collapses and expires:

Sir Richard What's wrong Langton – has she fainted?

Stephen (quietly) No, Sir Richard – she is dead!

End of scene – End of Act 1 – PICTURE

This image of 'the solitary woman in a flood of light' would have been familiar to a nineteenth century audience, as Elaine Hadley observes, but this 'picture' is only the end of the first act.¹⁰⁰ The audience are left to wonder how the plot might develop, particularly considering that the vengeful words she spoke are echoing in the air over her lifeless body.

The suspense continues during Part Two, which begins six years later, with Sir Richard ensconced in a position of power at Bracken Hollow, married to Lady Beatrix, niece of the Earl of Ruysdale. His confident position is under threat from a mysterious new character, Miss Dangerfield, who has been engaged as a companion to the Earl's daughter, Lady Effie Stanhope. The presence of the recent arrival terrifies him, whenever he sees her 'a violent fit of shivering comes over him' (Part II, Tableau 1, p. 52). This is because she reminds him of the wronged Helen Armytage, and when he first sees her and is told her name, he contradicts his informant:

Dangerfield? No – no, I mean the tall, fair woman, who glided through the corridor but now, and looked at me with the dead eyes of Helen Armytage!

(Sensation)

(Bracken Hollow Act II, Tableau I, p. 47)

Both characters – Helen Armytage and Miss Dangerfield – were played by the same actress, so the audience too would have perceived the likeness and presumably have enjoyed speculating on the exact connection between them.

¹⁰⁰ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, p. 133.

Mrs. Bright is playing with two theatrical conventions here. A precedent had already been set by *East Lynne* for the ruse of a character returning to their home in disguise, when audiences experienced the dramatic tension caused by the runaway Lady Isabel returning to the family home in the personae of 'Madame Vine', nursemaid to her own son, Willie. In Act 3, two of the characters are discussing the 'new governess', and one of them (Cornelia) says that when she saw the new employee without her glasses, she was 'astounded by the wonderful likeness, one would have thought it was the ghost of – of Lady Isabel!'.¹⁰¹ Sometimes, however, playwrights generated dramatic effect by something other than disguise. Unearthly power intervened, when wrong-doing had been committed, as a means to reveal the truth. In a play by Wybert Reeve, *Dead Witness; or Sin and its Shadow* (produced at the Theatre Royal Sheffield in 1863), the spirit of the murdered Ellen appears to her sister Mary to expose her guilty husband.¹⁰²

The mystery of *Bracken Hollow* is finally resolved later in Part II, when it is revealed that they are indeed one and the same person – Helen Armytage had not died after all and she has returned, disguised as Miss Dangerfield. Indeed she is at the centre of not just this revelation, but a further (somewhat incredible) plot twist, which provides the audience with a double 'sensation' scene. Although 'Helen' was not the daughter of Sir John Armytage, she has an even more prestigious heritage – her real father is the Earl of Ruysdale. The mysterious Mrs. Adair has confessed to kidnapping the Earl's baby daughter and selling her to Sir John Armytage. She thinks she is safe to speak, because the now grown-up woman died at Bracken Hollow:

Mrs. Adair Aye – do you think that I would ever have spoken, had she lived? No, I would have starved first – but she died 6 years ago ...

¹⁰¹ Palmer, *East Lynne*, Act 3, sc. 1, p. 329.

¹⁰² Wybert Reeve, *The Dead Witness; or, Sin and its Shadow*, Theatre Royal Sheffield November 1863, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53027 N.

(During the last speech the door has been very slowly opened, unperceived by the Earl or Mrs. Adair. At its conclusion it is thrown wide – discovering Helen standing in the doorway – she wears her own hair, as at first.)

Helen You are mistaken, Mrs. Adair – Lady Helen Stanhope never died at all!

(Sensation)

(*Bracken Hollow*, Act II, Tableau II, p. 76)

Lady Helen Stanhope/Helen Armytage had miraculously cheated death in 'one of those rare cases of suspended animation which sometimes defy even science the most profound' (Part II, Tableau III, p. 77). She tells the story of how she had appeared to be dead for 48 hours, and had even been placed in the family crypt, covered by a sheet of glass. Her faithful friend Stephen Langton, the family doctor, had come to mourn her, been startled when he noticed her breath on the pane, and aided her escape. They had decided to keep her recovery a secret, and she fled to America.

In a similar manner to the Lady Macbeth references in *Dane's Dyke*, the death-and-resurrection shock is adapted from the well-known, tragic ending of *Romeo and Juliet*.¹⁰³ This time there is a happy outcome for the protagonist - she is rescued, and in the revelation scene, she explains to her rapt audience (both on stage and in the auditorium) how her close encounter with mortality and a narrow escape from being buried alive aided and influenced her performances on stage, particularly in productions of the Shakespeare play:

I have passed an existence of strange adventure since that time – have been an actress, celebrated throughout the colonies, but no one ever knew that in the "Juliet" whose "potion" scene thrilled the vast audiences to awe and wonder, I was ever re-living my own past,

¹⁰³ Juliet takes a potion in Act 4 scene 3, which makes it appear that she has expired. Unfortunately Romeo does not receive the message that it is merely simulation, and believes that she is no longer alive. In despair, he kills himself (Act 5 scene 3), and when she wakes to find he is dead, she, too, commits suicide. William Shakespeare, *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. by Stanley Wells and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 335-366 (p. 360, pp. 364-365).

ever conjuring in my imagination the terrors of a doom I had, myself,
so narrowly escaped!

(*Bracken Hollow*, Part II, Tableau III, p. 78)

Helen connects her traumatic, near-death experience to her ability to give a fine rendition of the character of Juliet on stage. This connection between remembered sensations from an actor's life and her performance on stage would, some years later, be termed 'emotional memory' by Stanislavsky, and would become one of the cornerstones of his methodology for truthful performance.¹⁰⁴

Not only is Helen able to productively use her memories, but her experience in America helps her to gain maturity, and when she returns to Bracken Hollow in disguise, she presents a mysterious, yet impressive figure. She betrays her 'vocation' as a performer when she is asked to read a poem aloud:

...as she proceeds, warming with the subject and with the recollections it evokes, she drops the book, and recites it from memory, with appropriate gesture, as she finishes, and all present appear to be thoroughly charmed and astonished at her performance, the drop descends – quietly and slowly.

End of tableau (*Bracken Hollow*, Part II, Tableau I, p. 55)

The stage directions here are quite specific; it is another coup de théâtre for the actress playing the part of Helen, but her performance has inadvertently revealed her secret. Sir Wilfred Truelock, one of the guests at Bracken Hollow recognised her as 'Miss Horncastle' whom he had seen on stage in San Francisco:

I have seen you in another country, pursuing the vocation of an actress ... when, later on in that same day, you recited the poem, I recognised you at once... as the finest "Juliet" I have ever seen...

(*Bracken Hollow*, Part II, Tableau I, p. 59)

¹⁰⁴ Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), *On the art of the stage* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967). Some earlier performers attempted to theorise their acting methods in relation to understanding the past history and emotions of the characters they played. George Taylor cites Helen Faucit (1814-1898) and her book *Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters*, written after her retirement in 1880. George Taylor, *Players and Performance in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 184-186.

Despite the 'fame and fortune' with which Helen was 'showered' in America, she was never truly happy, because she needed to discover the truth about her real parents, and she reflects on her restlessness

...from city to city have I wandered - sometimes the favourite of the hour – the idol of the footlights – but ever pursuing vain, delusive clues to that which Destiny still shrouds from me – ever enduring the agony of a baffled hope – the despair of a blighted life.

(*Bracken Hollow*, Part II, Tableau I, p. 63)

Despite her quest for knowledge about her heritage, Helen's reverie uses repetition to emphasise that she also feels regret about the loss of her former career. When Sir Wilfred Truelock asks about her time in America, the stage directions note that she responds 'half dreamily, old recollections reviving': 'What a time that was! Fame, fortune, both were showered upon me then! Could I have forgotten – Ah! Could I have forgotten'... (*Bracken Hollow*, Part II, Tableau II, p. 59, emphasis in original).

The text not only indicates the importance of a sense of belonging for this character, but it also points to her need for a 'good man'. Stephen Langton, the faithful friend who saved her life and helped her to escape, has also encouraged her to overcome her need for vengeance, and she pays tribute to

...the power which the influence of a good, unselfish man, can wield over even the most reckless of us. As the old, mad animosity faded from that better part which grew from out the cleansing fire of my adversity, there came, instead, a yearning to look once more upon the scenes of my lost happiness, my bright and joyous youth...

(*Bracken Hollow*, Part II, Tableau II, p. 64)

When Stephen first proposed marriage, she had nothing to give him; she was still bitter about all that she had suffered, and she had certainly borne many tribulations. After the revelation that she was not the person she thought she was, she had been disinherited, jilted by her fiancé, her cousin (now Sir Richard) had suggested she be his mistress, and her father had died. Now,

after a period of exile and reflection, she can bring to Stephen 'a love purified by suffering, ennobled by gratitude, strengthened and sanctified by time...' (*Bracken Hollow*, Part II, Tableau III, p. 79).

Fortuitously at the end of the play, the couple know that they will not have to live on love alone. Stephen Langton is made heir to Bracken Hollow by the penitent, dying Sir Richard; Helen has her own wealth, family and status as the daughter of the Earl, and all is in place for a conventionally happy ending. This rich, about-to-be-married, and somewhat subdued heroine may fit comfortably into the conventions of romantic fiction and melodrama, but the audience would still have witnessed a powerful representation of a woman determined to make her own way in the world, someone who forged a successful career as an actress in America and returned to claim her inheritance and a husband.

There is no suggestion that Helen will continue her career on the stage; this element of her life is portrayed as part of a journey, and the implication is that she has now progressed to a more mature phase. In the first part of the play, she is rather proud, with an uncontrollable temper. Initially she learns how to use her vocal power, physical presence and self-possession to become a successful performer and also to terrorise her former tormentor, Sir Richard Armytage. In her disguise as Miss Dangerfield she 'glides' through the corridors of Bracken Hollow like a restless ghost, relishing her ability to terrify him. However, by the end of the play both she and her adversary have learned compassion and forgiveness. She thus undergoes a degree of psychological development, and her strength of character and principled stance provide a counterbalance to the prevailing opinion of actresses as morally suspect.

3.3 Representation of 'the Villainess'

Even the most malevolent female character in *Bracken Hollow*, Mrs. Adair, is given a personal history which goes some way to explain her vengeful actions. Together with 'the Fallen Woman' (this archetypal figure will be discussed in the next section), the 'Villainess' was becoming an increasingly common figure in Victorian melodrama.¹⁰⁵ Financial gain was usually a strong motivating factor, but revenge tended to also play a part, as is the case here. Mrs. Adair formerly worked for the Earl of Ruysdale and his wife Lady Katherine, as a nurse for their daughter Helen. She had fallen in love with Lady Katherine's brother, and they planned to elope. He had gone to Scotland, where he awaited her arrival, but the plan was discovered, and in order to prevent what the family deemed an unsuitable marriage, the powerless Mrs. Adair was taken away to a remote part of Cornwall and held prisoner. She was kept captive long enough for her sweetheart to believe that she had deserted him, and so he re-joined his regiment and sailed away to Canada, never to be seen again. Mrs. Adair's destiny was thus irrevocably altered, and her chance of happiness destroyed.

To take her revenge, Mrs. Adair then caused a major rift between Lady Katherine and the Earl, by convincing her of his infidelity, and when Lady Katherine died in childbirth, she took the child away and sold her to Sir John Armytage. In some respects, her behaviour is a demonstration of the corrosive effect that a lack of power and a desire for vengeance can have on a character. (Helen, too, confessed that she had suffered a 'mad animosity' until she accepted the calming assistance of Stephen Langton.) Mrs. Adair is evidently a lonely and embittered woman (we are never given any details of

¹⁰⁵ See Lynda Hart, 'The Victorian Villainess and the Patriarchal Unconscious' in *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (London: Routledge, 1994), and Chris Willis, 'The Female Moriarty: the Arch-Villainess in Victorian Popular Fiction' in Stacy Gillis and Philippa Gates (eds.), *The Devil Himself* (Westport & London: Greenwood, 2002).

why she is referred to as 'Mrs.' but we assume she has no husband). Although she is offered forgiveness at the end of the play she remains impervious to kindness, beyond moral rehabilitation '– for I despise, as I reject alike your pardon and compassion – As I have proved in the past, as I now am – so will I remain to the end – Implacable!' (Part II, Tableau III, p. 79).

This kind of unrepentant woman is an unusual one to find in the plays of Mrs. Bright; her female characters normally arouse more sympathy and compassion. The threatening figure of the malignant and dangerous woman is an intriguing subject, and merits further investigation, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is important to note that although Mrs. Adair may have been an unsympathetic character, she, too, provided a substantial role for an actress. Together with her enemy Helen Armytage, she dominates the action of the play and drives the narrative forward.

3.4 Representation of the 'Fallen Woman'

Another Victorian archetype, the 'fallen woman', is at the centre of Mrs. Bright's third play, *Naomi's Sin*. Sos Eltis documents the ways in which this ubiquitous figure was represented in fiction and on stage during the nineteenth century:

The epithet "fallen" could be applied to any woman who had indulged in sex outside the legal and moral bonds of marriage, whether as a seduced virgin, adulterous wife or professional prostitute. Her novelistic manifestations ranged from the child-mother whose seduction and redemption are narrated in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), to the scheming bigamist of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensational *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and the "pure woman" of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). Whereas novelists like Gaskell, Braddon, and Hardy were concerned with the psychology of the sexually delinquent woman, melodrama's forte was exterior action not internal motivation, so the fallen woman on stage was predominantly a convenient plot-mechanism rather than the focus of sympathetic analysis.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Sos Eltis, 'The fallen woman on stage: maidens, magdalens, and the emancipated female', in Kerry Powell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, pp. 222-236 (p. 223).

In this section, I argue that as a playwright, Mrs. Bright challenged the audience's perception of this familiar figure, and she is not simply treated as a 'convenient plot-mechanism' but rather becomes 'the focus of sympathetic analysis'. This is achieved through a combination of skilful writing and affective performance.

Naomi's Sin; or, Where are you going to, my pretty maid? was licensed for and produced at the Alexandra Theatre in Sheffield in May 1879.¹⁰⁷ According to the *Era* review, the play was a dramatised version of her own Christmas story, which had been published the previous December.¹⁰⁸ The narrative has many familiar elements: the unseen prologue concerns a poor governess (Naomi) who is seduced by a handsome cad (Captain Lefèvre). When she realises his promises of marriage mean nothing she runs away from him, and at the beginning of Act One, a few years later, she is again tempted, but this time by an honourable offer from a new lover (Arthur Tregonning) who is, of course, ignorant of her history. They marry, but her shameful past is revealed; she is rejected, and later it appears that she has committed suicide. Ten years later, in Act Two, she reappears in disguise (as Mrs Carton, a lady's companion) and saves the life of her new employer, Ethel Masters, who coincidentally is her former husband's new fiancée. Despite the selflessness of Mrs. Carton/Naomi, she is accidentally poisoned by her original seducer (Lefèvre), and she dies at the end of the play. The playwright created a sensational melodrama which followed the conventions to some extent. Atonement for a woman once she has fallen can only usually be achieved by her death, even though this tragic outcome is deferred from the supposed suicide, to a poignant scene at the very end of the play.

¹⁰⁷ This is the same year that *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen, was produced in Norway, although it would not be seen in England until ten years later, in 1889. Ibsen's play became an important landmark in the history of drama, not least because of its treatment of marriage and female independence.

¹⁰⁸ I have been unable to trace this published version.

More challengingly, Mrs. Bright also uses Naomi's story to critique male behaviour and to highlight the economic factors which limit women's choices. It is more difficult for a woman to live a life which society considers virtuous when she has scant support, and the playwright obliquely questions whether it is Naomi's 'sin' to have sexual intercourse outside of marriage, or to be poor and dependent. The opening scene of the play reflects the reality of the precarious financial and moral situation of single women without money or family protection. Women on their own struggled to survive, and although men sometimes offered a promise of security through marriage, relations with them were fraught with danger. The setting is the demimonde of London; a world of cheap lodging houses, inhabited by working women, artists and students.¹⁰⁹ Naomi, a dressmaker's assistant, is staying with her friend Jennie (who is employed as a dancer in pantomime) in Lambeth. Both of these badly-paid and insecure occupations would have presented practical challenges for the two women, but they also had a symbolic meaning: dancers were even lower than actresses in terms of moral reputation, and dressmakers, too, were considered susceptible to sexual corruption.¹¹⁰ Jennie is engaged to Charles Somerville, a doctor's assistant, who vows to marry her but never actually sets the wedding date. It becomes obvious that he is waiting for a woman with better financial prospects to come along.

¹⁰⁹ Kate Bright had some knowledge of these kinds of environments: the Census of 1871 reveals that she was living in the parish of St. George, Bloomsbury, in London, and sharing her lodging house with medical students and an articled clerk.

¹¹⁰ Women who worked in such establishments were sometimes used to showcase the fine outfits (which necessitated undressing), and their jobs were thus seen to encourage vanity and an unwholesome fixation on physical attractiveness. The eponymous heroine of Gaskell's *Mary Barton* meets her nemesis, Harry Carson, while he is 'lounging in a shop where his sisters were making some purchases', and his eye is caught by the 'beautiful little milliner'. Despite the strict daily regime of the proprietress, the girls who worked together in her shop still had the opportunity to discuss the latest novels, which also allegedly promoted day-dreaming and potentially dangerous fancies. The narrator comments that Mary picked up 'simple, foolish, unworldly ideas' from these 'romances', and her co-worker Sally Leadbitter, who was 'vulgar-minded', and 'lightly principled' helped to fuel her unrealistic ambitions. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 78, 88, 89.

Jennie ... Shure I can see the change thats come over yez – its only twice this blessed month, ye've fetched me from the Theatre.

Charley I can't get away, so often as [...] my position with Dr. Wilson, is more important than formerly, and so – (hesitating)

Jennie An so that's the raison ye niver have time to talk of our marriage, as once ye did!

Charley Now Jennie – would it not be the height of absurdity, for us to contemplate wedlock upon our present resources? You must be patient.

(*Naomi's Sin*, Act 1, scene 1, p. 4)

Although Naomi appears to be in a similar situation to her friend and is currently living in straitened circumstances (their lodgings are described as 'unpretentious but not poor'), there is a suggestion that she has a rather more genteel, and somewhat mysterious, past:

Charley I don't know how it is Jenny, but I never feel quite at home with your friend.

Jennie Naomi! Well ye see Charley, she's just a cut above yez...

Charley Oh! Hang it! I don't see that, a dressmakers' assistant!

Jennie But her Father was a clergyman and his father was a rare old English Squire...

Charley (Looking round contemptuously) Then how is it that she is content with this sort of thing?

(*Naomi's Sin*, Act 1, scene 1, p. 4-5)

The mystery of Naomi's past is eventually revealed: her mother had been a singer and so her father's family had disowned him. When both parents died, she was left with neither money nor family support. Once again, Mrs. Bright writes about a character who suffers from social exclusion because of her involvement in the business of art and entertainment.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ There may also be a hint that the social exclusion initially suffered by Naomi and her parents was connected to Judaism. Naomi is an old Hebrew name, and the character features in the Old Testament Book of Ruth. The name means 'pleasant, agreeable, my sweet', but in the Bible, after she has lost her husband and two sons she calls herself Mara, which means "bitter". 'Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me'. 'The Book of Ruth' Chapter 1, v. 20, Authorised version of *The Holy Bible*.

The status of women who work in theatre is contrasted with that of male visual artists when Arthur Tregonning, a painter, is introduced. His character is afforded respect and prestige, but at least he appears to be a gentleman in conduct as well as class. In contrast to the sexual exploitation of Jennie by Charley, Arthur is not only physically attracted to Naomi, but he also follows through his proposal of marriage, and Scene Two reveals the couple living happily in the more prosperous area of Chiswick, with Naomi installed as his new wife, as well as his artistic inspiration.

The romantic and sexual connections between a male artist and his female muse had been publicly, and sometimes scandalously, exposed by the activities of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood several decades earlier, and the fascination with this relationship persisted in bohemian circles and in fictional form to the end of the century and beyond.¹¹² *Trilby*, the phenomenally successful novel by Gerald du Maurier was published in 1894 and its theatrical adaptation by Paul Potter produced a year later.¹¹³ Although *Trilby* is loved by the middle-class artist Little Billee, there are obstacles to their relationship because his family disapprove of her, mainly because she is employed as a model. Even though Billee is a painter and supposedly open-minded, he is not really happy about her work either. Although *Trilby* was initially free-spirited and refreshingly pragmatic about modelling, she is eventually forced to see herself through the eyes of society - the narrator

Gregory Goswell, "What's in a name?" Book titles in the latter prophets and writings', *Pacifica 21* (2008), 8; Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments* (Leicester: Apollon, 2000), 42.

¹¹² Timothy Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1970 (reprinted 1985)); Jerome McGann (ed.), *D G Rossetti, Collected Poetry & Prose* (Rhode Island: Yale University Press, 2003); Clarissa Campbell-Orr (ed.), *Women in the Victorian Art World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

¹¹³ George du Maurier, *Trilby* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co, 1894); George Taylor (ed.), *Trilby and other plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

notes that 'she was destined soon to know both fear and shame'.¹¹⁴ The character of Trilby and her trajectory through the narrative again illustrates both the fascination with, and social disapproval of, unconventional women. In *Naomi's Sin* the way that the eponymous heroine is treated exemplifies the problems and ambivalences encountered by all women. It was necessary for women to be physically and sexually attractive, and yet their appeal placed them in danger.

Men wanted virginal beauty, and went to great lengths to procure and possess it, but as soon as a woman yielded, she was liable to very quickly become an object of scorn.¹¹⁵ The attractions of maidenhood, together with its attendant perils are discussed in Act 1, scene 2 of the play, drawing on the histories of other fictional characters. Arthur is painting a romantic and idealised portrait for which Naomi is the model, and the couple debate about the title it should be given. Before settling on Arthur's suggestion of 'Where are you going to my pretty maid', Naomi suggests 'Dolly Varden', a character who had appeared in the novel *Barnaby Rudge* by Charles Dickens in 1841. Dolly is beautiful and flirtatious; in the course of the story she must learn some difficult lessons not only about love, but also about her own motivations and morals.¹¹⁶ This young fictional creation became the subject of a painting by William Powell Frith the following year, 1842, in which she is depicted as self-confident and almost brazen.¹¹⁷ In the play, Naomi (even more ominously) then suggests the title of 'Olivia Primrose', a character from 'The

¹¹⁴ Du Maurier, *Trilby*, p. 95.

¹¹⁵ The journalist W. T. Stead exposed the lucrative trade in young prostitutes and the demand for virgins in 'The Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon', a sensational series of articles for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885.

¹¹⁶ Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (London: Penguin, 2003), first published in weekly instalments during 1841.

¹¹⁷ 'Dolly Varden' by William Powell Frith (1842), is part of the Victoria and Albert Museum collection <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O80877/dolly-var-den-oil-painting-frith-william-powell/>>.

Vicar of Wakefield' by Oliver Goldsmith (1766), who is seduced and then abandoned.¹¹⁸

'Where are you going to my pretty maid?' was a popular folk song, and one version of the lyrics is explicit and cynical about women's worth:

He Where are you going?
She Going a-milking
He What is your father?
She My father's a farmer
He What is your fortune?
She My face is my fortune
He I cannot marry you
She Nobody asked you, Sir, she said.¹¹⁹

If women are considered to be beautiful, they may invite seduction, but they must have money and position before they can be considered eligible for marriage. The final phrase given to the female character in the song is rather ambivalent: 'Nobody asked you, Sir' could signal spirit and defiance, that she refuses his attention, or it could mean that she is sexually compliant, happy to submit to his advances without a wedding.

When Arthur offers his suggestion for a title, Naomi quotes some of the song lyrics:

Arthur: What do you think of "Where are you going to my pretty maid"?

¹¹⁸ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* ed. by Stephen Coote (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

¹¹⁹ The song evokes scenes of bucolic courtship, and its exact origins are not certain. It was sung by the character Claire Ffolliott in the opening scene of *The Shaughraun* by Dion Boucicault (1875), and the words and music are provided in David Krause (ed), *The Dolmen Boucicault* (Dublin: The Dolmer Press, 1964), pp. 175, 240.

It is sometimes referred to as an 'Old English Dance', as in the published music by William Seymour Smith (London: B. Williams, 1888), or an 'old nursery rhyme' (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1957). There are many different versions, and some were published just prior to *Naomi's Sin*. For example, 'Where are you going to my pretty maid', Choristers' Album No. 48. Four-part song arranged and partly composed by Frank Pomer, price 6d. (London: Hutchings & Romer, 1875).

Naomi Delicious Arthur, so original.
Arthur And inspired by this (softly touching her face).
Naomi Then (rather naively) "My face was my fortune".
Arthur How so dear?
Naomi Has it not won me, first – your notice – and since – your love?

(*Naomi's Sin*, Act 1, scene 2, p. 9-10)

The stage direction that the playwright gives to Naomi, 'rather naively', suggests that the character is not aware of the ambiguity within the song. She is, however, conscious of the importance of beauty for a woman's prospects. As the dialogue continues, there is a suggestion that their apparently blissful relationship may be threatened:

Arthur Darling! Is my love so precious to you?
Naomi The earth contains no other treasure for me and if I ever lose it – I lose all.
Arthur Lose it? That can never be!
Naomi Never? -

(*Naomi's Sin*, Act 1, scene 2, p. 10)

The fragility of love based on an idealised vision of the beloved soon becomes evident as Naomi's mysterious past is dramatically revealed. Captain Lefèvre is invited (rather coincidentally) to view Tregonning's painting with his friend Lord Walton. On viewing the picture, he realises that the 'pretty maid' is the same one that he seduced some years earlier. The half-finished painting of youthful innocence becomes both a means of detection and a moral judgement on the model, who may appear virginal but whose appearance is deceptive, and this revelation recalls the portrait scene in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Braddon's novel (published in 1862) had been so successful, and had often been dramatised, so that audiences for *Naomi's Sin* would have known the story and been likely to make a connection (even if it was subconscious) between the two scenes. In the earlier tale, George

Talboys is taken by his friend Robert Audley to view a portrait of Lady Audley, Robert's new relation, but he is amazed to recognise the woman in the picture as Helen, the wife he thought had died.¹²⁰

Lord Walton had described the maid in the picture as 'perfection' (Act 1, scene 2), but when the model's history is revealed, she is perfect no longer. However, her 'perfect' image, or as Naomi terms it, the 'pretty fancy', is still a powerful visual symbol. At the very end of the play, when Naomi is briefly reunited with Arthur on her deathbed, she asks him about the picture:

Naomi The – the picture! You – remember.

Arthur It was never finished – it has its place amongst the many abortive efforts of my life.

Naomi Take it out and hang it, not in one of your grand rooms, but in some quiet corner where you and she can sometimes look –

Arthur Indeed I will.

Naomi It was a pretty fancy ...

(*Naomi's Sin*, Act 2, scene 4, p. 38)

Once fallen, a woman can only be redeemed through death and divine forgiveness, but the impossibly ambiguous image of a pure and innocent, yet sexually attractive woman remains fixed in the portrait and by extension, the cultural imagination.

The portrait is a visual reminder that Naomi still has the same outward form, but it is the public knowledge of her previous seduction that makes her completely different.¹²¹ The strict moral rules mean that, despite Arthur's distress, he is bound to reject her. She can no longer be a true wife to him;

¹²⁰ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Vol. I, Chapter VIII 'Before the storm', pp. 61-72 (p. 70-71).

¹²¹ Thomas Hardy would, two decades later, use some of these elements in his novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) to critique the sexual double-standard. Tess, the vulnerable milkmaid, is sexually exploited by Alec D'Urberville. She is condemned and rejected by her new love, Angel Clare, when she reveals her past – even though he too has had a sexual relationship before marriage.

she has simply become yet another casualty of 'the old tale of villainy and weakness' (Act 1 scene 3). He does at least offer her financial security but withdraws his love:

Naomi It – it is all over then?

Arthur If you mean affection – fellowship, the interchange of thought and feeling, all that have blest and made perfect this one short month of wedlock – yes – all. That is over but you shall have every consideration – I will make ample provision for you.

(*Naomi's Sin*, Act 1, scene 3, p. 15)

Heartbroken at his rejection, she leaves the house, and disappears. We discover later that she has sought sanctuary with her former friend Jennie, now that they have both been abandoned by the men they love. Jennie was simply exploited and deceived, whereas Naomi is held doubly accountable because not only is she a 'fallen woman' but she is dishonest. Deliberate deception and mistaken identity both feature strongly in this play (and in others written by Mrs. Bright) and are arguably used for ideological purposes as well as plot development.

The similarities and differences between characters enables the playwright to comment on gender and class difference, particularly when she juxtaposes Naomi firstly with Jennie, and later with Ethel Masters. Naomi and Jennie are two working women who both 'fall' and are both punished, and the similarities between them are also used to set up a mystery which allows for the reappearance of Naomi in Act Two. She has lent Jennie one of her dresses for the first day in a new job, but when the dancer witnesses her former lover's marriage to his employer's daughter on the way to the theatre, she throws herself into the river in despair.¹²² When her body is found, a

¹²² Suicide by drowning was last resort chosen by many hundreds of real and fictional seduced and deserted Victorian women, and this phenomenon is highlighted by Thomas Hood in his poem 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1843), which was extremely popular, but which some critics have labelled 'morbid' (Drabble, p. 130).

A review of *Naomi's Sin* described the imagined scene, which is not actually staged in the play: 'Naomi glides out of the house, lost to Arthur's love, a waif in the

monogrammed handkerchief in her pocket appears to indicate that it is Naomi who has died. (Given that it is only the end of the first act and that in melodramas, seemingly dead heroines often returned, it is likely that audiences were sceptical about this element of the plot.) The fact that Naomi and Jennie have become interchangeable could also be interpreted as a comment by the playwright that once women have 'fallen', they are simply condemned, and their characters and the individual circumstances of their lives are subsumed beneath this one defining feature.

Perhaps to counter this tendency to reduction, the writer attempts to differentiate between these two female characters and gives them idiosyncratic personalities. Jennie does not have much time on stage, but it is likely that she made an impression. She is Irish, and speaks in dialect with energy and charm. Their friendship is mutually supportive: for example Naomi tries to console Jennie when it is clear that Charles Somerville has no intention of marrying her; Jennie warns Naomi to be careful of her reputation when Arthur Tregonning flirts with her. After Naomi's marriage, Jennie's landlady writes to Naomi expressing concern for her lodger. She writes that 'she has run off to nothing, and looks awful! ...she has left the Theatre and I can see her clothes are all going' (*Naomi's Sin*, Act 1, scene 2). Naomi immediately prepares to visit her friend and offer assistance, and although her plans are disrupted by her own humiliating exposure, she returns to Lambeth as soon as she can. Despite their own difficulties, women care about each other and are able to put others' happiness before their own.

Act Two features another example of a strong female friendship which also allows the playwright to controversially suggest that there is not such a

world. A despairing woman flits towards Waterloo Bridge at night; she hides under a buttress, away from the police; there is a splash in the river, and another has been added to the long list of the weary, broken-hearted ones, who have found rest in the Thames'. Extract from unnamed newspaper, collection E. W. Rodgers, op. cit., 5 May 1879.

gulf between virtuous and 'fallen' women. Sos Eltis points out that a ruthless distinction was made between the two groups, and they were kept rigidly separate.¹²³ Partly this was due to a genuine anxiety that physical contact with those considered to be sexual sinners would cause moral contamination of the innocent, and this concern was frequently expressed in public discourse and in fiction.¹²⁴ Eltis notes that 'good and bad women were worlds apart, and contact between them had to be carefully policed'.¹²⁵ However, *Act Two* opens with Naomi (disguised as 'Mrs Carton'), newly employed as a teacher and companion to Ethel Masters, a rich heiress who is pure and philanthropic. Ethel uses her fortune well: she has built a school to house and care for poor orphan children, and it is the desire to do charitable work which brings the two women together. Naomi is seeking redemption from her past, and her affection for her new employer provides her with an opportunity to demonstrate her selflessness. When Ethel falls ill with scarlet fever, Naomi endangers her own life by insisting that she nurse her, and the relationship between them grows ever stronger.

Although Naomi is in disguise, the audience are given clues as to her real identity, and are likely to have strongly suspected the truth. When Mrs. Carton first arrives at Sefton Park, Ethel's home, she is alone in the garden and accidentally knocks over a basket containing a miniature portrait of Arthur. She faints at the sight of his picture, and while she is unconscious Captain Lefèvre is able to look fully at her face, and the stage directions highlight the moment of recognition:

¹²³ Eltis, 'The fallen woman', p. 226.

¹²⁴ Fallen women even consider themselves to be contaminated and dangerous. For example in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* by Elizabeth Gaskell (1848), the seduced and abandoned Esther becomes a prostitute. She visits her niece Mary, who 'advanced to kiss her aunt ... to her surprise her aunt pushed her off with a frantic kind of gesture, and saying the words, "Not me. You must never kiss me. You!" / She rushed into the outer darkness of the street, and there wept long and bitterly.' Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, Chapter XXI, p. 235.

¹²⁵ Eltis, 'The fallen woman on stage', p. 226.

Lefèvre Whom have we here? (Looks eagerly at her face). Great Heaven can it be? (Sees the picture in her hand, releases it, an evil smile breaking over his face).

(*Naomi's Sin*, Act 2, scene 1, p. 25)

The playwright (as she did in *Bracken Hollow*) uses a plot twist here which is comparable to, but slightly different from, that in *East Lynne*. In the earlier play, Lady Isabel deliberately returns to the family home after an accident has left her disfigured. In *Naomi's Sin* the eponymous heroine has chosen her new place of employment without any knowledge that she is about to re-encounter the people from her former life. Mrs. Bright could be criticised for relying on the helpful convention of coincidence, but Naomi's ingenuousness could perhaps elicit sympathy from an audience who could see that she did not intend to pursue Arthur.

Although Captain Lefèvre is ostensibly in control of the situation because of his new knowledge, he had probably not expected the two women (Naomi, his former lover, and Esther, his new quarry) to become so physically and emotionally close. In an intimate scene in Ethel's 'chamber' Naomi says 'Kiss me dear', and the stage direction indicates that 'they embrace almost passionately'. As they hold one another, Naomi assures Ethel of the pure and altruistic nature of her love:

...remember now and in the future that of all the love proffered and felt for you there is none in the whole world so true so disinterested as that which fills the heart now beating on your own.

(*Naomi's Sin*, Act 2, scene 3, p. 32)

Their ardent relationship is certainly a convincing depiction of the power of platonic love between women; but within this specific context perhaps the display of loving intimacy helped to persuade an audience that Naomi, as a

fallen woman, would not bring misery and corruption through her touch but only comfort and healing.¹²⁶

Naomi not only demonstrates a disregard for her own health but she also makes the ultimate sacrifice and dies instead of her friend. Given Mrs. Bright's literary and theatrical knowledge, it is unlikely to be accidental that the pseudonym she chose for Naomi was Mrs. Carton, the same surname as the hero of the best-selling *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens (1859). Carton is redeemed by his 'generous devotion' to Lucie Manette, which motivates him to change places with her husband Charles Darnay who is facing execution.¹²⁷ However, there is a rather ambivalent variation in Mrs. Bright's narrative, as Naomi accidentally, rather than deliberately, becomes a victim of murder. The increasingly desperate Captain Lefèvre, unsuccessful in his attempt to woo his cousin Ethel for her fortune, poisons her lemonade in a reckless attempt to kill her and inherit her money. The lemonade never reaches its intended recipient, Naomi unknowingly drinks it, and despite attempts to save her life, she dies. Although the exact circumstances slightly undermine her act of self-sacrifice, an audience would have the overall impression that it is her devotion to Ethel which ultimately leads to her death. Her unselfish actions aid her moral rehabilitation and illustrate that even though she is a fallen woman, she possesses true nobility.

¹²⁶ Their relationship fits within a long tradition of strong sisterly love between women, and there are many examples of its depiction in prose fiction and poetry. The narrative poem *Goblin Market* by Christina Rossetti (1862) tells the story of two (supposed) sisters: one who is seduced by the goblins and their wares and the other who resists. Many critics interpret the feast offered by the goblins as a metaphor for heterosexual pleasures and opinion is divided as to the exact nature of the relationship between the two women.

Lilian Faderman explores the social and cultural contexts and the sexual implications of such relationships in *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women's Press, 1985, reprinted 1991).

¹²⁷ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), first published 1859.

Not only does Mrs. Bright illustrate the existence of genuine affection between the two women, but she also suggests that Ethel could be Naomi's double. They have similar characteristics, but the crucial difference between them is their access to money: they were both orphaned and had to fend for themselves, but Ethel's inheritance assures her of a position and a power that Naomi did not have. The heiress has financial security which means that she can easily reject the Captain's advances. Although Naomi's father was a clergyman and thus had a certain status, he had married a singer, and consequently been ostracised. Naomi tells Arthur in Act 1 scene 2 that her father's family 'were narrow minded prejudiced people', and when her parents died she had no option but to earn her own living as a teacher. It was whilst in the lowly position of governess to Captain Lefèvre's sisters, 'goaded by his mother's sneers' (Act 1, scene 3) that Naomi succumbed to his seductive advances. Ethel, however, has no need of money from men; she is mistress of her own estate and thus of her own destiny. The comparative fate of the two women (Naomi dies, and Ethel takes her place as Arthur's wife) comments on the ways in which financial circumstances can help or hinder moral behaviour. When Naomi urges Arthur to look sometimes at the unfinished portrait, she includes Ethel in her instruction: 'Take it out and hang it, not in one of your grand rooms, but in some quiet corner where you and she can sometimes look –' (Act 2, scene 4, p. 38). The dynamic between these three characters, suggested by this imagined visual tableau, could be an interesting subject of study, but perhaps a psycho-erotic reading of the play stretches credibility. Suffice it to say that Arthur may be about to marry again, but the image of his first love will always remain a powerful memory. Symbolically, he can safely possess both the sexually attractive maiden and the rich and respectable wife.

The actress who played the part of Naomi had to embody the idealised love-object and be able to arouse sympathy as the fallen woman. For the performance to be effective, the audience needed to believe in the allure of the character, and as we have already seen, this usually required the performer to be physically attractive. In the original production of *Naomi's Sin*, Kate's sister Fanny Pitt played the part. When commenting on her performance in the *Era*, the critic notes with relief:

This lady is fortunate enough to be able in the play to make use of the line from the old song, "My face is my fortune," where it occurs without causing the audience to doubt the extent of the fortune.¹²⁸

There may be a note of sardonic humour in the critic's voice here, but the pressures on actresses were real ones. It was important that Fanny not only had a pleasing appearance, but that she was also a talented actress: if the conventional response to the fallen woman were to be challenged, it was vital that the performer should be able to excite the compassion of the audience as well as satisfying their desire for visual pleasure. Evidently Fanny was successful in both areas: the *Era* commented on her 'extraordinary powers of pathos' in the final scene, and the *Sheffield Post* wrote that her performance was 'supremely pure and touching', and her 'power and delicacy' won the 'sympathy and admiration' of the audience.¹²⁹ The reviewer E. W. Rodgers concurred that she had a potent effect from the beginning of the play:

The quiet, subdued, and unconstrained acting of Miss Fanny Pitt in this the opening scene was admirably sustained, and the curtain dropped amid loud applause... In the third tableau, her appeal for mercy, and for a last kiss, when her former relations with Lefèvre had been discovered and her husband was lost to her for ever, was depicted with the greatest art, and she revealed an intensity of emotion which made a great impression upon the house.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ *Era*, 11 May 1879.

¹²⁹ *The Era*, May 11, 1879; *Sheffield Post*, 10 May (quoted in an advertisement in the *Era*, 25 May 1879).

¹³⁰ E. W. Rodgers, Reporter, cutting from unnamed newspaper, dated 5 May 1879.

If the character of a fallen woman could engage the sympathy of an audience, perhaps her plight could also stimulate them to think about why she was in such a position and thus elicit a more considered response than merely dismissing it as 'the old tale of villainy and weakness' (Act 1, scene 3). The treatment of Naomi in the play demonstrates a subtle shift in emphasis from simple condemnation of the moral turpitude of the fallen woman to recognition that circumstances affect behaviour, and that men should also take responsibility for their actions. Melodramatic heroines were often portrayed in dire circumstances, prey to exploitation and villainy, but by presenting Naomi in the way that she does, the playwright critiques male behaviour and the sexual double-standard. The reviewer in the *Era* noted the skill of the playwright in engaging the audience, but he also hinted that the story did not shy away from exposing wrongdoing by both sexes:

The plot which we have attempted to outline is brought out most effectively in a succession of masterly situations, and is embellished by a dialogue which sparkles with wit, which never permits the interest in the whole progress of the play to flag, and in which we find a wide and almost cynical knowledge of human nature, contrasted by touches of the deepest pathos.¹³¹

It is difficult to know exactly which aspect of the play triggered his use of the phrase 'wide and almost cynical knowledge', but his words could be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the clear-eyed way in which Mrs. Bright reflected harsh reality in her drama.

In this play (as with her others), women suffer disproportionately in relation to their actions, and also in contrast to men. Captain Lefèvre, the malevolent character in *Naomi's Sin*, escapes any kind of punishment and is unrepentant at the end of the play. Arthur Tregonning and Charles Somerville reject Naomi and Jennie and could be accused of indirectly causing their deaths. At least they both express a degree of guilt and remorse, but the way

¹³¹ *Era*, 11 May 1879.

that the successful and respected Dr. Somerville reflects on his treatment of Jennie suggests that he is still not wholly contrite. He berates himself for his behaviour: 'Heaven knows how gladly I would forego a moiety of my present affluence could I undo the cruel wrong I inflicted upon that poor loving heart' (Act 2, scene 2, p. 27). It is notable that his repentance does not inspire him to give up all his current wealth, only a certain amount, and this lightly ironic touch is a characteristic hallmark of the work of Mrs. Bright. She allows an element of ambivalence in her depiction of Arthur, and although he speaks harshly to Naomi when her secret is revealed, we do have some visual clues to his miserable state of mind. After the initial revelation he 'sinks sobbing upon a chair', and when he searches for Naomi, after she has run away from him, the stage direction notes that 'he is very pale and his clothes are worn carelessly' and he 'has evidently not noticed the rain' (Act 1, scene 4, p. 18). However, even though he reassures her at the end of the play, just before she dies, that he forgave her 'long ago' (Act 2, scene 4, p. 37), she must pay for his forgiveness. She dies, whereas he is effectively exonerated, and free to marry again.

At the end of *Naomi's Sin* the men may be materially successful and/or have escaped their just punishment, but the reviews of the production suggest that it is the female characters who have won the 'sympathy and admiration' of the audience. If this was the case, and spectators generally reacted with compassion and understanding, I contend that it was achieved by the combined talents of writer and actor.¹³² Fanny Pitt effectively interpreted the characters written by her sister; she received many good notices for her performances, in this play, and others. For example, she also played the main role in *Bracken Hollow*: 'Miss Fanny Pitt very recently appeared with great success at the Theatre Royal, Rotherham, as Helen, in

¹³² *Sheffield Post*, 10 May (quoted in advertisement in the *Era*, 25 May 1879).

Mrs. Bright's romantic drama'.¹³³ The collaboration between the two women seemed to be a fruitful one and the next section will briefly examine their efforts as creative producers and performers. Furthermore, it will provide an insight into the talent and versatility demonstrated by female theatre practitioners during the latter half of the century.

Part Four

Kate Bright Pitt, resourceful producer and mature performer (1880-1906)

Mrs. Bright had, in a short space of time, created a portfolio of plays that could be offered to theatrical managements for productions and tours, and both *Not False but Fickle* and *Noblesse Oblige* had been produced by the husband and wife partnership of John Nelson and Carlotta Leclercq. More importantly, her dramas also provided roles for members of her family – I have given evidence of Fanny's involvement, and her younger sister Lottie Pitt performed in *Noblesse Oblige*, and impressed the *Sheffield Independent*: 'The honours of the evening fell to Miss Lottie Pitt, who, as Victoria ... gave a decidedly clever and amusing portrait of the character of a girl in the early part of her teens'.¹³⁴ Her aunt Jane Coveney (who, according to her advertisement specialised in 'First Old Women and Character Business') played Mrs Brooke in *Naomi's Sin*.¹³⁵ Mrs. Bright had written interesting female characters in her plays and now she, her sisters, or other 'Lady Stars' could perform them.¹³⁶ Fanny Pitt was not only a performer, but she also took on a management role, and the *Era* of 23 April 1881 announced that 'Miss Fanny Pitt's Company' had

¹³³ *Era*, 19 October 1879.

¹³⁴ 'Sheffield Independent, 7 December 1878.

¹³⁵ *Era*, 25 May 1879.

¹³⁶ Advertisement in the *Era* 18 June 1881: 'Naomi's Sin, Bracken Hollow, Noblesse Oblige – Mrs Bright can arrange with Lady "Stars" or Managers of guaranteed tours for the above successful plays of Modern Life. Press opinions furnished and all negotiations conducted by the Secretary, Dramatic Authors' Society'.

been 'specifically organised for the adequate Representation of Mrs Augustus Bright's Society Dramas'.¹³⁷ It seemed that co-operation and versatility would enable the family to have mutually supportive and accomplished careers; but an unforeseen event was to bring new challenges.

When Augustus Bright died suddenly at the age of 50 on 1 November 1880, it appears that his widow, at 36 years old, was obliged to rely on her own talent and resources. John Coleman, Lessee of the Theatre Royal and the Adelphi in Sheffield in the 1850s became a good friend to Mrs. Bright in later life, and in a letter to the *Stage* newspaper, much later, in 1902, he described what happened to her, in his customary rather extravagant style:

The girl was married at eighteen, and her career (which promised to be a brilliant one) was over almost before it began. A short spell of conjugal happiness, two or three children, then the stage manager (who upsets all human calculations), Death, stepped in, and Mr. Bright made his final exit, leaving a young widow, to fight the battle of life hand to mouth for herself and children. There was nothing for it but to return to the profession she had so indiscreetly abandoned, but her father was dead, a new generation had arisen who knew her not, the glory of youth had departed, and from that time to this it has been one incessant but courageous struggle to keep the wolf from the door. To-day acting in theatres, to-morrow in fit-ups, anywhere where honest work could obtain scanty pay.¹³⁸

He was motivated to talk publicly about his friend due to her unhappy predicament, which had arisen from an accident she sustained in a small theatre in Kent - she had fallen 'down a death-trap' and been badly injured. Given that this was well before the introduction of sick pay, Coleman was asking colleagues in the profession for donations to assist her in her time of need.¹³⁹

Coleman's account implied that her progress had always been difficult, but initially after her husband died she appeared to be managing her career

¹³⁷ *Era*, 23 April 1881.

¹³⁸ *Stage*, 20 March 1902. Although Coleman casually notes that Mrs. Bright had 'two or three children', I have only found evidence that she had two daughters.

¹³⁹ Many colleagues contributed, and the *Stage* recorded all the donations. In two months he had collected just over £35 on her behalf.

very well. Samuel Tinsley published her novel *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* very shortly after his death and she commemorated him on the frontispiece:

To my loved husband's memory
I dedicate a story
In whose progress he evinced much interest.¹⁴⁰

Her speedy adaptation of this narrative (re-titled *Dane's Dyke*) received a production at the Theatre Royal, in August of the same year.¹⁴¹

The Alexandra Theatre, not the Theatre Royal, had hosted the early productions of Mrs. Bright. Although the former venue near the cattle market was well-established and popular, it would have been rather more prestigious to have a production open at the latter place, particularly as it had been enlarged and thoroughly refurbished the previous November. The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* reported that 'it may be really considered an entirely new building', and described in glowing terms and great detail the beauty and splendour of the improvements.¹⁴² Moreover, the *Sheffield Independent* was of the opinion that this new play showed progress; one reviewer notes the 'marked advance' in her writing, whilst another article informs the reader that it is hoped to produce *Dane's Dyke* elsewhere, and its writer is cautiously optimistic about Mrs. Bright's prospects:

The path of dramatic literature is a perilous one to tread; for whilst the successes are few, the failures can be numbered by the thousand. Mrs Bright is, however, making her way. Each new step shows a positive improvement, and it may be that by-and-bye she will strike the happy vein which will lead to assured success.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Mrs. Augustus Bright, *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* (London: Samuel Tinsley and Company, 1881), p. 2.

¹⁴¹ The Lessee was at this time E. Romaine Callender, another entrepreneurial writer and actor who managed the Sheffield theatre for five years, from 1880-85.

¹⁴² *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, Monday 1st and Tuesday 2nd November, 1880. The Alexandra, perhaps not wanting to be eclipsed, had also been 'thoroughly improved in every part' when re-decoration had taken place during the summer, *Sheffield Independent*, 31 August 1880.

¹⁴³ *Sheffield Independent*, 25 August 1881.

Mrs. Bright, mindful of the 'perilous' nature of making a living from dramatic writing alone, also performed in this production of *Dane's Dyke*: she took on the leading role of Hortense Gresier. Her eldest child Dora made her debut, in a manner common to theatrical families, as Lily, her daughter. The production also provided the opportunity for Dora to showcase her musical talents; indeed the *Sheffield Independent* was more impressed by her musical skills than her acting. The critic reported that although she was 'very nervous ... she was thoroughly at home at the piano, and played a nocturne with no little ability'.¹⁴⁴ Dora would eventually achieve longer lasting fame than her mother through her music, particularly for her compositions, but both women illustrate the importance of versatility in the commercially competitive world of Victorian theatre.¹⁴⁵

The collection of plays written by Mrs. Bright, in which she could also perform, gave her an advantage over other mature actresses. Although there is no evidence that she wrote another play after *Dane's Dyke*, Hortense Gresier would become one of her staple characters in touring productions of that play, and she was able to mount and tour productions of her own work by combining her skills as an actress with her wide and detailed knowledge of theatres, performers and venues. After a successful initial run of six nights for *Dane's Dyke* at the Theatre Royal, it began a tour, and an advertisement in

¹⁴⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 August 1881.

¹⁴⁵ Dora Estella Bright, later Dora Estella Knatchbull (1862-1951). Composer and pianist, she was the first woman to receive the Charles Lucas prize from the Royal Academy of Music for musical composition in 1888. See Sophie Fuller, *Women Composers during the British Musical Renaissance, 1880-1918* (PhD, University of London, 1998); Gerald Norris, *A Musical Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1981), pp. 182, 336. She continued her association with theatre: she composed original music (referred to as 'striking' by the *Sheffield Independent*, 14 February 1893) for *Uncle Silas* by Lawrence Irving and Seymour Hicks, which was produced at the Shaftesbury Theatre in 1893, and involved Edward Gordon Craig and Violet Vanbrugh. *Era*, 2 January 1893.

In his account of the rise of the professional actor, Michael Baker asserts that the 'regular play-actor' sought for 'occupational distinctiveness' and he [sic] wished to distance himself from other kinds of performance. However, blurred distinctions could be useful, and provided opportunities for resourceful performers. Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor*, p. 15-16.

the *Era* on 2 July 1881 suggests that Mrs. Bright retrieved the copyright for all her plays, so she could manage them herself:

Naomi's Sin, Bracken Hollow and Noblesse Oblige

Mrs. Bright can negotiate with Managers for production of the above, with or without her own services.

Her plays still provided employment for her siblings: a production of *Bracken Hollow* at the Theatre Royal in Cardiff featured her brothers Mr. Felix Pitt and Mr. E. Bulwer 'as the hunchback and the chevalier respectively'.¹⁴⁶ The fact that the playwright herself became actively involved in the business of theatre again may have caused some problems for the relationship between Kate and Fanny - although all the Pitt family continued to work within the profession for many years, it would appear that these two siblings did not remain in close contact.¹⁴⁷

Mrs Bright's investment of time and energy into producing her own work may have been a practical and economic necessity, but it also helped to ensure that her plays were produced to her satisfaction, and she kept a careful watch on their reception. A negative review about the reception of her plays in Middlesbrough in the *Era* provoked her to write a letter in September 1881 which contradicted the critic's assessment and shifted the blame to the venue and its patrons:

I can only state that we counted two excellent houses in the six nights ... Mr. George Imeson [the manager] ... gave me liberal terms ... and

¹⁴⁶ *Western Mail*, 28 June 1881.

¹⁴⁷ Fanny Pitt had a long career as an actress, and a published anecdote reveals that she was evidently bold and defiant, as well as a talented performer. After a performance of *Moths* at Sturton Town Hall Theatre in Cambridge, she was served with a notice by the Town Clerk, threatening legal proceedings 'if she persisted in giving any more dramatic representations'. Although she had received permission to perform from the Vice Chancellor of the University, the Mayor had been absent at the time, and thus had not also given his consent. She read the letter from the VC aloud on stage, and 'remarked that it was not surely to be borne that a town of 35,000 persons was to be debarred from rational and proper recreation at the will of one man'. The article praised Pitt's courage, and opined that if the authorities penalised her, 'Cambridge is likely to be the scene of an agitation such as has not been known for years, and which will, we trust, sweep away these absurd and antiquated laws which invest two persons with such arbitrary powers'. *Era*, 14 October 1882.

it was not his fault that I was self-deceived in the status of the Theatre and the requirements of the audience.¹⁴⁸

She had already taken umbrage at a negative review of *Bracken Hollow* at Richmond in Surrey, and she rebuked the critic, telling him that 'misapprehension of character is not criticism'.¹⁴⁹

Touring was a necessary part of a theatrical career, and although Mrs. Bright had developed a special connection with Sheffield, she, like other theatre professionals, cultivated (wherever possible) mutually beneficial relationships with other provincial theatres and with venues in London. She frequently performed the work of other dramatists; for example she had a season at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon in the spring of 1885 with her younger brother Felix, where they both played major roles in several Shakespeare plays (*Measure for Measure*, *As You Like It*, *Cymbeline*, *Love's Labours Lost*, *Romeo and Juliet*), as well as in historical and contemporary drama and comedy (*The Lady of Lyons*, *A Shadow Sceptre*, *A Scrap of Paper*, *The School for Scandal*, *The Ironworker*).¹⁵⁰ Despite appearances in well-known plays in prestigious locations, Mrs. Bright (who, in these later years, increasingly referred to herself as Kate Bright, or Kate Bright Pitt) faced the same uncertainties as others of her profession: as every run or tour ended, there was no guarantee that there would be another.

Perhaps in a bid for more security, she even attempted venue management, and a review of one of her productions demonstrates her flexible and creative approach:

Todmorden – Theatre Royal
(Lessee and Directress, Mrs. Augustus Bright)

¹⁴⁸ *Era*, 10 September 1881.

¹⁴⁹ *Era*, 24 October 1880.

¹⁵⁰ Royal Shakespeare Company archive database: <http://www.calm.shakespeare.org.uk>; <http://www.theatricalia.com> [accessed 10 January 2013]; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 April 1885, *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 24 April 1885.

On Saturday last Mrs. Bright's Company favoured the patrons of this theatre with an excellent representation of *Macbeth*, which was magnificently mounted. The house was well filled, and the audience manifested their approbation by demonstrative applause after each fall of the curtain. ... The singing directress as first singing witch was highly commendable, and altogether a great success was scored.¹⁵¹

The critic may have praised the production, but there is something a little dispiriting about his description of Mrs. Bright as 'the singing directress' who is playing the part of 'first singing witch'. It is somewhat less prestigious than the lead role in a self-authored play. This seems to have been a short-lived diversion, and she abandoned theatre management even more quickly than her mother had.

Although the Pitts had achieved a level of stability during their time at the Theatre Royal, when Charles died his widow Ellen struggled to cope financially. She was bankrupt in April 1869 and she had a dispute with the incoming lessee, Mr. Gomersal, which ended in court.¹⁵² Boldly (or perhaps somewhat foolishly) she relocated to London, and undertook the management of the Surrey Theatre. Unfortunately her period of office ended quickly and rather ignominiously when she was summoned to Southwark police court 'to answer the complaint of several of the scene-shifters for neglecting and refusing to pay them their wages'.¹⁵³ Finally withdrawing from the managerial fray, Ellen returned to acting, and continued almost until she died in 1897.

Like her maternal parent, Kate's principal source of income in her later years was from performance, but her later engagements were shorter, and sometimes only consisted of an appearance on a variety bill, rather than a role in a full-length drama. In 1891 she appeared with Mr. Henry Bradford as 'dramatic sketch artists' at the Empire Theatre of Varieties in Coventry, sharing the bill with eccentric comedians, a character impersonator and a

¹⁵¹ *Stage*, 24 March 1882.

¹⁵² *Sheffield Times*, 17 December 1870.

¹⁵³ *Sheffield Independent*, 15 April 1870.

juvenile vocalist.¹⁵⁴ She was still getting parts in melodrama as late as 1901, and usually received complimentary notices: 'Kate Pitt Bright gives a clever portrayal of Ma Goodluck' in *Power and Glory*; and she 'deserves praise for her reading of the part of the 'Woman in Chains' in *Defender of the Faith*.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the venues declined in status (and were evidently dangerous), and when she was injured she became greatly in need of money, as evidenced by Coleman's appeal.¹⁵⁶

Even after her accident she still attempted to use her range of talents: she advertised that she was 'open to write sketches', and in 1903 she wrote a 'Christmas Serial' which was published in the *Warrington Guardian*. In January of the following year she reminded her co-professionals that she had been 'congratulated by press and readers upon her late successful story' and that she could 'arrange with recognised playwrights for dramatisation'.¹⁵⁷ There is no evidence that any collaboration resulted from this advertisement, and her professional career ended, rather poignantly, with a 'serious illness' in December 1905, and a personal notice in the newspaper which simply stated that she would be 'glad to hear from old friends'.¹⁵⁸ She had never fully recovered from her injury at the theatre in Kent, and she died at the relatively early age of 62.

¹⁵⁴ *Era*, 29 August 1891.

¹⁵⁵ *Stage*, 10 January and 28 February 1901.

¹⁵⁶ The Parliamentary Select Committee of 1892, established 'to inquire into the operation of Acts of Parliament relating to the Licensing and Regulation of Theatres and Places of Public Entertainment' was concerned to a large extent with building regulations and health and safety.

¹⁵⁷ *Stage*, 16 May 1901, 3 December 1903, 28 January 1904.

¹⁵⁸ *Stage*, 14 December 1905.

Part Five

'Mother of Mrs Kennedy Allen': the subject disappears

'The world is a barbarous monster, and forgets.'

John Coleman used this 'bitter epigraph', which he claimed was originally uttered by Dion Boucicault on his deathbed, at the head of his letter to the *Stage* about the plight of his friend, Kate Bright Pitt.¹⁵⁹ Her successful career had not brought lasting security, and although in the early days she had benefited from her family connections, her difficulties and isolation in later life demonstrated the limitations of these support networks. Her daughter Dora had married Wyndham Knatchbull, a Captain of the 3rd Dragoon Guards, and great-grandson of the 7th Baronet of Mersham Hatch; even after she was prematurely widowed she continued to live in comfortable circumstances in Babington in Somerset, but it seems that she was estranged from her mother. They certainly appeared to live separate lives; when Kate died she was alone in the West Midlands.¹⁶⁰ As well as her estrangement from her blood relatives, it appears that she did not maintain a cordial relationship with the Bright family, and perhaps their prejudices against actresses resurfaced once Augustus was no longer there to defend her. Although there is evidence that she remained at Olinda Cottage in Sheffield for a couple of years after her husband died, she is not listed at that address from about 1883 onwards, and she never lived permanently in Sheffield again.¹⁶¹ Although the Bright family was large and prosperous, and local historians have gathered many details about its members, she is absent from all their accounts. The family had a mausoleum at Moscar, in the countryside about seven miles outside the city

¹⁵⁹ *Stage*, 20 March 1902.

¹⁶⁰ Coleman, however, reports that 'she has received great kindness ... from her own relatives'. *Stage*, 20 March 1902. Her mother and sister predeceased her: Ellen Pitt died 14 November 1897 and Fanny on 19 February 1898.

¹⁶¹ The property is not listed in 1883, but by 1887 it is occupied by Henry Marsden and in 1889 by Mrs. E. Colver (*Sheffield Directory* 1883, 1887, 1889).

centre, but she was not interred there; indeed she received no obituary in the local press when she died and her name does not even feature in the list of noteworthy deaths compiled by the Sheffield Local Studies Library.

Despite the opinion of one critic that 'her plays are not written merely to suit the passing fancy of to-day, but will form a valuable addition to stage literature', her creative output has been forgotten.¹⁶² Although she received a short obituary in the *Stage*, the notification of her death in the *Era* is an illustration (and an indictment) of the way women are often edited out of theatre history. It simply states: 'Mrs. Augustus Bright, Mother of Mrs. Kennedy Allen'.¹⁶³ There is no mention of her performance career or her achievements in playwriting; she has been reduced to the roles of wife and matriarch. Her younger daughter Georgina, whose stage name was Miss Georgie de Lara, is also obliterated, and is referred to by her husband's name, Kennedy Allen. Georgina had toured with her mother in various productions in the 1880s, and went on to have a long career in comedies and musical theatre, an increasingly popular genre.¹⁶⁴ She played the part of Peggy Munro in *The Soldier's Wedding* by Walter Melville, and a review of the production in the *Stage* notes that it was her 276th performance, indicating a degree of success.¹⁶⁵ Rose Ellen Dibdin Pitt (another female relative) appeared at the City Theatre in Sheffield in June 1895 in a musical comedy

¹⁶² This quote appeared at the end of a personal notice from 'Miss Kate Pitt Bright' in the *Stage*, 2 April 1903, but notes that the opinion is reprinted from the *Era*.

¹⁶³ *Era*, 6 January 1906.

¹⁶⁴ *Era*, 12 December 1885. She later achieved success with *The Circus Girl*, which toured the provinces and played at the Standard in London. It was described as a 'merry musical play... with capital songs, pretty music, and pretty faces and dresses'. *Era*, 22 April 1899.

¹⁶⁵ *Stage*, 2 January 1908.

entitled *The Last Call*, and these younger generations provide continuity with the histories of twentieth century performance.¹⁶⁶

This chapter has documented and analysed the career of one individual woman, with the intention to challenge the commonly-held prejudices, or assumptions, about gender roles, melodrama, and cultural life outside the metropolis. Provincial theatre was not always subservient or inferior to London; it operated through an autonomous network, and employed talented and experienced individuals. Tracing the employment patterns of Kate Pitt (which rarely included the capital), has provided more evidence that regional theatres operated busily and successfully, and has indicated the connections and relationships between them.

In addition to her individual contribution, Kate (Catherine Coveney) Pitt Bright is also a representative of the many female playwrights who made an independent living from their work but have since disappeared into obscurity. Exposing her history has been instrumental in countering the belief, noted by Kate Newey, that no other type of woman playwright existed in the nineteenth century, beside those deemed 'exceptional'.¹⁶⁷ Women featured in many sectors of theatrical organisations and they had more control than is often acknowledged. Through their chosen medium of theatre, usually within the genre of melodrama, women practitioners had the potential to communicate with large numbers of people and to wield a certain amount of influence. Despite the restrictions imposed by hegemonic ideologies, the female characters in the dramas written by Kate Pitt were presented as more than two-dimensional stereotypes. Although her plays were usually referred

¹⁶⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 28 May; *Era*, 1 June 1895.

¹⁶⁷ Kate Newey, *Women's Writing in Victorian Britain*, p. 11.

to as 'dramas' or 'modern dramas' at the time of their original production, they are liable to be labelled as 'melodramatic' by twentieth and twenty-first century critics, and thus dismissed. It is true that they were written to appeal to the emotions of their audience; their plots are somewhat convoluted, and they use devices such as improbable coincidences and shocking revelations. Yet, using this popular medium, Kate Pitt placed women centre stage, and through her 'transcribing of actions feminine', she was able to challenge how women were perceived in the cultural imagination.¹⁶⁸

Public perception of a class, or group, of people is of particular concern in the next chapter, which considers two plays, described as 'sensation dramas' (usually categorised as a sub-genre of melodrama).¹⁶⁹ This form was chosen by the playwrights Joseph Fox and Charles Reade to document contemporary events in Sheffield and to address (in contrasting ways) the pressing problems arising from them. Through a consideration of these productions and their reception, my second case study will examine a different, yet complementary, aspect of the challenges that faced provincial theatre.

¹⁶⁸ Kate Bright, *Unto the Third and Fourth Generation* (London: Samuel Tinsley and Company, 1881), Book II, Chapter VII, p. 112.

¹⁶⁹ Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965).

Chapter Three

The challenge of using theatre for social and political intervention: *The Union Wheel* and *Put Yourself in His Place*

'The Stage might be the rectifier of abuses'.¹

'The abominations of trade unionism may be legitimate, but are not very attractive subjects for dramatic treatment.'²

Introduction

My second case study recovers the work of another forgotten playwright, Joseph Fox (1833-1906), and it focuses particularly on one of his plays, *The Union Wheel* (1870), which caused a significant amount of controversy when it had its premiere production. This chapter further develops my argument that the stage in Sheffield was a contested space, and it examines the specific challenges when drama is not only used to document current events, but also to serve as provocative advocate for a cause or a course of action. In *The Union Wheel* Fox depicted the violent industrial conflicts taking place in Sheffield which had become known as 'the Outrages'; as did his contemporary Charles Reade (1814-1884), who wrote *Put Yourself in His Place*, first as a novel, followed very quickly by a stage adaptation (prefixed by the phrase *Free Labour*), which was also produced in 1870.³ In this chapter I argue that both playwrights had social and political agendas which they attempted to promote through their dramas. The productions fuelled animated and indignant public debates about the suitability of such material for the stage; indeed, the reception of both plays

¹ Edith, a character in *The Union Wheel*, speaks these words in Act 1, scene 1, p. 3. Joseph Fox, *The Union Wheel*, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53084H. The text (transcribed from the MS.) is at Appendix A2. All page numbers cited refer to this transcript.

² Review of *Put Yourself in His Place* by Charles Reade, *Morning Post*, 30 May 1870.

³ Charles Reade, *Free Labour; or, Put Yourself in His Place*, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53085X): page numbers cited refer to the original pagination within the text of this copy. Reviews of Reade's play often referred to it without the prefix, and I have tended to follow this convention.

raised questions of censorship and betrayed deep-rooted anxieties about the subversive potential of performance.

My investigation of the plays situates them within a complex web of information and commentary which stretched across the country, and examines the complicated (and in this case mainly antagonistic) relationship between Sheffield and London. We shall see how provincial trade matters had a major impact on the history of labour and societal change; but of greater concern in this chapter is how this material was represented on stage, and the furore the productions caused. It is important to differentiate between the substance of the texts; how the material was interpreted on stage; and their place within a wider context of industrial relations and social instability. Most of the chapter is concerned with the immediate circumstances of the productions, together with detailed analysis of their representation and reception. However, the concluding section returns to the recurring theme of the value of theatre, and it examines how this question is dramatised in *The Union Wheel*. Moreover, it considers the ways in which Fox's contribution related to pressing debates in Sheffield about theatre in the 1860s and 1870s, particularly when it was compared with other forms of entertainment, such as music hall.

Both Fox and Reade used rich yet controversial source material: a potent combination of real, recent incidents, and the notorious local personalities who had been, and continued to be, involved in them. 'Outrages' was a term which was applied to the increasingly uncompromising tactics, used by some artisans in the cutlery and tool-making industries, in their battles to preserve levels of pay and conditions of employment against the growing threats of mechanisation and contentious business practices.⁴ From

⁴ The word 'outrage' is used in connection with destroying a grinder's working tools as early as 1829 (a report from the *Sheffield Courant*, reprinted in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* 19 December), and is increasingly used as a collective noun by the 1860s. The *Northern Star* reported on 2 May 1846 that 'these acts of disorder were not new

the 1840s onwards, rapid technological developments endangered the survival of the old craft skills, and the trade societies responded with increasingly aggressive means of enforcing compliance with membership and regulations. Threatening letters, and disabling the tools and equipment of recalcitrant workers (known as rattening) had been tacitly accepted as necessary practices by many artisans in Sheffield, but the increasingly savage methods were not.⁵ Common methods of intimidation and punishment included physical assaults in the street; 'blow-ups' (concealed explosives in grinding wheels which were designed to detonate as soon as they were set in motion); home-made bomb attacks on places of work or domestic premises; injuring or killing livestock, and shooting people. Newspaper reports of the situation in Sheffield grew increasingly strident (local historian J. H. Stainton described the demand for action as 'a gradually overwhelming cry throughout the country for some procedure to be adopted whereby such practices might be stopped') and this public pressure (from manufacturers, trade unions themselves, and the press) forced a parliamentary Commission of Inquiry, convened in the summer of 1867.⁶

The events taking place in Sheffield were pivotal ones in the history of industrial relations: the local turbulence was part of a much bigger struggle for employment rights, and the consequences would be far-reaching and long-

in Sheffield, but had prevailed more or less since 1837'. When questions were asked in Parliament, Sir J. Graham responded, that he 'was bound to say that Sheffield was the only town in England where crimes of this description were committed'.

⁵ The term 'rattening' is described as 'The act or practice of abstracting tools, destroying machinery or appliances etc. as a means of enforcing compliance with the rules of a trade-union, or of venting spite (chiefly associated with Sheffield)' J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 222-223. Melvyn Jones notes that the term is 'thought to be derived from the meaning of rats entering buildings and taking away or destroying human belongings', Melvyn Jones, *The Making of Sheffield* (Barnsley: Wharnccliffe Local History, 2004), p. 84; and this derivation is corroborated by the O.E.D., which further notes that 'ratton' is a Scottish and Northern dialect word for a rat, and cites an early example in Charlotte Bronte's novel *Shirley*, p. 227.

⁶ J. H. Stainton, *The Making of Sheffield* (Sheffield: E. Weston and Sons, 1924), p. 25.

lasting. The economic and social historian Sidney Pollard explains the significance of this historical moment in his introduction to the reprinted Report and Proceedings of the Inquiry:

The activities of the Sheffield unions were submerged in the question of the survival of trade unions as such, not just in Sheffield, but in the country as a whole. ...trade unions had been propelled into public consciousness in the mid-1860s and were to find themselves very quickly at a most critical turning point of their career.⁷

Pollard notes that another reason for the increased profile of unions (in addition to their role in the violent conflicts) was their increased size and activity, as workers recognised the strength of united action. New labour movements gathered momentum when artisans not only joined together locally with those in the same or similar trades but also formed 'large national amalgamated societies' and local and national trades' councils.⁸

This escalation was happening at the same time as the intense campaign to extend the electoral franchise, and there was a serious danger that the behaviour of the union militants in Sheffield would confirm prejudices about the brutality of the working class and thus discredit all attempts to achieve greater equality.⁹ An article in the local press warned of these grave consequences:

Another misfortune, and one decidedly more menacing than those we have named is the damage that is being done to the cause of popular government by the turmoil and clamour, the commotion and violence which characterise these trade combats.¹⁰

⁷ Sidney Pollard, Introduction, *The Sheffield Outrages: Report presented to the Trades Unions Commissioners in 1867* (Bath: Adams and Dart, 1971), p. vi.

⁸ Pollard, op. cit. p. vi-viii. He documents the contribution of Sheffield to the establishment of the Trades Union Congress (T.U.C.) and the struggle to make trades unions fully legal; and he stresses the significance of the Outrages. See also Sidney Pollard, 'Labour' in *The History of the City of Sheffield 1843-1993, Vol. II: Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 260-278, (pp. 264-5).

⁹ Despite the opposition, the Second Reform Bill was given Royal Assent in August 1867.

¹⁰ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 5 January 1866.

Later that year on 8 October 1866 a deliberate explosion in a cellar in New Hereford Street provoked nationwide censure, and newspapers such as the *Times* used this attack to justify the argument that the franchise should not be extended. A writer for the *Birmingham Daily Post* responded by spelling out the *Times*' syllogistic way of thinking, that it 'was an outrage ... committed by a trade-unionist, therefore trades' unions are responsible for it. Trades unions represent the working classes; therefore the working-classes are responsible for it'; but he went on to criticise this flawed reasoning as unfair, as a 'foul blow', and suggested that the *Times* was guilty of 'libelling a whole class in order to find a basis for a fallacious argument'.¹¹ The issue of the nature, or disposition, of the 'working classes' was fundamental to the debate about democratic rights, and all factions looked for evidence to support their point of view. The representation of working-class individuals, or groups, either in newspaper articles, or in prose fiction, or on stage, was therefore a crucial tool, or weapon, in the argument.

Historians such as Pollard emphasised the significance of the Outrages to the struggle for democracy and equal rights, and other dramatists since Fox and Reade have made use of this extraordinary material. For example a series of 'dramatic interludes' was written for radio in the 1930s about the history of trade unionism, and 'The Sheffield Outrages' featured as an individual episode.¹² The events also inspired a very popular production, titled *The Stirrings in Sheffield on Saturday Night*, written by Alan Cullen and directed by Colin George, which had its premiere at the Sheffield Playhouse in 1966, was revived there in 1968, and was mounted again in 1973 for the

¹¹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 20 October 1866.

The *Times* had a reputation for rather conservative views, whereas the *Birmingham Daily Post* was known to have Radical leanings, *English Newspapers: Chapters in the History of Journalism*, Henry Richard Fox Bourne, Vol. II (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966, first published 1887), p. 258.

¹² R. S. Lambert, Episode IV, produced by Jack Inglis, 3 May 1934; script published in *The Listener*, 9 May 1934.

opening of the new Crucible Theatre.¹³ This musical production has a special place in the popular cultural heritage of Sheffield; it tells the story of the Outrages rather in the style of *Oh! What a Lovely War* (which had been created a few years earlier in 1963 by Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop), with music-hall inspired songs and local folk tunes, together with cartoon villains and slapstick humour. Although described as a 'local documentary' in the programme note, the tone of the text suggests that celebratory entertainment, rather than factual representation, was its priority. It is often revived, for example it was produced at the University Theatre Studio in November 2011 by the Sheffield University Drama Society. In a conversation with Colin George (the original director) he admitted that the creative team behind *The Stirrings* were unaware of any nineteenth century dramatisations of the events.

This lack of knowledge yet again demonstrates the vulnerability of provincial theatrical history, and emphasises how important it is to seek out all the elements which relate to a particular set of incidents in order to assemble a more comprehensive picture. Even though the work of Charles Reade has received some critical attention, he was not a local writer, and the dramatic intervention made by Joseph Fox, who lived and worked in Sheffield, has been all but forgotten. Theatre was a public space which generally, at this time, had a mixed audience of all classes, so drama provided an unusually democratic opportunity to address important issues and to potentially influence opinion. Although the trade disputes began early in the century and continued through many decades, my analysis of events and their

¹³ Alan Cullen, *The Stirrings in Sheffield on Saturday Night* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974).

The Sheffield Playhouse was the home of the Sheffield Repertory Theatre Company at this time. The Repertory Company had moved into the Temperance Hall in Townhead Street in 1928, and after several successful decades, several of their members (including Colin George) became the driving force behind the creation of a new theatre for Sheffield, the Crucible.

interpretation is focused on the eventful three years between the Commission of Inquiry in June-July 1867 and the productions of both plays in 1870: they were not written in a period of dispassionate and calm reflection but rather amidst its divisive aftermath. The Inquiry had revealed the breadth and depth of the acrimonious situation within the cutlery industry in Sheffield, but it had not solved the problems, and these circumstances gave purpose and urgency to the playwrights' interventions, and significantly affected their reception. The events they dramatised were very recent, and violent attacks continued to unsettle local inhabitants as well as observers from farther afield.

Both *The Union Wheel* and *Put Yourself in His Place* could be described as melodramas, intended to have popular appeal, but their meaning and impact was complicated by the context of their production, which was overshadowed by the conflicting and competitive public rhetoric about the Outrages, their consequences, and anxiety about potential future conflict. The uproar that they caused became part of a broader discourse about appropriate material for the stage, and the relationship between theatre, politics and the public. In *Melodramatic Tactics*, Elaine Hadley analyses the ways in which the dominant style of popular drama influenced other kinds of mass media throughout the period, and her observations about the relationship between stage and social processes during the last third of the century are particularly pertinent here. She contends that the particular features of the 'melodramatic mode', namely 'familial narratives, criminal situations, overcharged emotionalism, and uncanny responsiveness to its audience', were used in many contexts where public opinion mattered. Although she makes reference to drama on stage, most of her case studies are drawn from other types of public address, such as pamphlets and

parliamentary debate.¹⁴ My analysis considers the tone and message of the two plays through detailed textual and production analysis, but it also evaluates their impact through an account of their reception. As part of this review, I consider the employment and influence of the 'melodramatic mode' in public meetings and published articles as well as within the plays themselves, and so the context of the productions becomes an even more integral element.

1. Drama as documentary; or documenting drama

1.1 The Commission of Inquiry, June-July 1867

The two plays were particularly challenging because of the severity of the situation they dramatised, and David Price notes that the Inquiry itself was 'extraordinarily dramatic'.¹⁵ In order to expose the truth about Union involvement in violence, and thus fully understand the extent of the problem, the Commission had been granted remarkable and controversial powers: it had jurisdiction to grant amnesty to all those who made a full confession about their activities. This was to pertain to any kind of criminal act, including violence and murder, which had been committed over the past ten years. (Although there was a much longer history of violent attacks due to trade disputes, the Commission limited their enquiry.) Granting amnesty in this way was a highly unusual step to take, almost unprecedented in the history of the legal system: in Pollard's words 'it violated every concept of justice'.¹⁶ He asserts that this somewhat dangerous strategy was chosen for a simple reason: 'to prove that the crimes were squarely to be laid at the door of the

¹⁴ Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace 1800-1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 183-4.

¹⁵ David Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers: Rebels and Radicals in Sheffield History* (West Sussex: Phillimore and Co. Ltd, 2008), p. 60.

¹⁶ Pollard, *The Sheffield Outrages: Report*, viii.

trade unions. There can be no doubt that without that quite extraordinary power the Commissioners would have been as unable as the police had been before them to lay bare the sources of the violence.’ However, Pollard suggests that there was a rather unexpected consequence: ‘the Sheffield Commission, like the national one sitting in London, served rather to strengthen the unions’ case and their legal position, than to undermine it’.¹⁷

The outcome was unknown at the beginning of the process, when members of the Commission began sitting in London. It quickly became clear that it would be difficult to gather evidence at a distance, and thus representatives visited Sheffield at the beginning of June 1867, and held their Inquiry there over six weeks. The hearings were conducted openly: according to J. H. Stainton, ‘the Commission was welcomed by a very representative attendance of the leading gentlemen in the town’, and his vivid descriptions of the proceedings emphasise their inherent drama.¹⁸ There is no evidence that Joseph Fox or Charles Reade were at the hearings, but both writers could feasibly have attended, or been in contact with those who had. Certainly there were writers present, who were part of ‘a crowd buzzing with excitement at the latest revelations and thirsting for more’.¹⁹ The clandestine activities of the trades unions were finally to be fully revealed to an avid public.

The Commission was thorough in its task: the Minutes of the proceedings run to almost 500 pages²⁰, and the *Sheffield Local Register* names almost 100 witnesses, ranging from file cutters, saw grinders and other tool-makers; to wives and associates of the artisans; secretaries of the

¹⁷ Pollard, *The Sheffield Outrages*, p. viii-ix.

¹⁸ J. H. Stainton, *The Making of Sheffield*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Pollard, *The Sheffield Outrages: Report*, xi.

²⁰ Pollard notes that the Report of the Commission contains the ‘verbatim account’ of witnesses, and thus it is a record of ‘personal drama’ as well as: ‘a guide through the maze of social and industrial relationships existing in Sheffield in the 1860s’. Pollard, *The Sheffield Outrages: Report*, p. i.

different branches of the unions; and solicitors, builders and ministers of the Church.²¹ Fictionalised versions of many of these characters appeared in Fox and Reade's plays, including the most controversial figure of William Broadhead (c.1815-1879), the powerful and charismatic Secretary of the Saw-Grinders' Union, who finally gave evidence on 20 June, the 13th day of the Commission. Even though his involvement in objectionable activities had been something of an open secret, the attendees at the hearing and the wider public must nevertheless have been taken aback by his statement, summarised in the *Sheffield Local Register*:

Broadhead confessed to the murder of Linley, the blowing up of Wheatman and Smith, blowing up Linley in the Wicker, blowing up Samuel Baxter, at Loxley, blowing up of Joseph Wilson, in Headford street, blowing up Reaney's Wheel, in the Park, blowing up Joseph Helliwell, at Blonk Wheel, and attempting to shoot him at Firth's; attempting to blow up Messrs. Firth's boiler, hamstringing Elisha Parker's horse, shooting at Parker, the Hereford Street outrage, hundreds of rattenings, and writing threatening letters.²²

Although the list ends rather bathetically with Broadhead's admission that he had initiated written threats, his confession would probably have resulted in the death penalty under normal circumstances. He would have been aware of this, and chose to accept the amnesty that he was offered, but his later behaviour suggests that he was not repentant. According to Stainton, he was capable of rapid transformations. When his admission at the Inquiry was greeted by hissing, he 'stood firm, idly toying with his eyeglasses, until the storm abated, and then callously went on', yet on the final day of his hearing he was apparently 'a broken and humble man, often crying bitterly as he answered the questions'.²³

Despite the conclusion of the Commissioners at the end of the six weeks that 12 of the 60 trades unions in Sheffield had sanctioned criminal

²¹ *SLR*, 3 June – 8 July 1867, pp. 754-9.

²² *SLR*, 20 June 1867, p. 756.

²³ Stainton, *The Making of Sheffield*, p. 36 and p. 38.

activity and that there was conclusive proof of the guilt of those responsible, nobody was prosecuted.²⁴ There was understandable anger in many circles, both locally and nationally, that ringleaders such as Broadhead had evaded the proper consequences of their actions, yet conversely he was steadfastly supported by those who believed in him as the saviour of their industry. The *Glasgow Herald* denounced his 'revoltingly atrocious confessions' and yet Isaac Ironside (1808-70), a prominent local radical, educationalist and publisher, wrote in a letter that members of trade unions had 'a duty to thrash all into submission who get their living by the trade and who will not obey the laws of their union without thrashing.'²⁵ When the Commissioners returned to London, they left behind a deeply divided community, the subject of scandalised commentary; and Broadhead became a potent symbol who inspired fear and loathing and awed admiration in equal measure.

1.2 Authentic representation and/or biased intervention

Even though it is easy to understand why both dramatists would be attracted to their source material (sensational drama played out by colourful characters, driven by passion, power and conflicting ideologies), it would seem to be more than mere coincidence that the plays appeared within a few weeks of each other. Reade's version of events was produced first: *Put Yourself in His Place* opened at the Theatre Royal in Leeds on 4 April 1870, and ten days later, on 14 April, Fox's play *The Union Wheel*, at the Theatre Royal in Sheffield. Given this temporal proximity and chronological order, and the fame of Reade compared with the relative obscurity of Fox, it is perhaps

²⁴ Some offenders lost their jobs, and/or felt pressured to leave the country, and although amnesty had been given, anonymity had not. For example, the *SLR* baldly stated: 'Departure from the country of James Hallam, one of the murderers of Linley, and a prominent witness before the Trades' Commission', *SLR*, 12 July 1867, p. 760.

²⁵ *Glasgow Herald* Thursday August 15, 1867.

Letter to Thomas Hughes from Isaac Ironside, quoted in Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 61.

understandable that Malcolm Elwin, in his biographical study of the former writer, describes *The Union Wheel* as 'a piratical version' of *Put Yourself in His Place*.²⁶ However, further investigation proves this accusation to be unsustainable: the plots of the two plays as well as their tone and focus, are quite different from each other, as will become apparent.²⁷

Reade was protective of his work and sensitive about plagiarism, and there is no evidence that he made any complaint about Fox's play. A more likely candidate for an accusation of piracy was Frederic Marchant, for his play *Honest Labour; or, Shifting Scenes in a Workman's Life*, licensed August 1870; and indeed the play reads rather like a parody of Reade.²⁸ Although the play is about industrial relations it is set in London and the names of its characters - Slyvery, Grudgery Growler and Lord Luxmore - indicate its employment of broad stereotypes. The review in the *Era* ostensibly exonerates the writer of the new play, although there could be a hint of irony in its claim that he 'was no doubt influenced in his choice of subject by the great success of Mr. Charles Reade's drama ... in making this remark we do not intend to charge Mr. Marchant with plagiarism'.²⁹ The London production visited Sheffield (at the same time as Reade's play) and was produced at the

²⁶ Malcolm Elwin, *Charles Reade: a biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), p. 208. It is worth noting that there are no recently published biographical studies of the author. The most recent criticism is Richard Fantina, *Sensational Fiction: the Daring Work of Charles Reade* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) but this book has very little reference to *Put Yourself in His Place*, or indeed any of his dramatic works.

²⁷ Reade was by this time a fairly successful author, and over the length of his career wrote at least thirty plays, noted in Nicoll, *Nineteenth Century Drama 1850-1900 Vol II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), pp. 535-536. Donald Mullin notes that there were 24 London productions of Reade's plays. Donald Mullin, *Victorian Plays: a Record of Significant Productions on the London Stage* (New York, London: Greenwood, 1987). Reade also gave evidence at the Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations in 1866.

²⁸ Frederic Marchant, *Honest Labour; or, Shifting Scenes in a Workman's Life*, B. L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53087 J.

²⁹ *Era*, 21 August 1870.

Alexandra, starring Mr. W. T. Richardson, 'the favourite Comedian and Character Actor, from Astley's, Holborn, and Britannia Theatres'.³⁰

It is true that Reade was first to venture into the territory of northern industrial relations in his fiction: in June 1868 (a year after the Report of the Commission had been published) he began to compose a new novel, which would become *Put Yourself in His Place*. Elwin asserts that Reade had been gathering material for a narrative about trade union activity in an industrial town for some years. However, the actor and manager John Coleman claims credit for the idea in his lively (although idiosyncratic and perhaps somewhat unreliable) memoir, *Charles Reade: As I Knew Him*: 'I suggested to Reade the subject of the Sheffield outrages for a story'.³¹ As detailed in the first chapter of this thesis, Coleman had spent extended periods of time in Sheffield during the 1850s and 1860s, and so would have had first-hand knowledge of actual incidents and the characters involved.³² *Put Yourself in His Place* was serialised in the *Cornhill* magazine in seventeen instalments between March 1869 and July 1870, and the three-volume novel was released in June 1870.³³ It was likely that Reade recognised the theatrical potential of his story, and always intended that it should be staged; his dramatic adaptation was first produced in April 1870, before the serialisation had finished, and two months before its publication in three volumes.

Reade's work has been described as 'documentary realism'³⁴ and he certainly undertook field research for this project. John Coleman describes how the two of them spent time in Sheffield, where they not only visited

³⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 3 November 1870.

³¹ John Coleman, *Charles Reade, as I knew him* (London: Anthony Treherne & Co Ltd, 1904), p. 311.

³² Chapter One, Section 2.4.

³³ Charles Reade, *Put Yourself in His Place* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1870).

³⁴ Wayne Burns, *Charles Reade: a Study in Victorian Authorship* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1961), p. 85.

locations where some of the Outrages had taken place, but also interviewed William Leng, indomitable editor of the *Sheffield Telegraph*, as well as Broadhead himself.³⁵ The Union leader would be portrayed in the play, thinly disguised as the character of Grotait. (Reade had chosen a name for his character which he presumably thought was rather witty; a note pencilled in to the copy of the script in the Lord Chamberlain's collection clarifies the pun: 'Gros-tête – big head').³⁶ Despite Reade's detective work, he was undeniably creating fiction, and moreover, he was writing with a specific personal and political agenda. Evidence provided by Elwin and Burns suggest that he was already prejudiced against any kind of unionisation, partly because he had sympathy for an individual's struggle against close-knit organisations due to his feeling of personal victimisation by the literary and theatrical establishment.³⁷ Burns gives a detailed description of Reade's carefully compiled notebooks, which consisted of newspaper cuttings, photographs, etchings, journal articles; and practically every description of Union activity had the words 'dirty oligarchy' scrawled in the margins.³⁸ In his introduction to the serialisation of *Put Yourself in His Place* Reade asserted that his writing was a heroic campaign:

I have drawn my pen against cowardly assassination and sordid tyranny: I have taken a few undeniable truths, out of many, and have laboured to make my readers realise those appalling facts of the day, which most men know, but not one in a thousand comprehends, and not one in a hundred thousand *realises*, until fiction – which, whatever you may have been told to the contrary, is the highest, widest, noblest, and greatest of all the arts – comes to his aid, studies, penetrates,

³⁵ Coleman, *Charles Reade As I Knew Him*, pp. 311-312.

³⁶ *Free Labour; or, Put Yourself in His Place*, Act 1, scene 1, p. 5.

³⁷ Burns notes that Reade's first serious writings were plays but 'then came the rebuffs' (p. 86). Even when he had several plays produced, he was dogged by accusations of plagiarism as well as harsh treatment at the hands of critics. Burns asserts that the effect of these attacks 'was to intensify the already paranoiac feelings of persecution' (Burns, p. 271).

³⁸ Burns. See particularly Chapter XI '*Put Yourself in His Place*: Humanitarianism at the point of a bayonet', pp. 268-283.

digests, the hard facts of chronicles and blue-books, and makes their dry bones live.³⁹

His description of Union tactics as 'cowardly' and 'sordid' is unequivocal, and directs the reader as to how s/he should feel about the narrative that follows.⁴⁰

Reade's use of 'a few undeniable truths' gave his work a stamp of authority, and the *Graphic* concurred that the 'scenes of outrage and violence are ... no figments of the novelist's brain but are recorded in grave official documents'.⁴¹ Nevertheless, his enthusiastic determination to enliven the 'dry bones' of his material ensured that his long novel (more than 900 pages) became a sensational romance which swept through recent events in the history of Sheffield, including the terrible flood of 1864.⁴² The collapse of the newly-constructed Dale Dyke Dam and the consequent inundation was certainly catastrophic, but Reade's authorial embellishments did not meet with universal approval. The *Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser* wryly commented on the grim detail and also on the absurdity of the narrative: '*Put Yourself in His Place* grows almost too horrible for perusal.

³⁹ Burns, p. 268.

⁴⁰ There were other nineteenth century novelists, such as Dickens (*Hard Times*) and Gaskell (*North and South*, *Mary Barton*), who were critical of union activity, but Reade appears to have been particularly single-minded.

⁴¹ *Graphic*, 22 January 1870.

⁴² 'Shortly after midnight on 12 March 1864, the embankment of the newly-constructed Dale Dyke Dam north west of Sheffield burst, disgorging 600 million gallons of water into the Loxley and Don valleys in less than half an hour. Villages, farms and manufactories along the valleys, as well as the poor districts of Sheffield close to the Don, were inundated. Between 250 and 300 people were killed'. Rob Hindle, *Some Histories of the Sheffield Flood 1864* (Bakewell: Templar Poetry, 2006), Foreword.

Samuel Harrison, reporter (and later to become proprietor) of the *Sheffield Times* collected a vast amount of information about the victims and the survivors, and published *A Complete History of the Great Flood at Sheffield* (Dewsbury: Evans & Longley, 1974, first published 1864).

Burns notes that Reade 'cribbed almost every detail of every scene' from Harrison, but also notes that Reade's imaginative inclusion of Henry Little and his heroic rescue operations became 'ludicrous' (Burns, p. 277-8).

The only relief is the wonderful rapidity with which the hero and the heroine recover from their trials and sufferings'.⁴³

This tendency to use lurid language, redolent of tabloid newspapers, militated against Reade's claim to be 'a thinking novelist, a lover of his kind, (who) encouraged the workmen in lawful combination'.⁴⁴ He continued the same sentence with the assertion that he 'wrote against their beastly ignorance and dirt, and their bloody violence and foul play'.⁴⁵ He was quick to make negative generalisations and to condemn those who took direct action for their rights, and Burns concurs that his portrayal of the northern artisans in the novel was comprehensively derogatory, 'the workers were not merely brutalized men; they were, literally, brutes ... at best a subhuman species with only one redeeming quality – that of loyalty to their fellows'.⁴⁶

The relentlessly negative opening paragraph of Reade's novel, in which a thinly-disguised Sheffield is described, confirms his attitude towards his source material. Even though Reade altered its industrial constitution and gave it the name of one of its neighbouring areas, it is obvious where the story takes place:

Hillsborough and its outlying suburbs make bricks by the million, spin and weave both wool and cotton, forge in steel from the finest needle up to a ship's armour, and so add considerably to the kingdom's wealth.

But industry so vast, working by steam, on a limited space, has been fatal to beauty: Hillsborough, though built on one of the loveliest sites in England, is perhaps the most hideous town in creation. All ups and downs and back slums. Not one of its wriggling, broken-backed streets has handsome shops in an unbroken row. Houses seem to have battled in the air, and stuck wherever they tumbled down dead

⁴³ *Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, 5 March 1870.

⁴⁴ Burns, op. cit., p. 281.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Burns, p. 275. Reade noted that there were two ways to stop the 'dirty oligarchy', 'either books or bayonets. I have tried a book. Others will try bayonets.' Evidence that his prophecy was fulfilled is provided by an illustration in his notebook of unarmed unionists in America being shot down by well-trained militia, and his accompanying comment confirms his tendency for rather callous and simplistic judgement: he wrote next to the picture, 'The Dirty Oligarchy crushed by the Republic'.

out of the melee. But worse of all, the city is pockmarked with public-houses, and bristles with high round chimneys. These are not confined to a locality, but stuck all over the place like cloves in an orange. They defy the law, and belch forth massy volumes of black smoke, that hang like acres of crape over the place, and veil the sun and the blue sky even in the brightest day; but in a fog – why, the air of Hillsborough looks a thing to plough, if you want a dirty job.⁴⁷

Reade's jaundiced depiction, exemplified in phrases such as 'the most hideous town in creation' are likely to have affronted the residents of Sheffield. Somewhat surprisingly one writer was galvanised to respond not in reaction to the overall picture of a grim and depressing place, full of sullen artisans who wilfully commit violence and murder, but because of incorrect technical information. An article headed 'A Novelist's Exaggeration' in the *Sheffield Independent* took issue with the struggles of the main character Henry Little to patent a machine he had invented and claimed that Reade misrepresented the procedure. The writer did, however take the opportunity to add, almost in passing, that 'the other scenes in *Put Yourself in his Place* which professes to depict the worst side of trades' unionism, are characterised by equal absurdities'.⁴⁸

Notwithstanding such criticism from the local press, Reade negotiated with Ben Webster, the lessee of the Adelphi Theatre in London, to hire the venue for a season, and (in collaboration with John Coleman) planned to first give the play 'a sort of public rehearsal' at the Theatre Royal in Leeds.⁴⁹ This theatre appears to have been chosen because of Reade's professional relationship with Coleman, who was its Lessee at that time (as well as of theatres in York and Lincoln), and the latter's memoir provides an evocative description of the last-minute, stressful rehearsals. Reade was very late with

⁴⁷ Reade, *Put Yourself in His Place*, Volume 1, Chapter 1, p.1.

⁴⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 10 January 1870. The critic for the *Birmingham Daily Post* (5 July 1870) judges the novel to be 'one of the strangest compounds of phantasy and realism' that he has ever read.

⁴⁹ Coleman, *Charles Reade*, p. 312.

the script, no doubt partly due to the difficulties of condensing a lengthy novel into a drama of reasonable duration, and the opening night was delayed, but the production finally opened on 4 April.⁵⁰ According to Coleman, even though the cast had valiantly learnt all their lines ('a circumstance without parallel or precedent in the history of drama!⁵¹'), the production was a failure:

My worst anticipations were, however, realised. Through the uncertainty of the announcements, there was a very bad house. The first act struck fire; the church scene, in the second act, electrified the audience; in the third act the interest drooped; in the fourth act it died out altogether, like the expiring gleam of a farthing rush-light!⁵²

Consequently, Coleman lost money (he claimed it was upwards of £600), he was 'deprived'⁵³ of his dream of critical acclaim for his starring role, and removed himself from the project. Undeterred, Reade planned to remount the production in London, secured the well-known actor Henry Neville for the main role of Little, and sent him to Sheffield to research the practicalities of the cutlery trade.

Put Yourself in his Place and *The Union Wheel* both received mixed reviews. However, through my analysis, it will become evident that their critical treatment was not the same, and the productions certainly differed in terms of their longevity and place in theatre history. *The Union Wheel* was produced in Sheffield from 14 April by Mr. William Gomersal (lessee of the Theatre Royal) where it had a run of 11 nights; it then transferred to the Leeds Amphitheatre for a week from May 9th, before it disappeared completely.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Many of the critics of *Put Yourself in His Place* referred to the play's interminable length. The critic for the *Birmingham Daily Post* (8 June 1870) was bitterly disappointed that the 'discourse' of the play was 'long-winded and dreary', and had tested the 'patience and endurance of British audiences'. *The Examiner* records that 'commencing at half-past seven, it was barely over at twelve on Saturday night', 4 June 1870.

⁵¹ Coleman, *Charles Reade*, pp. 313-4.

⁵² Coleman, p. 314.

⁵³ Coleman. The production at Leeds was not extensively reviewed.

⁵⁴ Advertisement in the *Leeds Mercury*, 5 May 1870: Mr. Gomersal's company from the Theatre Royal Sheffield, in the new sensational Drama, "The Union Wheel".

Given the hostile response from critics outside Sheffield, it was likely that managers were deterred from offering their theatre. Fox was a moderately successful actor and playwright, born in, and still (at this time) strongly connected to Sheffield, and whilst this local association encouraged a rather more sympathetic approach to his source material, perhaps it also helps to explain why metropolitan critics misrepresented and condemned his play. It was never given the opportunity of a London production, whereas Reade's play opened at the Adelphi Theatre in May, and after a run of about six weeks, transferred to the National Standard prior to a provincial tour, which took in such towns as Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham, reaching Sheffield in November 1870 (where it played for 12 nights).⁵⁵ Despite this longer exposure, Reade's dramatic adaptation never achieved the same level of critical or popular success as his novel.

The Union Wheel is conspicuously different from the other known theatre work by Joseph Fox, which tended toward historical and domestic melodramas, using either original stories or adaptations from novels. Although his obituary in the *New York Times* (1 September 1906) describes Fox as 'a prolific playwright', there is not enough available evidence to substantiate this claim. A full list of his known plays and productions, with plot summaries and press response, is at Appendix B2. Apparently, the only other play he wrote which had a similar setting to *The Union Wheel* was an adaptation, from Frances Hodgson Burnett's first novel of the same name, *That Lass O' Lowrie's*, produced at the Alexandra in Sheffield in September 1879. Although this story, which was set in a pit village in Lancashire, and had a feisty collier's daughter as its heroine, was described as 'a very interesting drama'

⁵⁵ Advertisement in the *Sheffield Telegraph*, 17 November 1870. An adaptation of the play was also released as a silent film: *Put Yourself in His Place*, Theodore Marston, Thanhouser Film Corporation/Film Supply Company (USA), 29 October 1912.

and 'most affecting', it, too had a short theatrical life.⁵⁶ However, although *The Union Wheel* was his only attempt at direct social and political commentary on stage, he continued to write and produce in theatre, indeed his subsequent career continued for several decades in both England and America.

Compared with the evidence provided by Reade's notebooks and journals, there are fewer clues to Fox's motives for writing about the Outrages, indeed he has left only a faint archival record. He immigrated to America in 1884 and settled in Yonkers; his obituary in the *New York Times* in 1906 gives a brief glimpse of other aspects of his life, outside of his theatrical career.⁵⁷ In addition to his occupation as actor and playwright, the article notes that Fox worked as a newspaper editor in England, and supported the Democratic Party once he arrived in the New World. Perhaps he was attracted to America because it offered new opportunities to break through traditional boundaries of class and gender. He made a tour of support for Grover Cleveland, who became the only Democratic President in the period between the Civil and First World wars, and he did the same for William Jennings Bryan in 1896.⁵⁸ This involvement in the political process and a proven commitment to a progressive party suggests that Fox was prepared to campaign for social change, and supports my contention that he was ideologically motivated to write his play about Sheffield.

⁵⁶ This review is in a book of press cuttings held by Sheffield Local Studies (LSL 792.094 SST) and the name of the newspaper wherein it appeared is not noted, although the book is signed 'E. W. Rodgers, Reporter, August 9, 1879'. The story, by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924) *That Lass O'Lowrie's* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997, originally published 1877), was apparently popular, Nicoll lists two other adaptations: *Jean, or that Lass O'Lowrie's* (Coveney) and *Liz, or that Lass O'Lowrie's* (Matthison and Hatton), Nicoll, *1850-1900*, p. 326, 481, 700.

⁵⁷ At the time of his death he and his family were still in America, his wife and six children survived him. His son Alfred became Commissioner of Charities in Yonkers. Obituary, *New York Times*, 1 September 1906.

⁵⁸ William Jennings Bryan, presidential candidate for the Democrats was then able to form a coalition that answered the call of progressive groups and rural interests including the indebted farmers and those arguing against the gold standard. Richard Hal Williams, *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan and the remarkable election of 1896* (Kansas: Kansas University Press, 2010).

The Union Wheel subtly presents a case for respect and equality and does not denigrate unionism per se, for example the sympathetic middle-class character Jack Summers asserts that 'Labour has a right to form its combinations against the despotism of Capital' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 5). The working-class artisans are articulate, and are given stage space to discuss the troubling issues about mechanisation and progress (a committee meeting takes place in Act 2, scene 3, pp. 21-23) and, as will be demonstrated, the Union members are depicted as basically decent individuals who are forced to make difficult choices. His writing was surely informed by his background and the intimate knowledge of the men on whom he based his characters. He was born in Sheffield in about 1833 to Joseph and Mary Fox, fishmongers and game dealers, and spent his early years living in Fargate, in the bustling centre of the town. It is difficult to learn much of his boyhood – there is some evidence that he went away to school (in the nearby town of Wath-upon-Deerne) but he clearly had ambitions beyond the retail trade, and he succeeded in the theatrical profession despite his relative poverty and lack of family connections. By the 1871 Census, after the successful production of at least three plays, his profession is listed as Dramatic Author and he has returned to Sheffield and his family, but this time in the more salubrious suburb of Heeley. Although he spent time in other cities, sporadic employment at local theatres and family ties ensured continued contact with his home town. Perhaps loyalty to his roots and his native knowledge moved him to counter Reade's rendition with a rather more affirmative and optimistic depiction of Sheffield and the industry that surrounded him.

2. Drama as social comment and advocate

2.1 The potential of 'union': trade, family, and Christian communities

Given the relentless negative publicity about the Outrages, it must have been a relief to the audience at the Theatre Royal to witness a generally benign representation of Sheffield on stage. The impact of recent events was not confined to those directly involved in the trades - the wider populace was affected, as was Sheffield's reputation. From reading the considerable amount of press coverage, it seems that inhabitants were divided between those who viewed the militant unionists as criminals who should have been severely punished, and those who showed, according to the *Glasgow Herald*, 'intensely disgusting sympathy' for them.⁵⁹ There was a considerable risk that the town would become inextricably associated with the Outrages and some editorials and news articles in the national press even implied that the whole community was complicit. An article in the London *Telegraph* in July 1867, reprinted in the *Sheffield Independent* suggested that the corruption was endemic, despite the grudging acknowledgment that the worst excesses were over:

Even Sheffield itself is improving. Grouped together as the hideous instances of violence and perjury have been, the effect is to make the town ... appear a sink of constant crime...⁶⁰

The *Globe* pronounced a harsher judgement, and reminded its readers that the Outrages had sullied the town in the eyes of the nation and opined 'If the

⁵⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 15 August 1867. Ownership of the *Glasgow Herald* changed frequently during the nineteenth century, but according to the brief history provided by the digitised newspapers project, it was always owned by a collection of local business and lawyers, which perhaps helped to account for its antagonistic stance towards union activity, 'British Newspapers 1800-1900', Nineteenth Century Newspapers, British Library/Gale Digital <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

⁶⁰ London *Telegraph*, reprinted in *The Sheffield Independent*, 11 July 1867. It is notable that often these derogatory articles are simply reprinted in the local press, with no editorial comment or rebuttal.

saw-grinders are a disgrace to Sheffield, let us not forget that Sheffield is itself a disgrace to England'.⁶¹

It seemed that action was needed to change public opinion and find a way to move forward. As part of a strategy to convince the sceptical national press that Sheffield was not a lawless wilderness, and Broadhead neither a typical inhabitant nor his behaviour generally tolerated, the Reverend Robert Stainton (father of the local historian who had so graphically described the events at the Commission) continued his long-standing and courageous opposition to Broadhead and initiated a campaign, which condemned the actions of those responsible for the Outrages yet encouraged reconciliation.⁶²

Reverend Robert Stainton was an influential preacher, practised in the art of public speaking, who often used the stage of the Theatre Royal as an alternative pulpit and it could be argued that his effort in this matter provides a good example of the ways in which the 'melodramatic mode' was employed.⁶³ At a public meeting convened in Paradise Square in July 1867 (the *Sheffield Independent* reports that 15,000 attended)⁶⁴, Stainton suggested that inhabitants should work together to re-establish the good name of the town, and according to the *Sheffield Local Register*, the following resolution was adopted unanimously:

That this meeting of thousands of the working men of Sheffield most emphatically declares that it views with the deepest shame and abhorrence the systematic crimes which have disgraced the trades of the town, and that the foul deeds, and those who have committed them, are enemies to the best interests of working men in general, and to trades' unions in particular. And that this meeting also expresses its

⁶¹ *Globe*, reprinted in the *Sheffield Independent*, 16 August 1867. According to Fox Bourne, the *Globe* at this time had new proprietors and 'became a vigorous exponent of ... cautious Conservatism'. Fox Bourne, *English Newspapers*, p. 275.

⁶² The younger Stainton writes of when Broadhead visited their home and threatened his mother, J. H. Stainton, op. cit. p. 286.

⁶³ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, pp. 183-4.

⁶⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 9 July 1867.

thanks to the Government for the wise course it adopted for the detection of the criminals, and its high admiration of the way in which the Examiners have prosecuted their work, with the complete success which has crowned their labours to arrive at the truth. And we, as working men and citizens of Sheffield, venture to hope that from this time a better state of things may exist amongst us. And we hereby declare our readiness and determination to do all in our power to redeem the character of our town, which by the misguided and wicked deeds of some of its inhabitants, has been brought under such bitter reproach.⁶⁵

Even if the *Sheffield Local Register* was correct in its estimation that thousands of working men agreed with this resolution, there were likely to be a number of 'working men' who believed that their own, or their colleagues' actions had been expedient, rather than 'wicked'. At a meeting two years later when Stainton was continuing his campaign against Broadhead, he was heckled so badly that he had to seek refuge in the police station.⁶⁶ Stainton's rhetoric allowed for no ambiguity, he clearly differentiated between right and wrong, between the 'criminals' who had committed or countenanced 'foul deeds' and the majority of inhabitants who felt 'abhorrence' about these acts. His language conveyed an emotional power and promoted both Christian ethics and civic duty. Phrases such as 'deepest shame' were presumably chosen to instil a sense of religious penitence in his audience; but the promise to 'redeem' the town also suggested the possibility of healing and forgiveness, and the hope of a brighter future. His praise of the 'complete success' of the Commission, now that the 'truth' had been revealed, suggested that it was not helpful to question the lack of punishment meted out to those responsible for the Outrages, rather it was better to focus on rebuilding their community.

⁶⁵ *SLR*, 8 July 1867, p. 759.

In this public address, Stainton demonstrates an understanding of the rhetoric needed for good communication. I discussed the text of his sermon 'The Unpardonable Sin' in Chapter One and deemed it unlikely to be successful as a performance.

⁶⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 8 November 1869.

Stainton chose words which might inspire a collective effort: the use of the term 'citizen', with its connotation that inhabitants had duties as well as rights, was surely not accidental. Together with inclusive words such as 'we' and 'us', the tenor of his speech encouraged his listeners to acknowledge a shared responsibility for the state of affairs, and advocated mutual co-operation in order to bring about a transformation. The resolution was delivered to those present in Paradise Square, but its message would have been relayed to a far wider public. Stainton would have been well aware that speeches could be reproduced in newspapers and other publications, so his address could conceivably have been part of a public relations exercise, which attempted to use mass media to promote, rather than condemn Sheffield.⁶⁷

The Union Wheel, too, could be seen as part of this campaign, which was still much needed, three years later. The language of the play is reminiscent of that employed by Stainton, although Fox acknowledges the complexity of the situation, and avoids unconditional censure of Union activity. There are debates within the play about the necessity and efficacy of combination as a means of trade organisation (particularly in the scene at the Wheel in Act 1, scene 3, pp. 12-16, and the Committee Meeting scene, Act 2, scene 1, pp. 21-23). Ultimately the plea for 'union' is for greater co-operation between those of diverse opinions and across the class divide. Fox began his deliberate play on words with the title: although the Union Wheel was indeed a real workplace for grinders in Sheffield and was the site of some incidents reported to the Commission, the playwright's decision to position it at the

⁶⁷ Stainton had published his own sermons, and the Paradise Square meeting was indeed reported in great detail in the *Sheffield Independent*, 9 July 1867.

centre of the story was motivated by something other than adherence to the actual facts.⁶⁸

If Fox betrays the influence of other fiction on his version of events a case could be made for *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell's novel of industrial disputes in Manchester.⁶⁹ Although Gaskell wrote her story over twenty years earlier, two theatrical versions had recently (in 1867) been produced, and given that Fox was a man of the theatre, it is likely that he saw either *The Long Strike* by Dion Boucicault or *The Great Strike* by Colin Hazlewood.⁷⁰ *The Great Strike* was produced at the Theatre Royal Sheffield in 1867, and the advertisement on Friday 10 May acknowledges the influence of its predecessors: 'The New Drama, founded on the same subject as Dion Boucicault, Esq.'s Wonderful Drama, *The Long Strike* (and) Mrs Gaskell's celebrated Lancashire Novel *Mary Barton*.'⁷¹ Even though both plays dealt with topical and relevant subjects (relationships between employers and workers, poverty, and trade union activity), they are not specific to Sheffield and the Outrages. Nevertheless, like *Mary Barton*, *The Union Wheel* promotes forgiveness and reconciliation rather than continued conflict.

Fox connects the industrial and domestic storylines by the recurring motif of 'union' – between artisans, employers and workers, men and women, and the name of his factory seems to have been a deliberate choice because

⁶⁸ An operative named Mr. John Sibray, a stove grate manufacturer, was beaten in the street in March 1862, and the attack was reported at the time (*Daily News*, 22 March 1862), and also formed part of the evidence at the Commission: It occurred 'opposite the Union wheel, in Sheffield here', 'Minutes of Evidence', in *The Sheffield Outrages: Report*, p. 378-9. A case of rattening 'at the Union Grinding Wheel' on a razor grinder called John Green was reported in the *Sheffield Independent*, 14 May 1862. The Union Wheel was sometimes in the news for more public-spirited gestures, an article in the *Sheffield Independent*, 19 January 1861 notes that grinders from this place of work had donated £3 3s to Sheffield Public Hospital and Dispensary.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, first published 1848).

⁷⁰ Dion Boucicault, *The Long Strike*, licensed for the Lyceum Theatre, 15 September 1866, Nicoll, p. 268; Colin Hazlewood, *The Great Strike*, licensed for the Pavilion Theatre, 8 October 1866, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53054 F.

⁷¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 10 May 1867.

of the possibilities offered by its name. One of the characters, Daft Jim, draws attention to the ironic contradiction inherent in the name of the factory when he ponders: 'I wonder what they call't the'Union for – when it's agen t'Union' (Act 2, scene 4, p. 29). Fox uses the various meanings of the word as a way to explore the problems in an accessible and relevant way, and, more importantly, to suggest ways of resolving them.

Mr. Parker is at the centre of both strands of the plot, and although his character and others in the play are not exact replicas of real people there are plenty of similarities which must have had a disconcerting effect on audiences. Elisha Parker was one of the victimised witnesses who gave evidence at the Inquiry, and whilst the fictional figure is never referred to by his first name, and the actual incidents (the real Parker was shot at and his horse hamstrung) do not occur in the play, the character must have resonated with an audience who knew about the tribulations of his namesake. In Fox's hands, Parker is a prosperous sawmill owner who comes into conflict with the Union because he refuses to dismiss his employee Job Langton, who has invented a machine to speed up the grinding process. This 'invention' does not appear to have been based on a specific new development but was rather a metaphor for the general threats of mechanisation to highly skilled manual workers. One of the Union men, Thomas Earnshaw, points out:

For if, as Job Langton brags, he can do as much with it as four good pair o'hands I think it doesn't need much logic to prove that where one is now short handed or idle, we've only got to introduce machinery to multiply into four.

(The Union Wheel, Act 2, scene 1, p.21)

There was no doubt however, that the fictional Union leader in the play who threatens Parker was based on the infamous William Broadhead, and Fox risked trouble by creating a character based on a powerful individual who aroused very strong opinions and emotions.

Perhaps his awareness of the dangers of blurring fact and fiction made Fox somewhat indecisive about the best name to use for his character. At one point in the manuscript (Act 2, Scene 1, p. 23), he refers to him as Broomhead, but throughout most of the text he is named William Brumley.⁷² He was in a similar quandary with one of his villains, who is generally referred to as Ted Saunders in the text but in all the reviews of the production his name is given as Joe Stammers. Even within the manuscript there is some confusion: for example at the beginning of Act 1 scene 5, the flirtatious maid Susannah, referring to Ted, calls him Joe: 'When Joe Stammers or even Jenkins the Policeman takes me out he does it tip top.' Ted is also called Joe a few times in Act 3 scene 5, and in the final scene of that Act, the speech is given to 'Ted', who says 'My name is Joe' (p. 51). It transpires that Ted Saunders was the name of a comedian associated with the Theatre Royal, so perhaps sensitivity to a fellow-actor's feelings influenced Fox to change his mind.⁷³ Attempting to match characters on stage, whatever their names, with familiar local figures is likely to have given audiences an added frisson whilst watching the production.

Spectators had plenty to hold their attention besides guessing games; like most melodramas the plot is filled with sexual intrigue and thrilling incidents, but it is made more relevant for the audience because the characters are convincingly located in Sheffield, enmeshed in the trades' disputes, and have to deal with their consequences. Fox employed creative strategies that might lead critics to describe his work as docudrama if it were

⁷² A man called Broomhead, a former secretary of the Pen & Pocket Blade Grinders Union was mentioned in the Minutes of Evidence, *The Sheffield Outrages: Report*, p. xiii.

⁷³ Advertisement for the pantomime *Little Goody Two Shoes* records that Ted Saunders played the Clown, *Sheffield Independent*, 1 January 1870.

There is a character called 'Joe Stammers' in a later play about working-class tribulation, entitled *Coming Home; or, Sithors to Grind* by G. R. Walker, 1873 (Nicoll, p. 611).

staged today, given that he included real settings such as Endcliffe Woods and the Porter Falls, and he paid close attention to the authentic features of the surrounding locale. Reference is made to the Alexandra Theatre in town, and Froggatt Edge in nearby countryside (a favourite destination for excursions), and the characters speak in authentic local dialect. The instance of rattening in Act 1, scene 6, and the threatening letter which is received in Act 2, scene 5 are convincing in their detail, but although Fox clearly drew on real occurrences and lived experiences, he used his theatrical skills to shape the story and imbue it with a particular timbre.

Fox employs customary elements of domestic melodrama (the upper-class rake, a virtuous woman imperilled) in *The Union Wheel*; yet the two love stories which are woven into his plot about a wheel-owner's stance against protectionism enable him to address the problem of the exploitation of Union principles for personal vendetta (the Oxford English Dictionary definition of rattening 'for spite' corroborates that this was a pertinent issue).⁷⁴ Parker had hoped for a union of marriage between his intelligent and outspoken niece Edith and his son Alfred, but is frustrated by the young man's lack of interest in her, and this is compounded by his dissolute behaviour. Edith's attention is instead drawn to Mr. Parker's nephew Jack Summers and the honest affection between them is contrasted with Alfred's sexual obsession with Mary Langton (daughter of Job and the fiancée of Harry Thomson, artisan at the Wheel and staunch Union member). When Mary refuses to become Alfred's mistress (he admits that he cannot marry her because of her class), he plots to abduct and rape her.⁷⁵ Alfred tries to enlist the help of Brumley, who

⁷⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 227.

⁷⁵ Fox possibly drew on *Mary Barton/The Great Strike* for this element of the plot - certainly the Alfred-Mary Langton-Harry Thomson lust/love triangle has similarities with the earlier stories. In the novel, when Mary tries to end her liaison with Carson, the mill-owner's son, he betrays his true nature and she realises that 'the attachment was of that low, despicable kind which can plan to seduce the object of its affection'. Chapter XI, p. 134. However, it may simply have been coincidental: Mary was a

furiously refuses and ejects him from his premises (Act 2, scene 3, p. 28-29). Although the word 'outrage' is not specifically used in the text to describe this planned sexual assault, it was very often used as such in newspaper reports and Fox must have been aware of both meanings.⁷⁶ Brumley's reaction credits him with a degree of integrity and contrasts his principled motives with Alfred's selfish and lascivious ones.

Brumley is characterised by his adherence to principle and an unwavering sense of duty, but as Jack Summers comments, this kind of strong unquestioning commitment can sometimes lead a man astray:

He thinks he does his duty to the Union. Duty is oft perverted into crime. There's but one step 'twixt the sublime and the ridiculous, and the line is almost as fine that separates great scoundrels from great heroes. A man may give himself body and soul to some pet project nor scruple to commit a crime for that though he would scorn to act so for himself.

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 1, scene 1, p. 6)

Brumley is not malicious, nor willfully violent; indeed he worries about the threat to Job Langton:

I'm very sorry Job's so obstinate. I shouldn't like any harm to come to him. But I must do my duty. The Union before all things is my motto.

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 1, scene 4, p. 16)

Although events in the narrative illustrate the potential consequences of this kind of rigidity, Broadhead's sentiment of 'the Union before all things' was popular with certain elements of the audience, and it was this reaction which led to intense criticism of the play, as will be demonstrated.

The interlacing of domestic drama with the industrial storylines provides a human element to the debate about the ethics of Union activities, and facilitates an exploration of the ways in which principles impact on

popular Victorian name, and seduction of a poor girl by a rich man was an all too common occurrence, in reality and fiction.

⁷⁶ Local papers provide many examples, 'Outrage upon a woman... Thomas Nicholson ... was charged with an indecent assault'. *Sheffield Independent*, 17 January 1867.

personal relationships, families, and the local community. Parker is depicted as a caring family man and responsible mill-owner, yet he is determined to introduce machinery despite the inevitable job losses this is likely to entail. His allegation that 'Trade Unions are the Tyranny' at the beginning of the play (Act 1, scene 1, p. 5), illustrates his initial belief in his unassailable right to free enterprise, whatever the cost. This combative and unconditional stance is challenged by the response from his more broad-minded nephew Summers, although even he has reservations about the power of the Unions, and agrees with Parker that their influence should be curtailed:

They should not arrogate the right to make a man join them, will he –
nil he. To say machinery shall not be employed, and dictate to a man
how he's to do his work.

(The Union Wheel, Act 1, scene 1, p. 5)

Parker's refusal to comply with the demands of the Union places his family, friends and employees in danger; and when personal vendetta is added to the industrial conflict there is an unforeseen tragedy: his son Alfred, who jealously sets an explosive trap for Harry Thomson at the Union Wheel, causes his father to be blinded instead (Act 3, scene 4, p. 47). As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the practice of putting gunpowder in the 'trough' of a grinding wheel was one kind of 'outrage' which Sheffield had witnessed - these types of attacks, which obviously could result in serious injury or death, were relatively common.

The relationship between Thomson and his fiancée Mary Langton is troubled by their conflicting opinions on the trades' disputes as well as the unwelcome attentions of Alfred Parker. Early in the play they have a heated exchange: Harry is uneasy because he can see that Alfred has ulterior motives, and she is angry that he places his trust in an organisation which has publicly declared her father Job to be an enemy of the working man. Mary challenges Harry - she feels that he is lacking in manly courage - and Harry uses the concept of family, particularly the ideal of a loving father, to try to

reassure her that he is pursuing the best course of action, and that his Union is firm but fair:

Mary You can speak bravely here. But I'll warrant you hadn't man enough⁷⁷ to vote against that notice my father got day before yesterday.

Harry Why did he leave the Union?

Mary Hasn't he the right to please himself?

Harry Well, scarcely! You wouldn't like to marry, would you Mary, if your father – mother – every relation that you'd got were dead against the match.

Mary No Harry. Why do you ask?

Harry The Union is a Father to us workmen. And if we disobey it we are punished, and right it should be so.

Mary A father punishes for his child's good.

Harry And so does th'Union. Trades'⁷⁸ topics aren't for women to discuss. Let's talk of something else.

Mary But when strikes come its t'women have to feel the consequences. I suppose today, my father will be discharged.

Harry Nay, perhaps not. We'll hope he'll make all right.

Mary They've roused him, and he'd rather starve than give up his machine, or, for that matter be dictated to. If Mr. Parker isn't man enough to keep him on, he means to emigrate.

Harry What, leave England, Mary?

Mary Yes, his mind's made up.

Harry But you'll not go with him.

Mary If he goes. I go. The Union you are so proud of will transport us.

Harry Damn the Union!

Mary That's honest!

⁷⁷ 'Man' seems to be used here in the sense of an attribute and this particular phrase is repeated by Brumley in Act 2, scene 3, p. 28. However, Mary also says 'isn't man enough', ten lines down, so it would seem that the two phrases were interchangeable in terms of their meaning.

⁷⁸ The punctuation is unclear in the MS. It could either be trade's, or trades' - the singular and plural forms of trade/trades appear to be interchangeable at this time.

Harry Nay. I don't mean that. All I mean is – Let's talk of another union that'll transport me, and make me the happiest dog alive. When shall I put up th'banns?

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 1, sc. 2, pp. 9-10)

Although Harry remains a faithful member of his Union throughout the play, his love for Mary and affection for her family confront him with the difficulty of reconciling the personal with the political. Afraid that he has lost the argument, he dismisses Mary's opinions with the familiar exclusion on the basis of gender, 'Trades' topics aren't for women to discuss'. When Mary quite rightly points out that women's lives are materially affected by what men say and do about their industry ('its t'women have to feel the consequences'), he deftly changes the subject by invoking a second meaning of 'union', and talks of their wedding instead: this acts as a convenient distraction and also reminds her that romantic love and the institution of marriage should be a woman's principle concerns. Later in the play Mary also uses the analogy of the family, but this time in order to defend her father's right to market his invention. Langton has lavished such time and care on it, she has come to think of it 'like a son and brother', and she threatens to renounce her fiancé Harry in order to fight the Union. Harry quickly reassures her that he will be loyal to her and to Langton: 'Since it is thy brother, I must watch over it as well. We three'll form a Union among ourselves' (Act 2, scene 5, p. 32).

The common proposition that matrimony is a desirable aim for both women and men is reaffirmed towards the end of the play, but with particular topical relevance; and the scene arguably promotes a progressive outlook. The linguistic double-entendres are given a material dimension when a double wedding celebration is held at the Union Wheel for Edith and Jack, and Mary and Harry - couples from the gentry and the working-class respectively. This festive occasion not only brings industry and domesticity (or

the personal and political) together visually, but the spectacle of artisans and employers, and men and women, in the same space also has a symbolic significance, particularly given the mixed composition of the audience. In a pointed speech to the assembled company, Mr. Parker compares the relationship between 'masters and their men' to that between husbands and wives, and whilst suggesting ways to improve the former, implies that the latter should ultimately take priority:

Mr. Parker I've been seriously thinking for some time of taking to myself a wife.

Edith You! and pray whom will you marry?

Mr. Parker Mary Anne – (Laugh)

Alfred Mary Anne what?

Mr. Parker There's only one Mary Anne.⁷⁹

Harry You'll commit Bigamy. She's the Trades Unions' wife.

Mr. Parker We'll sue for a divorce. This Commission of Inquiry perhaps will help us. My men – I've a few words to say. I've come to the conclusion that the best Trades' Unions are Unions between masters and their men – (Cheers). There's union now between us (Hear Hear) It shall continue – I mean something more than mere convivial union. A partnership between Capital and Labour. From this time forth the Union Wheel shall represent masters and men shall have fair wages according to their labour and effects⁸⁰ – with prosperity equally divided between the Labour and the Capital, and each man here will have an interest in the introduction of improved machinery, and

⁷⁹ The symbolic character of 'Mary Anne' would have been familiar to an audience with knowledge of trade union activities, as this was the name usually used to sign anonymous threatening letters. There is a history of using pseudonyms in popular protest to maintain anonymity in dangerous times; and a symbolic character also potentially removes individual responsibility and guilt. J. C. Hotten notes that Mary Ann is 'the title of the dea ex machine (sic) evolved from trades-unionism at Sheffield, to the utter destruction of recalcitrant grinders. She is supposed to do all the "blow-ups", steal all the bands, and otherwise terrorise over victims of the union'. J. C. Hotten, *The Slang Dictionary* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1887, reprinted E. P. Publishing 1972), p. 223.

⁸⁰ The punctuation here is ambiguous; the addition of a comma would make it clearer: 'From this time forth the Union Wheel shall represent masters, and men shall have fair wages...'

If Fox intended to suggest the rather more collective notion of: 'the Union Wheel shall represent masters and men', the sentence does not make sense (unless more words have been accidentally omitted).

the prosperity which beams on all. Mind, I don't debar you from joining the Trades Unions, or any other unions. In fact, I sincerely trust before the year is out, to see every bachelor of five and twenty bound in a union that no man can put asunder (Cheers).

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 3, sc. 4, pp. 45-46)

Parker emphasises Godly power over human - the religious sacrament of marriage is a powerful 'union that no man can put asunder' - but he also urges the artisans to work with him in a coalition.

By suggesting 'a divorce' with 'Mary Ann', Parker marginalises the role of trades unions in favour of a better direct relationship between employers and employees, yet he does describe a potentially radical resolution, a 'partnership between Capital and Labour... with prosperity equally divided between the Labour and the Capital'. His address, reiterated by the embodied visual image, could be interpreted as a proposal for a co-operative organisation, its socialist ideals suggested by the crucial inclusion of the phrase '*equally divided*' (my emphasis). However, there are no specific details as to how the problems arising from increased mechanisation would be tackled; the issue is rather resolved by an optimistic compromise: the men will accept progress, and with the companionship and support of women, harmony will be restored. The *Sheffield Times* seemed to share this optimism; and in an article published the year that the play was produced, which described a 'benign and complacent' Broadhead at church, the writer continued: 'So complete is the peace which has been restored to working class society in Sheffield, that the great trade organisations are no longer needed'.⁸¹ It could be argued that the play advocates the demise of 'the great trade organisations' but Fox's activity in America suggests that its writer was committed to increasing access to power through an improved democratic process. Despite the claims of the *Sheffield Times*, rattening continued for

⁸¹*Sheffield Times*, 3 December 1870.

some years after (the *Sheffield Independent* reported a case of rattening at the Union Wheel on 13 September 1881 and again on 6 December 1884), although the extreme acts of violence which had characterised the Outrages were not repeated. In any case, the developments in steel production over the next two decades completely changed the nature of the industry and the demographics of the town.

Although marriage as happy ending is a popular convention for drama, it could be argued that the notion of 'partnership' is as innovative for marriage as it is for industrial relations. The prevailing belief, supported by the legal framework, was that a husband owned his wife; certainly until the passing of the Married Women's Property Act in 1870 all a woman's possessions automatically passed to her husband.⁸² There are other tentative steps towards the emancipation of women in the play: the two main female characters, middle-class Edith and working-class Mary, are prepared to voice their opinions and take action where necessary. Mr. Parker seems to be both alarmed yet rather impressed when Edith takes him to task, and exclaims, 'Listen to her! Who'll say that women should not have a vote? If they were all like you, we'd have a parliament of women (*The Union Wheel*, Act 1, Sc. 1, p. 3). Jack Summers is undeterred by Edith's spirited independence, and the implication is that even though the two women are happy to get married, they will not be totally submissive to their husbands in the future.⁸³ Romantic relationships, like trade affairs, require compromise to flourish.

⁸² For a discussion on the impact of this Act on marital relations and household resources, see 'Wives and Household Wealth', Mary Beth Combs, *Continuity and Change*, Vol. 19, Issue 1, May 2004, pp.141-63.

⁸³ When the production transferred to Leeds, the review in the *Era* singled out the actresses who played Edith (Miss Emmeline Falconer) and Mary (Miss Lizzie Reinhardt) for particular praise, they 'contributed largely to the success of the piece' *Era*, 15 May 1870. Emmeline Falconer replaced Miss Mansfield as Edith in the transfer; neither Mansfield nor Reinhardt was mentioned in the reviews of the original Sheffield production.

In the play, women of all classes are prepared to speak up for what they believe is important, but the priorities for both Edith and Mary are still their families, and they are guided by Christian teachings of reconciliation and forgiveness. Despite Alfred's reprehensible behaviour (he planned to sexually assault her, and attempted to kill or seriously injure her fiancé) Mary is concerned with the condition of his soul, rather than earthly retribution. When the explosion at the Wheel severely wounds Mr. Parker, Mary deduces that it was because of Alfred's jealousy, yet rather than seek to have him punished, she begs Edith to persuade him to escape out of the country. Oblivious to her clemency, Alfred conforms to the familiar behaviour pattern of the sexually-obsessed rake, and shifts the blame on to her, rather than accept his own fault: 'You've been my evil spirit ... It was you and none but you put that powder in the trough' (Act 3, scene 6, p. 50). With noble perseverance, she simply reassures him that 'the Evil hour is past, these prayerful tears may wash away all stains of guilt. Your father will forgive. Heaven is kind and will have mercy –' (ibid.)

Indeed Godly, rather than mortal power is emphasised throughout the play, for example when Mary and Job are saved from the explosion at the Wheel by Daft Jim:

Mary God's providence that we're not blown up into Eternity. Let us thank Him on our knees.

Job His name be praised.

Picture, Act Drop – End of Act the Second.

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 2, sc. 8, p. 37)

This over-arching message was reiterated in the advertisements for the play, which were often headed with the phrase 'Man proposes but God disposes' (also used by Mr. Parker within the text).⁸⁴ The denouement of the play

⁸⁴ Mr. Parker is musing on his hopes for a happy marriage for his niece Edith: 'They say that marriages are made in heaven – but when we dull old fools meddle too

confirms that human plans do not always come to fruition (by the final scene Alfred Parker is dead and Saunders/Stammers is in custody), yet it also offers a promise of spiritual redemption.

Although the final tableau centres on the corpse of Alfred Parker, surrounded by Harry Thomson, Mary Langton and Jim Myers, the on-stage characters, as well as the audience, are reassured that his spirit will be reunited with that of his mother. This assurance is given by the man who is commonly referred to as Daft Jim, who belies his name by generally demonstrating common sense and a simple goodness. He comforts Harry and Mary, and their response not only reiterates the Christian message of forgiveness and reconciliation but also suggests that Jim is a beneficial role model:

Harry Poor fellow! If all our hearts were as simple as is thine, we should be nearer Heaven.

Mary Let his words be our prayer, that he has gone to her where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.

(End. Curtain.)

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 3, scene 6, p. 52)

The conclusion of the play also (perhaps more pertinently) offers the satisfaction of restorative justice, and the critic for the *Sheffield Independent* praised its closing scene:

much, they seem to be fashioned in the other place. There is an old proverb, Man proposes, but God disposes. It's true – it's very true.' *The Union Wheel* Act 2, scene 2, p. 26.

This quotation is a translation from a work of devotion by Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471). John Wesley was an early translator of his work, and his version reads: 'The purpose of just men depends not so much upon their own wisdom as upon the grace of God, on whom they always rely in whatsoever they take in hand. For man doth purpose, but God doth dispose, neither is the way of man in himself'. *An extract of the Christian's pattern: or, a treatise on the imitation of Christ*. Written in Latin by Thomas à Kempis, abridged and published in English by John Wesley M.A. (London: 1800). Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, University of Sheffield [accessed 10 November 2012].

The Christian framework is also signalled through the names given to characters: for example the virginal Mary, and her father Job. Although 'Job' was a popular Victorian name, the Biblical reference was likely to have been deliberate: the book of Job chronicles how his faith was tested by God by a series of trials, but he remained steadfast, and eventually achieved contentment.

The dramatis personae assemble to witness the downfall of vice and the triumph of virtue; dramatic justice is done to all, “all live happy ever afterwards,” and thus the drama terminates.⁸⁵

His use of the cliché ‘happy ever afterwards’ suggested that the ending was reminiscent of a fairytale and rather idealistic, and its comforting message a common one for audiences of melodrama. The pleasing outcome illustrates the advantages that fiction has over documentary, and the first review of the play in the *Sheffield Independent* had also approved of this satisfactory conclusion. The theatre historian Thomas Postlewait notes the possibilities that fiction, or the theatrical event, can offer, in contrast to the unchangeable facts of documentary, and he uses Aristotle to support his argument: ‘the historian reports what happened, but the poet represents what might happen’.⁸⁶ The critic for the *Sheffield Independent* used his review to highlight the difference between what occurred on stage and in real life, namely the lack of punishment meted out by the actual Commission:

“The Union Wheel” possesses this advantage over real life, that it brings the rattener and blower up to speedy justice, and if it be the means of teaching all who feel inclined to do the same kind of work that their fate will be similar, it will do a greater amount of good than the author in his most sanguine moments could have anticipated.⁸⁷

In the opinion of this critic, the ‘speedy justice’ meted out to the miscreants conveyed a strong moral message, and he anticipated that the production would have a salutary effect, because the ‘rattener and blower up’ were punished. However, the end of the play is actually rather ambiguous: the two characters who are penalised (Saunders/Stammers and Alfred Parker) have used similar tactics as militant Unionists, but they were motivated by personal malice. Saunders/Stammers witnesses Alfred tampering with the grinding wheel and attempts to blackmail him; Alfred refuses to comply with

⁸⁵ *Sheffield Independent*, 20 April 1870.

⁸⁶ Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Historiography* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 123.

⁸⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 18 April 1870.

his demands, there is a struggle and Saunders/Stammers stabs and kills him.

This element of the plot demonstrates once again that trade unions were sometimes made scapegoats for personal vendettas, and it also exposes how the promise of amnesty could be exploited. When the culprit is apprehended, and assured that he will face the death penalty for murder, he tries desperately to evade this consequence:

Saunders Don't be sure o'that. The Commission offers a free pardon for all as split again' t'Union. I'll split tomorrow. How I blowed up Langton's wheel. Brumley and all them's as bad as me.

Harry You are scoundrel enough for anything. Thank Heaven splitting won't save you from the hangman.

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 3, sc. 6, p. 52)

It is true that Saunders/Stammers tried to kill Mary, Job and Harry because of his wish for revenge (he courted Mary but was rejected, and when he is beaten by Harry for his involvement in Alfred Parker's plot to abduct her, his malevolence deepens). However the complimentary review in the *Sheffield Independent* glossed over the fact that Brumley, who could be described as a 'rattener and blower up', is not brought to 'speedy justice'. He sent Saunders/Stammers to 'blow up' the Union Wheel (even though he intended that the building only be destroyed) and justifies them as a 'simple duty' (Act 2, scene 1, p. 23). Brumley remains unrepentant, and indeed altogether absent from the end of the play. He is last seen in Act 3, sc. 3, pp. 43-44, when he instructs Saunders/ Stammers to escape from the Commission of Inquiry and depart for America; and then, a little later (in scene 6), Saunders/Stammers reports that 'Things have gone queer at the Assembly Rooms. Governor was as white as any clout, when he paid me my passage and a Tenner' (Act 3, scene 6, p. 51). Yet the critic suggested that the power of live melodrama is such that it can override ambiguity, and in his opinion,

the conclusion is simply that wrongdoers are punished, and thus the effect on an audience may be more beneficial than the playwright hoped or perhaps even intended: 'it will do a greater amount of good ... than the author... could have anticipated'.⁸⁸

Further moral guidance for the audience is provided by Daft Jim. Although he is unsophisticated, and often repeats the words from the children's game, 'Simon says', rather than hold a proper conversation, he provides a commentary on the action. 'Simon', like 'Mary Ann', is initially a straightforward euphemism for trade unions. Daft Jim uses the words of the game to deflect responsibility; he is given instructions and must simply do as he is told. However, although he acknowledges that he is a trade unionist, employed by Brumley to carry out rattening, he nevertheless sets clear boundaries on his activities. His decisions are influenced by the spirit of his dead mother, who he visualises watching over him; her imaginary, yet compassionate voice is stronger than that of Brumley, his live instructor. Jim refuses to disable Langton's wheel because:

...Job wor good to her and she oft talks to me about him. I durstn't go agen the dead. No. Not for t'Union. Her white face 'ud scare me. No. I dursn't do it. Simon says Thumbs down, and I must keep 'em down.

(*The Union Wheel* Act 1, sc. 4, p. 17)

His child-like phrases 'Thumbs up' or 'Thumbs down' signify assent to, or refusal of, a task; but he also uses them to judge the behaviour he witnesses and he begins to assert his own morality.⁸⁹ For example, Alfred attempts to abduct Mary, and Jim summons Harry to come to her rescue. Harry saves Mary, punches Alfred, and Jim celebrates: 'Simon said Thumbs up, and down he went' (Act 2, scene 7, p. 36). The audience would have been likely to cheer this simple, swift retribution.

⁸⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 18 April 1870.

Jim not only acts as an observer and critic of the action, but directly intervenes when those he cares about are in danger; and his loyalty to his friends and the way in which he cheekily outwits both Saunders/Stammers and Alfred Parker is likely to have endeared him to the audience. For example in Act 1 scene 6 he sets a rat trap for the malevolent artisan, who attempts to escape by jumping out of the window. Adding insult to injury, Jim then shoots Saunders in the backside, and gleefully whispers, 'Ted, lad. Thou'rt warm behind' (Act 1, scene 6, p. 20). These playful and rather anarchic elements give vitality to Jim's instinctive virtue; and the fact that the role was played by William Gomersal, the Lessee of the Theatre Royal and a well-known comic actor is liable to have made him a popular character, and possibly one who had a positive impact on an audience.

Jim speaks in dialect, and indeed *The Union Wheel* is one of the few Sheffield-based plays from this period to use local idioms so consistently. Given that its writer Joseph Fox was from a working-class background and lived in the centre of the town, it is likely that he would have had a good grasp of phrasing and regional colloquialisms. It is somewhat surprising that the actors in the company for this production are quite mixed in terms of their background: William Gomersal (Jim) was born in London; Lizzie Reinhardt (Mary Langton) was from New South Wales; and John Birchenough (Mr. Parker) was from Stockport, Cheshire.⁹⁰ Presumably they were skilled mimics, and had been well tutored, as there were no complaints in the reviews about their mastery of the Yorkshire accent. Attention to the speech patterns of Sheffield both in the text and through their accurate reproduction on stage afforded authenticity, but it was also a means to engage a local audience of all classes. This element, together with the detailed referencing of

⁹⁰ Information about the performers is from the Census data, April 1871. Lizzie Reinhardt's successful career was prematurely curtailed when she died, aged only 34, *Era*, 9 February 1872.

geographical settings already noted endows the play with a particular appeal. Not only are specific features included, but the experience of those in the audience is acknowledged; indeed those involved in both sides of the disputes are treated with respect and compassion.

The play stages a debate about a complex situation whilst promoting conciliation and forgiveness, and provides a resolution which promotes the benefits of different kinds of unions: those between artisans and their employers, between men and women, and ultimately between humans and God. It suggests that transformation, of individuals and their society, is possible, and the play combines elements of political and social analysis with the satisfactory outcomes of melodrama. Elaine Hadley argues that the way in which the genre communicated with its audience was not only a factor in its success as a theatrical experience, but it also challenged the dominant mode of public discourse:

Combined with its power to alter the course of fate, the melodramatic mode's inclusive and deferential mode of social organisation threatened both the values of the liberal elite and their own social value in Victorian culture, despite – or perhaps because of – melodrama's affiliation with women and the poor. In effect, the confrontation between the melodramatic mode and the culture of liberal debate, and therefore the distinct forms of social exchange they epitomized, was a battle over cultural capital that greatly influenced the ways and means by which public opinion and social status were formulated, packaged and disseminated in late Victorian England.⁹¹

The Union Wheel illustrates Hadley's argument, in that it promotes an 'inclusive and deferential mode of social organisation' and defends the position of 'women and the poor'. However, the play was quickly defeated in the 'battle over cultural capital' because its message was misrepresented by most reviewers outside of Sheffield and it was prematurely condemned as an advocate of violence and anarchy, as will be demonstrated in Part Three.

⁹¹ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, pp.183-4.

2.2 The opposite of union: individualism, difference and conflict

With its focus on an individual, the title of Reade's play immediately signals that his perspective significantly diverges from that of Fox. *Put Yourself in His Place* admonishes the reader/audience to imagine they are in the position of his idealised hero, the strong and handsome Henry Little. The review in the *Morning Post* acknowledged this suggestion, but was reluctant to follow it:

This, we presume, is the unfortunate man in whose place we are requested to put ourselves – a gracious invitation and doubtless well intended, but one which we had rather not accept.⁹²

When Reade adapted his novel for the stage, he prefixed the phrase '*Free Labour*' to the title, which reflected one strand of the argument against Unionism, that a man should be able to work wherever, and for whomever he pleased, and should not be confined to one trade or profession.⁹³ Little asserts that these choices are fundamental to individual liberty when he claims that 'A freeborn Briton is not a negro slave: he has a right to sell his labour in any market he chooses'.⁹⁴ This 'freeborn Briton' is a multi-talented craftsman and inventor, and this is one of the reasons he refuses to join a specific Union; he is singled out from the rest of his colleagues as special and exceptional. His ultimate triumph in his battles against Union pressure (he invents a machine for grinding saws, takes it to America and makes his fortune) is evidence that Reade championed individual rights and self-sufficiency over any form of collectivism. The *Pall Mall Gazette* confirmed this

⁹² *Morning Post*, 30 May 1870

When Little seeks advice about his love life from his faithful admirer Jael Dence, he asks her to 'put yourself in my place' (*Put Yourself in His Place*, Act 1, scene 1, p. 7).

⁹³ The question of 'free labour' was a hotly-debated issue, and in Manchester a Free Labour Society was formed in January 1869. Their founding resolution stated that they were 'fully convinced of the injurious effects of trades' unions', and their object was to 'secure to its members the free exercise of their rights to dispose of their labour under whatever terms and under whatever circumstances they may individually and independently think fit'. *Manchester Times*, 30 January 1869.

⁹⁴ *Put Yourself in His Place*, Act 1, scene 1, p. 6.

aspect of the character in its review, when it commented that 'He is the representative of the highest form of individualism'.⁹⁵

Little initially appears to represent the dominant Victorian doctrine that enterprise, or 'self-help' will be rewarded; and he duly gains his prize of financial success and romantic love.⁹⁶ Yet the happy outcome of the play is not a direct result of hard work and perseverance, although these factors do help to arouse sympathy for him. Even though the fictional character was based on an actual artisan who had fallen foul of the unions in Sheffield,⁹⁷ Reade deprives the audience of a working-class hero, when he reveals that Little has a noble heritage. Unbeknown to him (although perhaps increasingly suspected by spectators) his mother belongs to the local gentry; she is the long-lost daughter of Squire Raby who had disowned her years earlier when she married a 'trader' after her first husband had died. Raby is unrepentant about his uncompromising reaction: 'I washed my hands of her altogether, turned her picture to the wall, and forbade her plebeian name to be mentioned before me (*Put Yourself in His Place* Act 1, sc. 3, p. 11). At the end of the long and complicated narrative, after Little has returned from America with a fortune, the revelation means that his rank now matches his wealth and so he

⁹⁵ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 June 1870.

⁹⁶ Little's propensity for hard work is the kind of attribute promoted and celebrated in the extremely popular Victorian publication of that name. Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help*, ed. with Introduction and Notes by Peter W Sinnema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) was first published in 1859 and sold 20,000 copies within a year of its appearance.

⁹⁷ The inspiration for the character was a craftsman called James Bacon Addis and the details of the case are summarised in the Report of the Inquiry, pp. 90-92. He came from Deptford, South-East London, and was beaten quite badly by Jephson and some other men working for Messrs. Ward and Payne. He earned reasonable money (if he worked 10 hours a day he could earn £7.00 per week), kept apprentices, and had to pay for their keep and clothes out of his earnings. He was called names such as 'a bloody Cockney', so his outsider status would seem to have played a part in his victimisation. However, the significant conclusion of the Commissioners was that: 'Although the outrage was done by members of the Edge-Tool Forgers' Union, we have no evidence to show that it was an outrage promoted or encouraged by that union', *The Sheffield Outrages: Report* p. xiv.

is finally able to marry Grace Carden, (who had earlier rejected him because of his poverty and lowly status), and return to his proper position in society.

There are signs throughout the play that Little does not fit into his surroundings, such as when Jael Dence, his admirer comments, 'I often think that he is not a real workman. He is as fond of soap and water as a gentleman born'.⁹⁸ This observation, which discredits artisans whilst it praises Little, is afforded a degree of authority because it is spoken by Dence, who is herself from the working class.⁹⁹ Little's inability to conceal his essential character undermines one of the emerging arguments of the late nineteenth century, that social status is fluid, and instead reinscribes the belief that cleanliness is allied to virtue and thus is mainly the preserve of the middle and upper classes.¹⁰⁰

Put Yourself in His Place endorses, rather than challenges class distinction, but conversely *The Union Wheel* celebrates the merits of those who are not born to aristocratic privilege, and is a more accurate reflection of the creed of Samuel Smiles as expressed in his best-selling book, *Self-Help*. In the chapter titled 'Character – the True Gentleman', Smiles maintains that it is 'truthfulness, integrity and goodness' rather than money and position that confer true status, and the characters in the play bear witness to the truth of

⁹⁸ *Put Yourself in His Place*, Act 1, sc. 3, p. 10.

⁹⁹ Dence, who is bold and something of a tomboy is contrasted with Grace Carden, who behaves in a conventionally ladylike manner. She is described as a 'plebeian maiden' by the *Morning Post*, 30 May 1870 and the *Examiner* of 4 June 1870 described her as 'an Amazonian waiting-maid'. She loves Little, but he regards her as merely a friend, and she must be content to marry a man of her own class, Mr. Bayne. (Reade was surprisingly more radical in his novel, and Dence marries Squire Raby.)

¹⁰⁰ The discovery that a virtuous character, conspicuous in their lowly surroundings, has noble heritage is a common trope in Victorian fiction, and serves to reify class prejudice. For example the eponymous Oliver in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837) and Sybil in Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845) conform to this pattern, despite both authors demonstrating concern for, and a wish to ameliorate, the condition of the working class.

this maxim.¹⁰¹ Harry Thomson is a working-class man of principle; a loyal Union man who makes a reasoned argument for the acceptance of progressive ideas. He bravely defends his fiancée's honour and offers protection to her father at some risk to himself when he is threatened by the Union, as well as demonstrating physical strength and righteous anger in his dealings with Alfred Parker. Mary proclaims to her unwanted paramour that it is Harry who is the true gentleman:

Mary Yes; he does not wear kid gloves, nor patent boots, but he wears that about him which stamps him – what you are not – a Gentleman.

Alfred A Gentleman!

Mary His are the true credentials – an honest workman's hand, and honest workman's heart. He's offered them to me, and put you into the balance Sir, 'gainst them, with all the gold of Parker, Son & Co to weigh you down, you'd only be a feather in the scale, for cowardice is light.

(*The Union Wheel* Act 2, sc. 6, p. 33)

Despite his 'credentials' Harry reveals flaws as well as virtues (for example he is short-tempered with Daft Jim in Act 1, scene 2), and these details of contradictory personality traits help to give the characters credibility.¹⁰²

Reade, too, attempts some light and shade with his cast of characters; not every person from the upper class is virtuous, and it could be argued that he concedes that villainy pervades all levels of society, but the unsavoury character of Frederick Coventry (described in the review in the *Morning Post* as 'a wretch for whom we may hope there has never been a prototype in real

¹⁰¹ Smiles, *Self-Help*, p. 316. Arlene Young notes that the figure of the gentleman was 'arguably the most pervasive, important and unstable symbol in Victorian culture'. Arlene Young, *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents, and Working Women* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999).

¹⁰² The part of Harry Thomson was played by Mr. Dewhurst, who had already had a successful season at the Theatre Royal in a range of parts. The *Era* of 31 October 1869 notes 'Mr. Dewhurst is earnest without extravagance, and not only plays his parts in a gentlemanly manner, but always looks a gentleman'.

life') is portrayed as a peculiar exception, rather than the rule.¹⁰³ Coventry may be proof that 'an ancient family' can produce 'a rotten potato' (*Put Yourself in His Place*, Act 4, scene 2, p. 78), but the concept of inherited nobility, and thus the dominance of nature over nurture, is never fundamentally challenged. Little holds firm to his admirable characteristics despite the privations of his upbringing, and he is portrayed as part of an unbroken line. The weight of history and its effect on the future is graphically illustrated when his ancestor (a knight fully clad in armour) is revealed to him in a dream (Act 2, scene 7).

The romantic notion of love driving men to desperate acts is often employed as a motivating force in melodrama, and in this play it provides an element of mitigation for Coventry. His crime is one of passion, he is in love with Grace Carden, and plans to dispatch his rival (Little) in an explosion at the Star Wheel (the factory at the centre of the story). His accomplice Sam Cole has no such excuse; he is portrayed as an embittered artisan who is simply motivated by greed - Coventry offers him £100 to assist (Act 3, scene 1). This part of the plot is a good example of the way that Unions could be blamed for violent acts motivated by personal malice (a similar storyline occurs in *The Union Wheel*).¹⁰⁴ Yet Reade's narrative is not overly concerned with the injustice of this; neither does it credit those who belong to Unions with any motivations other than selfish ones. They are generally depicted as feckless and lazy, they want to earn their money for as little work as possible, and the review in the *Graphic* confirmed this intemperate and biased

¹⁰³ *Morning Post*, 30 May 1870.

¹⁰⁴ The real attack on John Green at the Union Wheel which was reported in the *Sheffield Independent*, 14 May 1862, confirms this tendency: 'the outrage is not one of those lamentable occurrences which are designated "trade affairs". It seems to be purely the offspring of private malice.' The other artisans in this case established a subscription fund to compensate the razor grinder for his loss.

approach when it commented that 'trades society people' are portrayed as 'irredeemably bad'.¹⁰⁵

This condemnatory generalisation is not confined to employees: the employers are just as bad, guilty of 'ravenous avarice', according to the *Morning Post*.¹⁰⁶ The factory in *Put Yourself in His Place* is owned by 'Mr. Cheatham' (an obvious clue to his character is provided by his punning name), who establishes his belligerent stance in the opening scene when he complains about his workers: 'I will not be dictated to by my servants. It's a cowardly conspiracy ... the men that eat my bread shall never be my masters' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 3). His belief that the workforce should be subservient to him is evident from the phrases 'my servants', 'my bread'; even Henry Little accuses the employers of greed and selfishness when he concurs with a fellow workman that 'a master is true to nothing but his own pocket' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 13).

Reade separates and elevates another tier of society, the squirearchy, represented by a character called Raby. Squires, landed proprietors or country gentry were collectively described by this term from the late eighteenth century, and are discrete from the aristocracy, the rising industrial middle class, and the working class. Given the bad behaviour by 'men' and 'masters', it is not surprising that Squire Raby has an extremely low opinion of all those who are involved in trade, indeed he has disowned his own daughter because of her marriage to a businessman. Raby has been asked to arbitrate in this dispute, but he cannot see a way forward and condemns both sides:

Weasels versus polecats. Polecats versus weasels. Manufacturers and their men are one set of egotistical knaves under different circumstances. The greedy masters would grind the servants to death,

¹⁰⁵ *Graphic*, 4 June 1870.

¹⁰⁶ *Morning Post*, 30 May 1870. This newspaper had gone through various periods of success and decline, and although it originally supported the Whigs, for most of the nineteenth century it was a moderate Tory organ. Fox Bourne, *English Newspapers*, p. 270.

if they could – the greedy servants would ruin their masters, if they could. What sympathy can a gentleman have with either?

(*Put Yourself in His Place*, Act 1, sc. 3, p. 21)

It is, of course, not necessarily true that the opinion of a character reflects the view of the writer, but this assertion that both sides are greedy ‘egotistical knaves’, and that a ‘gentleman’ is outside of, and superior to this struggle remains virtually unchallenged throughout the play. Reviewers understood that this murderous battle was at the heart of the narrative, and the critic for the *Morning Post* summarised the situation: ‘Labour and capital meet upon terms of mutual extermination, and the result is, of course, ruin.’¹⁰⁷

The unbridgeable gap between employers and employees in *Put Yourself in his Place* precludes the development of any kind of mutually beneficial system, and the only possible progress appears to be through individual struggles which leave class inequalities and injustice largely unchanged. The critic for the *Birmingham Daily Post* concedes that Reade’s play will not effect a transformation of society, but he does assert that the outcome is morally correct:

We have no faith in plays of this kind working a social revolution; but ... they inculcate healthy moral sentiments, and at least conform to the good old principle of making right triumph over might.¹⁰⁸

Despite this regional newspaper’s reputation for radical views, in the opinion of this particular critic, the ‘right’ of the individual should triumph over the ‘might’ of the Unions.¹⁰⁹

Reade may have had such an agenda to promote through his dramatic fiction, but as already indicated, his narrative did contain factual elements; and Little shared some features of his story with the real James Bacon Addis, particularly the fact that he produced carving tools and

¹⁰⁷ *Morning Post*, 30 May 1870.

¹⁰⁸ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 2 November 1870.

¹⁰⁹ Fox Bourne, p. 258.

completed the whole process of forging, hardening and finishing himself.¹¹⁰ There is no known record of how Addis reacted to the adaptation of his story by Reade, but he is unlikely to have been offended, given the sympathetic manner in which he was portrayed. However there are undoubtedly challenges for writers and actors who represent living individuals on stage, and the next section investigates this somewhat problematic area. There were particular problems in the case of William Broadhead: although alleged murderers had been represented onstage many times before this, it was unusual for the model to be in such rude health, alongside his theatrical simulacrum. Broadhead was not only a public and controversial figure, but he also had an acute understanding of the power of performance and was fully aware of how it could be exploited.

3. Challenging realities: representation and reception

3.1 Image and reputation; or, pride and prejudice

The reports of the situation in the media were dominated by the figure of Broadhead, and this concentrated focus distorted rational debate about the underlying causes of, and potential solutions for, the continuing unrest. His ubiquitous presence immediately biased some critics against the plays simply because the writers had dared to represent a 'monster' on stage.¹¹¹ This was certainly the case with *The Union Wheel*: the critics, particularly in newspapers from London and the south, reacted almost exclusively to the theatrical spectre of Broadhead and did not consider the way the character was actually portrayed; and it seemed they were not prepared to consider the constructive message of the play. In the volatile atmosphere of 1870, many

¹¹⁰ See footnote 97, for further information about the inspiration for the character.

¹¹¹ 'If the artisan and the labouring class could feel any general sympathy with the villains, we should soon be living, not in the England of History, but in a den of devils and a land of monsters.' London *Telegraph*, reprinted in the *Sheffield Independent*, 11 July 1867.

critics did not appreciate the subtle and nuanced approach to the material, and effectively deprived it of a fair hearing.

Given that *The Union Wheel* did not appear on stage until almost three years after the Commission of Inquiry had published its report of the Outrages, it might be supposed that the commotion would, by then, have subsided. However, the flames of indignation were fanned by Broadhead himself and the behaviour of his followers. Although his admission to the Inquiry and his actions immediately thereafter suggested contrition, his later behaviour implied something more cynical: that he was acutely aware of the necessity of humble gestures in public and sometimes behaved accordingly. On the same day as his confession, he resigned as Treasurer of the United Kingdom Alliance of Organised Trades, and shortly afterwards as Secretary of the Saw-Grinders' Union, yet his supporters refused to expel him, which caused alarm among his colleagues in the metropolitan and national trades councils.¹¹² These organisations were in a vulnerable position at this time, and thus it was politic for them to publicly distance themselves from the kind of violence revealed by the Commission. They threatened to exclude the Saw-Grinders, which would not only deprive these artisans of the benefits of belonging to a national organisation but also risked isolating all the cutlery trades by negative association. The differing degrees of militancy, frictions between the different branches, and disagreements about Union strategy were reported and discussed extensively in the local press, and doubtless provided the topic for heated conversations in public houses and other centres of social intercourse.

Despite the best efforts of men like Stainton to isolate and condemn Broadhead, it was clear that he had many allies, and his opponents became even more irate as they witnessed his infamy bring him prosperity. He still

¹¹² Report of the meeting of the London Trades in the Exeter Hall, *Sheffield Independent*, 4 July 1867.

presided over the Royal George, the public house in Carver Street which had been the centre of Union operations; the *Daily News* in July 1867 reported that he had 'been driving a tremendous trade since his name became so unenviably notorious'.¹¹³ Although magistrates refused to renew his licence in August of that year, the *Sheffield Independent* reported that he 'refused to leave until the expiration of the lease', which only occurred the following spring. It seems that he then tried to outwit the authorities and simply take on other premises, the King William Inn, in Holly Street.¹¹⁴ His presence was certainly a cause of frustration to those in positions of power, and in March 1869 the same newspaper reported a complaint from the Yorkshire aristocrat Lord Wharnccliffe to the Home Secretary about the legal regulation of beer houses, which asserted that 'if any argument were required in condemnation of the present system it would be found in the fact that "that scoundrel Broadhead" ... had been enabled to get a licence under it'.¹¹⁵ He boldly reappeared at the Brewster Sessions in August 1869 with an application for his new venue, but he was again unsuccessful, because the magistrates refused to agree that he was 'of good character', a necessary attribute for a licence.¹¹⁶ His friends, however, still refused to desert him.

Broadhead's moral compass may have been questionable, but his resilience and allure were undeniable. The *Sheffield Independent* continued in its report of the Brewster Sessions that after an emotional appeal failed to

¹¹³ *Daily News* (reprinted article from the *Birmingham Daily Post*), 3 July 1867.

¹¹⁴ The licence for the Royal George had been allocated to another tenant, as reported in *Sheffield Independent*, 28 August 1868, yet it seemed that Broadhead had taken advantage of a loophole in the law and simply moved elsewhere. When he appeared before the Brewster Sessions the following August, 1869, two witnesses 'spoke to the respectable manner in which the applicant had conducted the King William Inn, during the time it had been in his possession.' *Sheffield Independent* 18 September 1869.

¹¹⁵ *Sheffield Independent*, 11 March 1869.

¹¹⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 18 September 1869.

sway the magistrates and he announced he would be forced to leave for a new life in America, a subscription fund was set up to offer him financial assistance, and he received support from a surprising number of individuals. The Reverend J. F. Witty (vicar of St. Matthew's Church, Carver Street) agreed to become Treasurer and contributed £5.00, and he even criticised the magistrates' treatment of Broadhead as 'unjust and oppressive' at a meeting to discuss the fund at the Cutlers' Hall. The Chair agreed, and said that it was 'a disgrace to many gentlemen in the town that they were now persecuting him... their conduct was most un-English'.¹¹⁷ The *Western Mail* in Cardiff was more circumspect: their report about the fund claimed that contributors' motives differed widely, and implied that his enemies were so determined to be rid of him that they were prepared to donate.¹¹⁸ Broadhead may have been momentarily offended by his benefactors' intentions (if indeed he believed the story) but the way he mounted his defence suggested that his ego was strong enough to withstand much disapprobation.

The manner in which he took leave of his home town was the last straw for his opponents and conclusive proof of his celebrity status. The subtitle of the angrily descriptive article in the *Sheffield Independent* is 'Impudent Exhibition' and the mixture of politics and showmanship in aid of his emigration fund attracted a large audience to his choice of venue, the Pavilion Music Hall, located in Tudor Street, very close to the Theatre Royal.¹¹⁹ Even though the usual admission prices had been doubled, the event was sold out and had to be repeated a few nights later to meet the demand for tickets. His performance, reflecting the contradictions of his career, was a mixture of

¹¹⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 2 October 1869.

¹¹⁸ *Western Mail* (Cardiff), 27 September, 1869. This newspaper had only recently been founded (in 1869) by the Marquess of Bute, and was 'initially intended to be conservative in its orientation', 'British Newspapers 1800-1900', Nineteenth Century Newspapers, British Library/Gale Digital <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

¹¹⁹ See Appendix C1-3 for lists of venues, and D for maps detailing their locations.

reasoned argument and shameless self-promotion. He claimed that his only wish had been to 'protect and defend the labour of thousands of workmen', and pointed out that the desperate situation had arisen partly because trades unions were not fully recognised, and outside of legal governance, so members had been forced to take direct action when their regulations were contravened. However, using an audacious theatrical analogy from *Othello* to elevate himself to the status of tragic hero, he claimed he loved trades unions 'not wisely but too well'; and ended by an unabashed announcement that there were copies of his portrait on sale in the hall, and they would be sold for a penny each.¹²⁰ Broadhead's exhibitionism infuriated his critics perhaps even more than the actual deeds he had either committed or sanctioned. This anger deepened when he returned to England in February 1870 after only nine weeks' away. It was therefore not surprising that when the Theatre Royal produced *The Union Wheel* in April of that year some critics responded with vehement hostility.

3.2 The live subject: impersonation and symbolism

Much of the dynamic impact of theatre emanates from the physicality of the players and the tension between textual meaning and visual sub-text. The text is spoken by living actors who embody the persona of their characters, who are usually figments of the playwrights' imaginations, although sometimes they are inspired by real people. Particular challenges arise when the individuals who have motivated the fictional drama are not only controversial, but have an established public persona and are living

¹²⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 30 October 1869.

In Act 5 scene 2 of Shakespeare's play, the eponymous tragic hero Othello, after murdering his wife Desdemona, laments that he was 'one that loved not wisely but too well'. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. by Stanley Wells and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 819-853 (p. 853).

Stainton described the downfall of Broadhead at the Commission as 'a tragedy', Stainton, *The Making of Sheffield*, pp. 28 & 33.

within the locality of the theatre. Broadhead must have been a familiar figure for both Joseph Fox and the actor who played the part of William Brumley in *The Union Wheel*, Mr. Alexander. He was a member of the stock company at the Theatre Royal, which had opened for the Winter Season on Monday 11 October after refurbishment.¹²¹ Alexander had been employed for at least some of the season; he appeared as Banquo in *Macbeth* at the beginning of April¹²² and would have had the opportunity to observe his subject, particularly given that (apart from his nine-week sojourn across the Atlantic) Broadhead was fairly constantly in the public eye. The outspoken Union leader was clearly very careful about his appearance, as the *Sheffield Independent* reported when he ‘took his farewell of Sheffield’ at the Pavilion Music Hall on Friday 29 October 1869:

His “get up,” to use a music-hall expression, was unexceptionable. His irreproachable black effectively contrasted with the white cloth spread over the table behind which he stood to air his oratory. Supported by the usual candles and a decanter of water, Mr. Broadhead looked the *beau ideal* of smug respectability. By a stranger he might have been mistaken for a scientific lecturer, a teacher of pure morals, or a preacher of religion.¹²³

The writer asserts that the image of propriety onstage is merely an illusion; Broadhead had organised his ‘get up’; he had deliberately chosen his outfit, demeanour, and stage setting and thus ‘looked’ as if he were a respectable member of society. His subterfuge would fool ‘a stranger’, but not those who knew his history.

The element of masquerade in the appearance of Broadhead at the music hall had a memorable effect, and so later, when Mr. Alexander faithfully reproduced his costume and mannerisms, his performance was imbued with

¹²¹ *Era*, 17 October 1869.

¹²² *Era*, 3 April 1870.

¹²³ *Sheffield Independent*, 30 October 1869, reprinted in the *Leeds Mercury*, 2 November 1869. The Leeds newspaper was ‘one of the foremost provincial newspapers’ and the owner campaigned ‘tirelessly for social and political reform’, ‘British Newspapers 1800-1900’, Nineteenth Century Newspapers, British Library/Gale Digital <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

the ghost of the original. Indeed there was a suspicion that Broadhead himself was actually on the stage:

...it seems almost difficult to believe, the journey to America having failed, that the notorious ex-Secretary of the Grinders' Union had not turned his attention to the stage.¹²⁴

It seems that the actor was wholly successful in reproducing the affected behaviour of his role model, as the two reviews in the *Sheffield Independent* illustrate (Monday 18th and Wednesday 20th April). The second review described Alexander's performance in the play as 'an elaborate mimicry', and compared his theatrical representation with the stage persona of Broadhead at the farewell concert five months previously:

The suit of faultless black, the self-satisfied twirl of the eyeglass, the deliberate articulation, and the stale platitudes uttered so oilily, so closely resembled the *tout ensemble* of Wm. Broadhead as he washed his hands of all further connections with this wicked town at the Pavilion Music Hall, that it is hard to imagine the man is not standing before you.¹²⁵

Both the observer at the Pavilion and the critic at the Theatre Royal¹²⁶ suggested that the costumes worn by Broadhead/Brumley had a figurative quality, intended to enhance the integrity of the wearer. The suits were 'irreproachable' or 'faultless'; and this supposed innocence was transferred by a mysterious process of osmosis from the clothes to the man, who could then exploit the contrast between his implied purity and the 'wicked' town which had dared to oust him. However, the juxtaposition of the 'faultless' suit with the 'self-satisfied' manner of its owner and his 'stale platitudes' which were

¹²⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 18 April 1870.

¹²⁵ *Sheffield Independent* 20 April 1870.

¹²⁶ It is impossible to determine if these articles were written by the same person, but it could well have been the case.

‘uttered so oilily’ assured the reader that the description was ironic: neither Brumley (nor Broadhead) were blameless.¹²⁷

Although Broadhead was a prominent presence in Sheffield in the spring of 1870, there is no evidence that he saw *The Union Wheel*, but it is tempting to speculate that he did. Given his commitment to the cause of trade unionism, together with the careful cultivation of his image, he would surely have been concerned as to how he was portrayed on stage, yet we can only conjecture what he thought of Mr. Alexander and the detailed reproduction of his physical traits and style of speaking. However, when *Put Yourself in His Place* came to the Theatre Royal in November, Broadhead not only went to see the production, but confronted the actors both on and off-stage, and even threatened the playwright. The actor G. F. Sinclair, who played the role of Grotait in the original production of *Put Yourself in His Place* at Leeds, as well as in the Adelphi production and on tour, reported proudly in a letter to the *Era* that Broadhead had not only attended the production in Sheffield but had also praised his performance – ‘he stood up in the pit and in triumphant tones drew the attention of the audience to the resemblance between himself and ... G. F. Sinclair’.¹²⁸ Sinclair’s pride that Broadhead had been impressed with his rendition, suggests that as an actor, his concern for the quality and veracity of his performance took precedence over any potential anxiety he may have felt about the morality of his role model.

This quest for truthful performance took another actor, known only as ‘J.R.M.’ into dangerous territory, as he, too, detailed in a letter to the *Era*.¹²⁹ He had been engaged to play the part of Grotait ‘in one of the largest seaports on the west of England’, and had been sent to Sheffield by Reade to

¹²⁷ Reade included this characteristic of Broadhead for his version, Mr. Grotait, the stage directions read: ‘with an oily manner’, *Put Yourself in His Place*, Act 1, scene 1, p. 5.

¹²⁸ *Era*, 8 January 1887.

¹²⁹ *Era*, 25 December 1886.

do some first-hand research, with the instruction to 'procure an introduction to Broadhead, note his peculiarities and mannerisms, and give a "counterfeit presentment" of him in the part of Mr. Grotait'. It is easy to see why J.R.M. had been told not to divulge the reason for his visit, as he vividly described what happened in the course of the interview:

Suddenly his hitherto genial manner changed. He rose, crossed the room, and after looking down the passage, closed and locked the door. He then returned to the table, placed his outstretched hands upon it, and, looking me full in the face, said:-

"See heer, lad, tha'rt not a laker (play actor)¹³⁰ art tha'?" Without waiting for a reply, he proceeded in a tone of concentrated ferocity, "Tha' looks't like yan, and if a knew tha' weer, and sent heer to tak' me off on th' stage, I'd mak' thee as tha' wouldn't play for yan week at least. That ---- Reade," he continued, qualifying the name with a coarse oath, "when he wor in this ta'an, had fe'ace enough to send play-actor chap to ask if I'd go and see th' piece he'd written aba'at me. I didn't go, lad; but I he'erd all aba'at it fro' chaps as were theer, an' I'd a thowt no mo'ar o'fettlin --- if I'd th' chance than o' doin' some things as folks say I ha' done."

I hadn't the slightest doubt but that my excitable companion would have put this threat of personal violence into practice, had I not strenuously denied having any connection with the theatrical world, a statement which, although untrue, was my only means of safety, as he had plenty of "roughs" to assist him within call.¹³¹

In this account, Broadhead speaks with a very broad accent and in dialect, but the dialogue for Grotait (in *Put Yourself in His Place*) and Brumley (in *The Union Wheel*) is not written in this manner. J.R.M. may have exaggerated Broadhead's manner of speaking in order to emphasise his threatening presence, startle his readers, and confirm their prejudices that those from the north of England were wild and strange. In any case, Broadhead's alleged reaction to Reade's play, which assumed his starring

¹³⁰ The letter-writer, or perhaps the editor, felt the need to give an explanation of the word 'laker', but it appears to have been used by others as well as Broadhead. John Coleman quotes Thomas Youdan, commenting that Sheffield had a 'plethora of "lakers," as he elegantly termed them', John Coleman, *Fifty Years of an Actor's Life*, p. 580. The *English Dialect Dictionary* confirms that 'lake' or 'laik' is an old Norse word meaning 'play' that is widespread across the north of England. Joseph Wright (1855-1930), *The English Dialect Dictionary* (London: Henry Frowde, 1905).

¹³¹ *Era*, 25 December 1886.

I have not been able to discover anything further about this actor and his career, nor whether he ever actually played the role of Broadhead. The tour of *Put Yourself in His Place* was not particularly successful, so perhaps the planned performances never went ahead.

role in the drama, ('th' piece he'd written aba't me') appeared to confirm the size of his ego, as well as his propensity for physical violence. He was clearly unhappy about the way his character had been represented, and this response, and his denial that he actually went to see *Put Yourself in His Place*, counteracted G. F. Sinclair's account which asserted that Broadhead was pleased with the accuracy with which he was depicted.¹³²

The decisions about modes of speaking are revealing ones. There is not a clear distinction made between the character Brumley and his fellow unionists in *The Union Wheel*, and all the workmen use a certain amount of colloquial expressions and the definite article reduction (th', t'), but none of them speak in such strong dialect. Fox ensures that his working-class characters are recognisably from Sheffield and articulate, but Reade underlines the differences between Union leader and the other men rather more. At the beginning of the play Grotait contends that violent acts are committed by 'the lower workmen', whereas 'we, who conduct the trades, repudiate these outrages with horror' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 8).

Grotait is written as a more complex figure than the rest of the ill-disposed artisans. He appears to be compassionate, and thus subject to internal conflict about his actions, for example when he debates the consequences of the proposed assault by his cohorts on Henry Little:

My heart was always as much larger than yours as my head is. I have fought for the trade with my blood, but often and often humanity has pulled at my heart, and the struggle has torn me to pieces. This is such a decent chap; and he has got a mother; a perfect lady. How will she look when he is brought to her bruised and bleeding? Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Oh, dear' [Bursts out crying violently]

(*Put Yourself in His Place*, Act 2, sc. 3)

¹³² The *Sheffield Independent* on Thursday 24 November 1870 referenced the incident at the Theatre Royal: 'Mr William Broadhead was at this place last night, and evinced considerable interest in the representation of *Put Yourself in His Place*; and the story was repeated in the *Birmingham Daily Post* (Friday 25 November) and the *Western Mail* (Cardiff) (Monday 28 November) and *Belfast Newsletter* (Wednesday 30 November).

This display of sensitivity, which could provide an element of mitigation for Grotait, proves instead to be merely evidence of his emotional instability, and any sympathy for his character is promptly quashed. He attempts to parlay with Little, but when his adversary insults him, he loses his temper and orders that he be beaten to teach him a lesson (Act 2, scene 3). By the end of the play, the audience would probably agree with the *Morning Post*, that he encouraged the ‘infatuated villainy’ which was demonstrated by his fellow Unionists.¹³³

It was therefore arguably more than vanity that provoked Broadhead and his allies to threaten not only the actor J. R. M., but the writer as well. John Coleman notes in his memoir that

...the short life of the play was anything but a merry one ... Reade was continually assailed with anonymous letters, purporting to be from gentlemen of the proletariat [sic] of Sheffield, threatening to blow up both him and his piece with dynamite.¹³⁴

Although these threats substantiate the accusations that Union militants were quick to use violence as a means of communication, there is no evidence of any physical attacks and the threats subsided.¹³⁵

It was not surprising that Broadhead and his supporters were annoyed by *Put Yourself in His Place*, but it was more unexpected that the *Sheffield*

¹³³ *Morning Post*, 30 May 1870.

¹³⁴ Coleman, *Charles Reade*, p. 321.

¹³⁵ There are many anecdotes about Broadhead and how he lived out the rest of his life. He died in Sheffield, in March 1879, aged 63. Stainton maintained that after his return from America, he was ‘a very lonely and much-avoided man’, (J. H. Stainton, p. 40), but other accounts contradict this. He ran a small grocery shop for several years, and a sympathetic article in the *Sheffield Times* portrays him as a model of respectability, ‘Mr. Broadhead has now settled down into a purveyor of provisions on week-days, and frequenter of St. Matthew’s church on Sundays’ (*Sheffield Times*, 3 December 1870). However, there were disputes about whether he should return the money that had been collected for his emigration (he claimed it was all spent) and David Price reports that he continued to maximise his notoriety, and ‘was to be found in public houses, reciting ‘the infamous methods he had adopted, receiving money from the publicans and collections from the hearers’’. David Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 88. Price quotes from F. G. Belton (ed.) *Ommanney of Sheffield: Memoirs of George Campbell Ommanney 1882-1936* (Centenary Press, 1936), p. 148.

Independent took issue with the play on behalf of Samuel Crookes, another of the perpetrators of the Outrages. This artisan, responsible for some of the more serious crimes, including shooting a grinder called Linley, who later died, was commonly believed to be the prototype for the character Sam Cole, in the play. The *Sheffield Independent* is furious because of the manner in which he is represented:

... the make-up of the character is simply execrable, and we are sure if Crookes saw himself as he is portrayed [sic] upon the stage he would be intensely disgusted. Instead of making him look like a grinder, the *costumier* has made him appear as a ruffianly burglar, and that most certainly is a libel upon Crookes.¹³⁶

The implication here is that Crookes was not 'a ruffianly burglar', he was a grinder, and thus a rather superior individual, and so the character of Cole should have been played in a more accurate, and presumably more sympathetic, manner. However, whilst the *Sheffield Telegraph* complains that 'Sam is too gross, elderly, and un-Sheffield in dialect to pass muster for the original', the protest is in the cause of precision, not sympathy, and the writer bluntly states that Crookes was a 'sneaking assassin'.¹³⁷

From these reviews and accounts, it seems fair to suggest that audiences and critics in Sheffield were acutely aware of the interplay between reality and performance, and were prepared to unpick, and challenge, the layers of meaning in both *The Union Wheel* and *Put Yourself in His Place*. Those from London and other parts of the country were neither sensitive to nuance nor patient, and their reaction to both plays was generally negative, albeit demonstrating a range of different perspectives. Even though *Put Yourself in His Place* was criticised, the press did at least give it proper consideration. The next section examines the difference between local and

¹³⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 22 November 1870.

¹³⁷ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 22 November 1870.

national reaction to both plays, and investigates how the furore provoked criticism of the licensing system and the office of the Lord Chamberlain.

3.3 Offending the critics: provincial and metropolitan responses

Print media was harnessed by all parties who were involved in the Outrages, and this power was even commented on by one of the characters in *The Union Wheel*. When Saunders/Stammers lays a fuse to blow up the Wheel (with Harry Thomson, Job and Mary Langton inside), he muses, 'I five minutes there'll be a blow up -'ll make more noise i'Sheffield when t'papers come out tomorrow morning than it will here tonight' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 3). It was understandable that *The Union Wheel*, a play produced in Sheffield about the events that had so recently taken place there, attracted more attention than would normally be the case with a provincial production, but the response of the metropolitan press betrayed prejudice rather than genuine interest. By contrast, all three local newspapers, even though they represented different points along the political spectrum, were broadly sympathetic to Fox's endeavour, although their reviews revealed differing levels of enthusiasm.¹³⁸ The playwright was closely linked to Sheffield through birth, family, and profession, and although I have been unable to conclusively establish a connection with a specific newspaper, he may have also been a freelance contributor and even an editor in the town.¹³⁹ His intimate understanding of his source material certainly influenced the form and content of his play, and the fact that he was an established member of the community is likely to have influenced its reception.

Given that William Leng, the editor of the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* ('an influential voice for Conservatism'), had been very vocal in his

¹³⁸ The three main local papers in 1870 were: the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (Conservative/Tory), the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* (Liberal), and the *Sheffield Times* (Liberal/Radical).

¹³⁹ Obituary of Joseph Fox, *New York Times*, 1 September 1906.

condemnation of the Outrages, and had taken an active part in the campaign to establish a Commission of Inquiry (at the height of the Outrages, just before the Commission, Leng apparently kept a loaded gun on his desk), it is rather surprising that its review mainly confined its critique to the scenography, technical effects and performances, and declined to comment on the more controversial issues.¹⁴⁰ The article simply notes that

Several of the scenes are of a very interesting description. The interior of "The Union Wheel" is a capital illustration of a Sheffield grinding hull, and "The Elms" and "Endcliffe Wood" are very pretty. But the most pleasing and attractive scene is the concluding one, "The Porter Falls," which are situated near Fulwood. It is charmingly romantic, and to illustrate nature as completely as possible a continuous supply of water is kept running over the falls. ... The acting throughout is good ...¹⁴¹

When the critic does address the subject matter of the play, he is measured in his language:

The writer has been very successful in introducing into the drama incidents to enable him to illustrate the probable *modus operandi* of rattening and blowings-up, methods of revenge frequently adopted some time ago in one or two of the Sheffield trades by unionists.¹⁴²

This critic even minimised the extent of the incidents which provided the inspiration for the play, and implied that it was no longer a current or troubling issue by the use of phrases such as 'some time ago' and 'one or two'.

It was left to the *Sheffield Independent*, despite its strong Liberal credentials, to express misgivings about the sensitive subject matter, and whether it should have been produced at all:

The play is one which deals with trades' unionism, and introduced rattening, a blow up, and putting powder in a grinder's trough. The

¹⁴⁰ Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, p. 59, p. 60.

¹⁴¹ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 18 April 1870.

The *Sheffield Times* was also unstinting in its praise for the scenographic elements and declared that 'the scenery is excellent and most effectively painted, anything more striking than 'The Porter Falls' we have seldom seen on stage. This scene is alone worth the expense and trouble of visiting the theatre'. *Sheffield Times*, 23 April 1870.

¹⁴² *Sheffield Telegraph*, 18 April 1870.

propriety of producing such a play as this in Sheffield of all other places may possibly be questioned. One would almost think we had had enough of this kind of thing in reality without having it produced upon the stage ...¹⁴³

The contingent phrases ('may possibly', 'one would almost think') indicate wariness, but the critic also approved of the moral lesson taught by the 'speedy justice' in the play, as already discussed. Although a second review in the same paper a few days later gave a longer description of the plot and the acting, this writer was still concerned with the beneficial effects of the production, as much as its artistic and technical qualities:

Having said this much comes the question whether the "Union Wheel" is a drama which can effect much good in Sheffield, or whether, on the contrary, it is not calculated to have a prejudicial effect. The question is one which is worth deliberation.¹⁴⁴

This question of whether the stage 'in Sheffield of all other places' was an appropriate place to regurgitate the issues that had fractured the community was a pertinent one. Re-living recent events through performance could either be part of a healing process or it could cause further friction, and attract more censure to the town. The conclusions (if he reached any) of his 'deliberation' are not known but other critics, such as the reviewer for the *Sheffield Times* continued the debate. However, this one was more certain of his view; he felt that the quality of the writing was high, and moreover, that the production was a worthwhile endeavour:

The Union Wheel, a new drama by a Sheffield gentleman, has been produced at the Theatre Royal during the past week. We are glad to say, the work is an honour to the author and a credit to the town – it is exceedingly well written and full of good and useful sentiments.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ *Sheffield Independent*, 18 April 1870.

¹⁴⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 20 April, 1870.

¹⁴⁵ *Sheffield Times*, 23 April 1870.

The editor of the paper, Samuel Harrison had had to give up active leadership on the paper the previous year due to ill-health, but it continued to promote its founding principles of justice and equality. Harrison died in 1871 aged just 44. Given his journalistic career, it is tempting to think that Fox wrote for the *Sheffield Times*, and there is an intriguing similarity between the sentiments of *The Union Wheel* and this newspaper's criticism, but it has been impossible to find any evidence that this was the case.

The writer expressed his relief that the play was not only 'well written' but was 'full of good and useful sentiments'; and his phrase 'a credit to the town' suggested that the inhabitants could collectively be pleased and proud of this production. It is also worth noting that the reviewer calls Fox a 'Sheffield gentleman' and this title affords him a degree of status and emphasises his local connection.

This critic also revealed his own 'sentiments', not only about the play but on matters beyond it, and used his review to comment on, and indeed make an eloquent case for, trade unionism in general. His review expressed similar opinions to those advocated by the playwright:

Trades Unions are good and useful when well and wisely managed. The labourer is worthy of his hire, and the artisan classes do more wisely when they protect themselves and their families by uniting together in Unions – it is the abuse and not the use that renders them injurious to and a pest to society. Without combination the artisan is as a reed shaken by the wind, without strength, at the mercy of every master; by combination, when wisely and judiciously arranged, he is strong as the millionaire.¹⁴⁶

The article is rhetorical in form and tone, and poetical phrases such as 'a reed shaken by the wind' evoke sympathy for the struggling artisan. It is difficult to ascertain exactly who read the *Sheffield Times*, but it had a tradition of radicalism, and advocacy for the working classes, so it was likely to appeal to those concerned with social change. Whilst readers may have been in agreement with the opinions expressed in the review, it could also be argued that the repetition of the word 'wisely' (three times in eight lines) urged those who supported, or who may be more closely involved with trade unions, to follow a strategy of considered, rather than hasty, action. Although probably unconsciously used, it is also worth noting that the phrase 'well and wisely managed' echoed, yet contradicted William Broadhead's speech at the Pavilion Music Hall five months' previously, when he claimed that he loved

¹⁴⁶ *Sheffield Times*, 23 April 1870.

trades unionism 'not wisely but too well', and had received tumultuous applause.

The fear of Broadhead and his influence affected critics' attitude to the dramatic fiction: commentators were concerned about the effect that the play would have on its audiences, because of the still-volatile situation within the community. Even the critic of the *Sheffield Times* had to admit that the sentiments expressed by the confrontational activists were popular, and he seems to debate with himself about the extent of audience approval:

That the sentiments in support of trades unions are applauded is not to be wondered at, that some small applause, and it was not very small, is given to sentiments in favour of rattening is true enough..¹⁴⁷

His ambivalence ('some small applause ... not very small') reveals an uncertainty about how the sentiments uttered by Brumley were received; the *Sheffield Independent* agreed that elements of the audience ('the occupants of the gallery') demonstrated selective hearing, and expressed their approval of the extremism voiced by the Union leader:

A sad feature in connection with the representation of the play on Saturday night – and we suppose it will be the same at every succeeding representation – was that the sentiments which the author puts into the mouth of Bromley [sic] as to the interests of the union being above all considerations were loudly cheered by the occupants of the gallery, whilst sentiments which went to the contrary effect met with only a very partial response.¹⁴⁸

However, the overall opinion of the *Sheffield Times*' critic remained that

...the good outweighs the evil by a long way and we have no hesitation in saying that the "drama" cannot fail in being useful as against the evil-disposed members of trades unions.¹⁴⁹

These local journalists, who had an intimate understanding of a complex and difficult situation, were prepared to properly evaluate the play,

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 18 April 1870. Brumley's actual words are 'the Union before all things is my motto', Act 1, scene 4, p. 11.

¹⁴⁹ *Sheffield Times*, 23 April 1870.

and the critic for the *Sheffield Times* thought that it would even provide education and enlightenment for outsiders:

... altogether we believe the drama likely to produce much good and certain to be attractive, especially in towns where the saw trade is not so well known and understood as in Sheffield.¹⁵⁰

The critic does not elaborate on whether he thinks this transmission of useful information will happen if the play tours to other towns, or whether it will be a result of press coverage. In any case, he could not have been more wrong: critics for national and provincial newspapers, rather than welcoming the play as informative and insightful, exploded with indignation. It is unlikely that any of them actually saw the play: in most cases the papers simply reprinted extracts from the first review in the *Sheffield Independent* (Monday 18 April) but with the addition of rather more inflammatory headlines, which completely submerged the character of Brumley into that of Broadhead, and focused almost exclusively on this aspect of the production.

The *Sheffield Independent* acknowledged that elements of its review had been 'extensively quoted', and reprinted an article from the *Daily News* which echoed the local paper's concern that the 'decorous intention' of the playwright was 'neither relished nor encouraged by the audience in the gallery'. Moreover, the national publication took both playwright and manager to task for producing a play featuring 'villains' who had been 'specially veneered with a coating of heroism for the Sheffield district'. The article makes an unfavourable comparison between the provincial town and London, and asserts that, in the metropolis

pickpockets ... would never applaud the dramatic realisation of the business in which they themselves are engaged, nor do we think the proprietor of a transpontine theatre or gaff would venture to risk the production of a show which contained a lesson and an apology for thieves.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 April 1870. It has not been possible to trace the original article, as it appeared in the original publication. The *Daily News* was a very popular daily newspaper, which was founded as a Liberal rival to Conservative morning

This contention not only disparages the play, but also the Theatre Royal, by deeming it less discerning than even the commonest establishments in London. It is surprising that the local newspaper merely reproduced this tirade, without comment.

The actor Mr. Alexander, with his uncanny likeness to the *bête noire* of the media helped to convince these critics that the play served as a vehicle to communicate Broadhead's belligerent doctrines. The term 'Broadheadism', which suggested impassioned adherence to a faith, first appeared at the time of the Commission of Inquiry and continued to be used in articles about the Outrages and their legacy.¹⁵² It also became the main way to denigrate Fox's play, as this extract from *Punch* demonstrates:

With exceptionally bad taste the Manager of the Sheffield Theatre has produced a drama called *The Union Wheel*, which deals with "Broadheadism" (*hiss 'em* it should have been) and other unpleasant trade matters. The sentiments in favour of the ruffianism of the "Union" were received with delight by the gallery.¹⁵³

Other newspapers eagerly adopted the word to create eye-catching headlines, which emphasised the allegedly irrational and extreme behaviour of the Sheffield populace (or certainly the working-class members, collectively termed 'the gallery'): the *Western Mail*, published in Cardiff on Saturday 23 April, headed its article 'Broadhead Worship at Sheffield' (suggesting his iconic status and the idolatry of his followers); the *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* on the same day had 'Broadheadism on the Stage'; *Reynolds Newspaper* (London) of Sunday 24 April had 'Broadheadism at Sheffield'. Their distorted versions of the first review in the

newspapers. 'British Newspapers 1800-1900', Nineteenth Century Newspapers, British Library/Gale Digital <<http://find.galegroup.com>>.

¹⁵² A search on the British Library digitised newspapers revealed 80 instances of the term 'Broadheadism' across all newspapers from July 1867. 'British Newspapers 1800-1900', op. cit.

¹⁵³ *Punch*, 7 May 1870 (reprinted in the *Era*, 8 May 1870).

Sheffield Independent omitted the sections from the original about the quality of the script and its moral lessons. These reactions betrayed a fear that the play was nothing more than Unionist propaganda, and likely to inspire further Outrages.

The metropolitan press reviews went further than mere condemnation of *The Union Wheel*; their complaints extended to the licensing system; indeed their public questioning of how the play had managed to evade the authorities threatened to seriously undermine the procedure. The *Standard* was first to accuse the Lord Chamberlain of allowing inappropriate plays to be produced in the provinces when they would be prevented in London. Although *The Union Wheel* and Sheffield are not actually mentioned, the play and the place undoubtedly prompted its questioning of the potency of the 'Lord Great Chamberlain' [sic]:

Our inquiry is ... simply to his jurisdiction, through his Ministerial subaltern, over the English drama. What are his powers, or the powers of himself and his actual deputy, and how and through whom are they exercised? For what purpose were they created, and in what spirit do they act? ... All we can assert is that, Lord Chamberlain or no Lord Chamberlain, Mr DONNE or no Mr DONNE, plots are conceived and representations are popular in certain provincial towns which would never be tolerated, to name the ancient limits, within the precincts of Savoy ... what of this power if it be good for London, and inapplicable to Liverpool?¹⁵⁴

Punch caught up with the controversy and joined in the attack two weeks' later:

We always thought the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain extended to the Provinces so far as the licensing of new plays was concerned. If so, where was Mr. Donne on this occasion? Perhaps the piece was produced without his knowledge. If so, we beg to refer him to a recent number of the *Sheffield Independent*, in which this charming drama is fully described.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ *Standard*, 22 April 1870. This rather reactionary tirade seems to contradict the founding statement of the newspaper, which professed that 'the politics of the *Standard* are those of the age – enlightened amelioration and progress ... Bound to no party, our only object and aim are to make this journal the earnest and honest representative and exponent of true English spirit, interest, prosperity and freedom...'. Fox Bourne notes that the paper 'professed moderate and progressive Conservatism'. Fox Bourne, *English Newspapers*, p. 241.

¹⁵⁵ *Punch*, 7 May 1870.

The fact that the writer in *Punch* referred his reader to the review in the *Sheffield Independent* rather than offering any further exposition, suggests that his criticism was based on partial knowledge and prejudicial assumption, rather than actual spectatorship. Nevertheless his use of heavy irony when he described the play as a 'charming drama' (alongside his earlier accusation that it was in 'bad taste') demonstrated that he felt confident to pass pejorative judgement, and moreover to incriminate William Bodham Donne, the Examiner of Plays. *Punch's* suggestion that 'the piece was produced without his knowledge' was untrue, as the play had indeed been duly licensed, with only an instruction to 'omit the words "damn" and "curse" throughout'.¹⁵⁶ The accusation of negligence was unfair, given the tone and content of the play, but the outcry was nevertheless embarrassing for Donne and his department.¹⁵⁷

After this public reprimand, the Examiner of Plays was more cautious when *Put Yourself in His Place* was sent to him for licensing, and he wrote to Lord Sydney, who was then the Lord Chamberlain. Reade had apparently produced his play in Leeds in April without obtaining permission, but he applied for a licence for the proposed production at the Adelphi Theatre in London. Donne's letter (dated 10 May 1870) about whether Reade's play should be licensed, referred back to the reaction to *The Union Wheel*. Defending his original decision, Donne took issue with the article in the *Standard*, and used the way the critic had muddled official titles to strengthen his argument that the media had been misguided:

The writer in the London Standard was so well informed as to flounder between the Lord Great Chamberlain and the Lord Chamberlain and quite misrepresented the plot and tendency of the 'Union-Wheel'. He, to point his moral, I suppose, described the piece as inciting to strikes, violence, rattening, etc. whereas the real gist of it, was to show the

¹⁵⁶ Lord Chamberlain's Day Books, British Library, Add. MS 53704 (1866-1873).

¹⁵⁷ John Russell Stephens notes the controversy in *The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 125-6.

evils of such practices and to discourage them. My impression of 'the Union-Wheel' while reading it, was – that in it matters as between Masters and Men were very sensibly and temperately handled: the one being exhorted not to be tyrannical, the others not to be violent, but both to adjudicate their differences by the lawful weapons of reason, discussion and mutual conference.¹⁵⁸

Donne upheld his decision to licence the play, and his reasoning concurs with my analysis, that matters were 'very sensibly and temperately handled' and that Fox advocated 'reason, discussion and mutual conference', rather than violence. However, he also admitted that a text which seemed innocuous when read could cause offence when subjected to an actor's interpretation:

There is in the 'Union-Wheel' a character named Brumley – and the actor of it made himself up like Broadhead – a piece of bad taste which the reader of the Mss could not well foresee.¹⁵⁹

The actor is accused of 'bad taste' because he so closely resembled Broadhead on stage, and this clearly is the element of the play that caused the problems. Donne's comment 'which the reader of the Mss could not well foresee' highlights the dangerous space between text and performance which has long been exploited by those who sought to communicate the full meaning of their plays, despite censorship. In this case however, the way that the actor played the part contributed to the misunderstanding of the play, and the subsequent overshadowing of its message. There is no record of a reply from Lord Sydney, but the licence was nonetheless granted for *Free Labour; or, Put Yourself in His Place* and the London production went ahead, opening at the Adelphi on 28 May 1870.

The hostility and anxiety expressed by metropolitan critics to the appearance of Reade's play in the capital was somewhat different from their response to the provincial production of *The Union Wheel*, although they

¹⁵⁸ National Archives, Lord Chamberlain's papers and correspondence, L.C.1/232, Letter from William Bodham Donne, 10 May 1870.

¹⁵⁹ Donne, 10 May 1870.

betrayed similar apprehensions about audience reaction. The main concern of the critic for the *Athenaeum* was that the playwright had been profligate with subjects which required rather more careful handling:

Those disputes between labour and capital which form the most vexed question of the political hour are discussed in this piece as freely as though the stage were the hustings, while the statements and charges most apt to inflame political animosity to the height are bandied about as though they were the most harmless of matters.¹⁶⁰

He suggests that this potential to 'inflame political animosity' could have caused disruption in the auditorium, and he reflected that there was only an absence of disorder 'due to the care which seemed to have been exercised in the admission of the audience'.¹⁶¹ However, there is no evidence that the audiences were vetted, and it is unlikely that grinders from Sheffield would have travelled to London to see the production. Although there was a growing co-operation between different unions, there were also anxieties about too close an alliance with the northern Unionists, so perhaps there was only muted support from artisans in London. The *Graphic*, too, was concerned about the potential of trouble, particularly due to the polarised and antagonistic depiction of Unionists and those who refused to join:

Free Labour, it must be confessed, trenches upon rather dangerous ground for a stage representation. A play in which all trades society people are represented as irredeemably bad, while non-society people are not only in possession of all the cardinal virtues but are actually discovered in the end to be descended from illustrious ancestry, is a sort of challenge to both sides, at least in pit and gallery, to express their sentiments; and if the first performance passed quietly, it can only be attributed to the extraordinarily thin attendance.¹⁶²

The *Graphic* concluded that the thin attendance was likely to be because the actors were not well-known to a London audience, rather than from decisions based on political disapproval.

¹⁶⁰ *Athenaeum*, 4 June 1870.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Graphic*, 4 June 1870.

It may have been due to concern about how the audience might respond to the 'challenge' of *Free Labour* which induced Donne to attend an evening performance at the Adelphi. In a letter to Mr. Ponsonby in the office of the Lord Chamberlain he was able to report with relief (and indeed some sympathy for the playwright) that the production had been quiet and peaceful:

Poor Charles Reade had not people enough at the Adelphi to excite any more riot than a single police-man might not have quelled ... the Dress Circle quite empty ... there was no excitement at all.¹⁶³

He notes that the audience had shown sympathy for Henry Little, 'clapping when Neville knocked on the head the Trades Unionists who had come to do him that favour,' (emphasis in original manuscript), but apparently they had not responded to the broader implications of the narrative:

...as far as regarded any interest in the 'political!' [sic] questions of Masters and Men the scene might have been laid in Timbuctoo – and with the claims of labour never heard.¹⁶⁴

Donne implied that the audience felt disconnected from what they witnessed on stage, the events were far away 'in Timbuctoo', and were not of pressing concern. Reade may have wished to address serious questions in his play about the damaging divisions between employers and artisans, but apparently his public demonstrated little interest.

Although I have argued through this chapter that Reade privileged the freedom of the exceptional individual over the 'claims of labour' in a more general sense, he was undeniably concerned with social issues in his dramas, and they were intended to make his audience think, as well as be entertained. For example, *It's Never too Late to Mend* (which again began life as a novel, later adapted for the theatre) was a harrowing indictment of the penal system, which, like *Put Yourself in his Place* was based on detailed

¹⁶³ L.C.1/232, 24 June 1870. Spencer Brabazon Ponsonby was the Comptroller in the Lord Chamberlain's Office at the time.

¹⁶⁴ Donne, 24 June 1870.

research from Government 'Bluebooks'.¹⁶⁵ Reade's choice of subjects and his approach divided critics; some, like the one for the *Morning Post*, were clear that such subjects were not suitable for the stage:

The abominations of trade unionism may be legitimate, but are not very attractive subjects for dramatic treatment, there being little either to delight the eye or to regale the fancy in the spectacle of deserted forges, blown up workshops, and the grim haunts of ruffianly conspirators ...¹⁶⁶

In his opinion, not only is the subject 'not very attractive' but Reade is too keen to teach his audience a lesson, at the expense of providing a good evening of entertainment:

...the picturesque is systematically subordinated to the didactic, the purpose of the drama being to work out a salutary moral for the edification of all concerned.¹⁶⁷

His criticism is yet another instance of the recurring question of the optimum ratio of education to entertainment: how much of a challenge can theatre pose for its audience and still retain their interest and appreciation? On the evidence of the above review, he clearly thought that Reade had not achieved a favourable balance.

The writer who reviewed *Put Yourself in His Place* for the *Pall Mall Gazette* was conversely in favour of less sensation and more argument, and he advocated that the stage should not be about escapism, but should be a place to reflect on reality, or in his phrase, where 'the important questions of the moment' could be debated. Indeed he proposed that if there were more

¹⁶⁵ Burns, p. 163.

It is Never too Late to Mend: a Matter-of-Fact Romance, 3 Vols. (London: 1856). Reade's theatrical adaptation (with the same title) was first produced at the Theatre Royal Leeds, March 1865, *Era*, 12 March 1865 (B.L. L.C.P. 53044 D July-August 1865). The *Era* notes that John Coleman played one of the leading roles and that there had also been earlier adaptations by other playwrights. Coleman himself talks about the 'amazing and triumphant' production in *Fifty Years of an Actor's Life*, p. 638.

¹⁶⁶ *Morning Post*, 30 May 1870.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

plays of this kind of style and substance, the public would soon be educated and there would be less need for sensationalism:

...the whole of the drama is as thoroughly compatible with real life as can be wished, and as useful as very few English dramas are.

In what respect is it useful? it may be asked. In that respect, that it takes one of the most important questions of the moment, that it brings it in a popular form upon the stage, not with a view to excite people, to satisfy their vanity, or to pander to their taste by the exhibition of indecent sights ... It is scarcely probable that with the present taste of the London public there will be a rush to the Adelphi; but if pieces like "Free Labour" were more often brought on the stage, the taste of the public would be speedily changed; pieces with women as little dressed as possible would have less success; the introduction of cabs, railways, fire-engines, and the like would become less necessary, and the stage might be by-and-by raised from the degradation in which it now finds itself.¹⁶⁸

Although he advocated education through theatre, this critic also recognised the difficulty of changing public perception of what was suitable material for the stage. In his view, Reade's intention was not to 'excite people', and thus he would struggle to attract an audience whose 'taste' was for spectacle and exhibitionism. His conclusion is that Reade's talents should be deployed elsewhere, as he was a 'more careful student of society than a manufacturer of theatrical performances'.¹⁶⁹

It seems that Reade could not win: he was lambasted for either too much sensation or not enough. He clearly wanted the *mise en scene* to be evocative, and his scenographic directions reveal his visual imagination and attention to detail. The description of Woodbine Villa, home of his heroine Grace Carden, is the first of several romantic pictures:

A bay window, c., whence is seen Cairnhope Hill at some distance, a mountain with a slight purple tint, and a few thin streaks of snow in irregular vertical lines towards the summit.

(*Put Yourself in His Place*, Act 1 scene 3, p. 9)

¹⁶⁸ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 June 1870.

This attitude reflects the concern of many commentators that the theatre was in dire need of improvement, particularly in its intellectual challenges.

The *Pall Mall Gazette* was a venture by George Smith, a member of the publishing firm Smith, Elder and Co. and was conceived as 'a paper written by gentlemen for gentlemen'. Fox Bourne, *English Newspapers*, p. 274.

¹⁶⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 June 1870.

Reade's vision for the stage drew heavily on his former creative work; when he describes the interior of the deserted church in Act 2 scene 7, he simply notes 'see novel'. He asserted his wishes for other scenographic elements, and a note on the first page of the script directs that 'no music must be played in this piece except where the author suggests it'. Clearly he was determined to infuse his scenes with as much atmosphere and symbolic significance as possible. The hill that had been glimpsed from the window of Woodbine Villa now provides asylum to the resourceful Little, who has had to escape from the Union threats to the sanctuary of the countryside and an old church. The following monologue from Act 1 is a carefully constructed blend of music and speech:

[Music] The above music should be very harmonious, and arranged by the leader to suit the actual cadences of the actor's voice, when he is master of the lines.

In a cleft of Cairnhope Hill stands a building that foot of man rarely enters by day, and never by night, for superstitious awe keeps the simple villagers aloof. It is a deserted church. Built up among the heathery hills in rude and troublous times, it was a fortress as well as a temple: but now it has survived both uses, and is slowly but surely going to decay. Here, amidst broken monuments, and mutilated inscriptions, and fading escutcheons, I will set up my forge. Driven, by a foul conspiracy, from the haunts of men, oppressed industry shall take refuge at that mouldering altar.

(Put Yourself in His Place Act 1, sc. 3, p. 25)

Little suggests that his own situation of 'oppressed industry' connects to a long history of battles against destructive forces: he takes his place among 'broken monuments, and mutilated inscriptions and fading escutcheons'. His hideaway is also imbued with the thrill of the uncanny - a 'superstitious awe keeps the simple villagers aloof'. The scene is an idealised vision of noble toil, which celebrates an earlier time, and promotes the potential of the brave individual, who stands alone against his enemies.

Despite Reade's use of poetic (although at times rather ponderous) language, together with appropriate music and spectacular scenic effects

(such as snowstorms and explosions) and an action-packed plot, the majority of critics deemed the production unsuccessful, in London and during the provincial tour. The differing critical reactions reflected their geographical locations: London critics found there was 'little either to delight the eye or to regale the fancy in the spectacle of deserted forges', whereas a critic from Birmingham (a similar type of area to Sheffield), enjoyed the spectacle of industry at work. In fact it was the only part of the production which he enjoyed:

I must, however, note one resemblance to nature. It was a real anvil with sparks which I defy all Birmingham, and the Black Country to boot, to surpass.¹⁷⁰

When the production reached the Theatre Royal in Sheffield in November, the *Sheffield Independent* concurred that this technical effect was 'the only successful scene in the piece', and even the artisans in the gallery had approved, according to the *Sheffield Telegraph*:

How he (Henry Neville) performs it we leave to the gods, who were so well-satisfied – and they were no doubt Judges – as to applaud to the very echo.¹⁷¹

Even though it had little to do with the grinding of metal for tools and cutlery, the anvil was considered an impressive effect. Neville obviously thought it deserved repetition: on his benefit night during the run of *Put Yourself in His Place*, although he chose to perform another of Reade's plays that evening (*It's Never Too Late to Mend*), he extracted the scene and performed it as an after-piece to the main drama.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8 June 1870.

¹⁷¹ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 22 November 1870.

¹⁷² The *Sheffield Independent* reported that it 'took the place of the time-honoured farce at the end', 3 December 1870.

The focus on the spectacular (the play was billed as the 'Great Sensation Drama'¹⁷³) led the critic of the *Sheffield Independent* to complain that Reade had taken advantage of the events for theatrical effect:

We have had here quite sufficient real rattennings and outrages without having them produced upon the stage to the accompaniment of red fire and slow music.¹⁷⁴

The writer is pleased to report that *Put Yourself in His Place* 'played night after night to almost empty houses', and the article attributes this desertion by audiences to their disapproval of Reade's exploitation:

At the very outset we took exception to the production of the piece in Sheffield as being in bad taste. That opinion we still retain, and it is a satisfaction to find that it has been generally endorsed, and that our townspeople have, in a very effectual way, shown their opinion of the attempt to obtain money by picturing upon the stage the evil doings of a few misguided men in our midst.¹⁷⁵

The aggrieved response by the local press was also because their status as residents of the area privileged them in terms of knowledge, and they were irritated by the inaccuracies and over-exaggeration of the play (as they had been by the novel):

A good deal of that which referred to the outrages and terrorism was overdrawn, Mr Reade making a free use of a novelist's licence, and this is to be seen, though to a less extent, in the drama.¹⁷⁶

One element which is likely to have exasperated those with knowledge of the industry was that Reade confuses the specialist trades. In the play, Henry Little works in the cutlery industry, yet his labour, graphically illustrated by the fire of the forge and by the repetition of the song 'The Harmonious Blacksmith' throughout, signalled that he was principally a forger

¹⁷³ Advertisement, *Sheffield Telegraph*, 17 November 1870.

¹⁷⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 22 November 1870.

¹⁷⁵ *Sheffield Independent*, 3 December 1870.

¹⁷⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 22 November 1870.

The *Sheffield Telegraph*, which was overall more generous in its praise, also commented that: 'dramatic licence is observable throughout the piece', 22 November 1870.

and farrier. The *Graphic* actually calls Little 'a young blacksmith', whose argument is with the 'blacksmiths' trade union' - presumably Reade considered the scenic effect of a forge to be more eye-catching than that of a grinding wheel.¹⁷⁷ A review of Henry Neville's performance as Henry Little in the *Sheffield Independent* also complained of the playwright's failure to distinguish between the branches of the cutlery trades:

His is the chief character, and in his hands it receives the rendering of a highly-finished actor. It is not his fault that he is made occasionally to look somewhat absurd in the eyes of Sheffield workmen. For instance, being a saw-grinder, how comes it that the only time he is seen working (that is upon the stage) he is forging table-blades?¹⁷⁸

The affronted actor was not prepared to have the authenticity of his character questioned, and responded in a letter to the newspaper the next day. He not only corrected the reviewer's recollection of the details, but also pointed out that the character was based on a real person:

Permit me to correct an error in your admirable notice of Mr. Charles Reade's drama of 'Put Yourself in His Place'. Henry Little is not, as you say, a 'saw grinder' in the earlier portion of the piece, but a forger of carving tools. The only knife he makes is the one used in the church scene. Jacob Addis, of this town, is, I believe, the foundation of the character.¹⁷⁹

Although this may appear to be quibbling over details, keeping the separate and distinctive nature of each of the trades was one of the important issues at stake in the disputes. Reade had deliberately made his character a multi-talented craftsman, which is one of the reasons he refuses to join a specific Union. Neville and Reade had also done their research, although Neville misremembers the details in his letter, and Mr. Addis (his forenames were

¹⁷⁷ *The Graphic*, 4 June 1870.

¹⁷⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 22 November 1870. The fact that Little is a 'saw-grinder', and the machine he has invented relates specifically to those tools, goes right to the heart of the trade disputes, given that Broadhead was the Secretary of Saw-Grinders' Union.

¹⁷⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 November 1870.

James Bacon, rather than Jacob) was indeed a witness at the Commission, as already noted.

Another source of irritation was the failure of both Reade and his actors to render an authentic accent: Reade used a generalised northern dialect throughout the written text of *Put Yourself in His Place*. For example the use of t' (the definite article reduction) for 'the', and 'thou' for 'you' is common across Yorkshire.¹⁸⁰ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* 'clem' meaning 'starve' was used in Lancashire, Cheshire, Shropshire, Huddersfield, Leicester and Derbyshire, so it is likely that it was a familiar expression within the environs of Sheffield.¹⁸¹ Despite the inclusion of these technically correct idioms, the reproduction of the speech patterns did not satisfy the local press, and the critic for the *Sheffield Independent* admonished the cast:

There is one little bit of advice which should be given to all the actors who endeavour to talk the Sheffield dialect, and that is – don't. The faint imitation, if indeed it can be called that, which they give of the dialect may do very well in other towns, but to us in Sheffield it won't pass muster.¹⁸²

The *Sheffield Telegraph*, too, disparages their attempt, and laments that 'our Sheffield dialect is presented in a guise which would have made Abel Bywater shed tears.'¹⁸³ The asperity of the critic contrasted with the same paper's reaction to the rendition of accent in *The Union Wheel*: 'the imitation

¹⁸⁰ Joan Beal, *Language and Region*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁸¹ Redcar says: 'Union is a hard master; but it doesn't clem us, as t'master did, and would again.' Act 2, scene 4, p. 20. "clem/clam. v. 1". OED Online. December 2012, Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk>> [accessed 11 February 2013].

¹⁸² *Sheffield Independent*, 22 November 1870. The cast had apparently been recruited in the provinces, according to the *Graphic* (4 June 1870), this was one of the reasons for the play's lack of success in London. Thus they were likely to be from a range of locations across the country, but they had clearly not mastered the Sheffield dialect to the satisfaction of this critic.

¹⁸³ *Sheffield Telegraph* 22 November 1870. Abel Bywater (1795-1873) poet and linguist, was the author of *The Sheffield Dialect* (1839, 2nd Edition London, Halifax & Sheffield: Rodgers and Fowler, 1854).

of the grinders' vernacular, is in many points, truthful'.¹⁸⁴ The reviewers' comments about accents not only reveal a concern for veracity but also indicate a level of pride in a distinguishing feature of shared local identity.

The article in the *Sheffield Telegraph* suggests intimacy and common knowledge (a drama critic knows what 'grinders' vernacular' should sound like), and this closeness, which was a distinguishing feature of nineteenth century Sheffield has already been discussed both in the first chapter and in other sections of this one. The characters in Fox's play inhabit a shared space onstage (seen most notably in the joint wedding at the Parish Church and the celebrations at the Union Wheel), which reflects the shared experience of the real inhabitants, or in other words, the members of the audience.¹⁸⁵ Although there was a physical separation between classes in the auditorium (the apparently insurmountable division between dress circle and gallery), spectators from a cross-section of society still witnessed the same theatrical spectacle together, and the play written by Fox offered a vision of unity and co-operation between the different sectors.

Despite the mainly positive response to *The Union Wheel* by local critics, the play could not withstand the opprobrium of the metropolitan press. In any case, perhaps the play could have had only limited appeal: not only was it a timely reaction to current events, but the experience of members of the local audience may have facilitated sympathetic understanding of the action on stage, and possibly made them more receptive to its message of 'union'. Reviews suggest that those in the gallery disregarded the conciliatory aspects of the production and responded to the combative ones, but we have no proof that this was the case for all of the working-class audience members.

¹⁸⁴ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 18 April 1870.

¹⁸⁵ The intimacy of Sheffield was already changing. As the steel works expanded, and the townships of Brightside and Attercliffe grew, the middle classes moved to the west of the city to the new suburbs of Broomhill and Ranmoor, away from the smoke and noise.

The play was never given the opportunity to be tested in a metropolitan theatre so we can only speculate about how the critics (and a London audience) would have responded had they actually seen the play for themselves.

Although Mr. Gomersal claimed that it was 'the most Successful Drama ever produced in Sheffield', the play had a run of only eleven nights, and it closed on Thursday 28 April.¹⁸⁶ It was reprised for a short period (probably a week) at the Leeds Amphitheatre from 9 May, but after that, and despite a few adverts placed by Mr. Gomersal offering to re-stage the production at other venues there is no evidence that it was produced again.¹⁸⁷ The day after the play closed in Sheffield Mr. Gomersal's benefit evening brought his first season at the Theatre Royal to an end. Perhaps deliberately choosing less controversial material, he produced two comedies: *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith originally produced in 1773, and *The Swiss Swains* by Ben Webster from 1837, and in the traditional manner, addressed his audience at the end of the performances. Rather surprisingly, he did not mention the controversy about *The Union Wheel*; in fact he omitted the play completely from his review of the season.¹⁸⁸ Perhaps he felt that the level of criticism had made his position rather precarious and he wished to distance himself from the production, particularly given that in *Punch's* stinging review, it was the theatre manager who was criticised for allowing the play to be staged. Fox as playwright was barely mentioned by the London press, and neither the fuss, nor the lack of longevity of the play seems to have adversely

¹⁸⁶ *Era*, 24 April 1870.

¹⁸⁷ When the play was produced in Leeds the troublesome role of Brumley was played by Mr. Birchenough (who had originally played the elder Mr. Parker), rather than Mr. Alexander. Perhaps the company decided to underplay the Broadhead connection - there was certainly not much critical comment about this revival.

¹⁸⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 30 April 1870.

affected his career, except that he never produced such overtly political material again.

Both Fox and Reade should be given credit for their attempt to blend documentary realism and social commentary with the thrills and spectacle of popular melodrama. The *Union Wheel* was a timely intervention in topical matters in terms of its depiction of the Outrages and their aftermath, whilst it reaffirmed the simple and enduring maxim that the qualities of true nobility were within reach of everybody. Reade had made a case for the important role of fiction, 'the highest, widest, noblest, and greatest of all the arts'¹⁸⁹ in the introduction to the novel of *Put Yourself in His Place* but Fox included a meta-theatrical element in *The Union Wheel* by staging a debate which vindicated the moral purpose and worth of theatre. The final part of this chapter examines the way he presents this argument; and it also considers how some of the themes of his play have a wider resonance within the performance milieu of late-nineteenth century Sheffield.

Part Three

A dramatic debate about the value of theatre in Sheffield

'Is the Drama worthy of support?'¹⁹⁰

This section, which considers some of the other issues raised by *The Union Wheel*, shifts the focus away from the representation of the Outrages. It performs several functions: it analyses the way in which Joseph Fox used the play to assert the value of theatre as a means of effective communication; it reminds us of the state of performance culture in Sheffield in the 1860s and 1870s; and it anticipates some of the arguments about leisure and pleasure that will be documented and analysed in the final case

¹⁸⁹ Charles Reade quoted in Burns, p. 268.

¹⁹⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 30 January 1867.

study. My analysis of the reception of *The Union Wheel* and *Put Yourself in His Place* has detailed the widespread concern about the impact of the plays on the potential attitude and behaviour of their audience, and this anxiety reprised familiar arguments about the moral and political dangers of theatre, particularly as far as the working classes were concerned. As documented in Chapter One, this concern had been a recurrent one throughout the century, and was evident in the title of a debate held at Sheffield's Council Hall on Wednesday 30 January 1867 (at the height of the uproar about the Outrages).¹⁹¹ 'Is the Drama worthy of support?' was the question posed by Mr E. B. Grundy. Due to the fact that only the advertisement for this public debate in *The Sheffield Independent* survives – there is no record of the subsequent discussion - we can only speculate as to whether the speaker (a local trader) is referring to moral, financial, or another form of support.¹⁹²

Commercial interests inevitably influenced artistic or ethical aspirations and the question could have been part of a campaign to persuade audiences to attend performances at the theatre. Just a week after this advertisement appeared, a writer for the *Sheffield Independent* expressed concern that the Lessee of the Theatre Royal was underselling her product because it was a time of financial hardship:

Mrs. Pitt, being determined to afford everybody the opportunity of seeing the pantomime has been playing to half-price houses ... We do not think that in the end, cheap prices pay, and it is not too much to say that such a bill of fare as is provided at the Theatre Royal is worth a better price than the management puts upon it.¹⁹³

The writer of this article felt that the theatrical product was devalued, and it is notable that he defends pantomime, which some critics would deem inferior to

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² According to information in the Census (1861 and 1871), Edward B. Grundy was born in about 1840 and came from a family of drapers; his father had a business on the High Street, so they would have been a respectable lower-middle class family.

¹⁹³ *Sheffield Independent*, 19 February 1867.

'legitimate' drama.¹⁹⁴ In any case Mrs. Pitt, who had been left to manage on her own after the premature death of her husband, was presumably primarily concerned with getting as many people as possible through the auditorium doors during the pantomime season.¹⁹⁵ As documented in Chapter One, the challenge of producing critically and commercially successful theatre in Sheffield was one which managers met with resilience and ingenuity throughout the century, even though support, in all of its meanings, was not always forthcoming.

This debate about the worth of theatrical productions is compellingly dramatised in Fox's play; and provides the main thrust of the first scene, when the middle-class household at the centre of the drama are introduced. It is late evening in the Drawing Room at 'The Elms' and the family are engaged in the sedate leisure pursuit of playing cribbage, by gaslight. When Mr. Parker anxiously inquires as to the whereabouts of his son Alfred, their servant Paul ironically and rather mischievously suggests that he is at the Young Men's Christian Association. Mr. Parker remonstrates:

Mr. Parker You know very well Sir that Mr. Alfred's tastes don't lie in that direction. I wish they did. I'm afraid the Theatre's more likely to have tempted him from the family circle.

Edith Why afraid Uncle? Surely there's no harm in the Theatre.

Paul Not in the Theatre, Miss.

Mr. Parker Why, Mr. Goodson¹⁹⁶ said, in Church on Sunday, it was a hotbed of corruption.

¹⁹⁴ The pantomime for the season 1866-7 was *Hey Diddle Diddle! His Cat and His Comical Fiddle! Or, King Snowball and His Son Jack Frost!* 'Written expressly' for the Theatre Royal by Edwin Young Esq. Although there are jokes at the expense of the Town Council, the Gas Company, and the police; general humorous complaints about taxes and financial troubles, and the Reform Bill is briefly mentioned, there is no mention of Unions or trades' disputes (Pantomime programme and text, S-LSL Local Pamphlets, Vol. 129, No. 11).

¹⁹⁵ As narrated in the previous chapter, Mrs. Ellen Pitt was made bankrupt in Sheffield in 1869, and struggled to make any money from theatre management, either in the provinces or in London.

¹⁹⁶ The name of the Minister of religion could be a play on words: **Goodson** is similar to **Best**, the name of the cleric who wrote so many anti-theatrical sermons.

Edith Then, Mr. Goodson should have more sense.

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 1, Sc. 1, p. 3)

Mr. Parker's use of the word 'tempted' repeats the customary allegation that the theatre has a seductive power to entice the unwary down the path of immorality, and indeed he reiterates what he has been told at Church, that it is a 'hotbed of corruption'. Although the influential members of the church in Sheffield were not so judgemental in their attitudes as earlier in the century, the anti-theatrical lobby still had many supporters. We do not know how the actor delivered Paul's stressed repetition of the word 'theatre' (it is underlined in the manuscript), but it could indicate an ironic ambivalence. There is certainly a hierarchy at work in the choice of venues for entertainment: later in the play (Act 1, scene 5), Paul offers to take his sweetheart Susannah out for a meal and boasts that, unlike his rivals, 'when I treat young Ladies it's not at Raby's nor Strong Arms ... we'd go to Shapers, that's respectable'.¹⁹⁷ Given that Susannah is shamelessly flirtatious and toys with the affections of at least two men, the use of the word 'respectable' is rather ironic.

It is unlikely that Mary Langton, the virtuous working-class heroine would go to the same places as Paul or Susannah, but she does attend the Alexandra without her fiancé (Act 1, scene 2), which at that time still produced a combination of music hall acts and melodrama, although it was beginning to enjoy a better reputation than it had had previously.¹⁹⁸ *Honest Labour*, Frederic Marchant's parody of industrial disputes, had a short run there

¹⁹⁷ I have been unable to find evidence of these actual venues, but there was a range of eating and drinking places in Sheffield and their reputations varied, see Appendix C3 for complete list.

¹⁹⁸ See Chapter One, section 2.4.

around the same time that Reade's play was at the Theatre Royal, and George Leybourne performed there in May 1867 and November 1869.¹⁹⁹

Edith is not only swift to defend theatre in a general sense (she provides an inventory of the ways in which theatre is able to teach moral lessons), but more specifically, she is emphatic about the particular benefits it can bring to the troubled situation in Sheffield:

... The Stage might be the rectifier of abuses. Show virtue its own features – scorn its own image – the very age and body of the time its form and pressure. Show masters their own vices – bring them palpable before their eyes – spite of themselves they'd feel ashamed – and a ruffian work-man, seeing the scorn with which a blackguard's treated, get a lesson which neither Church nor press could give so well.

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 1, Sc. 1, p. 3)

Edith's defence of theatre, that it can 'show virtue its own features', not only quotes Shakespeare but also echoes a familiar argument, made since the days of the Sheffield Shakspeare Club in the 1830s.²⁰⁰ In other words, through watching the actors animate the 'virtue' and the 'vices' of characters on both sides of the industrial disputes, making them 'palpable', the audience will learn more effectively than through listening to sermons or reading newspapers.²⁰¹ The words that the playwright assigns to Edith, his fictional character, could be a defence of his own creative intervention.

Edith invokes the value of Shakespeare in particular, and makes a case for the importance of experiencing a live performance, as opposed to simply reading the text as a piece of literature. Using an analogy appropriate for both the circumstances within the play (Mr. Parker is a cutler) and the audience (most of whom would have intimate knowledge of the industry), she

¹⁹⁹ *Sheffield Telegraph*, November 3, 1870; *Sheffield Independent* 6 May 1867, 29 November 1869.

²⁰⁰ Edith is using the words of Hamlet, from Act 3, scene 2. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* ed. by Stanley Wells and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 653-690 (p. 671).

²⁰¹ This argument also reiterates Dickens' argument, which he developed in 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre', and discussed in Chapter One.

likens the skill of an experienced metal-worker to that of a 'practised reader whose life has been the study of his author' - both professions can provide apprenticeships for those who are willing to learn:

- Edith Don't you read Shakespeare, Uncle?
- Mr. Parker Certainly. He is my favourite author ...
- Edith Then, why debar the poorer classes from what you take delight in?
- Mr. Parker We don't debar them. They can read him.
- Edith Yes! But not understand, as when they hear some practised reader whose life has been the study of his author. By your rule, men might fashion for themselves their knives and forks but without apprenticeship, 'twould be a sorry piece of work.

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 1, Sc. 1, p. 4)

Edith emphasises that there is a marked difference between the ability to 'read' and to 'understand', and claims that the animated performance provides the necessary agency for full comprehension.

The civilising potential of theatre is further explored through characters in the Parker family. Alfred's dismissal of drama confirms his hedonistic and callous character, which is contrasted with the reasonable and honourable behaviour of his father and cousins who have a thorough knowledge of Shakespeare and other classical dramatists and quote freely from *Hamlet* and *Henry VIII* in the course of their intelligent conversations, and these citations also presume a level of knowledge in the audience. Alfred only wants to go to the theatre if it is amusing, and he has no knowledge of playwrights (even celebrated ones) and is not interested to learn. When Mr. Parker asks Alfred to accompany Edith he is very unenthusiastic:

- Alfred What! To see Richelieu – Not if I know it. One goes there to be amused. We can read Shakespeare in our closets.
- Mr. Parker And very much you read him, if one may judge from your acquaintance with his plays – Shakespeare write Richelieu!

Alfred And why not?

Mr. Parker Don't expose yourself. Don't you think he wrote Sir Robert Peel or Queen Victoria? I've no patience.

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 2, Sc. 2, p. 25)

Fox made an assumption that at least some of his audience would know that it was Bulwer-Lytton who wrote *Richelieu*, and they would not only get the joke but also enjoy a sense of superiority over the character of Alfred.

The behaviour of various characters in the *Union Wheel* helps to validate claims about the beneficial influence of theatre and the debasing tendencies of music hall. Comparisons between the two activities were topical as the new form of entertainment gave rise to intense competition for audiences, yet it also offered an opportunity for advocates of theatre to claim its artistic and moral superiority. Edith does not merely disagree with Mr. Goodson's narrow-minded view of drama and blame him for driving people away from the Church, but she also accuses him of closing theatres. If traditional venues cannot survive because their audience is forbidden to attend, then new (and morally worse) attractions are likely to step into the breach. She declares:

Mr. Goodson's wrong; and 'tis the bigotry of men like him that weans men from the Church, and converts Theatres into singing rooms, with beer, cigars, and worse ...

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 1, Sc. 1, p. 4)

Given the increase in the number of venues in Sheffield in the 1850s and 1860s (The Old London Apprentice, The Old Tankard, George Wilson's, New Canterbury, Union New, London and Alhambra music halls were all established during the 1860s, adding to many already-existing taverns which had entertainment rooms), Edith's anxiety, that the new forms would dominate, and possibly even supersede theatre in the future, was a relevant one. Many of the new venues had bad reputations because of excessive drinking and prostitution (see Appendix C1).

Similar developments were taking place across the United Kingdom, and prior to the Theatre Regulation Act in 1866, detailed information was gathered for a Select Committee.²⁰² The aim of this exercise was to examine the current situation, with a view to bringing together under one authority 'the entire regulation of theatres, music halls, and other places of entertainment'.²⁰³ Chief Constable John Jackson was summoned to report on the local situation, and although his evidence proudly asserted that 'places in Sheffield where entertainments of the stage are given, are well conducted', he was rather economical with the truth about the extent to which performance had become part of the repertoire at music halls and similar venues. He claimed that there was only one theatre (the Theatre Royal) and that the Alexandra was the only music hall, although he did acknowledge that the name of the Surrey might cause confusion:

There is another building known as a music hall; but that is called a music hall inasmuch as it is more especially used for holding concerts, in most instances, of a very high class.²⁰⁴

The Minutes of the interviews held by the Select Committee reveal the ambiguous nature of 'performance' and the ways that proprietors exploited the lack of clarity. The panel were clearly wise to these practices, and were very persistent and thorough in their questioning: reading the document, one can sense their cynicism and the Chief Constable's discomfort. Jackson eventually admitted that there were, indeed 'places where there are actors or dancers who give performances on a stage', but maintained that they were

²⁰² Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Working of the Acts of Parliament for Licensing and Regulating Theatres and Places of Public Entertainment in Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers (London: HMSO, 1866).

²⁰³ Report of the Select Committee, 28 June 1866, p. 373.

²⁰⁴ Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on Licensing and Regulations (part of the Report), p. 254.

well-run, did not permit prostitution, had singing which was not offensive, indeed they were frequented by 'the better conducted of the working class'.²⁰⁵

Jackson separated different sectors of the working classes by their behaviour and choice of venue, and this distinction echoed the language Charles Pitt used some years earlier when he referred to the 'rather superior class of mechanics' who at that time inhabited the gallery of the Theatre Royal. Yet it could be argued that they were not 'superior': this section of the audience was indeed the very group that had come under such scrutiny from the metropolitan and national press during the Outrages. They were the ones who 'loudly cheered' the pro-Union sentiments from the gallery, and some of them are likely to have attended the Royal Pavilion Music Hall nearby, whether Broadhead was the star attraction or not. They may even have been part of the unruly mob who jeered Reverend Stainton when he called a public meeting around the time of Broadhead's departure for America. On that occasion, Stainton had attempted to appeal to the crowd 'as citizens, as parents, as householders' to disclaim any association with Broadhead. He claimed they 'owed a duty to the town' and to the 'country at large', but his speech was interrupted on several occasions by a gang of about 300 workmen:

Almost as soon as the reverend gentleman commenced his address they groaned, and hissed, and shouted, and towards the close of the address amused themselves by singing the chorus of a popular Music Hall song, known as "Rolling home in the morning, boys".²⁰⁶

Their hooliganism escalated, and Stainton was finally forced to take refuge in the police station for his own protection. This behaviour served to confirm the reputation of the artisans for rebellious and rowdy behaviour, and their

²⁰⁵ Minutes of Evidence, p. 254.

²⁰⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 8 November 1869; Frank W. Egerton, 'Rolling home in the morning, boys' (Leeds: 1875).

anarchic spirit was in angry conflict with those like Stainton who believed that respectability and sobriety should be the cornerstones of community life.

Bad behaviour is, however, not portrayed as the preserve of the working class in *The Union Wheel*, and this particular music hall song is the one that Alfred, the supposed gentleman, drunkenly sings as his long-suffering servant carries him upstairs to bed at the end of Act 1, scene 1. Although the implication is that Paul the servant, Jenkins the policeman²⁰⁷, and Susannah the maid attend singing saloons, it is Alfred who demonstrates the corrupting influence of these places of entertainment with their 'swells' and loutish behaviour.²⁰⁸ Mr. Parker remonstrates with his son about his manners, 'which sadly smack of Vance and Champagne Charley' (Act 2, scene 2, p. 26). Dagmar Kift gives a succinct account of the 'characters' in music hall: Champagne Charley was a character created by George Leybourne and 'his best known rival' was Alfred Vance, whose character was Cool Burgundy Ben. This type of character was also known as a 'lion comique', who,

was by definition lazy and hedonistic and his repertoire of songs – with a few dishonourable exceptions – were hymns of praise to the virtues of idleness, womanising and drinking.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ The depiction of the policeman as a flirtatious toper, who abandons his duty to take his sweetheart out for dinner is a familiar one from the plays of the period, and contrasts with the respectability of Chief Constable Jackson. The following chapter will discuss the representation of the police more fully.

²⁰⁸ The original definition of 'swell' in reference to a person 'stylishly or handsomely dressed or equipped; of good (social) position; of distinguished appearance or status' which appeared in the *Flash Dictionary* edited by J. H. Vaux in 1812, had mutated to something more derogatory, and implied a vulgar display of wealth and pretence of status. 'Swell mob' is defined as 'a class of pickpockets who assumed the dress and manners of respectable people in order to escape detection'. E. Partridge, ed. Paul Beale, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 8th Edition, 1982), p. 394.

²⁰⁹ *The Victorian Music Hall*, Dagmar Kift (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 49. See also Peter Bailey, 'Champagne Charlie: Performance and Ideology in the Music-Hall Swell Song', in Jacky Bratton (ed), *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. 49-69.

Alfred's downhill trajectory through the play is a salutary example of the pernicious influence of alcohol and bad company.

At this time in Sheffield, it was an urgent necessity on both practical and ideological grounds to distinguish between those people and pastimes which were 'worthy of support' and those which were not. 1867, when Mr. Grundy posed his question about the value of theatre, was a demanding year for those in positions of responsibility and influence. In addition to the industrial disputes and the heated debates about the Reform Bill, the year had begun with extremely cold weather and poor economic conditions. A reporter for the *Sheffield Independent* on Saturday 19 January noted that 'Every day is adding to the number of the unemployed, to the exhaustion of resources and of credit, to the suffering of the weak and needy'. Practical problems of how to distribute limited funds raised moral dilemmas about who deserved assistance, and the writer compared the needs of what he termed the 'industrious and provident' poor man with one who earns well, but 'who half starves his wife and family, while he wastes the greater part of his money on drink, dogs, pigeons, or gambling'.²¹⁰ The article is therefore not merely about relieving poverty but is also a value judgement on how the working classes should spend their money and their leisure time. His conclusion is that the possession of money (and the greater freedom it brings) does not always lead to virtuous behaviour; indeed it can often have the opposite effect.

The working-class characters in *The Union Wheel* are not gamblers or drinkers; rather it is the supposed gentleman, Alfred Parker, who illustrates the damaging effects of wealth. The play condemns selfish and greedy pursuits from whatever class they emanate, and advocates the co-operative pleasures of family and community. Moreover, the play celebrates the people of Sheffield and their environment, and makes a significant contribution to the

²¹⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 19 January 1867.

argument that theatre was an effective means of moral education. Many of these themes (greed, family and community, local identity), together with questions of the moral value, or 'worth', of theatre (particularly when compared to other recreational pursuits), will be further explored in the next chapter.

One of the aims of this thesis was to investigate the purpose and quality of nineteenth century theatre, and this case study has been a key component of this enquiry. The critic in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (6 June 1870), writing about *Put Yourself in His Place*, applauded Reade's efforts at tackling weighty subjects on stage, and both this play and *The Union Wheel* demonstrate that 'sensation drama' could have a serious purpose under its 'red fire and slow music'; and had the capacity to provoke public debate.²¹¹ Much of the chapter has been focused on the specific circumstances of the Outrages and their representation; but the more general questions of what is appropriate material for the stage and the potential consequences of spectatorship have been of close, parallel concern.

My case study considered the challenges of producing dramatic fiction which used actual, current events, and living people, as inspiration and models. The difficulties the playwrights faced, which differed in each case, exposed both the prejudice of a hostile metropolitan and national press, and also the loyalty and regional pride of local critics. *The Union Wheel* was a native response to a crisis which was judged differently by those outside the immediate situation. Detailed consideration of the production and reception of the play has highlighted the inconsistent relationship between London and the regions. For most of the time, metropolitan critics were not particularly interested in what was happening in provincial theatre, and in this instance, when a play finally attracted their attention, they did not afford it sober

²¹¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 22 November 1870.

consideration, but rather jumped to conclusions, fuelled in part by their own preconceptions. Their excited response, however, is in marked contrast to the critical silence which has accompanied the play ever since. My research has re-inserted *The Union Wheel* into the history of the theatre (and industrial relations) in Sheffield, and serves as a reminder that provincial theatre in the nineteenth century could be a place for political issues to be aired and debated; and that sometimes it had a national impact.

Chapter Four

Challenging preconceptions about popular culture: *Keen Blades*

'One thing I admire in Sheffield people – that is, their love of enjoyment, for I think all have a perfect right to enjoy themselves, in their own way, and as their fancy leads them'.¹

Introduction

Keen Blades; or the Straight Tip by A. F. Cross and J. F. Elliston celebrates working-class pleasures and was produced at the Theatre Royal in May 1893. My final case study investigates theatre as 'amusement', a term which was applied to a range of theatrical genres during the Victorian period. At a time when leisure and recreation were contentious subjects, it is instructive to consider plays which may have been dismissed for their frivolity. This analysis reopens the investigation about the position of theatre in relation to other kinds of entertainment, first considered in Chapter One, and further advanced in the last section of Chapter Three. I consider the play as part of, and a reflection on, the 'sprawling hybrid' of popular culture (to borrow Peter Bailey's description), which was in an accelerated state of metamorphosis at this time.² This necessitates exploration of the spectrum of 'entertainment beyond and outside the hegemonic realm of the theatre', which as Jacky Bratton suggests, enables a better, more comprehensive understanding of the history of performance.³ The section entitled 'The discourse of the popular', in her revisionist book *New Readings in Theatre History*, provides a useful summary of the ways in which 'the field of "popular culture" has been under intense and partisan scrutiny and in the hands of competitive theorisation'

¹ News cutting from unknown source, describing a talent contest at the Albert Hall, 1887, S-LSL 942.74 SQ, vol. 17, p. 60.

² Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 10.

³ Jacky Bratton, 'Theatre history and the discourse of the popular', in Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 133-170 (p. 134).

since the 1960s.⁴ My analysis will draw on several of these theories and apply them to the particular circumstances in Sheffield.

The 1890s were a time when the society of the region was becoming a more sharply divided one, which was partly caused by alterations to its geography. Affluent suburbs developed to the west in areas such as Broomhill and Ranmoor, whilst large steelworks (and housing for their workforce) proliferated in the east, in the newly-created townships of Brightside and Attercliffe.⁵ The nature of the industries changed too; the 'heavy trades', including armament production, employed new labourers in great numbers, who often came from outside the city, and were 'strangers in every way' to the 'small-scale, "trade"-oriented traditions' of the cutlery industry.⁶ Both new and old inhabitants, no matter where they lived or how they earned a living, wanted pleasure as well as employment, and this chapter evaluates whether *Keen Blades*, the play under scrutiny, had something to offer an audience who appeared to be growing increasingly disparate.

Keen Blades had its premiere on Monday 22 May 1893; it was billed as one of the 'Great Attractions' for the Whitsuntide holiday by the management of the Theatre Royal, the enterprising duo of Weldon Watts and Edmund Tearle. They produced an entertainment for the holiday weekend which combined the pleasures of theatre with those of sport, presumably with the hope of attracting as many holiday-makers as possible. The play is described on the title page of the typescript as 'a great sporting melo-drama', and this phrase appeared to deliberately advertise its appeal for those who enjoyed all manner of games, as well as for others who wanted the suspense,

⁴ Bratton, 'The discourse of the popular' in *New Readings*, pp. 134-138.

⁵ David Fine, *A History and Guide to Sheffield* (Sheffield: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1992, revised edition 2003), p. 82-83. See also Pollard 'Labour', in *The History of the City of Sheffield* Vol. II, Society, pp. 268-271.

⁶ Pollard, 'Labour', p. 269.

romance, and humour of a typical melodramatic narrative.⁷ The plot does indeed combine elements of a mystery thriller with the drama of a spectacular sporting event, and the climax of the story is a race at a local track, the Heeley Recreation Grounds. An actual race, called the Sheffield Handicap, took place on the same day as the play opened, so the story on stage (the preparation for a foot race to be held at Whitsuntide) cleverly reflected a genuine situation. Given that the play was performed for the first time on Whit Monday, it would have been possible for audiences to watch both the real race and its fictional double, or to have chosen between the two. The particular Handicap featured in the play is likely to have been a relatively short sprint, and thus quick and exciting, so that audiences would have had the intense and enjoyable experience of being spectators at a 'live' race. They were granted extra satisfaction because the hero, Harry Bedford, not only won the race, but also his sweetheart, and, as far as can be ascertained from reviews, all the other strands of the plot were agreeably concluded. (There is a certain degree of uncertainty about the denouement, because for some unknown reason, the only known surviving copy of the script consists of just two acts – the third and final act is completely missing.)

My analysis of the play has two related concerns: its content, which is about aspects of popular culture (racing, betting, drinking), and its form, which engages its audience by arousing similar feelings as those activities do, such as excitement, suspense, disappointment, relief, the pleasure of winning, camaraderie. The narrative deals with issues which affected sporting and leisure pursuits, particularly class and money, and consequently raises broader questions about social mobility and identity. Although parts of the

⁷ The text of *Keen Blades* is at Appendix A3 and has been transcribed from the unpublished typescript held in the Lord Chamberlain's Play Collection at the British Library, B. L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53524 F. All page numbers cited refer to this transcript.

Although the word 'melo-drama' is written on the title page using a hyphen, which appears to emphasise the musical aspect of the genre, in fact no music cues are suggested throughout the text. It would appear simply to be a variant spelling.

play are set in certain locations which emphasise the contrasts between characters (a country mansion and an urban public house), there are other places like the racetrack, which bring them together. Sport is depicted as a unifying activity which can cut across class divisions, and the play itself could have appealed to its audience in a similar manner, because of the excitement it generated, and the shared triumph when the hero won. Running races, more commonly known at the time as 'pedestrianism', brought fame (and notoriety) to the city from the 1850s onwards and the play recognises this history, and provides an opportunity to celebrate it.

According to the review of the first night performance, the production mostly appealed to working-class inhabitants. The *Sheffield Independent* commented that 'the popular parts were well filled, although the dress circle was but scantily patronised'.⁸ The *Era* agreed that the play received a favourable reception from those in the cheaper seats, and attributed its success to 'the local colour' which 'appealed very strongly to the patriotic sentiments of the pit and gallery'.⁹ It is striking that the reviewer chose the word 'patriotic' to describe the feelings of the audience, when the play does not encourage pride in England, but rather in their county of Yorkshire. Like *The Union Wheel* (discussed in the previous chapter), the play uses recognisable local settings and the characters speak with an authentic regional accent. The reviewer notes that the 'patriotic sentiments' were expressed by those in 'pit and gallery' but the play also celebrates cross-class co-operation and friendship, and seems to want to include, rather than alienate, audience members from the urban middle-classes or the squirearchy.

⁸ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 May 1893.

⁹ *Era*, 29 May 1893.

Emphasis was placed on the local and sporting aspects of the play by the punning phrase which was used for its title, *Keen Blades*, which makes reference to Sheffield and its reputation for cutlery-making and steel production. As well as the literal sense of a knife or cutting tool, 'blade' had developed an alternative meaning, which probably came from (at some earlier time) conflating the instrument with the man who wielded it. The word had come to mean 'a gallant, a free-and-easy fellow' and from the eighteenth century could have been used with some ambivalence, in a manner described by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'generally familiarly laudatory, sometimes good-naturedly contemptuous'.¹⁰ 'Keen' also incorporates several meanings: 'intellectually acute, sharp-witted, shrewd' and 'eager, ardent, fervid'.¹¹ Sheffield's fame for the production of quality cutlery and tools increased throughout the nineteenth century, so it is not surprising that the meaning of 'blade' was often used and easily understood. For example a sympathetic character in a burlesque by Thomas (Fourness) Rolfe, titled *Voyage to California; or, Sheffield in 1849*, is called 'Will Brightblade'.¹² A review of *Put Yourself in His Place* by Charles Reade (produced at the Theatre Royal in November 1870) noted that 'Mr. Neville has made the part of Henry Little his own, and has been justly complimented for his delineation of this Sheffield Blade'.¹³ By 1893, 'blade' was common parlance in the city, and had developed a particular relationship with football. The town's second football club, Sheffield United (established in 1889) has still (in 2013) the popular

¹⁰ "Blade, n.". OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/view/Entry/19792>> [accessed 13 April 2013].

¹¹ "Keen, adj. and adv.". OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/view/Entry/102765>> [accessed 13 April 2013].

¹² Playbill, Hudson Collection, 2 March 1849.

¹³ *Sheffield Telegraph* 22 November 1870.

nickname of 'The Blades', and its current emblem is two crossed knives and the white rose of Yorkshire. However in the 1890s, the phrase was used to describe the other (and indeed oldest) club, Sheffield Wednesday (established in 1867), whilst United went by the name of 'the Cutlers' or 'the Junior Blades'.¹⁴

The nickname was not just used in football contexts; it was also appropriated by the running fraternity. Particularly pertinent to this play is the fact that Sheffield's entrant for the Long Distance Championship of England, run at the Agricultural Hall in London in 1878 was Peter Crossland, who was also known as 'the Sharp Sheffield Blade'.¹⁵ The word was used more generally to suggest that those living in Sheffield possessed naturally good qualities of sportsmanship, and in a letter published in 1892, expressing a wish to see rugby football played in the town, Henry Greenwood claimed that 'it would be played by local lads, as true as steel, real Sheffield blades'.¹⁶

The nature of 'local lads' is once again examined in this case study; and questions begin with the title of the play - 'Keen Blades' could be a complimentary phrase yet it is not without its ambiguities. A cut with a sharp knife can hurt, and a wounding remark can be described as 'cutting', thus quick wits can be used as a weapon, to vanquish an opponent with verbal dexterity.¹⁷ Witty repartee, and a tendency to puncture inflated egos, had been a well-publicised attribute of those native to Sheffield for some years, as the following two examples demonstrate. A satirical poem was published in

¹⁴ Headline, 'Sheffield Wednesday v West Bromwich Albion: the "Throstles" beat the "Blades"', *Sheffield Independent*, 16 February 1891; Keith Farnsworth, *A Pictorial History of the Sheffield Derby Matches* (Derby: The Star/Breedon Books, 1995).

¹⁵ P. S. Marshall, *King of the Peds* (Milton Keynes: Author House, 2008).

¹⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 9 September 1892.

¹⁷ "Cut, v.". OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/view/Entry/46341>> [accessed 13 April 2013].

1874, in a Birmingham periodical, the *Town Crier*, which mocked one of their local politicians for his failure to be elected as the parliamentary candidate for Sheffield:

Joe Chamberlain, my Jo, Josh,
When you to Sheffield went,
You never dream't how quickly
You homeward would be sent.

You've now learnt how to cut, Sir,
You're very sharp I know;
But Sheffield blades are sharper,
Joe Chamberlain, my Jo.¹⁸

The *Sheffield Telegraph* reprised the theme of sharp local wit when it gave a humorous account of an incident at the 1893 Whit Monday cricket match at Bramall Lane in the same week that *Keen Blades* opened. A spectator had taken great umbrage when 'an inoffensive man' accidentally stood in front of him, and thus blocked his view of the action. The reporter narrated what happened next, 'this Blade was warranted to cut, and he very soon treated his audience to a specimen of his powers of incisive argument'. The poor 'inoffensive' man is driven away, and 'the Blade' and his companions celebrate with 'yells of laughter'.¹⁹ These examples suggest that 'Sheffield blades' are sharp, although not always kind, and the play concurs with this contention; it dramatises, and vindicates, a kind of native wit, which is not dependent on formal education.

The additional sub-title, *The Straight Tip*, adds a phrase which would have been familiar to those with any interest in betting and gambling.

¹⁸ Anonymous, quoted in Tristram Hunt, *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City* (London: Phoenix, 2005), p. 341-2. Although Joseph Chamberlain was not born in Birmingham, he had become an influential figure in local (and national) politics. The matter of Chamberlain's election campaign was also featured in the pantomime *Beauty and the Beast*, performed at the Theatre Royal in Birmingham, before he was defeated: 'He may be the Sheffield blade's keen edged M. P.', quoted in Jill A. Sullivan, *The Politics of the Pantomime* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2011), p. 204.

See also Peter T. Marsh, 'Joseph Chamberlain (Joe) (1863-1914)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn Jan 2011 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32350>> [accessed 25 Feb 2013].

¹⁹ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 22 May 1893.

Sheffield (along with the rest of the country) had a flourishing betting culture alongside its passion for sports. Specialist newspapers and periodicals were known as the 'tipster' press, and, supported by new technologies such as the electric telegraph, were a lucrative by-product of this new national enthusiasm.²⁰ A 'tip' as to who is likely to win any kind of race is useful to someone who places a bet as long as it is true and honest; the word 'straight' indicates that this is so.²¹ The title thus combines several messages, which combine to suggest that people from Sheffield are smart, good producers of quality steel ware, good sportsmen, and generally honest. The play itself fulfils the promise of its title, and offers its audience an opportunity to celebrate a shared identity.

Although Harry Bedford is from a privileged background, he needs assistance from his groom and his working-class friends from Sheffield in order to succeed in his endeavours. He is honest and principled, but rather gullible, and it becomes apparent that his sheltered upbringing made him vulnerable to exploitation by the clever but deceitful Rayne Chalcraft when they were both students at Oxford. Harry is consequently heavily in debt, and although his father, Squire Bedford, loves him, he is appalled at what he assumes has been the wanton behaviour of his son. To teach him a lesson he forbids him to marry his sweetheart Blanche Middleton (who is also the Squire's ward) until his debts are settled. Harry has been successful as an all-round athlete at university, and so with the encouragement and practical help of his groom, Dick Truefitt, he plans to enter the Sheffield Handicap (a running race with prize money for the winner) under the pseudonym of Ned Deerfoot,

²⁰ These specialist newspapers proliferated in the north of the country; Manchester was a particular centre at the end of the nineteenth century.

²¹ The phrase seems to have come into use in the 1870s, specifically with regard to betting. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites *Punch*, from 26 August 1878: 'Honest advice as to wagering will henceforth be known as the straight tip.' J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 133.

in the hope that if he wins he will be able to recoup his financial losses, prove his worth to his father, and reclaim his fiancée. Harry must undertake this subterfuge so that he can run the race without the knowledge of his father, although his assumed identity serves other purposes. It is a crucial element in the twists and turns of the plot, provides humour, and also suggests that it is not socially acceptable for a gentleman to become embroiled in this predominantly working-class, pecuniary sport. The issues raised by the play reflect a broader debate about leisure and its place within the organisation of society. The discourse of rational recreation reveals that this was a contested topic, and the first section of this chapter summarises this contextual background.

Part One

Leisure: choice, control, and the rise of the consumer

1.1 Rational recreation

‘The Drama: may it long continue a source of rational recreation’.²² Mr. Rimington, as Chair of the Sheffield Shakespeare Club, gave this toast at its first anniversary dinner in 1819, and his salutation, together with sentiments expressed throughout the course of the evening, articulated his conviction that theatre not only entertained, but could also refine the consciousness and sensibilities of its audience. I have demonstrated throughout this thesis that many influential observers and commentators during the century did not share his confidence; by the last decade the debate about the pleasures, dangers, and worth of ‘the Drama’ was still a current, and lively, one.

There was not even agreement as to what ‘rational recreation’ actually meant, despite its increased usage during the intervening period. For example, an article in the *Sheffield Independent* in 1834 noted that the

²² Anon., *Proceedings of the Sheffield Shakspeare Club* (Sheffield: H. & G. Crookes, 1829), p. 4.

observance of the Sabbath 'gives opportunity, by rest and rational recreation to restore the vigour of exhausted nature'. However the writer construed the term very narrowly, as he thought it should even exclude the bell-ringing used to summon the congregation, which he regarded as 'a most unnecessary occupation'.²³ Other contributors to the paper challenged such strict interpretations, but by 1893, the year that *Keen Blades* was produced, the question of what could be judged 'rational recreation' remained inconclusive. A campaign from an organisation named the 'Sunday Society' to open all national museums and galleries on the hallowed day of rest provoked an editorial in the paper which requested clarification on the terminology: 'we would like ... if such a thing were possible, to have a distinct definition of the term "rational recreation"'.²⁴

The objections to Sunday openings in this particular article were not for religious reasons, but were raised on behalf of employees. The writer maintained that everyone needed at least one day respite from work:

The thought that the effort of the Sunday Society ... may lead up to the opening of concert rooms and theatres on the day set apart for rest, must give us pause. The doing so would involve the enforced labour of many persons, and one day for rest in seven is necessary for the health of the individual, and consequently for the good of the community.²⁵

The Sunday Society argued that this 'enforced labour' actually entailed comparatively light duties, and therefore could not be considered a hardship. Although the writer in the *Sheffield Independent* agreed that the tasks for an attendant at a museum or gallery were not onerous, he asserted that this would not be the case 'in respect of other places of amusement', which presumably included the aforementioned 'concert rooms and theatres'. He recognised that in order to provide recreation for one section of the

²³ *Sheffield Independent*, 1 February 1834.

²⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 5 December 1893.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

population, another group must labour. The problem, illustrated by this published debate, is that leisure was no longer simply a period of time set aside for pleasurable activities in which everyone could participate, but rather it had become a form of industry.

The emergence of, and competition within, the 'culture industries' in Sheffield from mid-century onwards was examined in Chapter One, but the question of what the working classes should do during their periods of freedom from labour is one that had exercised social reformers for many years. In the earlier part of the century, the great upheaval of the industrial revolution had caused fundamental changes not only to the way the majority of people's working lives were organised, but also to their modes of recreation. In one of the earliest studies (1978) of the history of work and play in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Leisure and Society 1830-1950*, James Walvin notes that

...early commentators were generally united in tracing the roots of the recreational changes to the social and economic transformation which had been reshaping the face of the country since the last years of the eighteenth century. These complex, interrelated forces of urbanisation and industrialisation had produced a society which, by the 1840s, was qualitatively different from any previous human society. England was becoming urban and industrial; few aspects of social life remained unaffected. Changes in recreations seen in their most acute form in the cities, were but one manifestation of deeper economic changes.²⁶

Later in this chapter I argue that there was continuity between earlier rural pleasures and their manifestation in the 'urban and industrial' setting of Sheffield, but it is worth noting here that the 'changes in recreations' for the working class during the first half of the century often meant a marked lack of pleasurable activity:

New industries ... worked the labour force as never before ... Working hours were long and unremitting; free time was scarce and inadequate to compensate for the exhaustions of work; holidays became ever rarer. Monday through to Saturday was devoted to work; Sunday was

²⁶ James Walvin, *Leisure and Society 1830-1950*, Themes in British Social History (London and New York: Longman, 1978), p. 3.

a hiatus between bouts of work. Furthermore the pre-industrial calendar of frequent and varied holidays was simply consumed by the encroaching national commitment to useful toil. When, asked early Victorians, did working people get the time to enjoy themselves?²⁷

Thanks to the efforts of social and political campaigners, a succession of Factory Acts in the 1840s and 1850s eventually shortened the working week: for example in 1850 the Amendment to Ten Hours Bill included the ruling that textile workers were to cease work at 2 pm on Saturdays, thus providing a half-day holiday in addition to the day of rest on Sunday. The granting of a Saturday half day holiday varied depending on types of industry and geographical areas,²⁸ and although the cutlers in Sheffield worked hard and their conditions were tough, their self-employed way of working afforded greater freedom than was given to those who toiled in the immense factories of other urban centres. It had long been a tradition that artisans would take an extra holiday at the end of the weekend, and the practice became known as 'Saint Monday'.²⁹ More free time and increases in levels of remuneration improved the living conditions for many of the working classes, yet these benefits also gave rise to concerns from those in powerful positions, about how this newly-gained spare time and money should be spent.

The changing nature of leisure during the period was a crucial part of the transformation of society, and Peter Bailey cogently argues that attempts to control it became part of a wider social programme of reform ideas, such as education and temperance, which gathered pace through the century. He details how, from at least the 1830s onwards, those responsible for government policy regarded education for the working classes as teaching morals, as well as skills. For example, Dr. Kay-Shuttleworth, a chief government policy-maker in the 1840s, noted that educational

²⁷ Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, p. 5.

²⁸ See the introduction to Tony Mason, *Association Football and English Society 1863-1915* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 2-3.

²⁹ Walvin, p. 6.

establishments, in addition to literacy and numeracy, should provide instruction on 'the nature of his [the artisan's] domestic and social relations ... his political position in society, and the moral and religious duties appropriate to it'.³⁰ A contemporary of Kay-Shuttleworth, the journalist and historian Cooke Taylor, concurred that although this vital indoctrination should begin in the classroom, it must be continued outside it, in order for it to be successful:

The lectures of the schoolroom will be utterly ineffective when they are counteracted by the practical lessons of the playground... It was the great but neglected truth, that moral education, in spite of all the labours of direct instructors, is really acquired in hours of recreation.³¹

'Rational recreation' thus often became indistinguishable from 'moral education', and the concept was eagerly brought into service not only by government strategists but also by those in Christian and temperance organisations. These various agents of social control may have accepted that periods of leisure were necessary in order to refresh and preserve the bodies of the country's workforce, but they intended to make use of this time to mould the labourers into compliant and useful citizens. The battles about leisure thus revealed broader issues about the identity and self-determination of the working class in an age of consumer capitalism, and this field of study has proved to be a productive one for social and cultural historians, particularly over the last thirty years.³²

³⁰ J. P. Kay-Shuttleworth, 'The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes' (1832), pp. 61-3, quoted in Bailey, Peter, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 37.

³¹ W. Cooke Taylor, 'Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire (Manchester 1842), pp. 132-6, quoted in Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, p. 37.

³² Although I make use of the phrase 'consumer capitalism', it is somewhat anachronistic. The concept only came fully into use during the twentieth century, but we can see its germination towards the end of the nineteenth, when all forms of entertainment (including sport) were becoming increasingly commercialised. There were many new ways that the consumer could be exploited as a significant source of profit. See Judith Flanders, *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* (London: Harper Press, 2006). Other critical accounts of this phenomenon are noted in the bibliography.

By the 1890s, many different initiatives to control the leisure time of the working classes had been attempted, with varying degrees of success.³³ Through his extended study of working men's clubs, Bailey illustrates the challenges that faced those who wished to put the philosophy of rational recreation into practice.³⁴ It had become clear to those who wished to provide moral education through recreation that not only must they offer activities that appealed to their intended recipients, but that the exercise was more complicated than it had at first appeared. As numerous examples from history illustrate, attempts at social reform, whether aided by majority consensus, or by force and/or propaganda, are neither straightforward nor wholly successful. Bailey sensibly cautions against making simple generalisations about 'the controllers and the controlled', and he advises historians not to ignore the 'complexity of motive and division of interest within ruling groups and the variable and ambiguous response their prescriptions meet with'.³⁵ Brad provides more evidence of the clashes and complexities inherent in these aspirational projects in his recent study, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain 1850-1945*. As Beaven reminds us, the late nineteenth century was an 'era of mass leisure', and he documents some of the attempts to manage the time and inclinations of a type of emerging individual whom he terms 'the pleasure-seeking citizen'.³⁶ Thanks to new developments in technology and improved means of transport, those with free time and disposable income had myriad ways to spend them both.

³³ See for example, the use of theatres for religious sermons, documented in Chapter One.

³⁴ Bailey, 'Rational Recreation in Operation: the Working Men's Club Movement' in *Leisure and Class*, pp. 106-123.

³⁵ Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, p. 9.

³⁶ Brad Beaven, 'The Era of Mass Leisure: the Pleasure-Seeking Citizen', in Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship, and Working-Class Men in Britain 1850-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 44-87 (p. 44).

1.2 The pursuit of pleasure

Spectacle, sport, the seaside

Sheffield was an immense urban mass by this time; the population had trebled in the period between 1851 and 1891 and the boundaries began to spread: 'the population of the east end areas of Attercliffe and Brightside where the heavy trades were located increased from 16,900 in 1851 to 103,000 in 1891, or sixfold in forty years'.³⁷ Evangelical organisations who sought to convert this workforce through recreational activities had to compete against the attractions offered by all manner of clubs and societies as well as theatres and music halls. In a letter to the *Era* in October 1894 Edward Welding claimed that it was full of 'free and easies' and that 'no town in England can boast of so many'.³⁸ The *Sheffield Telegraph* on Tuesday 22 May 1893 had several reports about the enticing Whitsun festivities that the 'pleasure-seeking citizen' (as defined by Beaven) was able to choose from. One of the most popular events was the daring exploits of Blondin in the Botanical Gardens, which drew a crowd of 18,000. Spectacular events such as these acrobatics on a high wire competed against spectator sports such as horse racing, football and cricket. Those who loved equine competitions had to travel outside the city, but the latter two sports were played locally. Sheffield Football Club was founded in 1857 and there is plenty of evidence to support the claim that the city was the home of association football.³⁹ Cricket had been very popular for many years. Amateur teams, whose members were drawn from industrial organisations, sometimes had the time and inclination to help fund theatrical endeavours; for example a production at the Theatre

³⁷ Pollard, 'Labour', p. 268.

³⁸ *Era*, 6 October 1894. Welding was an entrepreneur, who managed the music hall named the 'Grand Theatre of Varieties', see Appendix C3.

³⁹ See, for example Patrick Renshaw, 'Aspects of Sport and Recreation' in Clyde Binfield et. al. (eds.), *The History of the City of Sheffield: Vol. II Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 1993, pp. 468-474; Tony Mason, *Association Football*.

Royal in 1834 was advertised under the patronage of the Lead Works Cricket Club. Bramall Lane opened as the home of Sheffield United Cricket Club on 22 November 1855, and enthusiastic players (and their equally fervent followers) took part in local, national, and international leagues. The Whit Sunday match between Yorkshire and Australia at this 40 year old venue was reported to have had ‘an enormous “gate”’.⁴⁰ The same newspaper commented on the enduring relationship between sport and those who lived in the northern county: ‘What a comfortable game cricket is! ... Cricket is one of the two things which every Yorkshireman professes to know all about. The other is a horse.’⁴¹

There were copious other activities on offer for this particular holiday weekend, including museum visits and walks in the park, and ‘vehicles of every description conveyed hundreds to the beauty spots of Derbyshire and Yorkshire’.⁴² Improved transport had made excursions to the country or the seaside a possibility for those who toiled in workshops and factories, and although Sunday Schools remained reliable providers of affordable outings, independent travel was also becoming an option for those who wanted to experience fresh air and a change of scenery. By 1885 there were many advertisements for clothing sold by drapers which had been ‘manufactured especially for summer and seaside wear’, and the *Sheffield Independent* informed its readers that it was possible to obtain their local newspaper in “watering places” on the Yorkshire, Lancashire and Lincolnshire coasts, and at Rhyl, the Isle of Man, and Llandudno’.⁴³ John K. Walton concurs that the

⁴⁰ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 23 May 1893.

⁴¹ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 22 May 1893.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Sheffield Independent*, 2 and 23 May 1885.

hard-working cutlers took advantage of the opportunities offered by travel companies:

...artisan prosperity was sufficiently widespread to enable seaside visits to be commonly enjoyed at an early stage. By the turn of the century Sheffield cutlers and steelworkers had long been patronizing Bridlington and Cleethorpes, and by 1899 'a large number of Sheffield artisans' could be anticipated at distant Yarmouth, while a local newspaper remarked that, 'There are Sheffield visitors even at Folkestone'.⁴⁴

The use of the words 'even at', used in the concluding sentence of this extract is informative and significant. Artisans from Sheffield could now travel (usually by train) as far as Folkestone geographically, but they could also encroach on territory which had formerly been out of reach because of restrictions based on money and class. They could visit seaside resorts which had once been the preserve of aristocrats and the wealthy, and enjoy the same kinds of pleasures. The original genteel tourists sometimes felt resentful and threatened, and this clash of cultures on holiday is one illustration of the tension and uncertainty caused by the increase in social mobility towards the end of the century. Peter Bailey discusses the portrayal of the 'loutish stereotype' of the working man on holiday in *Leisure and Class*, and quotes the journalist Ewing Ritchie, just returned from Southend, who declared that he 'began to tremble at the very sight of an excursionist'. The novelist Ouida 'expressed her repugnance more fully' when she complained that workers on holiday were 'the exact semblance and emblem of the vulgarity of the age'.⁴⁵

Conflict is an essential element for drama and comedy, and the seaside became increasingly used as a setting for plays produced in Sheffield during the 1880s and 1890s. *Helter Skelter*, a fast-moving farce by George Walter Browne takes place in Yarmouth, and *Flint and Steel* by J. F. McArdle, a witty comedy about two 'sharp practitioners' who set up a marriage bureau,

⁴⁴ Walton refers to, and quotes from, a review of seaside resorts in the *Sheffield Independent*, 22 July 1899.

⁴⁵ Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, pp. 104-5.

relocates the action from London to Margate in Act Three. Judith Flanders reminds us that Margate was an inexpensive resort, and therefore it attracted a clientele from the lower-middle classes.⁴⁶ *Helter Skelter* and *Flint and Steel* were produced at the Alexandra in 1886 and 1881 respectively, and share familiar comedic devices such as exaggerated stereotypes and cases of mistaken identity. *Cupid and Co* by Horace Lennard (City Theatre, 1894) uses potential love affairs between unlikely paramours who meet 'on the sands' in an unnamed seaside resort as a mechanism for comedy.⁴⁷ The third act of this play is set in the garden of a public house near a river, filled with young men and women in boating outfits, enjoying champagne and each others' company; and demonstrates the ways in which new generations with fresh energy and irreverent attitudes were challenging accepted behaviour. Moreover, the storylines of these comedies reflected the reality that fashionable leisure pursuits were highly profitable, and that those who seized opportunities for making money were often not very scrupulous about their practices.⁴⁸ The same kinds of issues, particularly in relation to the commercialisation of sport, arise from the plot and characters in *Keen Blades*, which will be more fully discussed later, particularly in Section 3.2.

Thrills and spills at the circus

The other shared feature between these seaside comedies and *Keen Blades* is their physicality. Much of the humour in these particular plays (and

⁴⁶ Judith Flanders, *Consuming Passions* (London: Harper Press, 2006), p. 237.

⁴⁷ John McArdle, *Flint and Steel* Alexandra Theatre, 1881, Add. MS. 53252 J; George Walter Browne, *Helter Skelter*, Alexandra Theatre, 1886, Add. MS. 53361 G; Horace Lennard, *Cupid and Co.*, City Theatre, 1894, Add. MS. 53555 A, all B.L. L.C.P.

⁴⁸ Walvin observes that 'financiers sought to capitalise on the obvious collective wealth of the seaside visitor' and theatrical entrepreneurs were ready to seize the moment. He notes that 'theatres and theatre chains proliferated around the coast as investors sank their money into the lucrative world of seaside entertainment'. Walvin, *Leisure and Society* p. 75.

others of the genre) comes from visual and physical gags; they are full of slapstick and clowning, familiar from circus and pantomime. A constant fixture in the repertoire of both the Theatre Royal and the Alexandra was the annual pantomime, which normally opened on Boxing Day and continued until March.⁴⁹ Actors had to be physically fit: *Helter Skelter* was full of energetic scenes of policemen chasing their suspect, or fighting unknown assailants in a Punch and Judy booth, and this was typical of the kind of farcical comedy produced at both the Alexandra and the Theatre Royal. Although there was a history of competition between different forms of performance, there was collaboration between them too; managements recognised the potential of mixing genres and exploited talent wherever they could find it. For example the circus performer Charles Majilton developed a very successful career as the star of theatrical productions at the Theatre Royal; moreover he directed their 1893-4 Christmas pantomime of *Cinderella*.⁵⁰ Indeed, the plots of dramas sometimes seem to be written merely to facilitate specialty acts: Majilton produced and performed in *Helter Skelter*, and his whole 'family' starred in *Round the Clock*, an energetic romp written by J. F. McArdle and produced at the Alexandra in April 1880.⁵¹ A scene in the second act of the latter play is set on the stage of the Olympian Theatre, where the 'Majilton Entertainment' company have been fortuitously booked to perform.⁵² This was not a one-way transfer from circus to theatre; the seasonal offerings over the Christmas and New Year period 1892-93 included a mixed bill at Sam

⁴⁹ Some of the pantomimes written specifically for Sheffield are catalogued in the list of plays at Appendix A0.

⁵⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 26 December 1893.

⁵¹ John F. McArdle, *Round the Clock* ('an eccentric Comic Drama'), B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53199 S.

⁵² *Sheffield Independent*, 27 December 1893 and 4 June 1886; *Era*, 3 July 1886.

Lockhart's circus which featured a 'Great Equestrian Company, Wonderful Performing Elephants and The Grand Pantomime'.⁵³

The elision between areas of performance is a crucial aspect of the development of theatrical style during the nineteenth century, and further research into the careers of circus performers who developed their acting skills and became successful in theatre would yield much useful information. There is not space here for detailed analysis and a brief commentary must suffice. Creative artists like Charles Majilton had long careers across a range of genres, but their lives are difficult to track, partly because they were so transient, and partly because they often used stage names. Sometimes troupes used the title 'family' when they were not necessarily related by blood; and they selected a rather more exotic title for the group rather than use one which had been officially bestowed at birth. Charles Majilton was actually christened Luke Berrington, and the journalist Thomas Frost draws attention to this use of pseudonyms: "professional names" – noms de théâtre – are often puzzling, and it is not easy to discover the motives which prompt a man to change his name from Powell to Power or from Berrington to Majilton'.⁵⁴ There are numerous examples of this practice: a playbill for 1839 for the Theatre, Sheffield is illustrated by acrobatic performers, and the text reports that 'the Boleno family were received last night with shouts of astonishment and delight'. Several decades later Samson Boleno featured on the bill of the Surrey Music Hall (listed in the *Sheffield Independent* 22 June 1863), and this individual may possibly have been related to Sampson Levi Genesis Boleno, who birth is officially recorded, in 1859. However, Harry Boleno, who had a

⁵³ *Sheffield Independent*, 9 January 1893.

⁵⁴ Thomas Frost, *Reminiscences of a Country Journalist* (London: Ward and Downey, 1886), p. 173. Frost had a keen interest in popular entertainment and was also the author of *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881).

long and successful career as a pantomime clown, often appearing at Drury Lane (11 successive seasons), was simply using this exotic-sounding name as a pseudonym. Several obituary notices give his real name as Mason, and the *Sheffield Independent* states that he 'formed a ballet troupe with which he associated his professional name'. Whatever their birth and background, these performers shared the ability to please audiences, and the article emphasised this when it commented that Boleno 'possessed special qualifications which long rendered him the special favourite of the holiday-making playgoer'.⁵⁵

Other types of play or spectacle which have always been enormously popular are those featuring animals, and performing horses remained a stalwart attraction. *The Derby Winner* by Sir Augustus Harris, Cecil Raleigh and Henry Hamilton was a huge success when it opened at Drury Lane in 1894 and also when it toured nationally, including to Sheffield. When it visited the Theatre Royal in 1900, it was clear that it had already appeared more than once, and had been well-received each time. The *Independent* commented that the production was 'always warmly welcomed when it visits Sheffield'. The review also emphasised its potent blend of sport and theatre, commenting that 'the play is a complete education in matters of the ring and the course, and it is something more, namely, an extremely well-constructed drama of intrigue and counter-intrigue'.⁵⁶ The combination of racing and a 'well-constructed drama' was a winning one, and the co-writer of *Keen Blades*, J. F. Elliston, had one of his greatest successes as a producer with *In Old Kentucky* by Arthur Shirley. An advert in the *Era* aimed at attracting regional managers claimed that it was 'undoubtedly the Finest American

⁵⁵ *Sheffield Independent*, 28 January 1875.

⁵⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 4 September 1900. *The Derby Winner* by Sir Augustus Harris, Cecil Raleigh and Henry Hamilton, opened at Drury Lane on 15 September 1894.

sporting drama' and featured 'four racehorses and the only genuine piccaninny band in England'.⁵⁷ It was licensed for the Theatre Royal Hull (10 February 1894), produced at Elliston's Theatre Royal Bolton in May of that year, and was revived several times there (twice in 1895, twice in 1896, twice in 1898), as well as benefiting from runs in London (Pavilion 1898, Princesses' 1899).⁵⁸ The announcement that it was to be produced at the Alexandra in September 1895 predicted that this play, in a similar manner to *The Derby Winner*, would 'be warmly welcomed by those who saw the piece when it was last performed in Sheffield'.⁵⁹

Physical performance clearly had mass appeal, and sometimes managements opened up these displays of athleticism to include the audience and they were invited to demonstrate their skills on stage, as this report illustrates:

Apart altogether from the circus entertainment proper there was immense merriment caused last night by the performers in an amateur riding contest, and the audience rose to a certain pitch of excitement over a foot race for local competitors in which there were nine runners. Hardly less amusement was derived from the efforts of volunteers to ride the wonderful kicking elephant, "Harry".⁶⁰

There are two elements in this report which are worth exploring. The first one is that an actual footrace with 'local competitors' was staged as part of the entertainment (the circus ring would probably have served as the running track); and the second that much 'amusement' was caused by volunteers who attempted to ride the elephant. Spectators at a sporting event experience a particular thrill when watching a competition with an unknown outcome, and the suspense that is generated can be compared to that aroused by an

⁵⁷ Advertisement for J. F. Elliston Enterprises, *Era*, 24 July 1897.

⁵⁸ *The London Stage* notes that its first performance was at the Theatre Royal, Bury. 'In Old Kentucky' was also the name of a racehorse, included in the list of runners at Pontefract, *Sheffield Independent*, 25 April 1895.

⁵⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 16 September 1895.

⁶⁰ *Sheffield Independent*, 22 February 1893.

unpredictable drama. A parallel interest may be stimulated when ordinary people attempt an unusual activity in public; evidence suggests that spectators enjoy both the triumph and the (often comedic) humiliation that can be caused by such efforts.⁶¹ These participatory activities at the Circus may have been 'apart altogether' from the 'proper' evening's entertainment, but the account reminds us of the synergy between performer and spectator, as well as the similarities, and close relationship, between sport and theatre.⁶²

Although there is no evidence that the management of the Theatre Royal or the producers of *Keen Blades* asked for volunteer runners to participate in the performed race, the actors needed to create the same sense of excitement in the audience as if the competition was a 'real' one. The details of how the authors envisaged this scene, and exactly how it was achieved, are unavailable (because of the absence of Act Three). Some information can be gleaned from the review in the *Era*, which noted that the play used 'a clever mechanical device' to 'impart realism to the handicap scene'.⁶³ We can only imagine what the 'clever mechanical device' was, but we can surmise that it was something which helped to give the impression of the speed of the runners, perhaps something like a revolving stage. The

⁶¹ The enduring popularity of television programmes where the entertainment is provided by ordinary people trying, with varying degrees of success, to perform in public attests to the truth of this claim.

⁶² The Circus in Roman times was 'a place of exhibition for chariot-racing and athletic contests', Hartnoll, *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, p. 130.

Bertolt Brecht believed that the moribund state of the theatre in the early years of the twentieth century could be improved by taking lessons from sporting events and their spectators: 'We pin our hopes to the sporting public ... When people in sporting establishments buy their tickets they know exactly what is going to take place; and that is exactly what does take place once they are in their seats: viz. highly trained persons developing their peculiar powers in the way most suited to them, with the greatest sense of responsibility yet in such a way as to make one feel that they are doing it primarily for their own fun. *Against that the traditional theatre is nowadays quite lacking in character.* [Emphasis in original] Bertolt Brecht, 'Mehr guten Sport.' From *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 6 February 1926. Quoted in 'Emphasis on sport' in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and translated by John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978).

⁶³ *Era*, 29 May 1893.

review in the *Sheffield Independent* agreed that the play was a 'realistic sporting drama' which proved 'a powerful draw for the local public'.⁶⁴

All the fun of the fair

The production of *Keen Blades*, which combined dramatic narrative and physically exhilarating spectacle, can be seen as a link in a historic chain of performances which took place in a theatre space; but it can also claim to be related to long-standing traditions of outdoor entertainments such as fairs. In its coverage of the activities which were available for the holiday weekend, the *Sheffield Telegraph* noted this local annual event, but only to complain about its pernicious influence, commenting disapprovingly that its 'abominable smells and horrid noises ... had many willing victims'.⁶⁵ The *Sheffield Independent* also frowned on what it sceptically called 'a "pleasure" fair' and wondered 'where the pleasure comes in it'.⁶⁶

These disparaging reports reflected a more widespread antagonism towards fairs which had been growing through the century. In the rural society of pre-industrial England, holy days such as Whitsuntide were the time for large-scale outdoor events, which, although they facilitated necessary activities such as horse trading, were also celebratory. These colourful and noisy carnivals provided a host of participatory and spectatorial pastimes, both theatrical and sporting, and visitors relished these sensual pleasures. Fairs were one of the places where those who toiled for most of the year could enjoy their freedom wholeheartedly, and although this lack of restraint may have been tolerated in earlier times, it was viewed with consternation from the early part of the nineteenth century. Bailey suggests that the doctrine of rational recreation was considered to be an antidote to 'the prodigality of

⁶⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 30 May 1893.

⁶⁵ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 23 May 1893.

⁶⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 May 1893.

much working-class leisure with its determined exploration of the limits of the human appetite to the point of repletion or collapse'.⁶⁷ It was not simply that participants damaged their own health, but also that large crowds of intoxicated merrymakers provided opportunities for clever tricksters and thieves. Many a poor labourer would probably have returned home feeling sick and humiliated, having had their pocket picked, or been cheated out of their holiday money. Several stories in the *Sheffield Independent* from the 1820s confirm that holiday drunkenness facilitated theft and assault, and the following report alludes to the combination of the pleasure and danger that fairs presented:

The set out for the holiday-folk was unusually attractive: pantomime, equestrian, and wild beast establishments bewildered the country people with their various attractions ... it is probable that many minor robberies have also occurred.⁶⁸

The prevention of dishonest or criminal behaviour was one of the reasons given for the regulations and restraints placed on metropolitan and provincial fairs. Jacky Bratton and the sports historian John Hargreaves both write about the dismantling of this element of popular culture, albeit from different perspectives. Bratton focuses on the history of performative activity, and she details the long-standing involvement of the London theatres:

In the closed season the actors from the Restoration and eighteenth-century Theatres Royal had set up their booths at the fairs, and competed with the menageries, rope-walkers and freakshows to attract all ranks of holidaymakers.⁶⁹

Hargreaves is more interested in the feats of physical prowess which took place, but they both agree that those in positions of authority not only voiced

⁶⁷ Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, p. 36.

⁶⁸ *Sheffield Independent* 5 December 1829; see also 2 December 1826, 31 July 1830.

⁶⁹ Bratton explains how the 'fairground theatre' altered its mode of operation when the fairs were eventually closed down: 'The travellers, and the class of hereditary entertainers who managed the fairs, were modernising their enterprises and spilling over into cellars, gaffs and opportunistic tents and converted buildings...'. Bratton, *New Readings*, p. 53.

their disapproval, but also began to take action. Bratton asserts that these days of celebration were seen as nothing more than 'immoral and dangerous outbreaks of disorder'⁷⁰ - Hargreaves concurs, and claims that

Wakes, pleasure fairs and hiring fairs, which provided a major setting for sports, incurred the implacable hostility of the reformers and were whittled down gradually in number.⁷¹

These great trade and recreational events may have been curtailed, but pleasure-seekers and confidence tricksters found other outlets. One of the functions of the fair had been horse-dealing, and England's fascination with all matters equine continued. Racecourses, like fairs and the seaside, are places where all classes come into contact with one another, so the history of horse-racing is, like that of many popular activities, somewhat complicated.⁷² Although the Jockey Club, established in 1750 and described as 'the unelected ruling body of the sport',⁷³ was the stronghold of aristocratic and military gentlemen, the sport has a parallel history, as Hargreaves explains:

Newmarket was the scene of select upper-class meetings, but elsewhere the sport was still associated with local holidays, travelling shows, gambling booths, beer tents, cock-fights, boxing and wrestling.⁷⁴

There was such a problem with dishonesty at racecourses that in 1872, Alfred J. Toulmin published an advisory booklet for those likely to come into contact with the 'rogues and vagabonds of the racecourse', which included 'full explanations of how they cheat at roulette, three-cards, thimble ring etc.', as well as 'some account of the welsher and money-lender' in connection with

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), p. 23.

⁷² This diverse mix of humanity together in one place has inspired playwrights and artists from the Victorian period to the late twentieth century. For example, William Powell Frith, 'The Derby Day' (1856-8); Howard Brenton, *Epsom Downs* (1977).

⁷³ Mark Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter: Popular gambling and English Society 1823-1961* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 109.

⁷⁴ Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, p. 32.

the turf'.⁷⁵ Yet despite the dangers, crowds still flocked to these events. The *Sheffield Independent* reported that 'thousands ... wended their way' to the fair, and 'seemed to find no small degree of enjoyment as spectators of the outside of the gorgeously got up caravans or the wonders to be seen inside'.⁷⁶

Theatre managers and playwrights had long been aware that their potential audiences were fascinated by 'the wonders' to be seen at the fair, and in addition to offering similar attractions such as elephants, horses, and acrobatic feats, they also made creative use of the eccentric individuals and unpredictable situations associated with such events. This is evident from the text of a short musical farce called *The Horseman*, which was produced in the same year as *Keen Blades* at Crystal Palace Theatre in London. Although there is no record of it visiting Sheffield, it is relevant to include it here, as it evokes the mischief-making and merriment of holiday entertainments.⁷⁷ The 'dramatis personae' consists of Jack Plungeholm, the luckless gentleman gambler; Grace Goodluck, his sweetheart; Bill Breaker the bookmaker, and Sam Spottem, a card-seller. Songs celebrate the pleasures of the hunt, and one ditty is called 'Bookmaking Made Easy'. With the help of Sam Spottem, Jack Plungeholm finally gets the advantage of the wily bookmaker. Sam presents a challenge: he maintains that he has a horse that Bill will not be able to ride, and advises Jack to put as much money as he can on the bet. Bill, full of bravado, insists that he can master any creature, but he gets his comeuppance when Sam presents him with a rocking horse. This type of

⁷⁵ Alfred H. Toulmin, 'Rogues and vagabonds of the racecourse: full explanations of how they cheat at roulette, three-cards, thimble ring etc., and some account of the welsher and money-lender in connection with the turf' (London: John Camden Hotten, 1872).

⁷⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 May 1893.

⁷⁷ Captain Coe, *The Horseman, or The Favourite*, a musical farce, produced at the Crystal Palace Theatre, 1 April 1893. B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 535245 S.

short play, little more than an extended sketch, with its combination of music, wit and physical comedy was a standard element of the repertoire of theatres in Sheffield for most of the nineteenth century. For example, Harry M. Pitt wrote *Julius See-Saw; or, Dauntless Decius, the Doubtful Decimvir* for the Theatre Royal in 1869 which used the setting of ancient Rome for a burlesque about horse racing, drinking, and speculation.⁷⁸

The close and mutually influential relationship between theatres and the fairground is encapsulated by a phrase used by the critic for the *Sheffield Independent* in his article on the various attractions at the fair in 1893. He describes 'the gorgeously got up caravans ... a couple of small menageries, a circus, a ghost show', which he collectively terms 'the show business'.⁷⁹ The meaning of this term was later expanded to include a whole range of performative activity, and although it is commonly used even now, it still carries the stigma of 'illegitimacy', and its popularity is distrusted.⁸⁰

Part Two

Keen Blades: representation of, and attitudes towards, popular culture

Keen Blades embraces – my selection of this verb is intended to suggest both the range of topics and the tone of the play – many elements of popular culture, including those which were sometimes classed as disreputable or criminal. Bailey suggests that in the disputed territory of leisure, the prescriptions of those in authority were met with a 'variable and ambiguous response'.⁸¹ Although he is not making a specific reference to

⁷⁸ Harry M. Pitt, *Julius See-Saw; or, Dauntless Decius, the Doubtful Decimvir*, Theatre Royal, Easter Monday 1869, B. L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53075 I.

⁷⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 May 1893.

⁸⁰ Bratton underlines a distinction which has often been an impediment to theatre criticism and the study of its history, 'What belongs to "the popular audience" is not art', Bratton *New Readings*, p. 13.

⁸¹ Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, p. 9.

playwrights, his argument could be extended to include this drama. It refuses to condemn the world of the public house; rather it celebrates, and affirms the worth of, working-class pleasures, indeed it is possible to interpret the play as a form of resistance against those who wished to assert legislative and moral control over these activities. This section highlights the contrast between the messages contained in the play, with the opinions that were more usually expressed within the discourse of late Victorian society.

2.1 'Disorderly' sports

Some historians claim that the suppression of disorderly sports was part of a wholesale destruction of rural traditions, but Hargreaves argues that it is possible to trace a connecting path between these earlier activities and the urban leisure pursuits prevalent in the latter decades of the century. They may have taken different forms but still maintained a distinctive position, and in his words, 'the picture seems more complicated and the evidence for continuity in popular culture, in the shape of a great underground of popular sport, is somewhat stronger'.⁸² Pedestrianism, the 'popular sport' at the heart of *Keen Blades*, survived repeated and varied attempts to suppress it, particularly in the northern counties, and can be considered part of this 'great underground'. Hargreaves describes the sport as 'eccentric, undisciplined, bizarre', and it certainly had an intriguing history. It embraced a whole range of foot-races, from sprints of 130 yards to arduous marathons which could last up to 142 hours. It encompassed not just straightforward running, but often included other feats of strength: 'competitors walked backwards, raced in weighted clogs, picked up stones, trundled barrow-loads of bricks'.⁸³ Partly due to its association with rural festivals, it was categorised as a working-

⁸² Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, p. 52.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

class sport which had a tendency to unruliness, but its origins were also rooted in the pastimes of the aristocracy.

In his book *Turnpike Road to Tartan Track*, Frederick C. Moffatt asserts that long-distance running had been in existence from ancient times, and it had been popularised in England from at least the seventeenth century, when noblemen organised races between their footmen, and laid bets on the outcome. He describes a time when 'pedestrianism was, if not the sport of Kings, at least the sport of Dukes. It was competitive, regional, and mercenary'.⁸⁴ The sport was still extremely popular in the nineteenth century, and although its connection with the aristocracy was more or less broken by the 1850s, it retained certain crucial elements: not only were the races run for prize money, but large sums were to be made from betting on the competitors.

Hyde Park in Sheffield became a national centre for pedestrian contests, and Eric MacIntyre notes that 'the sport of professional running was to blossom into the great days of the Sheffield Handicaps'.⁸⁵ He emphasises the prestige of the competitions and the significance of Sheffield within their history, 'to win at Hyde Park ranked alongside a horse's success in the Derby'. However, he also documents that the 'great days' were short-lived, because of the financial aspect, which 'often led to forgeries over a runner's past form, with the aim being a bigger start and a betting coup'.⁸⁶ It was not surprising that these fraudulent practices caused trouble, and MacIntyre reports that

a disputed result could arouse great passions among the punters who then vented their wrath by rioting. After one such fracas at Newhall in 1883, the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* reported that "t'handicap's over;

⁸⁴ Frederick C. Moffatt, *Turnpike Road to Tartan Track: the Story of Northern Foot Handicaps* (Newcastle, privately published, 1979), p. 2.

⁸⁵ Eric M. MacIntyre, 'Sheffield's Pedestrian Pub', *Sheffield Topic*, November 1979.

⁸⁶ MacIntyre, *Sheffield Topic*, February 1980.

t'handicap's past; what a wonder, and what a relief". It had "caused more strife and contention than any for a great number of years".⁸⁷

At the time *Keen Blades* was produced, ten years after this article in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, the sport was continuing to suffer from negative publicity. Although the Sheffield Handicap was well-established, run at different times throughout the year, usually to coincide with the main holiday weekends (Christmas, New Year, Easter, Whitsuntide, and August Bank Holiday), many local newspaper accounts reported on the small attendance at fixtures. The actual Whitsun race in 1893 (a race of 201 yards, with a first prize of £100), which happened at the same time as the dramatised version, took place in the grounds of the Sheaf House tavern.⁸⁸ The fact that the Handicap was held at this particular location indicates where pedestrianism was situated in the sporting landscape of Sheffield at this time - the connection with a public house highlights the distinction between this kind of racing and the rather more respectable amateur sport of athletics. The connection between taverns and pedestrianism had been a cause for concern for some years, as the following extract demonstrates: 'There are several foot-racing grounds in connection with public houses: they attract the working-classes and promote betting and neglect of work to an extent which makes them a serious evil'.⁸⁹

Whilst acknowledging that pedestrianism could attract unscrupulous characters, it seems that the writers of *Keen Blades* wanted to celebrate its positive aspects and, to some extent, also rehabilitate the reputation of the city as a place that had national and international sporting stature. The play does not shy away from fraud and corruption, but it suggests that the

⁸⁷ MacIntyre, *Sheffield Topic*, December 1979.

⁸⁸ *Sheffield Telegraph*, 8 May 1893.

⁸⁹ John Taylor (ed.) *The Illustrated Guide to Sheffield* (Sheffield: Pawson and Brailsford, 1879).

incidents it depicts are exceptional, and are due to the greed of particular individuals like Luke Chalcraft and his son Rayne. Before the action of the play begins they have already inveigled the usually honest Sammy Titcomb into one of their schemes and they cheat him out of £3,000 (Sammy tells the tale in Act 2, scene 5), and Rayne has selfishly exploited Harry's talents at Oxford. The Chalcrafts plan to put up their own runner, Seth Crabtree, for the Sheffield Handicap. When the news is announced in the sporting press, Ned Deerfoot (Harry Bedford in disguise) is advertised as his only serious competitor, and in order to ensure Crabtree's success, they hatch a plan (involving Rayne's secret wife Lilith Bilton) to prevent Ned/Harry from running. They stand to win an awful lot of money from this interference, and although their plan ultimately fails, it provides one of the main strands of dramatic tension in the play.

It was not only fraudulent activity which caused problems for individuals who participated in, or supported pedestrianism. There were repeated attempts by local magistrates and police forces to regulate and suppress the practice with a range of supposed justifications. Hargreaves cites the case of a runner who was arrested and prosecuted in Bolton in 1866 on the grounds of indecency, because his legs were on show while he was racing in the streets.⁹⁰ Participants and enthusiasts were disparagingly termed the 'race-running fraternity' by police constables in Yorkshire, who grouped them together with 'dog fanciers' and those who participated in a whole range of 'blood sports', such as prize fighting and ratting, all of which took place in, or near by, public houses.⁹¹ Legislation such as the Cruelty to

⁹⁰ Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, p. 51.

⁹¹ Robert D. Storch, 'The Policeman as Domestic Missionary: Urban Discipline and Popular Culture in Northern England, 1850-80' originally published in *Journal of Social History*, 9 (1976), reprinted in R. J. Morris and Richard Rodger (eds.), *The Victorian City: A Reader in British Urban History 1820-1914* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), pp. 281-306 (p. 288).

Animals Act of 1835 had attempted to suppress activities such as cock-fighting but these and other practices continued in a clandestine manner for most of the century.⁹² The authorities were not only concerned about the welfare of animals; their desire to curb other similar activities sometimes appeared to emanate simply from prejudice and distaste. At the end of the 1860s Chief Constables in Yorkshire wanted to restrict licensing hours on the grounds that certain public houses were 'pests of society and the resort of dog fighters and racers, prize-fighters and others taking part in demoralizing games'. Certain kinds of leisure pursuits were deemed to be morally corrupt, and those who enjoyed them were labelled as 'the lowest class of company'.⁹³

2.2 The problem of the public house

The police, and other agents who attempted to control what happened within the vicinity of the public house, claimed that the games themselves were not the issue; it was rather the attendant criminal activities which caused the problems, as Walvin explains:

Most early Victorian sports were arranged by the drinking fraternity, particularly those sports which were either illegal or attracted a strong criminal element ... Boxers, like present day footballers, often took over a pub on retirement ... the services and clientele of local pubs were often used to organise and stage a prize fight. Pubs tended to become the headquarters for both sides ... and had the additional benefits of being able to provide the valuable services of gambling and prostitution.⁹⁴

Walvin may be using the term 'valuable services' somewhat ironically, but there was money to be made from these activities and taverns were, in effect, the centre for entrepreneurial activity. Local authorities would nevertheless

⁹² The *Sheffield Local Register* reports that a beerhouse keeper was fined for allowing cock-fighting, 15 January 1870.

⁹³ Storch, 'Policeman as Domestic Missionary'.

⁹⁴ Walvin, *Leisure and Society*, p. 36.

have regarded these auxiliary activities as immoral and harmful, and many observers agreed that the publican was responsible for a multitude of vices:

...wherever a social problem could be isolated it seemed to find sustenance and shape under a publican's roof. In the eyes of hostile witnesses the publican personified the gamut of social ills; he took money from the poor and gave them drunkenness in return, he harboured the prostitute and the criminal, organised the last of the small-scale blood sports, encouraged gambling and shored up the collapsing world of prize fighting.⁹⁵

If public houses were centres for illegal businesses, then the authorities had a valid reason for action to be taken against them. However, this determined opposition to certain elements of popular culture can also be seen as part of an oppressive interference in the lives of the working classes. Historians have questioned why the various authorities were so opposed to what may have been harmless pleasures. Although drunkenness and criminal activities were social problems, there was also fear of political activity and potential subversion, as Hargreaves observes in *Sport, Power and Culture*:

The concern about drinking was motivated by the recognition that so much of working-class culture, which was a beer culture, was organised around it. Trades unions and political groups traditionally held their meetings and discussions in pubs. Here then, was an institution in which working class people were in danger of evading surveillance by their superiors for a major slice of their free time. Consequently the beerhouse and the pub became one of the most closely supervised and regulated institutions in British society, hemmed in by a plethora of petty restrictions and subject to continual harassment by the authorities.⁹⁶

The 'petty restrictions' and 'continual harassment' that Hargreaves refers to are evident from local historical accounts, as is resistance and rebellion.

The recurrent appearance of the police in plays of the period reflects (and comments on) the historical reality that the police were a constant presence in ordinary people's lives, due to their employment as agents for

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Hargreaves, *Sport Power and Culture*, p. 36

For more on the consumption of alcohol and the attempts to control it, see Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: the Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872* (London: Faber, 1971).

social control throughout provincial towns. Robert Storch's illuminating essay 'The Policeman as Domestic Missionary' details the ways in which the police

brought the arm of municipal and state authority directly to bear upon key institutions of daily life in working-class neighbourhoods, touching off a running battle with local custom and popular culture which lasted at least until the end of the century.⁹⁷

The 'running battle' that Storch describes, between those who ran (and frequented) public houses and those seeking to restrict their activities are documented in local Sheffield newspapers and are also represented in plays staged for a Sheffield audience, of which *Keen Blades* is one example.

The play champions, rather than condemns, the world of the public house, and of the popular sports that were administered from it. The Ring o' Bells, the public house where much of the action of the play takes place, referenced an actual public house in Sheffield. A tavern called The Sportsman at 8 Pea Croft (now known as Solly Street) changed its name in 1862 to the Ring o' Bells and although by 1893 it had been renamed again as the Nelson Inn, it is likely to have provided spectators with a pleasurable moment of recognition.⁹⁸ When the landlord, Sammy Titcomb, is seen on stage for the first time, the scene is one of calm domesticity, he smokes a long clay pipe, and his wife knits beside him (Act 1, scene 3). Although he is a publican and bookmaker, and a 'gaffer' for runners, he is the head of an affectionate and mutually supportive family. He trains Harry and manages the competition for him, and he and his wife offer hospitality to their naïve guest and prove to be his true and loyal friends.

There is no evidence Sammy Titcomb was based on a real person, but according to the review in the *Era*, the delineation captured the characteristics of a 'typical Sheffield publican and "gaffer"'. Lonnen Meadows, who played

⁹⁷ Storch, 'Policeman as Domestic Missionary', p. 282.

⁹⁸ Michael Liversidge, *The Definitive A-Z List of Sheffield Public Houses* (Sheffield: Pickards Colour Publishing, 1999).

the part, was a well-known comic actor, and the review praised his detailed preparation:

Mr. Meadows has carefully noted the rough genial character of the class from which Sammy Stetcomb [sic] is taken, and his portraiture was thoroughly sound and consistent.⁹⁹

Although the reviewer thinks that publicans are 'genial', he reserves judgement about their morals. However, from reading the text and gauging the tone of the performance from the reviews, it would appear that *Keen Blades* challenged the negative depiction of the public house, and it does the same for small-scale betting and bookmaking.

2.3 Gambling

Gambling was by no means a new phenomenon, but it had become an increasing source of concern throughout the nineteenth century. Jeffrey Franklin notes in his essay, 'The Victorian Discourse of Gambling', that money, including ways of making and losing it, is central to the society of the period, and thus is often a subject of its fiction. His essay is focused on examples from novels, but his critical evaluations can be helpful when considering how money and gambling are treated in *Keen Blades*. Franklin prefaces his essay with a quote from Sir Ernest Cassel (banker to Edward VII) who notes that different names such as gambler, speculator and banker actually all describe the same type of individual. Gambling and speculation can both have the same result: they can facilitate rapid social mobility and thus threaten "natural" social boundaries.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ *Era*, 29 May 1893. The review referred to the character as 'Stetcomb', which seems to have been an error on the part of the publication, as the *Sheffield Independent* used the name 'Titcomb', as it appears on the typescript copy of the play.

The review of *Babes in the Wood* at the Theatre Royal in 1898, noted that Meadows was 'no stranger' to Sheffield audiences, having 'made his mark here years ago' *Era*, 1 January 1898.

¹⁰⁰ Jeffrey Franklin, 'The Victorian Discourse of Gambling: Speculations on *Middlemarch* and *The Duke's Children*', *ELH*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Winter 1994), pp. 899-921 (p. 903).

A study of the history of popular gambling, *A Bit of a Flutter*, by Mark Clapson, concurs with this analysis. The risks associated with gambling can cause an individual to lose everything, but they also mean that those deemed undeserving can make fortunes. Clapson claims that this randomness 'undermined the principles underpinning the social progress of the middle class', which were those of 'hard work, talent, and deferred gratification'.¹⁰¹ Although this reforming middle class was critical of the gambling of both rich and poor, legislation in effect singled out working-class gambling for legal prohibition. The Betting Houses Act of 1853 (which remained on the statute books until the middle of the twentieth century) was

specifically intended to eradicate the 'new form of betting' in which the owner of a betting house 'held a bag against all comers'. This was, at its most fundamental, the distinction between the older 'traditional' sidestake wagering and ready-money betting with a bookmaker, the basis of mass betting.¹⁰²

However, as Clapson explains, the Act was

both too late, and too flawed to be successful. The cultural weight of a betting and 'sporting' culture and its commercial transformation was developing on too large a scale and at too great a momentum to be contained.¹⁰³

Sheffield certainly had a flourishing betting and sporting culture at this time, which had been established for decades, but it was not without its detractors. In addition to government legislation, organised movements against betting had been gaining momentum. The National Anti-Gambling League was formed in 1889-90 and had three offices, in London, Manchester and York. It is likely that those living in Sheffield would have heard, and participated in, arguments for both sides, although there is surprisingly little comment in the local press.

¹⁰¹ Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*, p. 20.

¹⁰² Clapson, p. 22.

¹⁰³ Clapson, p. 23.

There are, however, newspaper accounts of legal infringements, and the way that these were treated by the authorities reveal a somewhat sympathetic attitude to these practices. During the 1890s those convicted of allowing their premises to be used for betting could be liable for a penalty of £100 or 6 months in prison. A case of a raid on a public house at Mexborough and the subsequent prosecution was reported in the *Sheffield Independent* in March 1893. The article indicates a degree of leniency shown by the local magistrate towards George Watts (the innkeeper), who was fined £5 and costs; Samuel Spencer (the bookmaker) had to pay a similar sum and the nineteen other defendants were ordered to pay costs only. An analysis of the betting books seized show a range of small bets, from 6d to £1, but 1 shilling seemed to be the most common. Spencer had £29.18s 7½ d in his pockets when arrested.¹⁰⁴ However, according to Tony Mason in *Association Football*, some upholders of the law in Sheffield would have reacted rather differently. He refers to an 'energetic anti-gambling magistrate in the town during the 1880s and 1890s called Edwin Richmond'.¹⁰⁵ Certainly those watching *Keen Blades* would have known that Sammy Titcomb's domestic business of bookmaking was illegal, and would have understood that he was in a risky position, operating outside the framework of the law.

Clapson notes that there were in fact legitimate gambling businesses, namely 'legal credit bookmakers' establishments'. The existence of these businesses illustrated the class divide, because 'this clientele was composed of largely middle-class punters who could afford to keep a cheque account with a bookmaker'.¹⁰⁶ This is another example of the ambiguity surrounding gambling at this time. There was recognition that it was a profitable industry,

¹⁰⁴ *Sheffield Independent*, 27 March 1893.

¹⁰⁵ Tony Mason, *Association Football*, notes to p. 180.

¹⁰⁶ Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*, p. 27.

as well as an activity that was potentially socially disruptive. The historical newspaper report about the raid in Mexborough and others like it, indicate that for the most part, local betting shops were like the one run by Sammy Titcomb and Felix Brock. They make some financial gains through their management of runners and their understanding of the complicated system of handicaps and betting - essentially they run a small-scale business.¹⁰⁷

Harry's success at the end of the play could be viewed as a celebration of this kind of modest enterprise. He not only wins the race, but his win is shared by others – he triumphs 'amid the shouts of the sons of toil who have "had a bit on him"'.¹⁰⁸ This shared bounty, and the sympathetic portrayal of those working as bookmakers contrasts strongly with most documented judgements. From early instances of the practice in the eighteenth century, to the end of the nineteenth, bookmakers had been at best viewed with suspicion, at worse vilified. Clapson notes that 'the birth of the bookmaking profession was associated with a measure of dishonour', and that by the early twentieth century they were 'castigated ... metaphorically as both parasite and predator, as "lice on the national head"'.¹⁰⁹ Given this level of censure, *Keen Blades'* presentation of gambling in a generally positive light is unusual.

A brief survey of the plays featured in this thesis reveals that the usual narrative trajectory is that an addiction to gambling either causes the ruin of

¹⁰⁷ Clapson discusses what he terms the 'informal economy of "penny capitalism"' in *A Bit of a Flutter*, p. 27; and articles in the sporting pages of the *Sheffield Independent* demonstrate that studying the past form of athletes and thus the likelihood of them winning required time, effort and a certain sort of intelligence. Depending on a runner's past form, he would be advantaged or disadvantaged by the selection of his starting point, and an example of the complexity of this system is provided by a report of the Sheffield Handicap in the *New York Times* of 1892: 'It was a 130-yard race. Collins was virtually at scratch, starting from the ten-and-a-half-yard mark, while Cunliffe had 10 $\frac{3}{4}$, Burrows 13 $\frac{3}{4}$, and Cross 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ yards. The betting was 7 to 2 on Burrows, 3 to 1 against Collins, and 30 to 1 against the others'.

¹⁰⁸ *Era*, 29 May 1893.

¹⁰⁹ Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*, p. 26 and p. 28, quoting Canon Horsley, *How Criminals are Made and Prevented* (1919), p. 169.

innocence, or demonstrates a character's general propensity for villainy. Characters created in 1878 by Kate Bright (nee Pitt) such as Richard Armytage in *Bracken Hollow* and Gustave Aycard in *Noblesse Oblige* are both unsympathetic gamblers and drinkers; in an earlier play by James Twigg, *The Ruined Merchant* (1851), the penchant of Mrs. Wilfred and her son Arthur for gambling is ruthlessly exploited by Lord Mountford because he wants them to be penniless and in his power. Researching further afield results in numerous examples, and titles of melodramas such as *The Betting Boy's Career, from the Counting House to the Hulks* are explicit warnings of the inevitable consequences of gambling.¹¹⁰

Even *Keen Blades* acknowledges the corrupting influence that the desire for money can have, and the play differentiates between small-scale honest bookmakers (Sammy Titcomb and Felix Brock) and those who are ruled by greed and who live by dishonesty and exploitation (the Chalcrafts and Jimmy Crouch). At the beginning of the play, Luke Chalcraft is described as 'one of the biggest book-makers in Sheffield and...the biggest scoundrel too', whilst Sammy and Felix are 'straight forrad' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 9), and their honour and loyalty is proven through the course of the play. Felix is adamant that he prefers to live in poverty rather than obtain money by dishonest means when he declares 'I'd sooner be poor Felix Brock than either Luke Chalcraft or his son Rayne – with all their brass' (Act 1, scene 3, p. 13).

Historical evidence suggests that there were only small amounts of prize money on offer for those winning the races (usually between £20 and £50, although sometimes as much as £200). The profitable part of the exercise lay in the promotion of the races as events (sponsorship and ticket sales), and from the associated betting. Knowledge of the complicated system

¹¹⁰ *The Betting Boy's Career, from the Counting House to the Hulks*, drama in two acts. Licence sent 12 August 1852 for performance at the Pavilion 12 August 1852. B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 52933 V.

of handicaps may yield some financial success, but in order to be assured of making large sums of money, it was necessary to move beyond honest competition and actually fix the races. Luke Chalcraft and his accomplices are fictional representatives of the real-life fraudsters described by Eric MacIntyre, in his account of the history of pedestrianism in Sheffield.¹¹¹ There are high stakes, and the villains in the play are prepared to go to great lengths to achieve their ends, as Rayne makes clear to Lilith Bilton, his partner-in-crime: 'If our man, Crabtree, wins I shall net five thousand pounds and nothing can stop him but this fellow Deerfoot – Dose him you must, kill him if you like but win the handicap he shall not' (Act 2, scene 1, p. 26). Later, in Act 2 scene 4, Rayne and his crony Jimmy Crouch calculate that they will lose up to £9,500 if their plan for fixing the race fails. Pedestrianism is not in itself at fault, it is rather the opportunities for profiteering that prove too tempting for some. The desire for money is a powerful force and can impel those in its grip to commit assault or even murder. Even the police are not immune from such temptations, and the next section considers the ambiguity with which the supposed legal and moral guardians of society are represented in this play and others of the period.

2.4 Policing pleasure; or, the pleasures of policing

Although the Ring o' Bells bears out the historical evidence that the public house is where the business of popular sport (including betting) could be administered and managed, it is depicted as an oasis of domesticity, and the only excessive drinking is done by the local policeman, P.C. Tobias Tubb. This representative of law and order is content to ignore illegal activities as long as he can enjoy the benefits they bring. The Titcomb family are happy to provide Tubb with food, drink and racing tips in order to keep him on their

¹¹¹ E. M. MacIntyre, *Sheffield Topic*, November, December 1979; February 1980.

side, and they are portrayed as cleverer, and indeed as more honest than he is. Tubb thoroughly enjoys his alcoholic treats and is not averse to gambling, although he pretends to be a model of propriety. The play thus undermines the authority of the police by revealing one of their members to be a hypocritical drinker and gambler. Indeed, Tubb exemplifies the self-interested and incompetent behaviour of the police, common to a lot of nineteenth century melodramas and burlesques written for a Sheffield audience. Given the spectre of censorship, it is somewhat surprising that dramas usually depict these uniformed 'agents of social control' not only as incompetent, but often lascivious and corrupt as well.¹¹² Perhaps there was a supposition on the part of those responsible for licensing that satirising the police was a useful safety valve; that members of the public could vent their frustration at the 'petty restrictions' and 'continual harassment' from municipal and state authorities, in a comparatively innocuous manner.¹¹³ Yet it is likely that this constant mockery had a detrimental effect on the power and status of those in uniform.

A brief consideration of just three plays from Sheffield's repertoire in the 1860s and 1870s demonstrates the ways in which the self-serving and bungling policeman was lampooned. In *The Dead Witness* by Wybert Reeve (1863), he is called Bones, and continually solicits food and kisses from the female servants.¹¹⁴ He has secret access to the house via the coal hole, which another character describes as 'the Peeler's soup kitchen' (Act 1, scene 2, p. 21). Despite the favours he receives, he is completely inept when it comes to catching criminals, and in a typical scene of visual and farcical humour, he chases a suspect, tumbles down, and his hat falls over his eyes

¹¹² Storch, 'The Policeman as Domestic Missionary'.

¹¹³ Hargreaves, *Sport Power and Culture*, p. 36.

¹¹⁴ Wybert Reeve, *The Dead Witness; or, Sin and its Shadow*, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53027 N, 1863.

(Act 1, scene 2, p. 21). Although he does not help to solve the murder at the heart of the play he does no real damage, but he is definitely an object of ridicule. However in *The Union Wheel* (1870) Jenkins' dereliction of duty has potentially serious consequences.¹¹⁵ He abandons his watch to make merry with Susannah, the object of his affections, which almost results in four of the characters being killed when there is an explosion at the factory. The following dialogue illustrates how easily he is persuaded to leave his post:

Jenkins Upon my word – if public officers – I've a good mind –
Susan To go to Shaper's – and you shall – See I've a shilling.
Jenkins But I'd forgot. I mustn't leave the beat. I was told to keep
 a sharp look out upon the Union Wheel.
Susan Oh it's safe enough. It won't move till you come back I
 warrant. Come or they'll be shut.
Jenkins I never could withstand a petticoat. (Exeunt)

(*The Union Wheel*, Act 1, scene 5, p. 19)

In addition to these depictions of incompetence and self-interest, plays sometimes featured direct conflicts between police and publican, which seemed to embody the battles between independent businesses and 'municipal and state authority'.¹¹⁶ In *Hamlet, Whether He Will or No*, a burlesque written by George Booth and produced at the Alexandra in 1879, the character of the policeman has a central role, and the attempts of the publican to manage his business in the face of police interference becomes one of the driving forces of the plot. As the title indicates, the play borrows unashamedly from Shakespeare, and most of the characters share the same names as those in the tragedy. 'Rosencrantz' the local policeman strikes fear into the hearts of working-class publican and aristocratic visitor alike.

¹¹⁵ *The Union Wheel*, an Original Drama in 3 Acts by Joseph Fox, produced at the Theatre Royal Sheffield, April 1870. B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53084 O.

¹¹⁶ Storch, 'The Policeman as Domestic Missionary', p. 282.

'Guildenstern' the publican uses Rosencrantz's attraction to his daughter Erica as a means of safeguarding his business:

But what are we to do – we must not fight
Here's Rosencrantz come his troth to plight
With Erica our daughter and you know
That he's our worse and most inveterate foe
Thrice has he had me fined for adulteration
And selling after hours – oh botheration
If we reject him he will make us tremble
For next year's licence – so – we must dissemble.¹¹⁷

They pretend that they are seriously considering the policeman as a viable suitor for their daughter, and she is forced to maintain the deception. Even the aristocratic visitor, the Honourable Jack Fitzfunk Harebrain, despite having money and status, is afraid of Rosencrantz. Nobody is immune from the vagaries of the law, and Harebrain reveals that he even had to flee the country to escape the police after being caught gambling out of doors:

The mention of him strikes my soul with awe
He's a policeman. I'll stake my bottom dollar
I almost feel his hand upon my collar
These gentry drove me from my native land
And sent me outlawed to a foreign strand
They sought to fine me for a grave offence
They caught me tossing in the street for halfpence
But I escaped their clutches and I'm here
And mean to enjoy myself so bring another beer.¹¹⁸

The rhyming couplets ironically draw attention to the draconian response of the legal establishment to the practice of small-scale betting. Harebrain had committed the 'grave offence' of 'tossing in the street for halfpence'.

The tone of the conflict in *Hamlet, Whether He Will or No* is one of almost comfortable and jocular antagonism. By the end of the play Guildenstern has succeeded in keeping his business afloat, Erica has become engaged to the aristocrat, and Rosencrantz continues to be an

¹¹⁷ George Booth, *Hamlet, Whether He Will or No or, The ghost's mistake of which he must take the consequences*, Alexandra, Sheffield, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53218 O. Date of licence 27 May 1879.

¹¹⁸ Booth, *Hamlet*, p. 12.

irritating presence in their lives. This same spirit of affable confrontation and compromise is apparent in *Keen Blades*. There may be animosity between Sammy the publican and P.C. Tubb, but they inhabit the same world, and there is a degree of understanding between them, even after Sammy discovers that Tubb has been bribed to imprison his runner Harry Bedford.

P.C. Tubb is an easily-led pawn in the Chalcrafts' scheme to prevent Harry/Ned Deerfoot from competing in the Handicap. When Harry visits the theatre, Lilith is despatched as a decoy to lure him away, so that he can be kidnapped and held prisoner. She tells him a fictitious story about a sick friend of his who has requested that he visit, and when Harry scuppers the plan by refusing to go, she falsely accuses him of assault. Rayne Chalcraft pays Tubb five pounds to ensure that Harry is imprisoned, and the compromised policeman comes along to the Ring o' Bells to report this arrest to the Titcombs. With a blithe lack of self-awareness, he pontificates, 'When young swells like this 'ere Mr. Bedford gets on the booze there's no accountin' for what they does' (Act 2, scene 3).

This scene not only progresses the plot, but also reveals the true nature of the policeman. During the dialogue the stage directions indicate that he happily exploits the liberal hospitality of the Titcombs, and this visual evidence contradicts his sanctimonious speech. When he first enters the tavern, their daughter Madge has just prepared a drink for Sammy:

Madge enters R.E. with glass of rum and milk. Tubb enters L.E. meets Madge in C. and takes the glass.

This stage direction sets up the visual joke, as Tubb takes the drink that was not intended for him, and then his comment underlines his carefree self-centredness:

Tubb "There's a providence which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will". Now ain't that funny? (Drinks off the contents). No sooner does a policeman feel thirsty than his wants are immediately anticipated by some kind and good looking woman like this. (To Sammy) I say

Guv'nor, you looks bad and well you may, you'll never get to heaven if you drinks rum and milk before breakfast.

(Act 2, scene 3, p. 33)

Poor Mr. Titcomb has not been given a chance to 'drink rum and milk before breakfast', but Mrs. Titcomb is happy to pass over her husband in order to supply Tubb with his 'wants' - she lets him enjoy another glass so that she can obtain information. The following exchange further illustrates both the hypocrisy of the constable, and the perseverance of the landlady and her friend Felix:

Felix Now Mr. Tubb, I know you of old. This young fellow didn't leave here till eight o'clock last night for the theatre. He was then perfectly sober, say you're joking, and I'll give you the straight tip for the handicap.

Tubb It's no use you trying to gammon me, Felix. Tubb always does his duty without fear or favour, bribery or corruptin'

Mrs T. (enters L.E. with a glass) You may as well wet t'other eye, Mr Tubb.

Tubb Sartinly mum, good stuff should never go a beggin' as a cove said the other day, when he was summoned for knocking a cadging parson down! (drinks and returns glass to Mrs. Titcomb)

(Act 2, scene 3, p. 34)

Whilst Tubb piously asserts that he 'always does his duty without fear or favour, bribery or corruptin'', and criticises the 'cadging parson', the audience observes the irrefutable visual evidence of him enjoying his third glass of rum and milk. Later in the scene, whilst drinking a fourth glass, he unselfconsciously comments that 'You never find Tubb a trespassing on generosity' (Act 2, scene 3, p. 34).

Eventually Tubb tells them what he knows and he is devastated to discover that Harry Bedford and Ned Deerfoot is in fact one and the same person. By arresting Bedford, 'Deerfoot' will be unable to run the race, and Tubb will not be able to benefit from the bet he has made on Deerfoot winning:

Felix ... you've only made a slight mistake Mr. Tubb. Ned Deerfoot last night was as sober as you are.

Tubb Ned Deerfoot! Why the prisoner himself gave his name as Harry Bedford.

Felix But Deerfoot's the name he runs in.

Tubb Then why the d—d didn't he say so? If I'd known that I wouldn't a run him in for twenty five pound notes – Ah. Tubb smells a rat!

Sammy (aside) And so does Sammy Titcomb. Who gave you this five pound note Mr. Tubb?

Tubb Now Sammy, I didn't say that anybody gave me one!

Sammy No, but a wink's as good as a nod to a blind 'oss tha knows.

Tubb (Enter Madge with a glass which Tubb negotiates) Well, as you've always acted like a Father to me Sammy, I'll tell you the truth – it was Rayne Chalcraft!

Madge The wretch! (EXIT)

Felix The scoundrel! (EXIT)

Sammy The villain!

Tubb He's all that and a bit more! It was a plant and I shall be proud to prove it.

Sammy But do you mean to stick to that five-pun note which Rayne Chalcraft gave you?

Tubb To say that I shall wouldn't be professional Sammy.

Sammy And to say that you'll give it him back again wouldn't be exactly true?

Tubb You are right there, Sammy, it wouldn't.

Sammy Then go and shove it on Ned Deerfoot at the best odds you can get, for he'll win the Handicap as certain as I'm now off to the lawyer's. (EXIT)

(Act 2, scene 3, pp. 35-6)

Even though Tubb has succumbed to bribery and caused major problems for the family, Sammy still gives him some good advice. If he is going to keep his ill-gotten £5, then he should put it to useful purpose and 'shove it on Ned Deerfoot at the best odds' (Act 2, scene 3, p. 36). There is an amicable

knowingness in their final conversational exchange about the money. Tubb refuses to directly answer the question, 'do you mean to stick to that five-pun note', and responds, 'to say that I shall wouldn't be professional'. Sammy and the audience know that what he really means is that he will keep the money and his use of the word 'professional' ironically and humorously highlights that his behaviour is not as it should be. What he says, and what he does, are not the same.

The 'professional' was an emerging concept during the later decades of the century and it arises in different ways through the play. One instance is to be found in the contrast between the behaviour of P.C. Tubb, allegedly a public servant (as a member of the local police) with that of a private detective, Mr. Lynx from London, who has been employed by Squire Bedford to track down his son Harry. The figure of the detective became an increasingly common one, and can be used to illustrate that new character types in dramas reflect and respond to altered societal circumstances. The increase in social mobility began to provide more opportunities, but consequently destabilised the established class system and thus challenged the roles that had been an integral and essential part of it. The third and final part of this chapter considers the position of *Keen Blades* in relation to this emerging new order.

Part Three:

Unstable identities in a changing world

3.1 The professional detective, deception and trickery

As the specialist police role of detective developed, it was duly reflected in prose fiction and drama. An early representative is Sergeant Cuff in *The Moonstone* (1868) by Wilkie Collins, described by T.S. Eliot as 'the first

and best of detective novels'.¹¹⁹ Elements of Collins' novel were drawn from the notorious case of the Road Hill murder and the investigations of the London officer assigned to the case.¹²⁰ In *The Moonstone* the crime has been committed in a country house in Yorkshire, and the detective meets resistance from locals loyal to the family and suspicious of outsiders. Sergeant Cuff's disinterested, detailed and persistent investigations are contrasted with those of the deferential local force. By the 1890s, this need for an objective outsider had, to some extent, provided the impetus for the creation of the independent profession of the private detective, who also appeared in print and on stage. Rather than taking on the role of public servant, the private detective was paid directly by the client for his (or her) investigative work.¹²¹

Harold Perkin, in his impressive work on the changes to society in the latter years of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, examines the development of the 'professional', whom he describes as belonging to a 'maverick fourth class', a new addition to the established ones of landowners, capitalists, and workers.¹²² He considers the birth of the 'professional ideal, based on trained expertise and merit', and how the new class 'depended on persuading the other classes to voluntarily part with a surplus to pay for the

¹¹⁹ Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* first published 1868. T. S. Eliot gave this verdict in the first Oxford World's Classics edition, 1928.

¹²⁰ Mr. Whicher was the detective in the case, and Kate Summerscale has written a book which is part-reconstruction, part-biography and partly a cultural investigation of the implications of the case, particularly in the challenges it posed to class privilege and secrecy. Kate Summerscale, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher, or the Murder at Road Hill House* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008). Although specialists, both Sergeant Cuff and Mr. Whicher were employed by the police, they were not independent investigators.

¹²¹ In fiction, Sherlock Holmes, the creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), is perhaps the most well-known example.

¹²² Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London: Routledge, first pub. 1989, revised edition 2002).

vital, non-material services which they claimed to provide'.¹²³ Whilst the professionals themselves may have emphasised the 'trained expertise and merit' in their work, they encountered problems with their new manner of employment in terms of social acceptability. In his examination of the discourse of money in Victorian fiction, Jeffrey Franklin suggests that it occupied a paradoxical position: on the one hand finance was 'the broadest and most pressing issue of the nineteenth century', yet on the other, in the words of one of the characters in Trollope's novel *The Duke's Children*, 'a real gentleman ... should never think of money at all'.¹²⁴ The unambiguous act of exchanging cash for services rendered may have been too candid for those who aspired to the upper echelons.

The private detective was often portrayed as a morally ambivalent figure, one who was sometimes prepared to use less scrupulous practices in order to obtain a satisfactory result for his (rarely her) clients; and images of an ethically questionable figure have persisted into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹²⁵ The choice of 'Lynx' for the name of the detective in *Keen Blades* suggests this ambiguity, given that his namesake is a wildcat, noted for its extremely good hearing, which hunts its prey ruthlessly. He first appears at the home of Squire Bedford, where he meets Dick Truefitt. Although both men are employed by the Squire, Dick's loyalty lies with his son Harry, and so he is deeply suspicious of the stranger. He recites a list of (rather tortuous) puns which all express his disapproval:

¹²³ Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society*, pp. 3-4, p. 116.

¹²⁴ Franklin, 'The Victorian Discourse of Gambling', p. 912.

¹²⁵ The iconic character of Philip Marlowe was first created by Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) in his novel *The Big Sleep* (1939). According to Kevin McCarron, when the character first appears he is 'complexly insouciant yet dogged' with a 'downbeat view of contemporary urban life', and he evolves to be 'actively misanthropic' in the later *The Lady in the Lake* (1943). Humphrey Bogart played the role in the film of *The Big Sleep*, which was directed by Howard Hawks in 1946 and was critically acclaimed.

There's various kinds o'links, tha knows. There's the links in a chain of evidence which the lawyers sometimes fasten so tight around a poor devil's neck that it chokes him. Can't say as how I should like them. On the other hand there's a nice fat round links o' sausages which nobody objects to, and then there's the missing links we sometimes read about in the newspapers, these are a kind of mysterious high class monkey I understand, which nobody appears to know anything at all about (jerking his thumb over his shoulder) Think yon chap's one o' them.

(Act 2, scene 2, p. 27)

Dick's description of 'the links in a chain of evidence' suggests some sympathy for the defendant who has to face the clever logic of a prosecution counsel, and consequently an implied anxiety about the role of the detective in collecting and presenting proof of misdemeanours. At the same time Dick uses semi-understood ideas from recent evolutionary theories to mock his adversary, describing him as 'a kind of mysterious high class monkey'. This is deliberately insulting to Lynx and suggests that he is of low intelligence, yet also that he might act in a mischievous or disruptive way.

Dick continues to tease Lynx in a later exchange, when the detective admits that his allotted task is to find Harry:

Dick But I say Guv'nor, is that what you do for a living?

Lynx Yes, that is my business.

Dick Lor! And do you think you could find me a son?

Lynx Decidedly, providing you paid me, of course I don't work for nothing.

Dick Certainly not, and what's yer figure?

Lynx Well, it varies according to the circumstances of the case.

Dick Just so. I suppose you alters yer figger according to the size of the article provided. Now we've got two gels, nice little things in their way, but I've told the missus I'm determined we'll have a son that can take my place in the stables when I'm gone out to grass. You find him for me, Guv'nor but mind he'll have to stand five foot one and a half, neck a quart o'beer, and fight a rough round wi' any lad in the country, and s'help me Moses, I'll call him Dick Truefitt Junior.

(Act 2, scene 2, p. 31)

Dick sets Lynx the impossible challenge of finding him a perfect son, who is not yet even born. Despite this mocking treatment, Lynx preserves his dignity, along with an air of distance and mystery. He glides in and out of the action rather like the cat which provides his name.

The detective may be employed by the Squire, but he also helps Harry and the Titcombs when he reveals that Rayne is planning to trick them, and assists them to foil the plot. When he visits the Ring o' Bells towards the end of Act 2, after Harry has been released from prison, he explains how he fooled Rayne by pretending to be rich and gullible in order to obtain information. It appears that he is more than happy to play the Chalcrafts at their own game of deception and he confidently tells Harry that he has 'been practising my old masher trick on him and he thinks he's got a pigeon to pluck'. He completes the sentence with the question 'Twig?' to check that Harry understands him (Act 2, scene 5, p. 42), and this use of the popular slang of the day may be intended to show how clever he is, but these kind of idiomatic expressions also mark him out as different from the other characters. Language is an important signifier of identity, and it is one of the elements (like costume and behaviour) which can be deliberately altered if the intention is to deceive.

Harry assumes a false identity but his motives are worthy ones: he wants to recoup the money he has lost in order to regain his father's approval and reclaim his fiancée. He disguises himself again in order to foil the Chalcrafts' second plot. They admit that they had cheated Sammy in the earlier scheme whereby he lost £3,000, and they now offer him a deal, that if he will pull 'Deerfoot' from the race they will pay him back. The rendezvous is arranged and Rayne Chalcraft is to come to the Ring o' Bells with the cheque. Rather fancifully, Felix and Madge have been rehearsing for some amateur theatricals, and this means that fortuitously there are some costumes

available, and Harry selects one to disguise himself as a Commission Agent. It is difficult to ascertain the exact distinction between bookmakers and commission agents at this time, but the inference in the play is that the agents are morally worse – Harry makes a rather derogatory association through his choice of a pirate outfit. Even the false name he uses, ‘Mr Crawley’ implies a rather unpleasant character. At the crucial moment of signing the agreement, Harry, by a sleight of hand, substitutes a different document, which reads: “Received the sum of £2,950 from Rayne Chalcraft, which money was owing to me, over certain betting transactions at Oxford” (Act 2, scene 5, p. 46). Harry could be accused here of foul play, but because his deception is in order to redress a wrong, it is presented as necessary and forgivable. The Titcombs do not get their money back, but they can now safely enter their candidate for the race. Harry uses disguise to help him successfully negotiate a world that is foreign to him, but he never relinquishes his true heritage and status – that of a gentleman.

3.2 Sport, class and professionalism

One of the central questions raised by the play, and which was a much-debated one at the time, is whether it is appropriate for those who demonstrate sporting prowess to receive any kind of financial reward. If this is considered acceptable, then another conundrum quickly follows, namely is it possible for a person simultaneously to be a professional sportsman and a gentleman? Tony Mason testifies to the conventions regarding this matter in the chapter ‘Amateurs and Professionals’ in his book about the history of football. He states simply that ‘playing for money was something gentlemen did not do’.¹²⁶ As sporting events became more popular, matters became

¹²⁶ Tony Mason, *Association Football*, p. 69.

more pressing. There were issues about who was eligible to take part, the constitution of sport as a spectacle, and its increasing commercialisation.

The display of physical feats of strength and agility for an admiring crowd was traditionally associated with theatre and circus. Mason notes that the proliferation of sporting newspapers had

very much a man-about-town flavour. They celebrated the leisured, moneyed life around the drama, music hall and race track. It was the world of the late nineteenth-century equivalent of the young Regency bloods who obtained their excitement and experience from the professional performances of actresses and jockeys.¹²⁷

However, enthusiasm for sporting events was not only demonstrated by juvenile aristocrats, it was evident in the hundreds of working-class men who increasingly spent their leisure time at football and cricket matches, or horse races. Social reformers had argued for much of the Victorian period that physical exercise and competitive sports were an excellent method of developing a certain type of moral character and creating healthy and well-disciplined individuals; but spectatorship, and, as Bailey notes, 'partisan identification with team and players', often reconstituted the 'emotional temper and spirit of an earlier society' that advocates of rational recreation were attempting to quash.¹²⁸

These divergences of opinion about participation and spectatorship led to an ever-increasing division between amateur athletics and pedestrianism, and *Keen Blades* dramatises this controversy. Harry Bedford complicates the situation because he straddles both environments and he is portrayed as a decent, honourable man. His conduct is described by his fiancée Blanche Middleton as an improvement on that of his father. When the Squire implies that Harry has gone to the Bedford Arms (a local public house) for a chat with the 'pretty barmaid' she responds sharply: 'Henry may have

¹²⁷ Tony Mason, *Association Football*, p. 188.

¹²⁸ Peter Bailey, 'Rational recreation and the new athleticism' in Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, pp. 124-146 (p. 144).

been a trifle extravagant, but some follies of his father's youth he does not imitate' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 5). Her faith that Harry is not a philanderer is justified, but although she attempts to minimise his financial difficulties by her euphemism that he has been 'a trifle extravagant', he is actually heavily indebted to his father. The audience know that his debts are due to the duplicity of his supposed friend Rayne Chalcraft, and not a result of his own profligate behaviour, but (presumably because he is embarrassed to have been hoodwinked) Harry has kept this part of his story a secret, and so he is misjudged by the Squire.

Blanche tries to support Harry by emphasising his sporting achievements at university, but the following dialogue shows that his father is dismissive of the merits of athletics, and focused only on the inability of his son to manage his money:

Blanche Who was it that pulled stroke oar when Oxford won the Boat Race, last year? Who gained the college prize for the highest batting average and who beat all his opponents at the intervarsity athletic meeting? As a runner your son stands without a peer among the gentlemen amateurs of England and if you are not proud of him, I am.

Squire (ironically) Oh! Quite so, I admit everything you put forward on behalf of your champion's running powers, it's his marvellous powers of running into debt which threatens to make his father a pauper.

(Act 1, scene 1, p. 4)

The Squire's punning jibes about his son running/ running into debt discredits Harry's success, and in the next scene he gives more reasons for his dislike of physical exercise and games. He believes that it is not possible for a man to develop his intellect at the same time as his physical aptitude, and his concern about spectacle becomes clear when he mixes up athletics and acrobatics:

Squire A man can't transform himself into an acrobat and put knowledge into his brain pan at one and the same time.

Harry Not an acrobat father, you mean an athlete.

Squire And what is the difference, Sir?

Harry There is a vast difference, Sir.

(Act 1, scene 1 p. 6)

Harry, who is more liberal than his father, is affronted when he is compared to an acrobat, and is keen to stress that they are not the same at all. Squire Bedford once again puns again on the word 'run', but this time it is to restate his opinion that there is no distinction to be made between the two types of activity:

Squire As you're such a clever runner perhaps you'll run a penny show and advertise yourself as the great amateur clown and gymnast.

Harry Don't say those nasty things, Dad!

(Act 1, scene 1, p. 7)

Harry's offended response, 'don't say those nasty things' indicates that even he thinks that circus performers are socially unacceptable.

Squire Bedford believes that there is no difference between athletes, clowns and gymnasts, and that they all belong to the world of fairs and circuses. (Even though gymnastics is now, in the twenty-first century, well-established as a modern Olympic sport, the extreme physical contortions of the participants can evoke memories of the circus and even of the 'freak show'.) Historical visual evidence could further support the Squire's view: a photograph taken of the runner F. Dixon in 1900 portrays him much more like a circus performer than an athlete as we might think of one now. His pose is carefully arranged; he has a shaved head, except for a central strip from the forehead to the back of the neck, and he is wearing nothing except a silky, skimpy, thong-like garment. The image emphasises the performative and exhibitionist nature of the athlete.¹²⁹ The producers of *Keen Blades* would have been aware of the importance of the physicality of the athlete's role,

¹²⁹ Photograph reprinted in *Turnpike Road to Tartan Track*, p. 119. There is no information given about the purpose of the photograph, or where it was originally published.

indeed the *Era* review comments that the actor Harry Stamford who played the part of Harry Bedford was 'manly, dashing'.¹³⁰ We have no illustration of how Harry was dressed when the race was staged, but we can surmise that he gave a performance of athleticism which provided the kind of pleasure for an audience reminiscent of that provided by circus entertainment.

Harry takes the conversation in a different direction, trying again to convince his father that physical training is a worthwhile apprenticeship for gentlemen. He asks the rhetorical question 'Who was it said the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing grounds of Eton?' which calls attention to the belief that the skills of good sportsmanship, learnt through English schools, are also necessary for strong leaders who will be proficient in warfare. The phrase was attributed to Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington (1769-1852), which gave it a certain status, and although its provenance was never definitively confirmed, the idea behind it remained popular.¹³¹

This relationship between the promotion of sport in the public school system and the creation of defenders of the English nation is considered by Hargreaves in *Sport, Power and Culture*. He persuasively argues that the motivation of influential characters such as Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby School from 1828-42, was to produce 'men who were disciplined, socially responsible and self-reliant enough, not only to govern themselves but the lower orders as well'.¹³² According to Hargreaves, these men would constitute a new generation of leaders, forged from 'the older landed "patrician" ruling class and the rising bourgeois elements', thus developing

¹³⁰ *Era*, 29 May 1893.

¹³¹ The more common wording of the phrase was 'the playing fields', rather than 'grounds', but there seems to be no particular reason for, or significance due to, the alteration.

¹³² Hargreaves, 'Consolidating the Bourgeois Model' in *Sport, Power and Culture*, pp. 38-56 (p. 39).

and strengthening the existing social and political system.¹³³ In the play, Harry was born into the landed class, but his broader outlook and the divergence from his father's opinions could align him with 'the rising bourgeois elements' as well. He may disagree with his parent about certain aspects of education, but there are similarities as well as differences, and he benefits from the many privileges which accompany his inherited wealth and position. The radical transformation of society during the nineteenth century inevitably destabilised the class structure and Hargreaves asserts that during the last three decades a 'remaking process' took place, in order to

resolve two related problems ... how the ruling elite was to demarcate itself as such, and how the middle classes were to differentiate themselves from the working class and identify with the elite.¹³⁴

Harry belongs to the 'ruling elite', yet in the following speech he again complicates his position by defending the working classes' passionate interest in sport, and he praises them above the aristocracy:

And if you will allow me to say so, I consider the lowest working man's love of football reflects infinitely more credit on the nation than the more lordly (princely) pastime of Baccarat.¹³⁵

(Act 1, scene 1, p. 6)

¹³³ Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, p. 38.

¹³⁴ Hargreaves, p. 67.

¹³⁵ Baccarat was one of several fashionable card games, which, along with roulette, rouge et noir, and chemin de fer, were played for money by wealthy, often aristocratic pleasure-seekers, and might be collectively described as 'gaming'. They are effectively games of chance, as much as skill. Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*, p. 1.

The game had also been the subject of scandal which began in 1891 and involved the Prince of Wales, and the baronet and socialite Sir William Gordon-Cumming (1848-1930). They had been playing at a house party at Tranby Croft, near Hull, when Gordon-Cumming was accused of cheating, and one of the guests, Edward Lycett-Green threatened to publicly expose him. Given that playing the game had been illegal since 1885, this risked compromising everyone involved, including the Prince. Gordon-Cumming was pressed to sign a pledge never to play cards again in return for total secrecy. He duly signed, but the story still emerged, and although he later went to court to try to prove his innocence, his reputation was ruined. The case became a popular sensation inspiring not only extensive press coverage, but also several music-hall songs and jokes about 'backing a rat'. Jason Tomes, 'Cumming, Sir William Gordon Gordon-, fourth baronet (1848-1930)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, May 2005; online edn, Jan 2010 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/39392>> [accessed 14 Feb 2013].

The recent scandal (only two years before the production, and still fresh in the collective memory) is likely to have inspired this reference, and probably also accounts for why the word 'princely' is in brackets. A reference to the Prince in this context was probably a little too risky, and 'lordly' was a safer choice.

Harry criticises the activities of the wealthy whilst defending those of working men. His assertion that football 'reflects ... more credit on the nation' not only validates the sport but also suggests the integrity of its players and enthusiastic followers. Given the historical significance of Sheffield to the development of football, and its enormous popularity at this time, it is likely that Harry's comment would have been received with pleasure and pride by a local audience.

Squire Bedford's dismissive comment to his son that he should advertise himself as the 'great amateur clown and gymnast' continues to blur the distinction between spectacle and sport, but also introduces the growing gulf between unpaid and professional participants. Those like Arnold who championed athletics in the public school system and who believed that sporting ability should not be connected with financial gain were very keen that sport should retain its amateur status. The public debates about whether sportsmen should be paid for their skill and effort foregrounded the question of social inclusion. If working class people were not paid for the time spent training and playing, they simply could not afford to do it. In *Keen Blades* Dick Truefitt reminds Harry that he will need money to enable him to train to a proper standard:

Dick Well, you say you 'avent much money, Sir! Excusin' me...

Harry Very little, but it's not necessary for a professional runner to be a millionaire exactly is it?

Dick Certainly not, Master 'Arry, but of about a 1000 runners, I only knowed one as tried the dodge of training on air, and he trained so fine, that a 'igh wind came one day and blowed him into 'eaven. What you wants is plenty of mutton chops with the fat orf and plenty o' good old bottled port with the cobwebs on. Then there's your trainer's expenses 30/- a week at the lowest.

(Act 1, scene 1, p. 9)

Money was not normally an issue for those from secure financial backgrounds, but Harry must learn about the realities of life with no income,

as he attempts to become a competitive athlete without the support of his father.

Hargreaves argues that the determination to preserve the amateur status of sport was deliberately intended to maintain class hierarchy:

...the strategy of promoting amateur athleticism, maintaining control over the major sporting institutions and creating socially exclusive sports, achieved the objective. The key discourse/practice through which differentiation was accomplished and through which power relations exerted their effect was the amateur-professional couplet and the key ideological figure was that of the 'gentleman'.¹³⁶

As Hargreaves explains, a gentleman did not usually need to rely on prize money or sponsorship, but was able to enter competitive sports purely for the enjoyment and the glory of winning. The Amateur Athletics Association was founded in 1880, and although this opened up new opportunities, participation was obviously difficult for those without a private income, who needed to earn money - as Dick Truefitt points out to Harry in the play, it is impossible to train 'on air' alone. Hargreaves suggests that if working-class runners wanted to be part of the respectable organisation of athletics, they had to forgo any monetary reward, which effectively excluded them:

The amateur-gentleman character of athletics was retained simply by redefining manual-worker athletes as amateurs and having as little truck as possible with the practices of the more working-class sport of 'pedestrianism'.¹³⁷

It is clearly quite unusual for someone like Harry Bedford to be involved in pedestrianism. Harry's close competitor Seth Crabtree and his trainer Mark Punchard (whose name gives a clue to his character) are working class, rough in speech and manner. Harry is a well-mannered and respectable man, who attends the theatre and goes to bed early. He is seen to be a gentleman through birth and behaviour, and has the credentials of an amateur sportsman (excelling at team sports at Oxford), yet he also runs a

¹³⁶ Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, p. 67-68.

¹³⁷ Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, p. 68.

race for money, watched by spectators. It is not just prize money that he wins; he may also benefit financially from the race being organised as a commercial venture, in that he could profit from audience entrance fees and from betting. In addition, the race provides business opportunities for bookmakers and ordinary punters to make money. His character thus disrupts the division between 'amateur athleticism' and 'pedestrianism', because he takes part in the competition in a professional capacity yet he still retains his honour, respectability and status. Dick's prediction to the audience at the end of Act 1, scene 1 is therefore significant:

... whether he wins or loses, I know he will do one thing, he'll prove that a man can run in a Professional Handicap without sacrificing his titles either of a Sportsman or of an English Gentleman!

(Act 1, scene 1, p. 10)

It is frustrating that the reviews do not comment on this aspect of the play and we can only speculate whether some or all of the Sheffield audience agreed with Dick, and whether the sentiments expressed in the play had any wider impact.¹³⁸

3.3 Consumer capitalists: sports, gambling and social mobility

Harry Bedford manages to maintain an ambiguous position as a professional sportsman and a gentleman, but the implication is that his involvement in pedestrianism is only temporary. However, the problems which surrounded sport, particularly the class issues and gambling, continued. Commercial sporting events with their potential for making large amounts of money have presented those in authority with a dilemma since they began to

¹³⁸ The amateur-professional divide affected many sports including cricket. Even until the middle of the twentieth century it was unacceptable for the England cricket team to be captained by a professional; amateurs and professionals had different dressing rooms and different entrances onto the field of play, and in reports and on scorecards the amateurs always had 'Mr.' in front of their names (or 'Sir' or 'Lord' if appropriate) whereas amateurs were simply listed by name.

evolve in the nineteenth century, and this conundrum is summarised by the authors of *Gambling, Work and Leisure*:

One of the classic ... conflicts of capitalism (in England at least) is that between the attempt made on the one hand to control working-class leisure, largely by the suppression, or stringent regulation, of drink, gambling and a host of other amusements; and, on the other hand, the rush to cater for their tastes at a nice commercial profit.¹³⁹

The authors' assertion makes it clear that, in their opinion, the controllers and the profiteers are very often the same people or organisations, and thus national and municipal governments are implicated alongside companies who are overtly concerned with trade and commerce.

Leisure was an industry with the potential for enormous profits. The 1890s were a difficult time for English trades, and it was imperative that industrial cities were able to build economically-beneficial relationships with America and other growing countries overseas. Spectator sport, with its associated business opportunities, was one way of doing this. The impulse to make money vied with the desire to impose regulation based on moral judgements, which led to the 'conflict of capitalism' as noted in the above comment from *Gambling, Work and Leisure*.¹⁴⁰ Despite the damage to its reputation wrought by accusations of fraud, the Sheffield Handicap was still managing to attract international competitors, and in an article in the *New*

¹³⁹ D. M. Downes and others, *Gambling, Work and Leisure: a Study across Three Areas* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 38.

It is notable that one of the three areas studied was Sheffield: although the study looked at contemporary (1970s) society, Sheffield clearly was still of interest in terms of its gambling habits.

Whilst there may have been public condemnation of gambling, there was also tacit acceptance of it from the authorities. See Mark Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*, Chapter 2, 'Gambling, culture and economy in England', pp. 32-39, and Tony Mason, *Association Football*, Chapter 6, 'Drink, Gambling and the Sporting Press', pp.

¹⁴⁰ *Gambling, Work and Leisure*, p. 38.

There is scope for further exploration of the huge growth in the gambling, or 'tipster' press at this time. Manchester was a particular centre for the production of these specialist newspapers. It is clear that whilst there may have been public condemnation of gambling, there was also tacit acceptance. See Chapter 2 (Part V) 'Gambling, culture and economy in England' in Mark Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*, pp. 32-39; and Chapter 6, 'Drink, Gambling and the Sporting Press' in Tony Mason, *Association Football*.

York Times, published 12 January 1892, it is described as ‘the biggest foot race of the year in England’, and six runners came from America to compete.¹⁴¹ This report also confirms the large amounts of money at stake in these competitions because of sponsorship and betting: one of the American runners was called Collins, and his backers stood to make \$100,000 if he won. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, popular sports (along with other forms of recreational activities such as music hall) were being transformed by commercial development. In *Keen Blades*, ‘the rush to cater for their tastes at a nice commercial profit’¹⁴² is led by unscrupulous capitalist entrepreneurs like the Chalcrafts.

Luke Chalcraft is a variation on the stereotyped figure of the late-Victorian capitalist, familiar to audiences of drama and readers of novels, the northern man of business, blunt and uneducated, who makes his fortune through hard work.¹⁴³ However, Chalcraft has not made his money from arduous labour within heavy industry; his wealth has come from the business of gambling. The writers’ choice of name for father and son would seem to have been deliberate. William Calcraft was a well-known and well-paid executioner of the period who not only earned his living by killing people on behalf of the state, but like other executioners, he conducted a profitable business, selling off the effects of the condemned. His surname had thus become shorthand for someone who made money by unpleasant, and some

¹⁴¹ There is evidence of a longer history of competitive exchange between the two countries, and one which the writers of the play reference. The character Harry Bedford’s pseudonym would have evoked memories for some in the audience of an Indian named Louis Bennet, who came to England in 1860 and competed under the name ‘Deerfoot’. Frederick C. Moffatt, *Turnpike Road to Tartan Track*, p. 11.

¹⁴² *Gambling, Work and Leisure*, p. 38.

¹⁴³ Early examples include Mr. Carson and his son Harry in the play *The Great Strike*, 1866, by C. H. Hazlewood. Early in the play a character remarks, ‘it’s well known, there are no masters so hard on their work-people as those who have risen from such a station themselves’. There are later, more complex manifestations such as the eponymous John Rutherford in Githa Sowerby’s *Rutherford and Son* (1912) and Henry Horatio Hobson in Harold Brighouse’s *Hobson’s Choice*, which, although first produced in 1916 was set in 1880, in Salford.

would say immoral, means. This information suggests that the similarity of the names Chalcraft/Calcraft is not accidental, but rather helps to portray Luke and Rayne as examples of those who benefit from other people's misfortunes or wrongdoings.¹⁴⁴ Luke Chalcraft represents an emerging class of entrepreneurs (who could now be called consumer capitalists) who seize the opportunity to make money not only from individuals' love of sport but also their addiction to gambling.

Luke, his son Rayne, and their accomplice Jimmy Crouch ('the Chalcraft Clique')¹⁴⁵ have the same kind of native wit and entrepreneurial spirit as Sammy Titcomb and Dick Truefitt, but these 'keen blades' want power and status as well as money. Although Luke is uneducated, he has grand ambitions for his son Rayne, and has already paid for him to go to Oxford in the hope that this will ease his passage into society. Jimmy teases his friend for this reverence for formal education; he is confident that he knows how to make a good living from trickery and corruption and does not need to know the proper names for his activities. In the following exchange, Luke berates Jimmy for his ignorance yet betrays his own lack of finesse:

Luke If we can't square the book, he says we must do it by chicanery! Chicanery, my boy! Chicanery!

Jimmy Who're you a coddling eh? Chic – what? How much a pound is it?

Luke Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! See what yer miss by not being eddicated, it means gillory-poke, Jimmy, gillory-poke!

Jimmy H'm! I suppose you mean we shall have to do a bit of nobbling. You and me didn't 'av to go to college to learn that trick.

(Act 2, scene 1, p. 24)

¹⁴⁴ Some reviews refer to the character as 'Chalcroft' so perhaps the name-association, if indeed it was intended, was not recognised.

¹⁴⁵ As described in the review in the *Sheffield Telegraph*, 22 May 1893.

Although Jimmy has not heard the word 'chicanery' before, he and Luke have plenty of choice expressions of their own, 'coddling', 'gillory-poke', 'nobbling', which enrich their language, and gives the two of them a particular identity.

Jimmy and Luke are conspicuous because of their idiomatic speech and this is one way that people are classified and judged.¹⁴⁶ In the play (as was usual in society at the time), class is still determined by birth and it is not easy for an outsider to comfortably inhabit the world of the gentry. It was whilst Rayne was at Oxford that he met Harry Bedford, and at the same time he encountered the insurmountable obstacles to any attempted rise in social status. Money is not enough on its own, as Harry reports:

Rayne Chalcraft was at the same college as myself and his people must have been well off, for he had always plenty of money to throw about. But at the same time there were very few of the fellows who cared for him. I don't know why, exactly, but somehow or other you could see he was no gentleman.

(Act 1, scene 1, p. 10)

Although Luke and Rayne are financially successful and have acquired the surface accoutrements of status at the beginning of the play, their efforts to gain acceptance in the upper echelons are thwarted.

Luke, however, is determined to believe that his son has achieved an elevated position and brags about it in Act 2, scene 1: 'This is my son – just come from college, refused the invitation of six Lords a purpose to come and see his old dad' (p. 23). He also hopes that Rayne will consolidate his status through a high-society marriage, but he will be disappointed in this aspiration as well, because his son has, some years ago, clandestinely wed the adventuress, Lilith Bilton.¹⁴⁷ She had to flee Sheffield because of her criminal activities but she returns during the course of the play and secretly meets with Jimmy, so he discovers that she is married to Rayne before Luke does. This

¹⁴⁶ The acquisition of socially-acceptable language was one of the main themes of George Bernard Shaw's comedy, *Pygmalion* (1912).

¹⁴⁷ This archetypal character will be considered more fully in a later section.

gives him the opportunity to laugh privately at his friend's pretensions of grandeur, and the audience can share the joke:

I suppose it's only natural for a chap to be a bit gone on his own bantling... what a precious shindy there'll be when Mr. Luke Chalcraft finds out that his clever son as let him in for such a haristocratic daughter-in-law. Ha! Ha! Ha!

(Act 2, scene 1, p. 27)

Luke is full of pride in his son, or, as Jimmy colloquially terms it, he is 'a bit gone on his own bantling', but he is proved wrong about Rayne in every respect. Although Luke may be a new type of character because of his occupation as a consumer capitalist, he also fulfils a rather more traditional role of a doting, and sometimes foolish, father.¹⁴⁸ Rayne calls Luke 'the old imbecile' behind his back (Act 2, scene 4, p. 39), he feels no family loyalty, and his motives are purely selfish ones. In addition to his financial improprieties Rayne is subject to the temptations of his business; he admits that 'I have been gambling heavily and losing damnably and I swear I've not a penny left in the world' (Act 2, scene 1, p. 26). He is also licentious, and even though he is already married, he attempts to seduce Sammy's daughter Madge. When she refuses his attentions he physically attacks her, and she is only saved by the timely entrance of her father and Harry (Act 1, scene 3, p. 19).

By making Luke and Rayne Chalcraft such unsympathetic characters, the play appears to settle for a conventional scenario which carefully preserves class hierarchies. It fails to provide a solution to, or even seriously challenge, the unavoidable problem suggested by the authors of *Gambling, Work and Leisure* of how to reconcile the determination to suppress working

¹⁴⁸ This figure appeared across different genres, and could be used for tragic, as well as comedic effect. In *Light*, by E. Romaine Callender, which premiered at the Theatre Royal in 1883, Sampson, a circus performer has a daughter Helen, who he sends away to school because he loves her, and wants her to grow up away from the supposed bad influence of his rather disreputable milieu. She matures to a rather supercilious young woman, becomes involved with a supposed gentleman who is later revealed to be a brute, and all ends unhappily. E. Romaine Callender, *Light*, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53288 B.

class amusements whilst at the same time to profitably exploit them. The sympathetic Titcombs, who are involved in gambling on a small scale, are never going to threaten the existing social order by making large amounts of money and attempting to become upwardly mobile. As Elaine Hadley claims in *Melodramatic Tactics*, 'the melodramatic mode in its various manifestations was profoundly reactionary', and on one level we can read *Keen Blades* as confirmation of this assertion.¹⁴⁹

Conversely, Hadley also suggests, (and I have demonstrated elsewhere), that the mode is rather more nuanced, and provides scope for subversion.¹⁵⁰ *Keen Blades* may not promote the kind of 'dangerous social and financial upheaval' that could be associated with gambling in nineteenth century fiction, but there are nevertheless some challenging aspects to the play.¹⁵¹ The audience are invited to make moral judgements about the characters, rather than those based strictly on the law. Moreover, it is not only working-class people whose activities are scrutinised; the upper classes are criticised to some extent, and there are suggestions of ways in which their behaviour could be improved.

3.4 Co-operative relationships within a secure class structure

Harry Bedford is an English Gentleman, his pedigree is clearly signalled from the beginning of the play, and his status is never seriously challenged. Dick Truefitt uses the language of animal breeding - 'I've never seen a downright thorough bred 'un like the young Squire' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 10) - to confirm his excellent heritage. The use of the term 'Squire' for both father and son locates them within the traditions of old England,

¹⁴⁹ Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace 1800-1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 11.

¹⁵⁰ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵¹ Franklin, 'The Victorian Discourse of Gambling', p. 903.

representatives of the system of benevolent paternalism. There is an early example of Harry's gentlemanly behaviour later in the same scene when he gallops his horse to the village in order to pick up some purchases for Blanche; he proves that he is not only a good rider but also gallant. His father, too, is passionate about all matters equestrian, but love of horses is not only confined to the rural gentry.

Dick Truefitt may have his roots in the city, but he also has a strong connection with the upper-class country Squire because of their shared passion. Cadeby, the pleasant tranquil village location where the family live, would be familiar to a local audience because of its proximity to Doncaster Racecourse. Given that there was an enthusiastic racing fraternity in Sheffield, it was probable that many in the audience, across all classes, shared this equine enthusiasm. Dick is physically small, suggesting a possible previous career as a jockey, and although this past history is never fully revealed, the humorous banter between the two men is littered with metaphorical allusions to animal behaviour. Dick tells the audience that he will avoid the furious Squire (when he has just discovered how much his son is in debt) until he has calmed down, or 'after Miss Blanche has smoothed down his coat a bit' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 3). Although the Squire is outwardly gruff, he is genuinely concerned when his son disappears, and Dick is sensitive to his true feelings.

A commonly-held supposition (which still persists in some quarters today), was that formal education cannot necessarily provide a person with psychological insight, or the ability to deal with difficult situations, and the relationship between Dick and Harry exemplifies this theory. The uneducated groom expresses surprise when the gentleman explains how he was exploited at college, 'I thought 'as 'ow you were a bit flyer than that, Master 'Arry' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 9). Dick is certainly 'fly', he has a native wit which

enables him to take part in verbal sparring matches with the Squire, and as a former inhabitant of Sheffield and an expert in foot-racing, he can introduce Harry to Sammy Titcomb who will initiate the rather naïve young gentleman into pedestrianism. He is thus an important character for the themes of the play as well as the plot; the writers can use him to foreground the relationship between knowledge and intelligence (or native wit), which enables them to comment on education, class, environment and social status.

The attractive and wholesome character of Cadeby and the cushioned life of a country squire are contrasted with the pleasures and dangers of the urban situation in 'smoky Sheffield' as the city is often described (for example Act 2, sc. 1, p. 21).¹⁵² Harry is vulnerable, and Dick knows that he will need support when he enters the complex and risky world of professional running:

There's some rum characters mixed up wi' a Sheffield handicap tha' knows [...] what you'll have to do is first to go to Sheffield and find a good gaffer. There'll be plenty glad enough to keep a lad who can do even time, but go first of all to Sammy Titcomb, of 'the Ring o' Bells'. He is about the straight forradest chap I knows in Sheffield.

(Act 1, scene 1, pp. 8-9)

Dick's use of the word 'rum' (which since the 1800s had the double meaning of 'bad' as well as 'odd' or 'peculiar') acknowledges that there are unscrupulous characters involved in pedestrianism and that Harry will need the protection of a 'good gaffer' - a reliable trainer and manager - who will look out for him.¹⁵³ Harry does indeed develop a mutually beneficial relationship with this working-class publican and bookmaker, which as we have seen is quite unusual. Through his involvement in this sport, Harry experiences an environment that was previously unknown to him, and the play demonstrates

¹⁵² The rapid growth of cities and their attendant social problems occasioned much anxiety, and were places where many late nineteenth century reformers focused their attention. Brad Beaven notes that in key aspects, the 'civic' project was a 'class' one. Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men*, p. 7; and see also A. Croll, *Civilising the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).

¹⁵³ Simpson and Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 235.

that there can be a successful association between these two contrasting milieus, and consequently between two classes.

Although there is co-operation between characters of different backgrounds, the boundaries between social groupings remain. Harry has been able to participate in a professional race without losing his status; and he is also permitted to participate in the game of wits, and display the characteristics of a 'keen blade' without dishonour. He has the advantage of benefiting from different sections of society, because he begins as a member of a privileged class, who then matures and gains insight through his experiences amongst the working-class of Sheffield. Even though he is initially reliant on Dick Truefitt, ultimately their relationship remains one of master and servant.

Dick may be able to hold his own in conversation with those in positions of authority such as the Squire and Mr. Lynx but fundamentally he knows his place. His acceptance of the hierarchy could even be suggested by his surname, 'true fit'. However, the underlying message is that those in a privileged position have responsibilities as well as rights, and this is made explicit in a conversation Dick has with Blanche Middleton in Act 1. She is about to visit someone from the village who has influenza and although Dick is concerned that she is putting herself at risk by doing so, he applauds her concern, and comments that she is unusual in her caring approach. Indeed he ruefully notes that very often it is those who are affluent who are the most selfish and inhumane:

Blanche Influenza draws no distinction I believe between master and man mistress or maid, and whether they perform them or not, rich people have their duties and responsibilities as well as the poor!

Dick Aye, Aye, Miss Blanche, you will excuse me a-sayin' so, but if all the gentry'd only take a few leaves out o' your book we shouldna hear quite so much now-a-days about poor folks kicking over the traces, tha knows! There's t'owd Doctor Prosser, for instance, he's neither chick nor

child, and they do say in t'village as how he's a rollin' in money and yet if a poor labourer's wife goes to him for a bottle of physic for her sick babby the old skin-flint allus says 'I hope tha's got t'half crown – if not you must go and fetch it – no money no physic at this shop!

(Act 2, scene 2, p. 29)

As evidenced in this dialogue, the play is concerned with the responsibility that wealth brings, and it suggests that those with money should be benevolent in their actions.

Although charity and philanthropy are promoted in this exchange, the Bedford and Middleton families' claim to money and status is unquestionable. This tacit acceptance of the status quo illustrates Hadley's assertion that the melodramatic mode is reactionary, 'hearkening back to a deferential society and its patriarchal grounds for identity'.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, although the play may ultimately support the existing hierarchies, it is also concerned to demonstrate that morality, and a sense of local identity, can transcend class and encourage unity.

3.5 Regional identities

The other significant aspect of the play which may have created a bond between otherwise disparate audience members was its location in the city of Sheffield and its environs. *Keen Blades* is about a specific community, and it is likely that the people who lived there would have been interested in its settings, subject matter, language and characters. The *Era* observes that 'the scenery ...was very realistic, and two of the local scenes evoked the loud and continuous applause of the large audience'.¹⁵⁵ The same review notes that it was 'the local colour' which 'appealed to the 'pit and gallery', yet somewhat surprisingly there is no evidence of a firm connection between the playwrights

¹⁵⁴ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁵ *Era*, 29 May 1893.

and the city that provided their inspiration. A. F. Cross has remained obstinately elusive; I have been unable to find any trace whatsoever of his life or career. His co-author, James Fyfe Elliston has left a more extensive archival record, but research reveals that the majority of his contribution to theatrical history was in the north-west of England, mainly in Bolton. However, as I have already demonstrated, Sheffield was part of a nationwide network of provincial theatres, and professional relationships between the personnel of different venues facilitated creative partnerships. Edmund Tearle, who was Lessee and Manager of the Theatre Royal in April 1893, was listed in a commemorative brochure as one of the regular actors at the Grand in Bolton, so this may have been a helpful connection. Elliston would return to Sheffield in 1898 to produce the pantomime *Babes in the Wood* (also at the Theatre Royal) and although he was not a native, his play can be considered as an affectionate tribute to the city, its culture and its popular sports.¹⁵⁶

It may have been an interest in pedestrianism which drew Elliston to Sheffield. In an article published in 1897 he is described as ‘that well-known sportsman and theatrical manager’, although there is no further information available about what type of sport he was involved in.¹⁵⁷ The evidence suggests that he was a man of the theatre first and foremost. Born in Scotland, his early career was in the north east of England, the Census of 1881 describes him as a Theatrical Manager in Bishop Auckland aged only 28, and he enjoyed several years of success as an actor, before moving into

¹⁵⁶ Souvenir Programme of 25th Anniversary of re-opening of Theatre Royal, Bolton, 19 November 1913, notes by J. F. Elliston. Local Studies, Bolton 792/ELL; *Era*, 1 January 1898.

¹⁵⁷ Anon. (possibly George Falconer), *The Lancashire Steeplejack: a Sketch of His Career and Work by an Outsider* (Bolton: W & T. R. Morris, 1898).

An undated programme for a charity ‘Match of the Season’ played between the ‘Wanderers’ (the Bolton town football team) and ‘Elliston’s Dick Whittington Pantomime Company’ provides some evidence of the theatrical impresario’s continued interest in sport. Bolton Archives, 22/360/2/61.

production and venue management.¹⁵⁸ His forte was popular entertainment which combined circus and theatre and he presided over the Grand Theatre at Bolton for many years until he died in 1920. He understood the attraction of spectacular, physical entertainment, and his venue was built to be as versatile as possible:

The Grand ... stands alone among English halls – magnificent and unique. The most novel feature is that the building, designed primarily as a circus, is so constructed that in a few hours it can be converted into a theatre...¹⁵⁹

Although *Keen Blades* would have been eminently suited to such a venue it was not produced there; instead when the play transferred to Bolton it was produced at Elliston's other business venture, the Theatre Royal, where it ran for a week from 5 June.¹⁶⁰ The review in the *Era* for the Sheffield production opined that 'the plot and incidents are strong enough to interest and amuse any audience', but given that the play is so rooted in local culture, and that there is traditionally a competitive spirit between the counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire, its success was not assured.¹⁶¹ Due to the lack of extant reviews, we can only conjecture about its reception.

We have already seen in Chapter Three that it was difficult for actors to please the critics with their rendition of the Sheffield dialect, and the cast of *Keen Blades* received a similar response. Although the review in the *Sheffield Telegraph* does not single out particular individuals for praise or censure, it is certainly candid: 'the dialect of the Sheffield cutler and grinder is capitally imitated by some, but murdered by others'.¹⁶² There is no specific reference

¹⁵⁸ *Era*, 26 March 1876, 5 January 1879.

¹⁵⁹ *The Bolton Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 'Pillars of Bolton', 1897.

¹⁶⁰ The licence given by the Lord Chamberlain was for the Theatre Royal, Bolton. The label on the typescript is dated 8 April 1893.

¹⁶¹ *Era*, 29 May 1893.

¹⁶² *Sheffield Telegraph*, 22 May 1893.

to Lonnen Meadows, who played Sammy Titcomb, but it was important for the plot and the humour that his character was believably from Yorkshire. It would seem, however, that he was a Lancastrian actor, judging by the description of him in the *Bolton Review* as 'our popular local comedian'.¹⁶³ Whatever his heritage, he successfully avoided personal chastisement in this particular review. When he commented on the 'dialect of the ...cutler and grinder', the critic also (perhaps inadvertently) confirmed the way that the local working-class is deemed to be inextricable from the predominant industry of Sheffield. None of the characters is actually involved in these occupations but the terms were shorthand to describe a particular type of individual. Despite the mixed abilities of the actors, the 'straight forrad' character of the Yorkshire working-class man and woman is confirmed and celebrated by the play.

This strong northern identity is contrasted with those from the south, particularly the 'Lunnoner', as Mr. Lynx is referred to. The metropolis is viewed with suspicion, and indeed it is the place to which Lilith Bilton escaped, after she had committed her crimes of theft and assault. Lilith herself makes no distinction between locations, when she cheerfully discloses to Jimmy that 'I find the jays are to be caught just as easily in London smoke as in smoky Sheffield' (Act 2, scene 1, p. 21). Lilith may have found victims in both localities, but as far as we can tell from the reviews of the play, she is finally outwitted by the combination of the Titcombs and Harry Bedford, the triumphant Sheffield blades in this case. There are territorial competitions elsewhere - when Lynx and Sammy Titcomb have a lengthy exchange notionally about birds and the weather, it is an opportunity for them to pit their wits against one another. Their dialogue is really a battle for superiority between the geographical regions of England:

Lynx Fine growing weather, Mr Titcomb!

¹⁶³ *Bolton Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2.

- Sammy Oh! Aw! I'm told the geese¹⁶⁴ are coming on uncommon well.
- Lynx Indeed? I'm a stranger in these parts but I understand Sheffield's quite a noted place for 'em (surveying the apartment) I've already seen some very fine specimens, I assure you!
- Sammy But they don't come up to Lunnoners, do they Mr. What's your name? Slinks? Or Blinks?
- Lynx My name is Lynx Mr. Titcomb, and you are quite right, there are some remarkably fine birds in town, but you mustn't take them on appearances, Mr. Titcomb, you'll find them deucedly tough, I assure you!

(Act 2, scene 5, p. 41)

Lynx warns Sammy that he may look like a 'fine bird', but underneath he is 'deucedly tough'. His rather affected language signifies his status as an outsider, but he holds his own against Sammy's deliberate, and mischievous, inability to get his name right. In the end Lynx proves his worth, but there is no doubt that the sympathetic characters and the champions of the play are those from Sheffield and the regions of the north of England.

As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the play draws attention to the ambiguity of the phrase used as its title, *Keen Blades*. It pays tribute to those spirited characters in Sheffield who are loyal and true (and it is significant that those who are honourable manage the public house), but it also acknowledges that some local characters use their quick wits to cheat. When Harry first arrives at the Ring o' Bells, and is welcomed into a cosy domestic scene, he draws a distinction between his new acquaintances (the Titcombs and Felix Brock), and those who have wronged him in the past (Luke and Rayne Chalcraft). He admits to the family that 'in times past I have fallen amongst some keen blades from this smokey town of yours but if I'm

¹⁶⁴ 'Goose' used as a noun can mean 'a fool', as well as the water bird. Sammy and Lynx are really arguing about which of them is the more astute, and whether Sheffield or London can claim to produce less or more gullible individuals. Jonathan Green, *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang, 2nd Edition* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2005), p. 628.

not greatly mistaken I'm now in the midst of friends' (Act 1, scene 3, p. 15). Sammy Titcomb and his family represent the positive type of 'blade', in that they use their wits but are honest and 'straight forrad' (Act 1, scene 1, p. 9).

3.6 Female 'blades'

This section examines some of the ways that issues of regional identity in *Keen Blades* intersect with those of class and gender. The female characters in the play possess some of the traits that could allow them to be described as 'blades', and there are women in each of the different groupings: the earthy local working class, the wealthy and privileged gentry, and the greedy scoundrels, but irrespective of their backgrounds, they are active agents and able to stand up for themselves. The 1890s were a decade when women were becoming ever more visible within the public sphere, and the demands for their rights became impossible to ignore. Continuing the campaigning that had begun several decades earlier, organisations in Sheffield such as the Brightside Women's Liberal Association held meetings and invited speakers in favour of women's suffrage.¹⁶⁵ Local aristocrat the Earl of Wharnccliffe refused to commit himself on the issue but attempted to gratify the regional pride of his female audience when he addressed them at a social event, as reported in the local press:

Although he did not desire to compromise himself on the subject of female suffrage, he thought it would be a good thing if all the women in the Hallam Division had votes as well as the men; but he would not say this of the women throughout the whole of the United Kingdom (Hear, hear, and laughter).¹⁶⁶

Keen Blades is not overtly concerned with the rights of women, but nevertheless the way that the female characters are portrayed reflects, and

¹⁶⁵ *Sheffield Independent*, 4 February 1892.

¹⁶⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 31 August 1892.

comments on, some of the questions about female identity which were being raised elsewhere.

The working-class women in the play have a certain degree of power and independence within their own environment, but it is limited. Mrs. Titcomb is never addressed by her first name, she is the archetypal matriarch, and her purpose is to be wife, mother and protector of her family. Sammy is nominally the head of the household, but his blustering attempts to assert his authority are humorously undermined by his outspoken and independent-minded partner, and their daughter Madge. Early in the play it transpires that Rayne has been attempting to seduce this young woman, who is happily engaged to Felix, a friend of the family. Mrs. Titcomb has playfully led Sammy and Felix to believe that she has been encouraging Rayne, when she actually has no such intention. When her husband complains, she chides him for thinking she would behave in such a manner:

Mrs. Titcomb (placing the knitting on her knees and laughing aloud)
Thou two simple-sighted gawmines. What's thou been thinking about – both on ye? Does suppose I'd let our Madge wed Rayne Chalcraft? Nay lads, I'd sooner see t'lass buried that I would!

Sammy (severely) Mrs Titcomb! Thou's been makin' a fool on me again?

Mrs Titcomb (standing) Nay lad, I couldna do that, thy father and mother's saved me the trouble.

(Act 1, scene 3, p. 15)

Although Sammy speaks to her 'severely', his wife stands her ground and responds wittily once again, implying that he has been a 'fool' since birth. The *Era* commented that the actress Carrie Braham, who played the part of Mrs. Titcomb 'was clever as a vulgar, good-hearted landlady', and if local working women came to see the production, they may well have seen a marriage on stage which, in many respects, reflected their own.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ *Era*, 29 May 1893.

In any case their daughter Madge does not need their intervention, because she has a strong will, and is determined to select her husband on her own terms, as she tells her parents:

When I get married, it will be to an honest straight forward Yorkshire lad, tha' knows, and not to a smooth tongued deceitful jackanapes, like Rayne Chalcraft.

(Act 1, scene 3, p. 13)

However, when she refuses Rayne's attempts at seduction, and he attacks her, she needs her male friends and relations to save her. Neither Madge nor Mrs. Titcomb is absolutely essential to the plot, but they help to position the play more firmly in its working-class setting in Sheffield; and they provide much of the humour. The fact that Madge will marry is not questioned (in the dialogue above she says 'when', not 'if'), and an audience is likely to have happily accepted that women would continue to support the cycle of family life; to fulfil their prescribed roles of mothers and daughters.

Even Blanche, the heiress, with a fortune in the bank, cannot do as she pleases. She could easily afford to pay off Harry's debts, but she is not allowed to do this, and (not surprisingly) she finds this to be irksome:

Harry Blanche! You would be a good kind fairy if you could, I know you would, but there are one or two obstacles in the way which even a fairy cannot surmount.

Blanche And what are they?

Harry Well, in the first place, my little fairy is not her own mistress and her careful guardian – my father – has insinuated that the wicked Prince – which is myself – cares not so much for the person of his ward as for her money bags...

Blanche: Fiddlesticks! That's a very unfairylike expression I know -

(Act 1, scene 2, p. 11)

It is likely that 'vulgar' in this context has the meaning 'persons belonging to the ordinary or common class in the community, esp. the uneducated', rather than the rather more pejorative 'having a common or offensively mean character; coarsely commonplace'. Simpson and Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 782-783.

Harry's use of the phrase 'little fairy', although used affectionately, serves to diminish the power that Blanche has. His analogy of their situation with those from pantomime or children's story infantilises her and indicates the conventional nature of their relationship.

Blanche is not only characterised as a 'fairy', but her behaviour is consistent with the prevailing notion that women are naturally placid, and able to act as a calming influence. Dick explains that Blanche is able to control the Squire when he is angry and impatient, but rather than use a metaphor from children's stories or theatrical entertainment, his opinion and advice comes directly from his world of horse breeding and training. Moreover, he suggests that her capability to soothe an ostensibly stronger man is a trait shared by all women:

When I've a vicious nag to tackle I first put a strong wristed lad on his back, but when it comes to taking the nonsense out of a fiery tempered specimen of the male sex ... then I always says "put a lady in the saddle". She may ride under six stone nothing, but she's bahnd to settle him in the long run. Dick Truefitt's not been wed 20 years come next grass for nothing tha knows!

(Act 1, scene 1, p. 3-4)

Despite her gentleness, Blanche speaks her mind, for example when she defends Harry against the criticism of the Squire. She also regards her charitable work as a duty that she believes all those in her privileged position should perform, but her challenges to the men who surround her are made within certain limitations.

The female character who is (temporarily) granted the most freedom is Lilith Bilton, who embodies the figure of the Adventuress. This increasingly popular archetype was a variation on the Villainess (discussed in Chapter Two), and she posed even more of a threat, because of her powerful erotic allure. The eponymous Lady Audley was an early incarnation, but there are many examples from prose fiction and drama of the second half of the

nineteenth century.¹⁶⁸ Lilith Bilton exhibits most of the usual characteristics: she exploits her physical attractions and is self-centred, materialistic and ruthless. Although she is married to Rayne Chalcraft she has been living in exile in London, and only returns to Sheffield because she has run out of money and thinks her husband will supply her with what she needs. She discloses her intention when talking about Rayne to Jimmy Crouch, 'I guess he's in clover now, and very soon I mean to be nibbling myself' (Act 2, scene 1, p. 22). She becomes embroiled in the plot to ensure Harry Bedford does not win the Handicap; she is used to lure him away so that he can be kidnapped and held prisoner until the race is over.

As with the Chalcraft family, it would seem that her name is a deliberate choice to suggest the wicked and dangerous aspects of her character. Lilith is a female character from Jewish mythology: the first wife of Adam, she reputedly refused to be subservient to him, and she has been demonised in a variety of ways over the succeeding centuries, even more than Eve. The sexually attractive yet treacherous adventuress, beloved of Victorian prose fiction and drama, was yet another development in the historical conception and portrayal of woman as temptress. Although she embodied a fundamental, cautionary tenet of Christian theology and teaching, this type of character occupied an ambiguous position on stage: she was corrupt, and supposed to be an object of disdain, yet she was alluring, pleasurable to watch. She often had an active role in the narrative, and her spirited manoeuvrings made her a focus of attention. The actress who played the part of Lilith evidently executed her role with aplomb: 'Miss East

¹⁶⁸ See Zoë Aldrich, 'The Adventuress: *Lady Audley's Secret* as novel, play and film', in Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (eds.), *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 159-174.

The character of Lucrezia, in a play (discussed in Chapter 3) by Joseph Fox titled *Ambition's Slave; or, A Game of Chess* (1883) is described as having been 'an adventuress in Paris', *Era*, 20 January 1883.

Robertson portrays [sic] the adventuress very cleverly, and is at the same time fascinating'.¹⁶⁹

The enthralling and intriguing figure of the adventuress appears in several other plays during the 1890s which had their premiere in Sheffield. *Spellbound* by Fenton Mackay was produced at Stacey's (which later became known as the City Theatre) in 1892 and featured a sister and brother duo who hold a mysterious power over the beleaguered George Westland, who becomes increasingly desperate as the narrative progresses. Blanche Valron (alias Blanche de Santos) is an exotic and beguiling creature, who unusually is still alive and not in prison at the end of the play, but her brother the Count is killed, and it appears that her power ceases at the same time that he expires.¹⁷⁰

The figure of the adventuress inevitably loses her potency by the end of every play, so although we do not know for certain what happens to Lilith Bilton in *Keen Blades* (because of the missing third act), we assume that she is one of 'the villains' who are 'marched off by a cordon of police, charged with various crimes and otherwise discomfited' as reported in the *Sheffield Independent*.¹⁷¹ The review concluded that 'everything ends as merrily as a marriage bell' and indeed a wedding for the virtuous heroine was part of the customary happy ending of many melodramas.¹⁷² Outwardly beautiful yet immoral women, on the other hand, are punished, and any freedom that they have enjoyed, must be curtailed. The female characters in this play obey these narrative and ideological rules, and although they take an active role

¹⁶⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 May 1893.

¹⁷⁰ Fenton Mackay, *Spellbound*, Stacey's, 23 November 1892, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53513D.

¹⁷¹ *Sheffield Independent*, 23 May 1893.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

and are an enjoyable part of the entertainment, their power is limited, and so the customs are upheld.

This third section has demonstrated that *Keen Blades* supports the existing hierarchies of class, as well as those of gender, but the play also suggests ways in which social interaction could be improved, and advocates that those in a privileged position should be mindful of their responsibilities. It promotes characteristics such as integrity and loyalty, which cut across class divisions, and through its depiction of the Titcomb family it challenges prejudices about working class recreations, including those activities which could be classed as disreputable, such as pedestrianism, drinking, and gambling. Its tone of wry humour could be interpreted as a plea for tolerance for such recreational occupations; but at the same time it acknowledges the problematic issues arising from the increasing professionalisation and commercialisation of sport. In terms of its content, and because of its visceral connection with its audience, the play suggests that there is value in spectatorship as well as participation and that both should be inclusive, yet at the same time it raises questions about who should profit from - and ultimately have control of - these leisure activities. Although it does not provide all the answers, the play celebrates Sheffield as a vibrant home of good sportsmanship and honest endeavour; it pays tribute to a native wit, and exposes hypocrisy. In doing so, it fosters a proud local identity, which can transcend class and encourage unity.

Keen Blades is ostensibly about sport and gambling (specifically pedestrianism), but my chapter has been concerned with broader issues about the 'place of amusement'.¹⁷³ This phrase has a double meaning: during

¹⁷³ *Sheffield Independent*, 19 November 1831, and countless other examples throughout the century.

the nineteenth century a theatre building was regularly referred to as such, but the term can also refer to the position, or status, of crowd-pleasing entertainment within theatre history. Although the play was produced in 1893, my case study acknowledges, and connects to, a longer history of popular culture, including those activities which were 'outside the hegemonic realm of the theatre'.¹⁷⁴ A key site was the public house: the assertion by cultural historians that it was central to the social life of the working-classes throughout the period has been substantiated by my research in Sheffield. Not only were these venues the place for political discussion, blood sports, gambling and music; but the theatrical entertainment provided in their attached rooms may have been the way that many people were introduced to the art form. This theory is difficult to prove, given the scarcity of records about these sites and the people who frequented them, but my findings have certainly confirmed that there were a large number of such venues in Sheffield (which in many cases became independent music halls), and they played a significant role in its performance history.¹⁷⁵

One of the primary aims of this project was to recover neglected material; to heed the warnings of historians such as Loren Kruger, who observes the 'faintness' of the archival record of theatre 'in the margins of the metropolitan repertoire'.¹⁷⁶ The information relating to these 'illegitimate' forms is barely discernible; nevertheless it is possible to trace the close connections between these places of entertainment and the 'legitimate' theatres in Sheffield. There was physical proximity (the rowdy Royal Pavilion was almost next door to the Theatre Royal); and fraternity between personnel. For

¹⁷⁴ Bratton, *New Readings*, p. 134.

¹⁷⁵ See Appendix C3 for chronological histories of many of these halls.

¹⁷⁶ Loren Kruger, 'History Plays (in) Britain: Dramas, Nations and Inventing the Present' in Worthen and Holland, *Theorising Practice*, pp.151-176 (p. 167), noted in my Introduction.

example, Edwin Romaine Callender, manager of the Theatre Royal, defended Alfred Milner, landlord of the Star Music Hall, at the Brewster Sessions in September 1883. Apparently Callender had visited 'several times' and found it to be 'respectably conducted'.¹⁷⁷ His testimony proved to be helpful on this occasion, and Milner's licence was granted.

The Star was the kind of place where performers gained their early experience. Many of them made the successful transition to larger and more prestigious establishments, but as the separation between the theatre of 'art' and that of 'entertainment' became more marked, they often faced barriers to career progression and development.¹⁷⁸ Even Dan Leno, who journeyed a long way from clog dancing at the Star to become the celebrated idol of the Drury Lane pantomimes, never properly fulfilled his ambition to be taken seriously as a theatrical performer.¹⁷⁹ Caroline Radcliffe states (in the abstract for her unpublished thesis) that 'Leno's position serves to emphasise the historically instituted demarcations between the legitimate theatre and the music hall'.¹⁸⁰

Evidence suggests that audiences were liable to disrupt the 'demarcations' and demand 'the right to enjoy themselves' at a range of performative events.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, the notion of 'intertheatricality' as defined by Jacky Bratton and discussed in my Introduction, inevitably embraced a range of performance modes.¹⁸² Bratton's theory suggests, and my research confirms, that there was a fluid exchange between performance

¹⁷⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, 21 September 1883.

¹⁷⁸ Bratton, *New Readings*, p. 16.

¹⁷⁹ News Cuttings, LSL 942.74 SF, Vol. 25, p. 140.

¹⁸⁰ Caroline Radcliffe, 'Dan Leno: Cultural Hegemony in the Victorian Popular Theatre' (PhD, University of London, Royal Holloway, 2006).

¹⁸¹ News cutting from unknown source, 1887, op. cit.

¹⁸² Bratton, *New Readings*, p. 38.

forms, which countered the attempts to define theatre within strict artistic and ideological parameters. My introductory chapter outlined my intention of challenging the judgemental differentiation between 'high' and 'low' culture,¹⁸³ and the third case study has examined some of the ramifications of this ideological approach in the closing years of the nineteenth century. The various attempts to categorise theatrical presentations could almost be described as a campaign: they certainly had enduring consequences, and were liable to permanently divide audiences as well as performers. In Chapter One, I outlined my definition of the term 'process' in relation to performance aesthetics (as well as to the practicalities of theatre production and its shifting status). Examples from the theatrical history of Sheffield, documented in this chapter and throughout the thesis, testify to the ongoing tension between the urge to embrace, or resist, elements of popular culture.

¹⁸³ Jacky Bratton, 'The birth of our grand narrative', in Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 10-12.

Conclusion

In 1893, the same year that *Keen Blades* was produced, Sheffield was officially designated a city, an elevation in status which acknowledged how much the region had evolved since its somewhat modest beginnings. Its enhanced prestige was celebrated on 21 May 1897, when the new and impressive Town Hall was formally opened by Queen Victoria in her Diamond Jubilee year. The city proved that it belonged to the new technological age when it used the novel medium of film to screen a pictorial account of the Royal anniversary celebrations at the Theatre Royal.¹ Cinemas would soon be added to the plethora of venues for arts and entertainment, and although their incursion helped to fashion a very different cultural landscape from that of the beginning of the nineteenth century, many of the same problems remained. Creative entrepreneurs had faced many challenges, and although in some respects the nature of these difficulties had altered, it was evident that theatre was still a contested site. The questions of what it should be, and who it should be for, were still being asked, and would continue to perplex participants, audiences, and commentators into the next century and beyond.

One of the issues that my thesis confronts is the extent to which class and gender hierarchies affected the creation and reception of theatrical productions. I have investigated whether plays that were locally produced had the power to communicate to a range of audience members, and if they could instil a sense of empathy, perhaps even unity, between disparate individuals. This question is still relevant to a consideration of the theatre in Sheffield on the cusp of a new era; at a time when industrial and social changes were

¹ The presentation, described as 'animated photographs', was provided by Lumiere, and were an additional attraction in a touring production of the musical comedy *Morocco Bound*, Clifford H. Shaw and Stuart R. Smith, *The Early Years of Cinema in Sheffield 1896-1911* (Sheffield: West Riding Graphic Supplies, 1995).

communicating conflicting messages. There was a chance that the increased prosperity of the region would benefit those who were largely responsible for it, and that the workforce would enjoy better living conditions and a consequent improvement in status. Yet conversely it seemed that class divisions were becoming more entrenched, and this was partly caused by the changing nature of those industries, as explained in the introduction to Chapter Four. Social segregation was exacerbated by two concomitant changes: the increasing separation of middle-class residential areas, away from industrial and business premises; and the concentration of new housing for employees close to their workplaces, which had recently shifted to the huge industrial plants of Attercliffe and Brightside. Earlier in the century the physical layout of the town had been fairly haphazard: the Theatre Royal and the Alexandra were located amid an assortment of factories, workshops, homes, retail establishments and public houses; and the intimate and accessible nature of their auditoria reflected the shared space of the streets outside.

Accounts by local historians illustrate some of the contradictory developments which were taking place in the new city. The campaign for universal suffrage was accompanied by demands for access to education for all; and since the Education Act of 1870 literacy and numeracy had increased among women and the working classes.² This resulted in other opportunities for personal development; the aim of the university extension movement was to bring higher education to a wider range of people.³ Public subscriptions supported the fundraising campaign for a university for Sheffield (the new building opened in 1905), and it could be argued that this kind of shared

² Richard Brown, *Education, Crime and Leisure* <<http://amazon.co.uk/Education-Leisure-Nineteenth-Century-ebook/dp/B005UD1ZXQ>> [accessed 21 May 2013].

³ Helen Mathers, *Steel City Scholars: the Centenary History of the University of Sheffield* (London: James and James, 2005), p. 227.

endeavour demonstrated loyalty and civic pride and helped to foster a sense of harmonious accord; yet this active citizenship was undermined by the lack of proper integration.⁴ The building project was pioneered by local industrialist and philanthropist Mark Firth (1819-1880), and David Fine claims that

Nowhere in Britain were Victorian class distinctions so geographically stated ... Mark Firth may have shared meat pies with his workers, but their children would never play together.⁵

As demonstrated in Chapter Four, 'playing together', whether between children or adults, was not straightforward, and recreational activities sometimes appeared to increase the distance between different sectors of society, rather than bring them together.

Despite evidence of physical separation and exclusive activities, music and drama were, however, sometimes still able to bring all classes together. An example of this capacity is provided by an account of a concert of 'Stabat Mater' by Rossini at the Albert Hall in Sheffield in 1896, which is revealing in several ways. The concert had been lengthy, and some people got up to leave before it had finished, which annoyed a critic for the *Sheffield Independent*, who complained of the ill-mannered behaviour of these spectators. He was, however, also unexpectedly impressed by others, as he explained:

Seated near ... was one of what would have been judged to be one of the lowest type of Sheffield's workers, who volunteered to his neighbour, "See thi; that chap (one of the orchestra) plays at Tommy's" and later asked "Doesn't 'ta know that?" ... and began to hum the melody. A little later, he observed in an undertone "That's t'chap 'at ah've cum'd to hear, t'orgin; ah've nivver heard it yit." But he and his mates kept their seats, if they wore their cloth caps, until the close.⁶

⁴ Firth College, one of the institutions which merged to form the new University had opened in 1879; the University College was chartered in 1897.

John Roach, 'The University of Sheffield', in *The History of the City of Sheffield 1843-1993, Vol. II: Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 347-363 (p. 348); Mathers, *Steel City Scholars*, p. 6.

⁵ David Fine *A History and Guide to Sheffield* (Sheffield: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1992, revised edition 2003), pp. 82-83. See also Pollard, 'Labour', in *The History of the City of Sheffield, Vol. II: Society*, pp. 268-271.

⁶ *Sheffield Independent*, 1 December 1896.

The writer of the article emphasised the class-defining headwear and colloquial speech of his subject, and betrayed a rather judgemental attitude, labelling him 'one of the lowest type of Sheffield's workers'. Notwithstanding this assessment, he at least acknowledged that the music enthusiast observed proper etiquette, and recognised the composition. Furthermore, the critic for the *Independent* confirmed that members of the orchestra of the Albert Hall had been 'drawn from the respective theatres of the city' such as the Theatre Royal and the Alexandra (or 'Tommy's', as the spectator calls it). This anecdote not only suggests that there was continued co-operation between the different venues; but also that listening to the music that was played to accompany melodramas could stimulate an interest in orchestral works and classical concerts more generally.

The interconnected nature of the development of theatre in Sheffield is also illustrated by the establishment of the latest venue to join its multifarious theatrical terrain. On Monday 11 October 1897 the grand and opulent Lyceum Theatre opened, centrally located on the corner of Arundel Street and Tudor Street. It was a new building, and yet its site was saturated with its previous history: the venue replaced the short-lived City Theatre, opened in 1893 and partially destroyed by fire in 1896, which was itself a rebuild of a Circus from the 1870s.⁷ This process of physical layering alludes to more ephemeral relationships between past and present 'places of amusement', and more broadly between genres and types of performance. Venues were built, altered, and re-named with surprising frequency, and although this can be bewildering for the researcher, it also demonstrates a dynamic, rich and complex story.

One of the connecting threads of my narrative of theatre during the period concerns its contested nature, which remained an uneasy

⁷ See Appendix C3 for a detailed chronological history of the building.

amalgamation of public institution and commercial business. The centrality of a theatre building to its community is celebrated in the description of the 'brilliant audience' at the opening of the new Lyceum in 1897, which included 'leading local celebrities' who represented 'civic life, the law, and commerce'.⁸ The financial impetus behind theatrical endeavour was immediately foregrounded by John Hart, the new managing director, in his welcome speech. He wryly reflected that he and fellow members of the syndicate (who financed the venue) had received little in the way of encouragement for their proposal to embark on this venture:

...when it was first resolved upon that a first-class theatre should be established in Sheffield, we were told that there was not the least possibility of its paying...⁹

Despite Hart's inference that a 'first-class theatre' was not only a new initiative but financially foolhardy, my account has proved that numerous individuals had ventured to produce imaginative and economically-viable performances in Sheffield for many years. The members of the syndicate who formed the managing company of the Lyceum were, in some ways, successors to the shareholders who had ensured the survival of the Theatre Royal through its turbulent history. Yet circumstances were different, and in the ever-more competitive environment of consumer capitalism, owners would be under even more pressure to privilege business considerations. A third of the shares of the older venue were sold in 1897 to the 'Lyceum Company' which seems to indicate detached professionalism and a desire for monopoly on the part of the new organisation.¹⁰

Issues of aesthetics and commerce, which, as I have demonstrated, often crystallised into the question of whether theatre should be deemed 'art'

⁸ *Era*, 16 January 1897.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ 'Register of Proprietors', SA CA373/4.

or 'entertainment', assumed a particular character during the final years of the nineteenth and the early ones of the twentieth century, as radical new ideas emerged about both the form and subject matter of dramatic composition. Theatre practice was also becoming more overtly political, exemplified by the careers of women such as the actress, director and writer Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952). Due to the restrictions of censorship, small club theatres with private membership were established, so that they could produce material deemed unsuitable for a public audience by the office of the Lord Chamberlain. The Independent Theatre in London, managed by Jacob Grein, mounted productions of the work of controversial playwrights such as Ibsen and Shaw, and it is possible that small theatres in Sheffield such as the Bath Saloon catered to an audience who were interested in these innovations.¹¹ More research is needed but it could be an illuminating exercise to discover the ways in which the city engaged with these new theatrical developments. Additionally, an investigation of amateur theatre companies could yield fresh discoveries, particularly about the direct relationship between theatre and politics. We know for example that organisations for female suffrage performed sketches and plays at their meetings as part of recruitment and morale-boosting, and it could be revealing to follow the trajectories of some non-professional companies, who were not so bound by financial imperatives. In 1878, an article in the *Sheffield Independent* asserted that 'amateur companies were all the rage', and that their conditions of operation were much improved. Apparently, there were more venues available than 'half a century ago', when the amateur actor 'flourished in the clubrooms of obscure

¹¹ The first production at the Independent Theatre was Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, 13 March 1891, a year later it produced G. B. Shaw, *Widowers Houses*, 9 December 1892.

The Bath Saloon was a small theatre above the public baths on Glossop Road in Sheffield. It first opened in the 1830s, and was still in existence in 1895. Records are sparse, but some information survives about its production history.

public houses, and had to strut and fret his hour upon the stage in an unsympathetic atmosphere of tobacco smoke and the fumes of stale beer'.¹²

Popular productions in the main theatres also reflected the social revolution, and some of them began to overtly challenge performance conventions, although many still adhered to the old reliable formulas. Plays such as *Shall He Forgive Her?* (written by Frank Harvey and produced at the Alexandra in 1894) straightforwardly employed the familiar features of melodrama. The main thrust of the plot is about a wronged woman who tries to make a fresh start with a new husband, only for her past to be revealed through a series of extraordinary coincidences. When her calm existence is shattered by the sudden re-appearance of both her abandoned husband and the man whose life she once saved, one of the characters expresses aloud what the audience were perhaps feeling, 'It seems wildly impossible'.¹³ Although it does not appear that this line was intended to be humorous, the writers of musical comedies (which were just then in vogue) seized opportunities for satire. *Cupid and Co*, written by Horace Lennard and produced at the City Theatre in 1894, was described as a 'musical farce' and made fun of these improbable twists of fate, as illustrated in this comical scene between the character of Jupiter Jones and his 'long-lost son' Frank:

Jones And what is your name?

Frank My name is Smith.

Jones (Staggering) Smith! (Clutches as if choking) I – have – heard – that- name! Oh! Do not say that you were christened Charles!

Frank No, my name is Frank.

Jones A-ha! I thought – I feared – I hoped as much! Do not tell me that you had a father and a mother.

¹² *Sheffield Independent*, 17 December 1878.

¹³ The play, written by Frank Harvey (1841-1903) and produced at the Alexandra on 2 April 1894, originally had the alternative title of *The Woman He Married* and was licensed for the Prince's Theatre Bradford, 23 February 1894. B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53543 J; Nicoll, *Plays 1850-1900*, Vol. II, p. 408.

Frank I will not tell you; it is only too evident.

Jones Stay, gentle stranger. Supposing you had a father, and that father had a son – would you be he? This suspense is terrible! ... (Gasping) I have only one clue – but it may suffice. Your name is Smith?

Frank It is.

Jones S-m-i-t-h?

Frank Yes.

Jones Then tell me, do not deceive me – does your name appear in the London Directory?

Frank (Deeply affected) It does!

Jones Then you must be my long-lost son!

(*Cupid and Co*, Act 3, pp. 83-84)

In addition to satirising clichéd dramatic devices, musical comedies such as *Cupid and Co* acknowledged the rapidly changing lifestyles of their audiences.¹⁴ New kinds of businesses catered to the increasingly significant figure of the consumer, which, together with modern technologies, offered new employment opportunities for women. They began to occupy more public space than previously as they took on positions as, for example, shop assistants, barmaids, and typists, and these burgeoning careers provided fresh material for the stage. The 'girl' – young, lively, and witty - became a recognisable stage character and can be found in many plays of the period: *The Shop Girl*, by Henry J. W. Dam at the Gaiety Theatre in London in 1894 followed *A Gaiety Girl* by Owen Hall at the Prince of Wales in 1893.¹⁵

¹⁴ Horace Lennard, *Cupid and Co*, musical farce/burlesque, City Theatre, 6 August 1894, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53555 A, re-titled *The School of Love*, 4 October 1898.

¹⁵ *Gaiété*, a 'comic opera' by H. Aylen and Joseph Eldred was produced at the Theatre Royal in 1874, but the script is untraceable, so it is difficult to ascertain if it is an early example in a similar vein.

Peter Bailey has written a chapter which examines the phenomenon of 'the girl' within this emerging genre, 'Musical Comedy and the Rhetoric of the Girl, 1892-1914', in *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 175-193.

The 'girl' was a figure in novels too, Grant Allen (pseudonym of Olive Pratt Raynor), *The Type-writer Girl* (London: Pearson, 1897), noted by Arlene Young, who

Provincial theatre was alert to the trend: Leda, the feisty heroine of *Cupid and Co* works behind the bar of 'the Swan' public house, and Act Two features a song and dance routine of 'typewriters' in the office of a matrimonial agency (the term was applied to the person, as well as the machine).¹⁶ The lyrics that they sing mitigate the potentially challenging depiction of independent women at work:

Some day we shall marry, at least we hope so
And then never more all the day shall we go
Tick-tick-tick-tick
Tapping on the keys...

(*Cupid and Co*, Act Two, p. 45)

Although the women express a wish to find a husband, thus conforming to the expectations of Victorian society, nevertheless these kinds of spirited characters embodied (and often celebrated) the new realities of autonomous women who were employed outside the home. Further detailed research into these musical amusements would broaden our knowledge of the routes by which progressive ideas infiltrated popular provincial theatre during the fin de siècle.

Indeed the representation of the figure of the actress herself had advanced by the 1890s. In another musical comedy, *On the March* (by Cecil Clay, B. C. Stephenson, and W. Yardley, produced at the Theatre Royal in July 1896), much of the humour arises from mistaken identity and light-heartedly tackles the issue of women in the theatre.¹⁷ A group of nice upper class girls are mistaken for actresses:

Edith (aside to Elfrida & Flo): Who does he take us for?

also observes that the type-writer and the bicycle both became symbols of liberation. *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents, and Working Women* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 145.

¹⁶ The mythological names of the characters provide a jocular undercurrent.

¹⁷ Cecil Clay, B. C. Stephenson, W. Yardley, *On the March*, Musical Comedy, B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53602 K.

Scroggs It is quite an agreeable surprise to find three such delightful votaries of Thespis to assist us in our performance to-morrow evening.

Elfrida (aside to Edith & Flo): Why, they take us for actresses – How dreadful.

Flo: Not at all – I think it's capital fun.

Edith: So do I, splendid. Let's keep it up.

(*On the March*, Act 1, p. 37)

The young gentlemen who have been recruited to the army are about to take part in an amateur production of Gounod's *Faust*, and they are impressed with their prospective acting partners:

Felix (to Farris): I say these girls are nailers¹⁸ – I'd no idea actresses were so ladylike.

Farris (to Felix): Oh yes, my dear chap, nowadays the stage is crowded, I am told, with younger scions of the aristocracy of both sexes.

(*On the March*, Act 1, p. 38)

If 'scions of the aristocracy' could happily take up careers in the theatre, it was a sign that attitudes were changing. During the period covered by the main body of this thesis, involvement in professional theatre had been a palpable obstacle to social acceptability. It was one of the causes of tension in the life and work of Mrs. Bright (as detailed in Chapter Two), and even attendance at a play came under scrutiny in plays such as *The Union Wheel* (in Chapter Three). Musical comedies like *Cupid and Co* and *On the March* were the kinds of theatrical entertainments in which Georgie de Lara and Rose Ellen Dibdin Pitt (young relations of Mrs. Bright) appeared, and more investigation could make further connections between the position of women, and actresses, during the earlier and later periods.

One of the aims that originally motivated my research was to discover the relationship between the theatre in Sheffield and a sense of local pride, or

¹⁸ The changes to language are a notable feature in these musical comedies of the 1890s, as new words and phrases are used. 'Stunners', 'soubrette', 'care a rap', 'ripping nice girl', all appear in *On the March* by Cecil Clay (Theatre Royal, 1896) and there are other examples, in other texts, of such novel colloquialisms.

civic identity. Although it was a little disappointing not to discover more plays with specific regional settings or themes, nevertheless there is plenty of evidence that theatrical endeavour had a role in fostering a sense of community. This is most apparent in plays such as *The Union Wheel* and *Keen Blades*, but it is also manifest in the many charity events organised by theatre managers over the years, particularly joint ventures with military personnel and sports clubs (as detailed in Chapter One). It would be instructive to investigate how relationships and attitudes altered, as the close-knit, and for most of the nineteenth century, still parochial town asserted its position as a major city. I discussed in Chapter Four how identities were in flux at this time, and the notion of civic identity and regional pride could be compared to, and contrasted with, the formation, and celebration, of a national character, and the role that theatre played in notions of Empire. Recruits were needed for international conflicts such as the Boer War (1880-1; 1898-1902) and later World War I (1914-18), and drama was exploited to encourage the necessary patriotism. Even a light comedy such as *On the March* celebrates the bravery of the armed forces of Britain:

Like our motto "Staunch and Steady"
Or in peace or warfare's eddy
For our duty always ready
On the March, On the March.

(*On the March*, Act 2, p. 32)

Questions about what it means to be a British citizen, and attitudes towards the foreigner, are raised in later comedies and melodramas. Plays such as *Secrets of the Harem* by Max Goldberg and *Naughty Boys* by John Tresahar (both produced at the City Theatre in 1896) could be helpful to an assessment of the extent to which theatre in Sheffield either challenged or supported dominant xenophobic attitudes.¹⁹ An initial reading of both plays

¹⁹ Max Goldberg, *Secrets of the Harem* (City Theatre, 1896), B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53616B; John Tresahar, *Naughty Boys*, which was later given the alternative title of *The Chinaman* (City Theatre, 1896), B.L. L.C.P. Add. MS. 53552M.

reveals negatively stereotyped portrayals of foreign characters and their lifestyles, but more rigorous analysis would be required before reaching definite conclusions, particularly given that my over-arching intention was always to challenge easy assumptions.

The main focus of my analytic attention has been on those plays which fall under the umbrella term of melodrama, although there has been some consideration of burlesque and comedy. Given the length of the period under study and the amount of available material, it has not been possible to fully investigate the relationship between music hall and theatre, although the evidence, as I have suggested, indicates that it was a close one – sometimes co-operative and sometimes vituperatively competitive. Two of the characters in *Secrets of the Harem* are ‘Cockney Music Hall stars’, and an examination of the way these characters are portrayed could lead to an investigation into the later evolution of this genre in Sheffield, as well as revisiting its earlier manifestations.

During the last decade of the century, the small-scale, independent music halls gave way to huge new variety ‘palaces’, which were managed by powerful companies with multiple financial interests in towns and cities across the country. The Empire Palace of Varieties opened in 1895 and the Hippodrome in 1907, and the latter boasted that it was ‘Sheffield’s Premiere and most select Variety Hall’.²⁰ In the same way that the small halls and their entrepreneurial owners threatened the Theatre Royal from the 1850s onwards, this popular and highly commercial descendant would dominate the business of entertainment for many years, despite the continuing co-existence of the Theatre Royal, the Lyceum, and the Alexandra. Given the potential discouragement of working-class audiences that the increasing

²⁰ Playbill for the Sheffield Hippodrome reprinted in Hillerby, *The Lost Theatres of Sheffield*, p. 126.

respectability of theatre might entail, questions could be asked about the status of the respective venues and the composition of their audiences.

Discovering the nature of the theatre spectator in Sheffield was always going to be a difficult task. My research has confirmed that working-class, as well as middle-class people attended the theatre throughout the period, and that they responded immediately and audibly to the material they saw on stage. From the critical comments about actors' performances by Jacky Blacker in the early decades, to the raucous approval of Union activity in *The Union Wheel* (1870), to the cheers of delight at the running race in *Keen Blades* (1893), those who bought tickets for the pit and gallery were not afraid to express their opinions. The *Era* reported that, during a performance of *Naomi's Sin* (1879), at the point in the scene when the heroine is about to consume the tainted lemonade a 'sympathetic voice' from the gallery exclaimed, "Doan't drink, lass! thou'll poison thysen!"²¹ Despite these clues, written reviews still provide the most extensive form of commentary, and it is not easy to ascertain the social background of the critics who wrote them, as they are nearly always anonymous.²² However, as I noted in Chapter One, journalists often had parallel careers as playwrights, and both professions attracted bright and ambitious individuals from working-class backgrounds, such as Joseph Fox. Another writer, Thomas Frost, who published a book about circus celebrities and worked briefly for the *Sheffield Post*, had a poor upbringing in Croydon and often complained in his autobiography that he was short of money.²³ Reviews of productions may therefore reveal more about

²¹ *Era*, 18 May 1879.

²² George Lemon Saunders used the pseudonym of 'Veritas' for his critical writing. Research has revealed his identity and thus we know that he was the 'son of a small tradesman' (Obituary, *Era* 7 August 1870; Barker, Unpublished PhD). As far as the evidence suggests, he only produced reviews for a very short period of time.

²³ Thomas Frost, *Reminiscences of a Country Journalist* (London: Ward and Downey, 1886).

working-class responses than perhaps is sometimes acknowledged, but there is still more to learn. My research has nonetheless confirmed that theatre was an activity which was experienced by many of the inhabitants of Sheffield.

My three main aims in this project were to challenge the prejudices about popular commercial entertainment, the place of women, and the significance of theatre in the provinces. I have been able to demonstrate that although theatres were obliged to operate as businesses, this neither precluded artistic ambition, nor the ability to comment on, and even attempt to ameliorate, social conditions. Melodramas produced at the Theatre Royal and the Alexandra encompassed a broad range of subjects and although their creators needed to make a living, evidence from the texts (and in some cases personal statements or actions) suggests that they were motivated by more than money. Plays were written in a style which would appeal to audiences but also challenge them, and my research has confirmed that spectators were often prepared to listen. Not only were women among this body of playwrights, but they also used their financial capabilities (as shareholders in arts venues), as well as their performative and managerial skills, to make an impact on the development of theatre in Sheffield, and also throughout the provinces. Notwithstanding the marginalisation (from critics and theatre historians) of women and popular performances in regional theatres, what has emerged from my investigation is that this town was peopled by innovative characters and possessed distinctive characteristics. It had its own identity and concerns, which were sometimes different from London and from other areas of the country; and its particularity was reflected in, and expressed by, its theatre. Although theatre-makers faced many challenges, they had enthusiastic supporters, even in the earlier decades. Creative entrepreneurs, including many women, contributed to the success of

numerous venues, and these individuals have ensured that the theatrical history of Sheffield remains vibrant, diverse, and culturally significant.

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