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# **Challenging Narratives: Gender, Politics, and Performance in Mid- Victorian Classical Burlesque**

**by**

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degree of  
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## **DECLARATION**

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.



## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to challenge the accepted historical narrative developed by classical scholars on mid-Victorian classical burlesque, which they describe as a demotic form of entertainment encoding politically subversive meanings in terms of gender. The first section challenges the assumption that classical burlesque authors had politically radical beliefs in relation to the issue of gender. Despite their Bohemian lifestyle, the analysis of memoirs, novels, comedies, and farces written by classical burlesque authors, as well as the satirical representations of gendered social types in magazines like *Punch* and *Fun*, illustrate that their degree of political involvement was limited. The second section of this thesis claims that classicists have interpreted classical burlesques merely as written scripts, thus neglecting the comicality embedded in performances. The acting styles, use of cross-dressing and linguistic conventions of classical burlesque are analysed as elements which enabled the achievement of comic effects in performance and undercut the serious significance of the characters' verbal claims. The third section of this thesis questions the alleged demotic appeal of classical burlesque despite the lack of sufficient evidence. It argues that a considerable portion of the burlesque public may have been composed of upper- and middle-class young gentlemen, who lived a 'fast' and mildly dissipated lifestyle. Ultimately, this thesis offers an historical investigation which aims to re-instate the centrality of classical burlesques as comic performances which satirised the conventional mid-Victorian gender paradigms, without seriously endorsing the need for reform, and without aiming at indoctrinating their audiences, whose background may have been more privileged and conservative than classical scholars have acknowledged.

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Objectives

This research questions the historical discourse around classical burlesques as formulated by classical scholars. Since the publication of Edith Hall's 'Medea and British Legislation before the First World War'<sup>1</sup> in 1999 and for the past twenty years, classicists have dominated the scholarly field of study in mid-Victorian classical burlesque, interpreting the genre as sympathetically staging the early battles for independence fought by mid-Victorian women, who refused to be assimilated to the stereotype of middle-class selfless wives and mothers and asked for equality in matters of legal separation and divorce. According to classical scholars, the radicalism of classical burlesques resonated with the supposedly progressive political views of the working-class audiences whom such plays allegedly targeted. Consequently, the perception of mid-Victorian classical burlesque as a demotic form of entertainment has reached the status of what Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson term a 'master narrative'<sup>2</sup>, which has so far been uncontested.

This research aims at re-assessing the stance of mid-Victorian classical burlesque towards the gender politics of the age, evaluating whether the classical burlesques staged in the 1850s and 1860s in the West End theatres of London seriously advocated for the rights of women as classical scholars contend. Focusing on three key areas of investigation, namely the identity of classical burlesque authors, the characteristics of the genre, and the composition of its audiences, this thesis will unveil the methodological shortcomings of classical scholars' investigations: firstly, I will argue that they unjustifiably equated the Bohemian lifestyle of classical burlesque authors with political progressivism; secondly, I will claim that they overestimated the radicalism embedded in classical burlesques by focussing solely on written scripts and neglecting performances – and thus, their inherent comicality; thirdly, I will contend that their descriptions of classical burlesque audiences as demotic are hardly supported by substantial evidence. Drawing on a range of evidence which works to reinstate the centrality of the genre's

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Hall, 'Medea and British Legislation before the First World War', *Greece & Rome*, 46 (1999), 42-77.

<sup>2</sup> Cochrane and Robinson define the 'master narratives of theatre' as 'the selection of key individuals, institutions and events for inclusion in the histories which have formed traditionally accepted historical canons'. See Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson, 'Introduction', in *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*, ed. by Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-29 (p. 7).

comicality in performance, this thesis argues that mid-Victorian classical burlesques were less politically subversive than indicated in modern scholarship.

## 2. The Mid-Victorian Age: Gender Politics and Ideologies

A general understanding of the socio-political background of the 1850s and 1860s, as characterised by the parallel development of political liberalism and of social constraints influencing the representation of gender, is necessary to investigate the relationship of classical burlesques to the context in which they were performed. In an influential study, William L. Burn defines the two central decades of the nineteenth century as ‘the age of equipoise’<sup>3</sup>, encapsulating the relative political, economic, and social stability of the era. His view of this tense and complex period of British history has been recently re-affirmed by Martin Hewitt, who recognises the existence of a specific sensibility defining the mid-Victorian period.<sup>4</sup> If continental Europe was agitated by the 1848 wave of revolutions, mid-Victorian Britain managed to avert any danger of radical upheaval, spreading instead a sense of optimism and improvement.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the reluctance of historians to divide the reign of Queen Victoria into homogeneous phases, such a positive climate is generally said to have begun in 1851, on the occasion of the Great Exhibition in London.<sup>6</sup> The six million visitors that attended the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park celebrated Britain’s supremacy in terms of industrial and technological progress and witnessed the viability of British social organisation.<sup>7</sup> The display of artefacts from all over the world drew attention not only to the industrial production, design and consumption of goods but also to the importance of labour. For this reason, Jeffrey Auerbach believes that the Exhibition enacted the liberal principle of ‘harmonization of different and potentially incompatible classes’<sup>8</sup>, encouraging the concerted work of people representing the entire social

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<sup>3</sup> Burn’s ‘age of equipoise’ extends from 1852, the year after the Great Exhibition in London, to 1867, when the second Reform Bill was passed. William L. Burn, *The Age of Equipoise: A Study of the Mid-Victorian Generation* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Hewitt, ‘Introduction: Victorian Milestones’, in *The Victorian World*, ed. by Martin Hewitt (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 1-53 (p. 16).

<sup>5</sup> Hewitt, ‘Introduction’, pp. 20-22. The same position is embraced by Gertrude Himmelfarb in Gertrude Himmelfarb, ‘Introduction’, in *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays*, ed. by Gertrude Himmelfarb (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 1-17 (p. 9).

<sup>6</sup> Historians generally agree on the choice of 1851 as the starting point of the mid-Victorian period. See, for example, Burn, *The Age of Equipoise*; Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971); Hewitt, ‘Introduction’. An exception is represented by K. Theodore Hoppen, who believes that the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 marks the beginning of the age. See K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> The Great Exhibition ‘affirmed Britain’s global industrial leadership’ and ‘the stability and viability of British society’. See Hewitt, ‘Introduction’, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 31.

spectrum. The Royal Commission appointed to organise the Exhibition constructed a celebratory rhetoric of peace and industrial progress, without openly endorsing liberal free trade.<sup>9</sup> In fact, after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, affiliating the event to the *laissez-faire* tenets of political liberalism meant alienating the sympathies of the protectionist landed aristocracy.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the Commission tried to avoid the open celebration of free trade to render the event as inclusive as possible.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in the eyes of its contemporaries, the Great Exhibition embodied the triumph of liberalism: both foreign and local visitors recognised in the Crystal Palace, a structure entirely made of iron and glass, the epitome of British industrial progress and modernity, enabled by the enactment of free trade ideologies.<sup>12</sup>

According to Hewitt, the mid-Victorian confidence in progress and prosperity survived the political and ideological issues that troubled the stability of the age.<sup>13</sup> In matters of foreign policy, the Crimean War (1853-1856) threatened Britain's powerful position in Europe. Britain fought with France and Turkey against Russian control over the Holy Places in Palestine and, predominantly, against Russian expansion in the Middle East. At first, the government of the Prime Minister Lord Aberdeen tried to promote peace initiatives but, when the Russian occupied Ottoman principalities in the autumn of 1853, it was decided that the British fleet should be sent to the Black Sea. As Orlando Figes notes, the government's turn to military interventionism was encouraged by Lord Palmerston and by the influence of his ideas on public opinion: acting as Home Secretary from 1852 to 1855, Palmerston was perceived as the spokesperson for British 'liberal interventionism abroad'.<sup>14</sup> Palmerston's ability to cultivate the press popularised his

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<sup>9</sup> J. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition*, p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> In 1815, a corn law imposing a ban on the importation of cereals was introduced. This law was meant both to guarantee Britain's food supply and to recompense the landed aristocracy for its contribution to the Napoleonic wars. The duties on imports established in 1815 were progressively reduced with subsequent laws until the repeal of 1846. The Anti-Corn Law League, formed in Manchester in 1837, exercised remarkable pressure in depicting the laws as responsible for the crisis that afflicted Britain in the 1830s: by limiting imports, the laws kept up prices and reduced the poor to starvation. Conversely, the protectionists were afraid of the over-reliance on foreign sources of food that the adoption of free trade would have triggered. The League, thanks to the financial support of the new men of wealth produced by the Industrial Revolution, created successful propaganda that contributed to the Prime Minister's (Sir Robert Peel) decision to eventually repeal the laws. See Anthony Howe, 'Free Trade and its Enemies', in *The Victorian World*, ed. by Martin Hewitt, pp. 108-124 (pp. 109-113).

<sup>11</sup> J. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition*, p. 63 and Wolfram Kaiser, 'Cultural Transfer of Free Trade at the World Exhibitions, 1851-1862', *The Journal of Modern History*, 77 (September 2005), 563-590 (pp. 571-572).

<sup>12</sup> Kaiser recalls, for example, how Henry Cole, in his *Lectures on the Results of the Great Exhibition, delivered before the Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce*, argued that the Crystal Palace would never have been built in the first place without free trade and fair competition. See Kaiser, p. 571.

<sup>13</sup> According to Hewitt, the mid-Victorian age was characterised by an impression of 'domestic security and improvement'. See Hewitt, 'Introduction', p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 149.

belligerent position as an attempt to reinforce and export British liberty, civilisation, and free trade beyond national borders. For example, in her autobiography, Harriet Martineau figures the Crimean war as a crusade against Russian barbarism and despotism.<sup>15</sup> As the conflict developed, William H. Russell, a correspondent writing for *The Times*, denounced the incompetence of British military authorities: the cold winter of Crimea condemned many common soldiers to death, while officers enjoyed great privileges.<sup>16</sup> Public indignation eventually brought down Aberdeen's government, who resigned in January 1855, and favoured the aggressive patriotism of Lord Palmerston, who was asked to form his government in February. His triumphant rhetoric framed him as the saviour of national character from the previous mismanagement of the campaign.<sup>17</sup>

If the Crimean War threatened British stability on a political level, the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 troubled the domain of science, questioning the very nature of man: Darwin constructed his theory of evolution on the basis of the mechanisms of natural selection, according to which different species spontaneously adapt and compete to guarantee their survival. Not only did *The Origin of Species* challenge the role of God as sole creator of the world with its evolutionary patterns, but the recognition of apes as the ancestors of *Homo Sapiens* also shocked the most prudish of Darwin's contemporaries.<sup>18</sup> In the same year, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* interrogated the notion of individual liberty and men's position within society. He recognised how the democratic age in which he lived was controlled by a 'tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling'.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Mill felt that the yoke of custom, public opinion, and their influence on the Victorians were hampering the individual pursuit of freedom and happiness. To avoid this, Mill described a series of circumstances in which it was legitimate for both society and the state to intervene in the lives of individuals: firstly, he believed that liberty could only be developed after the achievement of some basic standard of civilisation; secondly, he stated that 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will,

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed account of Martineau's views on the Crimean War see Lauren M. E. Goodlad, 'Geopolitics and the Victorian Geopolitical Unconscious', in *The Victorian World*, ed. by Martin Hewitt, pp. 175-190 (p. 179).

<sup>16</sup> Figes, pp. 309-310.

<sup>17</sup> Figes, p. 311.

<sup>18</sup> Susie Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), p. 298 and John Hedley Brooke, 'Darwin and Victorian Christianity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, ed. by Jonathan Hodge and Gregory Radick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 197-218 (p. 199).

<sup>19</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. by Mark Philp and Frederick Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 12.

is to prevent harm to others'.<sup>20</sup> Echoing Mill, Hewitt reveals the paradox lying at the heart of the 'age of the equipoise': far from being dominated by unquestioned liberalism, the 1850s and the 1860s saw both legal and ideological forces at play in the limitation of individual liberties. Notions of gentility, domesticity, and morality constrained the behaviour of the mid-Victorians, while public opinion threatened the transgressors of the norm. Encouraged by the complacently triumphant rhetoric of the time, the mid-Victorians might have optimistically believed they lived in a world of unrestricted freedom, but they were disciplined by various, invisible forces exercising control.<sup>21</sup>

As Mary Poovey notes, the mid-nineteenth century is indeed characterised by the 'making of ideology'<sup>22</sup> in terms of gender: images of masculinity and femininity were diffused through sermons, manuals of conduct, and literary or artistic works, in order to normalise and regulate the interactions between the sexes. Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House*, first published in 1854, epitomized the woman as goddess of the hearth and family, absorbed in the roles of wife and mother, since 'she loves with love that cannot tire'.<sup>23</sup> With a spirit of self-abnegation, she continuously pleases her husband, for 'him to please / is woman's pleasure'.<sup>24</sup> Women's love and efforts contribute to the elevation of men who, being entirely devoted to active and aggressive pursuits, need 'pardon'<sup>25</sup> or 'a comfortable word'<sup>26</sup> to eventually find rest. Ten years later, John Ruskin delivered a lecture at the Town Hall of Manchester, 'Of Queen's Gardens', which emerged as a celebration of the Victorian virtuous matron. Later published in *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin's lecture summarised the dichotomic opposition between the sexes:

[t]he man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest [...] But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is [...] for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision [...]. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise – wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Hewitt, 'Prologue: Reassessing *The Age of the Equipoise*', in *An Age of Equipoise? Reassessing Mid-Victorian Britain*, ed. by Martin Hewitt (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-38 (pp. 9-11).

<sup>22</sup> Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1854), l. 9. 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures Delivered at Manchester in 1864* (New York: John Wiley and Son, 1865), pp. 90-91.

Men and women were accorded separate spheres of action: men excelled in the public one, working and performing their social and civic duties, while women sustained their partners by taking care of the household and children.<sup>28</sup> Such a distinction was considered as intrinsically natural because it was based on anatomical and biological differences. Medical observation and discourse on female genital apparatus connected female sexuality solely to reproduction and associated the pursuit of female sexual pleasure either with crime or mental insanity.<sup>29</sup> Hence, if middle-class women did not conform to the domestic paradigm, they were automatically construed as prostitutes or mad, and publicly tainted with the label of ‘fallen’.

The demonic fallen woman was diametrically opposed to the sanctified wife and mother. As Nina Auerbach notes in her seminal work *Woman and The Demon*, both images permeate mid-Victorian visual arts. In June 1858, Augustus Egg exhibited at the Royal Academy *Past and Present*, a trilogy that allegorised the tragic destiny of an unfaithful wife: discovered by her husband and ostracised by her family, the woman who succumbs to sexual instincts loses her social status, being left in absolute poverty and despair.<sup>30</sup> Fallen, like the half apple lying on the floor in the first painting of the series (Figure 1), the woman is symbolically cast out of her domestic paradise.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ruskin ‘adhered to the traditional sexual stereotype [...]. Having through mere assertion “proven” that the sexes are complementary opposites, Ruskin then proceeds to map out their worlds, reserving the entire scope of human endeavour for the one, and a little hothouse for the other’. See Kate Millet, ‘The Debate over Women’, in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 121-139 (pp. 125-126).

<sup>29</sup> Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, ‘The Victorians, Sex, and Gender’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*, ed. by Juliet John (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 162-182 (p. 167).

<sup>30</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 154-155.

<sup>31</sup> Lionel Lambourne, *Victorian Painting* (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 374.



Figure 1. Augustus Egg, *Past and Present No. 1*, 1858, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.2 cm, Tate Britain, London

Five years later, in 1863, George Elgar Hicks exhibited *Woman's Mission*, a triptych celebrating women's duty in the three stages of life: she is *Guide of Childhood*, *Companion of Manhood*, and *Comfort of Old Age*. In the second painting (Figure 2), a woman is seen leaning against her husband who is visibly troubled by some unfortunate accident: the man is holding a letter with a black border, which suggests bereavement. Hence, Hicks seems to have visually translated Patmore's exaltation of women's salvific power of consolation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Lambourne, p. 377.





Figure 2. George Elgar Hicks, *Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood*, 1863, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 64.1 cm, Tate Britain, London

The cult of domesticity and the demonization of female sexuality constrained the mores of the middle classes, but the separate spheres paradigm was not applicable to the lower social strata, where women were often required to economically support their families. Working-class women had poor occupational options and, in some instances, resorted to prostitution. The paternalistic rhetoric of the nineteenth century recognised poverty as the principal reason that obliged working-class women to become prostitutes.

However, the existence of a class-based immorality or the ‘sexual propensity’<sup>33</sup> of women of the lower classes was also acknowledged. The evangelical publications devoted to the topic of prostitution in the 1840s, for example, recognised how the sexual instincts of the poorest of women played a role in causing their descent into crime, illness, and premature death.<sup>34</sup>

If female sexuality was either denied, condemned, or confined to the lower social strata, men were perceived as having naturalised sexual needs whose satisfaction was, if not justified, largely tolerated.<sup>35</sup> Pornography and prostitution emerged as endemic phenomena of the age, even though male sexual mores were increasingly constrained by ideals of self-regulation and, in some cases, continence. Thomas Carlyle, for example, imagined the male self as governed by restless, fluid, sexual energy that was perceived as dangerous and diseased. To neutralise this unclean and polluted aspect of manliness, Carlyle encouraged the repression of sexual instincts. Therefore, rather than stressing heterosexual prowess, Carlyle framed masculinity as associated with discipline and asceticism: Abbot Samson, the protagonist of Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843), turns male fluid energy from pleasure to the productive realm of monastic and industrial work.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the tenets of ‘Muscular Christianity’<sup>37</sup>, first theorised by Charles Kingsley, depart from Carlyle’s total repression of the sexual instincts governing human bodies. Kingsley described their satisfaction as both natural and sanctified, insofar as the expression of sexuality was perceived as manifesting God’s will, as long as it was limited to marital intercourse.<sup>38</sup>

These different yet regulating approaches to male sexuality remained, for a large part, theoretical. In effect, as John Tosh notes, ‘[y]outhful aspirants to bourgeois masculinity commonly experimented with forms of leisure and sexual expression that conflicted

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<sup>33</sup> Nina Attwood, *The Prostitute’s Body: Rewriting Prostitution in Victorian Britain* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Attwood quotes the works of William Tait, Ralph Wardlaw and Joseph Talbot. See Attwood, pp. 3-4.

<sup>35</sup> Heilmann and Llewellyn, p. 167.

<sup>36</sup> Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 26-28. For a more detailed account of Carlyle’s depiction of masculinity, see also James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Muscular Christianity was a religious, literary and social movement advocating the interconnectedness of male physical strength, religious certainty and the ability to control the world. Kingsley’s *Yeast* (1848), for example, describes the development of the protagonist’s bodily and moral strength. See Donald E. Hall, ‘Muscular Christianity: Reading and Writing the Male Social Body’, in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. by Donald E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 3-13.

<sup>38</sup> Laura Fasick observes how Kingsley ‘is obsessed with sexuality, for him sanctified by monogamous marriage’. See Laura Fasick, ‘Charles Kingsley’s Scientific Treatment of Gender’, in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. by Donald E. Hall, pp. 91-113 (p. 91).

sharply with the hegemonic values of industry and continence'.<sup>39</sup> The development of an entrepreneurial and urbanising society, that emphasised the necessity of economic stability, translated into the deferment of marriage until a family could be materially supported. Such a delay was often invoked as an excuse to justify younger middle-class men's resort to prostitution.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, marital sexual dissatisfaction was held responsible for male adulterous gratification of sexuality.<sup>41</sup> Mid-Victorian men paradoxically contributed to a vicious market they rhetorically condemned and censored, blaming and demonising women who sold their bodies and therefore polluted both the cities and society. This moral and sexual double standard translated into a legal one when, around the 1850s, prostitutes were considered the main source of infection in the case of venereal diseases. The diffusion of gonorrhoea and syphilis among British soldiers and sailors solicited parliamentary investigations that resulted in the approval of the 1864 Contagious Diseases Act. Treating women as scapegoats, the Act authorised sanitary inspections on any apparent prostitute without taking into consideration male involvement in the transmission.<sup>42</sup>

The legislation on divorce discussed in Parliament in the mid-nineteenth century constitutes another example of the observation of a gendered double standard. Married women were granted no civil or political rights: Lee Holcombe states that 'under the law, married women were classed together with criminals, lunatics and minors'<sup>43</sup>, since they were prevented from acquiring private property, entering into contracts or even incurring debts after marriage. Under the principle of coverture in common law, women were legally 'covered' by their husbands and therefore virtually non-existent. However, this state of affairs changed when population growth and urbanisation placed external constraints on family units, thus stressing the necessity of reforming the procedures for obtaining divorce.<sup>44</sup> In 1850, the Prime Minister Lord Russell appointed a Royal Commission on Divorce, whose observations identified two problematic areas of

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<sup>39</sup> John Tosh, 'Masculinity in an Industrialising Society: Britain 1800-1914', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (April 2005), 330-342 (p. 335).

<sup>40</sup> Eric M. Sigsworth and Terry J. Wyke, 'A study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease', in *Suffer and Be Still*, ed. by Martha Vicinus, pp. 77-99 (p. 85). A similar argument is developed in Mike Huggins, *Vice and the Victorians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 120.

<sup>41</sup> Sigsworth and Wyke, p. 86.

<sup>42</sup> Huggins, pp. 134-135.

<sup>43</sup> Lee Holcombe, 'Victorian Wives and Property', in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 3-28 (p. 7).

<sup>44</sup> For the development of the legislation on divorce see Poovey, pp. 51-88. A summarised yet comprehensive account has been more recently provided in Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Struggle and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 9-14.

intervention. Firstly, the Commission observed the coexistence of two parallel procedures to obtain divorce, which created confusion. The Roman Catholic divorce *a mensa* allowed both men and women to petition to the ecclesiastical court for divorce in case of adultery, sodomy, or cruelty. However, this form of separation did not allow the ex-spouses to remarry. Therefore, during the Reformation, a parallel practice developed to sidestep this ban: the divorce *a vinculo* allowed husbands to ask for a specific parliamentary bill to separate from their unfaithful wives and eventually remarry. Both procedures were extremely expensive and beyond reach of all but the wealthiest.<sup>45</sup> The second anomaly registered by the Royal Commission on Divorce was the discrepancy between the English and Scottish law. Scotland did not observe the Roman Catholic and Reformation practices, having developed its specific set of laws according to which both men and women could petition for divorce in simpler and cheaper ways on the grounds of infidelity.<sup>46</sup> The case of Caroline Sheridan Norton, who campaigned to obtain a divorce from her husband after having been accused of adultery, increased both public and parliamentary interest in the matter.<sup>47</sup> The detractors of the upcoming legislation believed that a more liberal approach to divorce would trigger massive separations undermining marriage constraints and, accordingly, the very foundations of British society. However, in 1857, the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act was approved. It transferred jurisdiction over the dissolution of marriage to a secular Court of Divorce and stated that divorced wives had the same rights over property as unmarried women, thus having the chance to acquire goods after a legal separation.

Despite these partial achievements, the measures introduced by the Divorce Act were still perpetrating social injustice: men could easily divorce their unfaithful wives, while women were obliged to provide concrete evidence that their husbands' unfaithfulness was aggravated by bigamy, incest, or cruelty. Furthermore, the Act 'did not give all married women equity rights over property, but instead addressed only the most egregious injustice, the case of the separated wife who had no defence under common law'.<sup>48</sup> In

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<sup>45</sup> The procedure for obtaining a divorce *a mensa* costed between £300 and £500, while a divorce *a vinculo* could cost up to £1000. See Poovey, pp. 55-56.

<sup>46</sup> Poovey, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Caroline Sheridan was an upper-middle-class woman who married George Norton, the son of a Tory aristocrat with no money. The family was dependent on her earnings as a writer and on her Whig connections. She accused her husband of physical and emotional brutality. George Norton, in turn, removed their children from their house and brought Lord Melbourne to court, accusing him of being his wife's lover. The jury returned a verdict against Norton, but Caroline was still married to a man she loathed. Therefore, she wrote and published two pamphlets advocating for divorce and authority over her children (*English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854) and *Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill* (1855)). See Poovey, pp. 62-70.

<sup>48</sup> Poovey, p. 84.

other words, the Act did not recognise that a wife, as an individual subject, had the right to own and control property. In order to register further improvements in this respect, it is necessary to wait for the approval of the first Married Women's Property Act in 1870, thanks to which women could own as separate property the earnings acquired during marriage, investments, and legacies. Another problematic aspect in case of divorce was the issue of parental authority over children. In 1839, with the approval of the Infant Custody Act, mothers were given the chance to petition for the custody of children under the age of seven and request regular contact with the older ones. Before then, fathers retained absolute power over the infants. Thanks to the 1857 Divorce Act, women could be granted custody of children, unless they were found guilty of adultery.<sup>49</sup> Finally, the full press coverage of divorce cases exposed the minute details of domestic life with voyeuristic indulgence: daily newspapers such as *The Times* included divorce court columns that collapsed the demarcation between private and public, exposing individual vices to public scrutiny. The erosion of privacy perpetrated by newspapers revealed the gap between the rhetorically constructed happy marriage and the real struggles it represented, thriving on scandals that predominantly damaged the reputation of women.<sup>50</sup> Hence, even if divorce was legally viable, the publicity and visibility it entailed could have made it less desirable for those who wished to safeguard their status and privacy.<sup>51</sup>

As classical scholars have rightly noted, issues of marital unhappiness, divorce, control over property, and child custody informed the content of many classical burlesques staged in the 1850s and 1860s in the West End theatres of London.<sup>52</sup> Hence, starting from such a background, this thesis investigates the stance displayed by classical burlesque performances towards mid-Victorian gender politics and ideologies in order to question their alleged political alignment. However, before venturing into such analysis, it is necessary to illustrate what burlesques were and how their comicality worked in the nineteenth-century theatrical world. The next section will be devoted to the definition of

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<sup>49</sup> The situation improved in 1873, when a second Infant Custody Act extended mothers' rights to petition for the custody of their children up to the age of sixteen. See Griffin, p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> 'What can be tolerated as a private tragedy becomes morally intolerable and socially hazardous under the conditions of modern journalism. The becoming-known of personal scandal is seen as damaging to everyone, but of course most especially to women'. See Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 190.

<sup>51</sup> Leckie suggests that 'publicity was also understood to act as a deterrent to divorce in an argument that relied on the efficacy of scandal as a mechanism for social control (scandal, here, was not opposed to the law, but rather was an extension of the law in a different register)'. See Barbara Leckie, *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper and the Law, 1857-1914* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 101.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, E. Hall, 'Medea and British Legislation before the First World War' and Laura Monròs-Gaspar, 'Introduction: Why Classical Burlesque?', in *Victorian Classical Burlesques: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Laura Monròs-Gaspar (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 1-60 (pp. 29-30).

burlesque as a theatrical form of entertainment and to a survey of how it has been critically perceived from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

### 3. Nineteenth-Century Theatre and the Re-appraisal of Burlesque

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the population growth and the rebuilding of London as a global metropolis caused the addition, relocation, and redevelopment of entertainment venues that shaped the West End, the East End, and the South of London. The two patent houses of Covent Garden and Drury Lane – with the addition of the Haymarket Theatre during the summer season – could not satisfy the needs of increasingly diverse and numerous audiences and, therefore, ‘illegitimate’ theatres started springing up both north and south of the river Thames. Until 1843, these ‘minor’ venues could not legally perform any form of purely spoken drama and thus, in order to sidestep the ban, they resorted to the staging of burlettas, pantomimes, melodramas or any other genre accompanied by music. The status of the ‘minors’ was eventually recognised by the Theatre Regulation Act in 1843: after a long process of investigation conducted by a Select Committee appointed by the Lord Chamberlain, it was legally established that all venues licensed as theatres could perform whatever form of entertainment they wanted.<sup>53</sup>

The opening of the theatrical marketplace induced the accelerated decline of the former patent houses in the West End and, accordingly, the decline of the traditional forms of tragedy and comedy.<sup>54</sup> Eventually, Covent Garden was turned into an opera house, while Drury Lane was gradually transformed into a theatre of spectacle.<sup>55</sup> Conversely, the ‘minor’ theatres constellating the West End prospered, forming what Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow call a ‘theme park’<sup>56</sup> devoted to the entertainment of the theatregoers. Many West End venues offered light pieces such as burlesques and farces featuring in shorter programmes and performed in increasingly comfortable venues.<sup>57</sup> In the East End

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<sup>53</sup> The 1843 Theatre Regulation Act cancelled the monopoly over the legitimate forms of drama permitted at Covent Garden and Drury Lane (with the addition of the Haymarket in the summer season), stating that ‘patent houses and minor theatres alike could produce any genre they thought would turn a profit’. See Tracy Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 17-18. For a more detailed account of the competition between minor venues and the patent houses prior to 1843 Theatre Regulation Act see Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> According to Davis and Emeljanow, ‘[t]he year 1843 was a watershed for the large patent theatres. No longer able to command by right, they also came to realize that the market for “legitimate” drama was shrinking’. See Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), p. 194.

<sup>55</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, pp. 194, 208.

<sup>56</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, p. 175.

<sup>57</sup> For the sake of brevity, the outline of the West End theatres and their repertoires is here generalised. A more composite picture emerges, for example, from Jacky Bratton’s work, which is focused on the

of London, theatres such as the Pavilion, the Britannia, and the Standard entertained the lively theatrical spectators in their neighbourhood. They seem to have capitalised mainly on melodramas and pantomimes, insofar as these genres had a wider social appeal encompassing both the lower-class patrons living in the neighbourhood and those coming from further afield, including the middle classes.<sup>58</sup>

Within the West End area, not every theatre chose to stage burlesques during the mid-nineteenth century. As Richard Schoch notes, burlesques were never staged by the principal nineteenth-century actor-managers, such as W. C. Macready (Covent Garden and Drury Lane), Samuel Phelps (Sadler's Wells), and Charles Kean (Princess's). However, burlesques regularly featured in the repertoire of the Adelphi Theatre, of the Olympic Theatre and, most of all, of the Strand Theatre, under the management of the Swanborough family (1858-1887).<sup>59</sup> Often opening at holiday times, mid-Victorian burlesques parodied a range of serious sources, such as Greek tragedies, Shakespeare's plays, Italian operas, and melodramas. Different burlesques were staged simultaneously in different theatres: for instance, during the Christmas season of 1858, Robert Brough's epic burlesque *Iliad; or, The Siege of Troy* was staged at the Lyceum Theatre; Henry J. Byron's burlesque *Mazeppa* was performed at the Olympic Theatre; and Andrew Halliday's burlesque *Kenilworth* premiered at the Strand Theatre.<sup>60</sup> However, no burlesque author, theatre, or company specialised in the writing, mounting, or acting of a specific burlesque type. Likewise, mid-Victorian critics and intellectuals evaluated different kinds of burlesques following the same guidelines, regardless of the source they parodied. Despite their commercial success, burlesques were often regarded by their contemporaries as lacking any artistic value. For example, an anonymous contributor to

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influence that women managers had on the organisation and repertoire of theatres such as the Olympic, the Adelphi and the Strand. Bratton recognises how, other than farces and burlesques, dramatic adaptations of Dickens' novels, translations from the French and spectacular melodramas were also popular in the West End. See Jacky Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage: Marriage, Management and the Mapping of Gender in London, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 170-204. In *The West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery*, John Pick also illustrates the development of the West End as a theatrical district increasingly catering for the middle and upper classes, with a series of managerial choices aimed at discriminating and materially excluding the lower strata of society. See John Pick, *The West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery* (Eastbourne: Offord, 1983).

<sup>58</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, pp. 67-68, 90-92. The picture of East End theatrical entertainments is certainly more complicated: there were other theatres in the area, such as the Grecian, the Standard, the Effingham and the City of London. Davis and Emeljanow illustrate how their repertoires varied individually. For example, the Grecian, the Pavilion and the Standard sometimes featured operas in their programmes, while the Britannia, the Effingham and the City of London chose more popular forms of entertainment. See Davis and Emeljanow, p. 94.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, ed. by Richard Schoch (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. xi-xlvi (pp. xxviii-xxix).

<sup>60</sup> 'THE CHRISTMAS ENTERTAINMENTS', *Era*, 26 December 1858, pp. 11-12.

the *Sunday Times* wondered ‘what good can come of burlesque writing, in the long run? What good is there in it? [...] Is the drama the better for it?’.<sup>61</sup> The critic conceived burlesques as mere repositories of vulgar jokes and lavish scenic effects. More explicitly, in a letter to Fanny Kemble, William Bodham Donne, the Examiner of Plays, considered burlesques as testifying to ‘the decline, if not the utter decay of all dramatic feeling’.<sup>62</sup>

Theatre historians have only recently started to recognise the cultural value of Victorian burlesque as a dramatic genre, even if its first systematic study dates back to the nineteenth century. William Davenport Adams’ *A Book of Burlesque: Sketches of English Stage Travesty and Parody* is constructed as a survey of the origins of theatrical burlesque in the seventeenth century, its codification and diffusion from the ’30s to the ’60s of the nineteenth century, and its gradual decline in the 1870s. One of the limitations of this study is explicitly acknowledged by the author himself: Adams focused his attention on the ‘literary rather than the histrionic side of burlesque’<sup>63</sup>, thus neglecting the importance of performative elements in the parodic process of meaning-making. From Adams’ perspective, James Robinson Planché is considered the creator of two different kinds of burlesque, namely the one inspired by Greek and Roman mythology and the other parodying fairy tales. However, in praising him as a burlesque author, Adams ignores the fact that Planché referred to his own plays as extravaganzas. Planché believed that extravaganzas corresponded to ‘the whimsical treatment of a poetical subject’<sup>64</sup>, while burlesque was ‘the broad caricature of a tragedy or a serious opera’.<sup>65</sup> Adams connects instead extravaganzas to ‘bouffoneries musicales’<sup>66</sup> and identifies burlesque rather confusingly with ‘definite and deliberate travesties of subjects previously existent’.<sup>67</sup> As it appears from the aforementioned definitions, the distinction between the two theatrical genres is not clear-cut and has therefore been the subject of scholarly dispute over the years.

After this first manifestation of interest, burlesque either disappeared from the histories of British theatre or was regarded as representing the descent into mere spectacle, the

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Burlesque Writing’, *Sunday Times*, 29 April 1860, p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> *William Bodham Donne and his Friends*, ed. by Catharine Bodham Donne Johnson (New York: E. P. Dutton & co., 1905), p. 202.

<sup>63</sup> Adams acknowledges that his ‘business has been with the literary rather than the histrionic side of burlesque’. See William Davenport Adams, *A Book of Burlesque: Sketches of English Stage Travesty and Parody* (London: Henry & Co, 1891), p. iii.

<sup>64</sup> James Robinson Planché, *The Recollections and Reflections of J. R. Planché: A Professional Autobiography*, 2 vols (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1872), II, 43.

<sup>65</sup> Planché, *Recollections*, II, 44-45.

<sup>66</sup> W. Adams, *A Book of Burlesque*, p. iii.

<sup>67</sup> W. Adams, *A Book of Burlesque*, p. iv.



domination of empty laughter and the legitimisation of the taste for vulgarity. Theatre historians writing in the middle of the twentieth century tend to judge Victorian burlesque on the basis of its resemblance to the great tradition of stage satire of the eighteenth century. George Rowell, for instance, laments the lack of conventions like those adopted by Henry Fielding or Richard B. Sheridan, necessary in his view to make a uniform theatrical genre out of nineteenth-century burlesques.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, in *A History of English Drama*, Allardyce Nicoll believes that Victorian burlesques were founded on ‘the love of the fantastic, the impossibly exaggerated and the patently absurd’<sup>69</sup> rather than being sustained by the critical purposes animating plays such as *The Rehearsal* or *The Critic*. In the same vein, Victor Clinton-Baddeley distinguishes between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century burlesques by means of a terminological separation: Buckingham, Fielding, Sheridan, and Canning wrote proper ‘burlesques’, while nineteenth-century playwrights produced ‘extravaganzas’, that is ‘burlesque without an object, burlesque weakened into farce, a whimsical entertainment [...]’.<sup>70</sup>

It is only in the 1980s, with the work of Michael Booth, that Victorian burlesque is approached from a new perspective. Instead of considering nineteenth-century theatre as ‘a vast sea of theatrical trivia and downright badness, a drama that slumbered fitfully for a hundred years while the glorious dawn of Shaw and Oscar Wilde waited’<sup>71</sup>, Booth suggests changing the premises according to which Victorian dramatic genres are evaluated. In the case of burlesque, this means abandoning the eighteenth-century theatrical canon as a point of comparison and reassessing burlesque as a distinct phenomenon. In his *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre*, Booth acknowledges the difficulty of distinguishing Victorian theatrical burlesque from its predecessor, that is the genre of extravaganza, popularised in 1830s and 1840s by Planché.<sup>72</sup> The term ‘burlesque’ is understood as ‘the very coexistence [...] of the domestic and contemporary milieu with the fairy-tale, classical legend, or historical event dramatized’.<sup>73</sup> This element is a component of both the genre of extravaganzas and of

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<sup>68</sup> According to Rowell, ‘there is little in mid-Victorian burlesque to match Fielding’s or Sheridan’s skill in raising a recognisable theatrical style or convention to the level of inspired absurdity’. George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre, 1792-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 72.

<sup>69</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, *History of English Drama*, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), v: *Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900*, p. 147.

<sup>70</sup> Victor Clinton-Baddeley, *The Burlesque Tradition in the English Theatre after 1660* (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 109.

<sup>71</sup> Michael Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Booth, *Prefaces*, p. 174 and Michael Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 196.

<sup>73</sup> Booth, *Prefaces*, p. 174

mid-nineteenth-century burlesque. According to Booth, the difference between the two lies in the heightening of the burlesque – the parodic element – noticeable from the 1850s onwards. Whatever source burlesque was reworking, be it taken from classical mythology or contemporary melodrama, Booth believes that there is a constant pattern of transformation meant to ‘reduce character and situation to the level of domestic life, the humbler the better, and violently juxtapose them with the topography, social life, and supposed comic eccentricity of modern London’.<sup>74</sup> The processes of diminution and domestication of both characters and contexts is carried out with a ‘disrespectful’<sup>75</sup> attitude towards the canon and authorities represented by the sources. Burlesque inspiration is so eclectic as to include every opera, melodrama, classical tragedy or, in general, any serious production that could be successfully parodied.<sup>76</sup>

Schoch develops a similar approach towards the various manifestations of Victorian burlesque. His work mainly focuses on those dramatic texts that parody Shakespeare’s tragedies, but he acknowledges the variety of inspiration for burlesque, which is considered ‘indiscriminate in taste’<sup>77</sup> since it ‘excepted no areas of knowledge from its parodic assault’.<sup>78</sup> According to Schoch, the requisite for a play to be successfully burlesqued is that it had to be known by the target audience, whose understanding entailed the survival and the success of the genre for almost a century. The audience was required to possess a certain degree of competency with the hypotexts being rewritten and with the contextual areas of knowledge that burlesques interrogated. Therefore, Schoch believes that these plays ‘never formed part of middle-class attempts to educate mass audiences through popular culture’<sup>79</sup>, but they were rather directed to the enjoyment of the relatively educated middle classes.<sup>80</sup>

Schoch enumerates all the characteristics of burlesque that remained constant from the 1840s to the end of the nineteenth century:

[r]hymed couplets in either a paraphrase or parody of [...] original text [...]; the transposition of characters from ‘high’ to ‘low’ and of events from past to present [...]; the ludicrous re-enactment of classic scenes [...]; a pronounced theatrical bias, with an emphasis on stage business, sight gags, and special effects [...]; relentless puns [...]; topical

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<sup>74</sup> Booth, *Prefaces*, p. 184.

<sup>75</sup> Booth, *Prefaces*, p. 185.

<sup>76</sup> Booth, *Prefaces*, p. 182.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Schoch, *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 4.

<sup>79</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 114.

<sup>80</sup> Schoch warns against a simplistic use of the term ‘middle class’ to describe burlesque audiences, since ‘the Victorian middle class was never a singular social category’. See Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 113.

references to life in London, ranging from the price of butter to the Trafalgar Square riots; and soliloquies and set pieces rewritten as lyrics to familiar songs, whether popular, operatic, or even minstrel [...].<sup>81</sup>

Among these features, the topicality of burlesque is considered responsible for the genre's decline in fashion and critical appreciation. Being context-dependent, burlesque humorous references to contemporaneity rapidly became unintelligible. Hence, the dramatic pieces began to be regarded as frivolous or were thoroughly neglected.<sup>82</sup> This said, Schoch does not imply that Victorian burlesques represented high manifestations of culture but suggests that they still open themselves to multiple and compelling possibilities of interpretation.<sup>83</sup>

In matters of definition, Schoch adopts a more radical approach: he denies the existence of any meaningful difference between extravaganzas and burlesques, since the terms were used interchangeably by the authors themselves.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, rather than focusing on what burlesque *is*, Schoch tries to understand what it *does*. Shifting from a formal to a functional definition, Schoch believes that '[w]hether originally labelled burlesques, travesties, extravaganzas – or some combination thereof – the plays [...] all present themselves as comic misquotations of original "legitimate" plays and performances'.<sup>85</sup> This research is largely informed by Schoch's approach in considering wordy definitions as unnecessary and imprecise. The term burlesque will therefore be used to encompass both mid-Victorian burlesques and extravaganzas.

#### 4. Burlesquing the Classics

From the history of burlesque reception traced above, it emerges that those theatre historians who have engaged with Victorian burlesque have either considered the genre as a whole or focused solely on the plays that satirise Shakespeare's tragedies. Classical burlesques, on the other hand, have only been studied by classical scholars, who have investigated the reception and parodic transformation of Greek and Roman tragedies and epic poems into nineteenth-century comic theatrical pieces. Such an interest developed at

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<sup>81</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 12.

<sup>82</sup> According to Schoch, '[w]ritten practically overnight, rehearsed in a week, and performed for a month or two, these comic plays were attractive only as long as they remain novel'. Therefore, it is not surprising that 'the custodians of Victorian cultural memory have ignored theatrical burlesque when even its own practitioners were indifferent to preserving a documentary record'. See Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 17.

<sup>83</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> '[...] the terms "burlesque", "travesty", and even "extravaganza" were used interchangeably by playwrights, managers, actors, critics, and spectators alike'. See Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xiii and Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 18.

<sup>85</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 18-19.

the turn of the twenty-first century with the pioneering studies of Hall. Her seminal article ‘Medea and British Legislation before the First World War’ connects burlesque portrayals of the Euripidean heroine with nineteenth-century debates concerning divorce legislation and women’s rights.<sup>86</sup> Between 1845 and 1856, four burlesques rewrote the story of Medea: Planché’s *The Golden Fleece; or, Jason in Colchis and Medea in Corinth* (Haymarket Theatre, 1845); Jack Wooler’s *Jason and Medea: A Comic. Heroic. Tragic. Operatic. Burlesque-Spectacular Extravaganza* (Grecian Saloon, 1851); Mark Lemon’s *Medea; or, A Libel on the Lady of Colchis* (Adelphi Theatre, 1856); Robert Brough’s *Medea; or, The Best of Mothers with a Brute of Husband* (Olympic Theatre, 1856). According to Hall, these four plays explore the social reality that Medea would encounter if abandoned in Victorian England, echoing the contemporary parliamentary debates over women’s rights. As a nineteenth-century woman, Medea had no property of her own and would have therefore faced poverty, starvation, and despair.<sup>87</sup>

Hall, together with Fiona Macintosh, is also the author of a more comprehensive study that traces an extensive panorama of all the adaptations, translations, and performances of Greek tragedies for the British stage between 1600 and 1914. The chapter in *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre* that is dedicated to Victorian classical burlesque describes its origins as combining three elements: the parodic potential of burlesque is seen as connected to the British tradition of theatrical satires popular in the seventeenth century; its musical component is said to derive from the influence of eighteenth-century ballad opera, such as John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728); the element of spectacle is associated with the interactions with fairground entertainments that often included scenes inspired by classical mythology. However, Hall and Macintosh believe that Kane O’Hara’s classical burlettas are the closest ancestors of Victorian classical burlesque. Pieces such as *Midas* (1762) or *The Golden Pippin* (1763) represent the same mixture of music, spectacle, and parody that will be central to the evolution of burlesque in the Victorian age.<sup>88</sup> In particular, *Midas* could have directly influenced nineteenth-century

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<sup>86</sup> E. Hall, ‘Medea and British Legislation before the First World War’, pp. 42-77.

<sup>87</sup> E. Hall, ‘Medea and British Legislation before the First World War’, pp. 53-61. Macintosh analyses the Medea burlesques from the same perspective. See Fiona Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed: Burlesque and Gender on the Mid-Victorian Stage’, in *Medea in Performance 1500-2000*, ed. by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Oliver Taplin (Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre of the University of Oxford, 2000), pp. 75-99.

<sup>88</sup> Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1600-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 356.

burlesque authors, since it remained part of London's theatrical repertoire until the 1830s.<sup>89</sup>

As Hall and Macintosh note, classical burlesque's usual combination of songs, puns, and topical references is enriched with (mis-)quotations taken from Greek tragedies or epic poems. Furthermore, from the 1840s, classical burlesques specialize in satirizing not only a mythological story in itself but also the conventions of Greek drama, such as the presence of the chorus and the use of specific modes of expression.<sup>90</sup> Hall and Macintosh conceive burlesque as a manifestation of nineteenth-century popular culture: their thesis is that burlesque acted as a medium through which non-educated spectators belonging to the lower-middle and working classes could enter into close contact with the classics, without having a formal training in Greek or Latin.<sup>91</sup> From their perspective, not only did working-class spectators regularly attend West End theatres, but they also witnessed classical burlesque performances in the neighborhood theatres located in the East End and south London.

Such a conception has spread in academia and has influenced other classical scholars who have engaged in the study of Victorian classical burlesque. Conceiving burlesque as a popular form of entertainment, Laura Monròs-Gaspar believes that 'burlesque audiences covered the entire social spectrum [...]. The spectators' acquaintance with the mythological figures evidences the increasing access of the middle and lower classes to antiquity'.<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, she imagines a system where the various degrees of competency of the socially stratified audience correspond to an equally stratified understanding: if the educated middle-class patrons were likely to recognise the similarities and differences with the classical hypotexts, the 'less learned audiences'<sup>93</sup> would have probably appreciated more topical references or comical sketches.

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<sup>89</sup> For example, the renowned manageress Madame Vestris acted as Apollo in Kane O'Hara's *Midas* (Haymarket Theatre, 1825). Moreover, for his first classical extravaganza, *Olympic Revels; or, Prometheus and Pandora*, Planché directly borrowed melodies and songs from Kane O'Hara's burletta. See Donald Roy, 'Introduction', in *Plays by James Robinson Planché*, ed. by Donald Roy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 1-35 (pp. 9-10).

<sup>90</sup> Hall and Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre*, p. 365.

<sup>91</sup> According to Hall and Macintosh, classical burlesques have an 'evidential value in terms of the access to classical culture available in the mid-nineteenth century to working- and lower-middle-class people, of both sexes, who had little or no formal training in Latin or Greek'. See Hall and Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre*, p. 350.

<sup>92</sup> Laura Monròs-Gaspar, "'The Fairest One with Golden Locks': Parodying Helen on the Modern Stage', in *Adaptations, Versions and Perversions in Modern British Drama*, ed. by Ignacio R. Gay (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 12-25 (p. 16). A similar view is articulated in Laura Monròs-Gaspar, *Cassandra the Fortune-Teller: Prophets, Gipsies and Victorian Burlesque* (Bari: Levante Editori, 2011), p. 156.

<sup>93</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 12.

Monròs-Gaspar focuses on the burlesque versions of the myths of Helen and Cassandra drawing on Lotman's semiotic theories to justify the interconnectedness of nineteenth-century real life, theatrical representations, and the visual arts.<sup>94</sup> In her analysis, Helen appears as endowed with an intellectual superiority that separates her from her male counterparts, who merely parody the epic heroes; while Cassandra represents the trope of the woman as fortune-teller with dangerous access to knowledge.<sup>95</sup> In her monograph dedicated to Cassandra, Monròs-Gaspar focuses at length on translations of Homeric epic, popular fairground entertainments, equestrian and theatrical burlesques, conceiving them as contributing to the creation of a semiotic substratum that entangles the conflicting views on women and knowledge as both dubious and fascinating.

Moreover, Monròs-Gaspar has critically edited four classical burlesques centred on myths whose protagonists are strong-minded women, namely Edward L. Blanchard's *Antigone Travestie* (Strand Theatre, 1845), Frank Talfourd's *Alcestis, the Original Strong-Minded Woman* (Strand Theatre, 1850), Brough's *Medea; or, The Best of Mothers with a Brute of Husband* (Olympic Theatre, 1856) and Talfourd's *Electra in a New Electric Light* (Haymarket Theatre, 1859). Monròs-Gaspar refers to the notion of strong-mindedness as a construct pointing to a definite socio-political referent: the strong-minded women of the nineteenth century possessed qualities that were regarded as more appropriate to men.<sup>96</sup> The burlesque reinterpretation of Antigone, Alcestis, Medea and Electra emphasizes, from her point of view, their masculine traits of personality and their ability to move in the male-dominated public sphere of action, thus giving 'a deeply rebellious view of the roles of women in society'.<sup>97</sup> Both Antigone and Electra interfere in male politics, while Alcestis and Medea give voice to the disillusionment of marriage, the hardships of separation and the legal vulnerability of children immediately before and after the approval of the Matrimonial Causes Act. Therefore, according to Monròs-Gaspar, even if burlesque lacks an explicitly political discourse, these four examples manifest the syncretism of classical heroines with Victorian women, who are given a voice on stage thanks to the humorous framework of the genre.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Monròs-Gaspar refers to Lotman's semiotic triangle 'between real human behaviour, theatre and the visual arts [...] in nineteenth-century Russian theatre' as underlying her analysis on Victorian classical burlesques. Monròs-Gaspar, *Cassandra the Fortune-Teller*, pp. 17-18 and Monròs-Gaspar, 'Parodying Helen', p. 12.

<sup>95</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, *Cassandra the Fortune-Teller*, p. 186 and Monròs-Gaspar, 'Parodying Helen', p. 20.

<sup>96</sup> Monros-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 33.

<sup>97</sup> Monros-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 13.

<sup>98</sup> Monros-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 39.

Edmund Richardson adopts a more radical approach in his analysis of Brough's *Medea* as a manifestation of the reformist political position of the author.<sup>99</sup> Specifically, Jason's failure in his attempt to tame the savage Medea is seen as embodying the flawed rhetoric of the Crimean War. Jason, whose costume resembles the uniform of a British redcoat, shows ineptitude in war and combat. His only option to improve his social position is marrying into the royal family.<sup>100</sup> Medea, in turn, appears as a mid-Victorian abandoned wife whose terrible deeds are exclusively attributable to the mistreatment suffered at the hands of her husband. Deserted by Jason but still formally married, Brough's Medea has no legal identity.<sup>101</sup> In eliciting the public's sympathy towards the abandoned wife, Brough's burlesque brings to the fore the interests of the poor and humble. Thus, according to Richardson, Brough dispossesses the upper echelons of British society of their exclusive mastery over the classics.<sup>102</sup> In this sense, Richardson postulates a rather unconvincing association between classical burlesque and political radicalism. He believes that Brough's *Medea* acted as a watershed for the redefinition of the conventions of the genre: 'when classical burlesque was derided as [...] insignificant, timorous and apolitical, Brough politicised, radicalised and reinvigorated it'.<sup>103</sup>

More recently, in her unpublished doctoral thesis and in her article 'Myth and popular culture: Brough's Victorian Burlesque *Medea* as a heterotopic cultural space', Marta Villalba Lázaro generally describes mid-Victorian classical burlesque as 'a form of popular theatre, [...] primarily addressed to the lower classes'.<sup>104</sup> She focuses on Brough's *Medea* as a product of popular culture which may be interpreted as an example of heterotopia, defined after Michel Foucault as 'a combination of metaphorical fields that enables the contestation of hegemonic structures of power'.<sup>105</sup> Villalba Lázaro discusses Brough's *Medea* as a site of heterotopic juxtapositions enabling the author to critique mid-Victorian gender politics. For instance, she argues that Medea

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<sup>99</sup> See Edmund Richardson, 'A Conjugal Lesson: Robert Brough's *Medea* and the Discourse of Mid-Victorian Britain', *Ramus*, 32 (2003), 57-83 (p. 57) and Edmund Richardson, *Classical Victorians: Scholars, Scoundrels and Generals in Pursuit of Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 121.

<sup>100</sup> Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, p. 118.

<sup>101</sup> Richardson, 'A Conjugal Lesson', pp. 62-63, 70, and Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, pp. 118, 120-121.

<sup>102</sup> According to Richardson, Brough 'took the past away from the most powerful in the land, those "heroes of antiquity"', and used it to advance the cause of the abandoned family, the forgotten soldier'. See Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, p. 125.

<sup>103</sup> Richardson, 'A Conjugal Lesson', p. 79.

<sup>104</sup> Marta Villalba Lázaro, 'Myth and popular culture: Brough's Victorian Burlesque *Medea* as a heterotopic cultural space', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, (2021), 1-15 (p. 4) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2021.1932076>> [accessed 26 January 2022].

<sup>105</sup> Villalba Lázaro, 'Myth and popular culture', p. 2.

simultaneously moves in the realms of both high (ancient) and low (popular, modern) culture: not only is she presented as the barbarian wife of the Greek hero Jason following Euripides' tragedy but, by means of topical references, she is also metaphorically foregrounded as a mid-Victorian working-class woman struggling for the recognition of her rights as an abandoned wife and mother. Hence, whilst developing against the backdrop of ancient Greece, Brough's *Medea* raises serious concerns over the treatment of women in the mid-Victorian age.<sup>106</sup>

In *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, Rachel B. Davies focuses instead on those burlesques derived from ancient epics. She analyses the simultaneous manifestation of interest in both nineteenth-century archaeological discoveries in Asia Minor, which were widely discussed in the press of the time, and Homer's and Virgil's epic poems, which became privileged subjects of theatrical burlesques.<sup>107</sup> These plays engage with the representation of modern cities 'by revivifying Troy and Carthage as imaginary spaces where the mythical past could be recreated in the light of present-day events'.<sup>108</sup> The fate of the city of London and that of the British Empire are ironically linked to those mythical cities whose destruction serves as a *memento mori* for modernity. As far as audiences are concerned, Davies advocates for a composite public attending classical burlesque performances. Departing from Schoch's idea of 'competent audiences' as a pre-requisite for understanding burlesque satirical subversions, Davies believes that knowledge of the classics at a basic level was enough for audience members to understand the humour of epic burlesques. Moreover, she claims that such knowledge was possibly owned by the lower-middle- and working-class people who read cheap and widespread publications outlining mythological plots and characters.<sup>109</sup>

Davies is also the editor of four Victorian epic burlesques, namely Thomas Dibdin's *Melodrama Mad!; or, The Siege of Troy* (Surrey Theatre, 1819), Planché's *Telemachus; or, The Island of Calypso* (Olympic Theatre, 1834), Brough's *Iliad; or, The Siege of Troy* (Lyceum Theatre, 1858) and Francis Burnand's *Ulysses; or The Ironclad Warrior and the Little Tug of War* (St James's Theatre, 1865). Davies believes that these four burlesques exploit two main strategies enabled by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: while the

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<sup>106</sup> Villalba Lázaro, 'Myth and popular culture', pp. 6-11. See also Marta Villalba Lázaro, 'Victorian Medeas: The Convergence of Class, Gender and Radical Politics in Literary Rewritings of the Classical Myth' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Universitat de les Illes Balears, 2018), pp. 99-134.

<sup>107</sup> Rachel B. Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians: The Drama of Classical Ruins in the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>108</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 266.

<sup>109</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 224.



references to the Trojan war facilitate comparisons with Shakespeare's plays and contemporary conflicts, the peregrinations of Odysseus become a romantic travelogue.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, allusions to the adulterous relationship between Helen and Paris, and to Ulysses' romantic affairs during his voyage, allowed burlesque playwrights to reference the conflicting perceptions of marriage and infidelity characterising the age.<sup>111</sup>

This summary shows that classical scholars have generally concurred in their interpretation of classical burlesques as voicing their authors' concerns about mid-Victorian gender politics whilst attracting popular audiences. However, as stated above, this research departs from such an accepted narrative, approaching classical burlesques from a more evidence-based methodological standpoint which will be outlined in the following section.

## 5. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In the past twenty years, a new interest has spread in academia around mid-Victorian classical burlesques, culminating in the publication of Monròs-Gaspar's and Davies' anthologies mentioned above. Classicists have mainly approached classical burlesques through the theoretical lens of classical reception. Classical reception accounts for the seepage of Greek and Roman tragedies or epic poems into nineteenth-century culture in complex and multiple ways. Charles Martindale, in re-appropriating Jauss' reception paradigm, asserts that the classics are not only endowed with meaning in themselves, but are also experienced, altered, and assimilated by users located in a precise historical moment.<sup>112</sup> Similarly, Lorna Hardwick posits that the reception of the classics is 'concerned not only with individual texts and their relationship with one another but also with the broader cultural processes which shape and make up those relationships'.<sup>113</sup> Hence, burlesque may be seen as a cultural product revealing the attitudes with which the Victorians perceived and interpreted the classical world in their own historical age. Indeed, as the previous survey has shown, classical scholars have mainly focussed on the process of adaptation of source texts into mid-nineteenth-century burlesque scripts: their

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<sup>110</sup> Rachel B. Davies, 'Classical Burlesques and Homeric Epic', in *Victorian Epic Burlesques: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Entertainments after Homer*, ed. by Rachel B. Davies (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 1-31 (p. 10).

<sup>111</sup> Davies, 'Classical Burlesques and Homeric Epic', p. 17.

<sup>112</sup> Jauss paradigm 'would acknowledge the historicity of texts, but also allow for the aesthetic response of readers in the present (any present of reading)'. See Charles Martindale, 'Introduction: Thinking Through Reception', in *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, ed. by Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 1-13 (pp. 3-6).

<sup>113</sup> Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 5.

analyses show how, hypothetically, classical burlesques transformed the classics so as to comment on mid-Victorian gender politics and attract popular audiences.

Whilst acknowledging the relations that classical burlesques have with their source texts, this research aims at focussing on the *performances* of classical burlesques as crucially endowed with comicality. Therefore, I follow a methodology rooted in the scholarly field of theatre history and historiography. After Thomas Postlewait, I propose an evidence-based investigation of classical burlesque performances and their audiences.<sup>114</sup> Firstly, this thesis relies on archival research for the collection of a satisfactorily varied and substantial corpus of primary and secondary sources. The Lord Chamberlain's Plays Collection in the British Library, which preserves the theatrical pieces performed on British stages until 1968, holds the scripts that were submitted for censorship. In the case of unpublished pieces, the manuscripts provide surviving written evidence of the text prior to the stage performance; whereas, in the case of published plays, when one or more texts survive, the consultation of manuscripts allows the researcher to analyse and evaluate editorial choices in terms of changes or omissions.<sup>115</sup> The Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Collection has been mainly useful for the retrieval of playbills, while newspaper archives, including the digitalised version of the British Newspaper Archive, allowed the collection of performance reviews and, occasionally, visual materials portraying performers and/or stage settings.

Once primary sources are gathered, what Maggie Gale calls the process of 'archiving the already archived'<sup>116</sup> takes place: materials must be re-catalogued and re-arranged in a new organic context by the researcher, who actively transforms scattered fragments of the past into meaningful units of memory.<sup>117</sup> In this phase of work, the limitations of the archive, together with the problematic nature of historical evidence, must be taken into consideration. Specifically, the archival prioritisation of the written word affects our knowledge of Victorian burlesque performances, insofar as the genre's aural and visual components are almost impossible to recover. Following Diana Taylor's demystification

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<sup>114</sup> Thomas Postlewait, 'Historiography and the Theatrical Event: A Primer with Twelve Cruxes', *Theatre Journal*, 43 (1991), 157-178 (p. 157). See also Thomas Postlewait and Charlotte M. Canning, 'Representing the Past: An Introduction on Five Themes', in *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography*, ed. by Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), pp. 1-34 (p. 1).

<sup>115</sup> Among the burlesques examined for this research, one play survives only in its manuscript version, namely Mark Lemon, *Medea*, British Library Add. MS 52960 (L).

<sup>116</sup> Maggie Gale and Ann Featherstone, 'The Imperative of the Archive: Creative Archive Research', in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. by Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), pp. 17-40 (p. 19).

<sup>117</sup> Carolyn Steedman, 'The Space of Memory: In an Archive', *History of the Human Sciences*, 11 (1998), 65-83 (pp. 67-68).

of the archive's omniscience and stability, it must be acknowledged that gestures, dance, and singing elude the written text.<sup>118</sup> Taylor opposes the mutability of such embodied practices, which constitute the 'repertoire'<sup>119</sup>, to the supposedly fixed material held in archives. Furthermore, as Schoch notes, since burlesque thrives on topicality, its texts are often subject to impromptu interpolation through the addition, revision, or deletion of jokes, which signal the genre's ephemerality.<sup>120</sup> Finally, the inherent biases of performance reviews and commentaries must be considered: as Postlewait notes, reviews are deeply entrenched in the specific moral, social, political, and aesthetic codes of representation characterising both reviewers as individuals and as members of society at a given time in the past. In addition, the codes of interpretation of twenty-first-century historians are inevitably superimposed on the event as described by contemporary documents. Hence, the analyses of evidence documenting an historical event are to be conceived as interpretative approximations.<sup>121</sup>

The predominance of textual evidence and its (un-)reliability emerge as issues which problematise the investigation of classical burlesque performances. However, despite such limitations, this research will attempt at bridging the gap between textual evidence and performance, as it conceives classical burlesque scripts as *texts to be performed*. Following Raymond Williams, this research relies on contextual information which elucidates the conditions of burlesque performances. In *Drama in Performance*, Williams argues that a general appreciation of the 'conditions of performance'<sup>122</sup> – e.g., socio-political background and dramatic conventions – is crucial for capturing the performative elements which characterise a given play at a given time in the past. In other words, 'if properly "read" within the context prescribed by those conditions, the dramatic text will utter its own language of physical action and gesture'.<sup>123</sup>

In order to unearth their 'conditions of performance', I will read classical burlesques against the backdrop of the notions of 'intertheatricality' and 'repertoire', respectively developed by Jacky Bratton and Tracy Davis. In *New Readings in Theatre History*, Bratton asserts that 'all entertainments [...] performed within a single theatrical tradition

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<sup>118</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 19-20.

<sup>119</sup> Taylor, p. 20.

<sup>120</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>121</sup> Postlewait, 'Historiography and the Theatrical Event', p. 167.

<sup>122</sup> Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance*, with a new introduction and bibliography by Graham Holderness (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 16.

<sup>123</sup> Graham Holderness, 'Introduction to this Edition', in Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance*, pp. 1-14 (p. 4).

are more or less interdependent'.<sup>124</sup> This happens because both performers and spectators share a background 'knowingness'<sup>125</sup> of previous theatrical productions that influences both the acting and watching of every new performance. Davis starts from the same premises, identifying 'repertoire' as 'that which constitutes the day-to-day competencies of performers and audiences to make and understand theatre, drawing upon their familiarity with aesthetic conventions, contemporary politics, and cultural preoccupations'.<sup>126</sup> She specifies that evidence of 'repertoire' can be found in a network of 'associational, polytextual, intertheatrically citational, recombinant patterns'<sup>127</sup>, that more or less explicitly link performances to one another. The notions of 'intertheatricality' and 'repertoire' may be used to highlight shared performative conventions between different kinds of burlesques (e. g. classical, Shakespearian, operatic, and melodramatic burlesque) and different theatrical genres of the mid-Victorian age.

More specifically, I will focus on the investigation of the lifestyle of classical burlesque authors, their (auto)biographies, novels, comedies, and farces as potentially manifesting their political (dis)alignment. In addition, and perhaps crucially, I will evaluate the acting styles of nineteenth-century comic burlesque performers, interrogating primary evidence such as nineteenth-century performance reviews, memoirs, and commentaries. Moreover, I will consider stage directions, as they offer explicit indications of the tone and stance of performers on stage, as well as of scenic arrangements. Finally, I will evaluate how the distinctive elements of burlesque language – slang terms, rhymes, and sequences of puns – may have had humorous consequences when uttered on stage. In this way, this research will highlight the discrepancy between the literary meaning of classical burlesque scripts, which seemingly take the side of women in their early battles for independence as classicists have suggested, and the comicality of performances, in which the seriousness of such claims is drastically downplayed.

The synthesis of findings of my historical investigation is bound to involve a certain degree of speculation. This is due to the fact that performances of classical burlesques are inevitably transient in nature. Similarly, although interrogating both descriptive accounts

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<sup>124</sup> Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 37-38.

<sup>125</sup> Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, p. 37.

<sup>126</sup> Tracy Davis, 'Introduction: Repertoire', in *The Broadview Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Performance*, ed. by Tracy Davis (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2012), pp. 13-26 (p. 13).

<sup>127</sup> T. Davis, 'Introduction: Repertoire', p. 14.

and more empirical data such as the income of potential spectators, it is hardly possible to describe the composition of classical burlesque audiences in absolute terms. Hence, this thesis does not propose itself as an exhaustive narration, but rather as an attempt at historical approximation advocating for the inherent comicality of classical burlesque performances and for their general appeal to middle-class audiences.

### 5.1 The Performance of Gender

This research also focuses on the performance of gender in a selection of classical burlesques, since classicists have considered gender representations as crucially manifesting the political alignment of burlesques. Although this thesis does not offer a feminist reading of classical burlesque performances, it partially relies on theories developed in the field of gender studies whilst also being indebted to the work of feminist theatre historians such as Davis and Bratton. Firstly, throughout this thesis, the term *masculinity*, as opposed to *manliness*, will be employed: even though it started being used regularly only after the Second World War, *masculinity* accounts for a plurality which is not embedded in the term *manliness*, a nineteenth-century monolithic indicator of the standard ideal of manhood.<sup>128</sup> This research illustrates how different models of masculinity were staged and parodied in classical burlesques performances (for example, the ‘fast’ young man and the muscular hero), as they developed either against or according to the dominant ideal of mid-Victorian manliness, corresponding to the middle-class *paterfamilias*.

Secondly, this research acknowledges the patriarchal bias governing theatrical performances of classical burlesques during the mid-nineteenth century: these plays were written by exclusively male authors and possibly enjoyed by a male-dominated audience. According to theories first developed in the field of film studies, their perspective, or ‘gaze’, influences the representation of women as sexual objects for the consumption of male heterosexual pleasure. Sue-Ellen Case, who adapted the concept of the ‘male gaze’ to theatrical experiences, explains how it ‘asserts that the representations of women are perceived as they are seen by men’.<sup>129</sup> In a similar fashion, Jill Dolan points at the uneasiness experienced by the feminist spectator of canonical drama when she acknowledges that her gaze is ideologically driven by staging techniques – such as

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<sup>128</sup> For the differentiation between the concepts of manliness and masculinity see John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 2-3.

<sup>129</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and the Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), p. 119.

entrances, exits, dialogues – that encourage the adoption of a voyeuristically male perception of femininity.<sup>130</sup>

In mid-Victorian classical burlesques, actresses were dressed in scanty costumes which revealed their bodies dancing on stage. Several scholars have argued that the bodies of burlesque actresses were fetishized for the enjoyment of male spectators and even exploited by male theatre managers and dramatic authors who capitalised on female performers' attractive looks and saucy attitudes. However, this research follows in the footsteps of Davis' and Bratton's investigations, respectively articulated in *Actresses as Working Women* and *The Making of the West End Stage*, as it challenges the passivity attributed to actresses in the nineteenth-century theatrical industry.<sup>131</sup> This thesis claims that burlesque actresses were highly skilled professionals, who may have had agency and control over the development of their careers.

Finally, this research aims at investigating the manifold impact that the practice of cross-dressing had on the performance of gender in mid-Victorian classical burlesques. The goal of Victorian burlesque cross-dressers was not that of realistically portraying men or women. The imperfect disguise of the performers was clearly recognisable and, therefore, humorous. Being evidently non-mimetic, the instances of cross-dressing found in burlesques seem instead to be directed towards the staging of parodic caricatures of gendered images and behaviours. Hence, cross-dressing in classical burlesque may be seen as comically exposing the artificial and culturally specific nature of mid-Victorian stereotypes of manhood and womanhood. Following the pioneering studies of Judith Butler, this thesis conceives cross-dressing as implicitly foregrounding gender as performative, as it corresponds to the reiterated performance of specific acts that are culturally and historically linked to the notions of masculinity and femininity.<sup>132</sup>

The corpus of classical burlesques analysed for this research shows how male performers acted predominantly female protagonist roles, such as mythological degenerate mothers (such as Medea) and strong-minded queens (such as Dido). Male cross-dressed actors caricatured female rebelliousness exaggerating women's reactions and satirising their emotional instability. In these instances, male-to-female cross-

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<sup>130</sup> Dolan writes '[t]he woman spectator finds herself, once again, the site of the conduit for an identificatory relationship between men, a gift in a male exchange that does not benefit her at all'. See Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as a Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), p. 14.

<sup>131</sup> See Tracy Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991) and Jacky Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*.

<sup>132</sup> Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 1-23.

dressing may be read as a tool to reinforce male power: as Marjorie Garber argues, at the height of feminine behaviour, wearing women's clothes and make up on stage, actors embodied and laughed at a male-made version of womanhood.<sup>133</sup>

As far as female-to-male cross-dressing is concerned, Bratton's approach emphasises the necessity of determining whether the representation of cross-dressed women was sexualised or not.<sup>134</sup> In classical burlesques, actresses' performances of male gods and warriors, who danced and showed their legs in vaguely classicising costumes, are hardly conceivable as uneroticized. Apart from analysing its voyeuristic appeal, this thesis investigates how female-to-male cross-dressing also enabled the process of downplaying male heroism and thus critiqued the tenets of Muscular Christianity, which came to be perceived as normative in the mid-nineteenth century: classical heroes become feminised dandies, unable to perform any of the heroic deeds traditionally ascribed to them. Another scenario involves the female performance of ephobic male characters: when cast for the role of gods such as Cupid, cross-dressed actresses do not participate in the debasement of their masculinity, insofar as their iconography is androgynous, rather than distinctively virile. Engaging with Bratton's theorisation of boy roles on the Victorian stage, this research investigates burlesque actresses' possible experimentations with the fluidity of gender boundaries when performing boyish gods.<sup>135</sup>

## 6. Chapters Overview

In order to revise the narrative created and accepted by classicists, this thesis is articulated in three sections, each focussing around a key area of investigation: the identity of classical burlesque authors, the characteristics of the genre, and the composition of classical burlesque audiences. In the first section, corresponding to the first chapter, I illustrate how classical scholars arguably misread the identity of mid-Victorian burlesque authors. Their Bohemianism is treated as synonymous with political progressivism. However, I will argue that the degree of political involvement of Bohemian burlesque authors was limited, especially in relation to the issue of gender. After having described the underworld of London's Bohemia, using a range of mid-

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<sup>133</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 60.

<sup>134</sup> Jacky Bratton, 'Mirroring Men: The Actress in Drag', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, ed. by Maggie Gale and John Stokes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 235-252 and Jacky Bratton, 'Irrational Dress', in *The New Woman and her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, ed. by Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 77-91.

<sup>135</sup> Bratton, 'Mirroring Men', pp. 235-252.

Victorian and modern sources, I will claim that the memoirs, novels, comedies, and farces written by Bohemian classical burlesque authors sketch respectable and conventional portraits of women. This chapter also considers the satirical portrait of womanhood appearing in journals such as *Punch* and *Fun*, which classical burlesque authors either edited or contributed to. Overall, the analysis of the literary and theatrical outputs written by burlesque authors, together with the evaluation of their lifestyle, does not offer enough evidence to posit the generalised spreading of politically radical sentiments in their Bohemian community as classical scholars have suggested.

The second section, encompassing the second, third, and fourth chapters of this thesis, starts from the premise that classicists have misinterpreted classical burlesque as a theatrical genre, focussing only on written scripts and thus neglecting the comicality embedded in performances. Chapter 2 analyses the acting style of male low comedians and female comic actresses, as they arguably contributed to downplaying the serious significance of burlesque performances. Drawing on evidence from classical burlesque scripts, performance reviews, contemporary commentaries, and memoirs, I will argue that, when performing the roles of strong-minded heroines, low comedians orchestrated the transitions between moments of drollery and pathos so as to excite the laughter of the audiences. Then, I will focus on character actresses, who framed strong-minded women as stock comic types, such as that of the virago. Finally, I will deal with younger actresses, who arguably undermined the strong-mindedness of female characters by foregrounding their flirtatiousness. Despite portraying frivolous characters, younger actresses who performed in burlesques arguably developed a distinct set of skills which enhanced their professional careers, and the opportunities open to them.

Chapter 3 is centred on the practice of cross-dressing. I will analyse the performance of several well-known low comedians, such as Edward Wright and Frederick Robson, whose grotesque appearance caricatured and undermined the serious claims made by female burlesque characters as to their independence. I will then consider the function of female-to-male cross-dressing, which simultaneously facilitated the sexualisation of actresses, as they performed in breeches to titillate burlesque audiences, and parodied the muscular heroism of male characters. I will also evaluate actresses' performances of boy roles, such as that of the god Cupid, emphasising their potential for allowing a preliminary exploration of gender boundaries.

In Chapter 4, I will consider the humorous effects that puns, rhymes, slang terms, and topical references had on classical burlesque performances. Puns and rhymes arguably



deprived the characters' speeches of serious significance. Moreover, the use of slang terms and topical references actualised classical burlesque characters into mid-Victorian 'fast' men and women. In the mid-nineteenth century, the term 'fast' was perceived as indicating an utter disregard for all that was conventional and respectable. Young heroes, like Burnand's Paris, who appropriate the 'fast' slang of the age, are framed as enjoying drinking in pubs, gambling, and prize fighting, thus rejecting normative middle-class masculinity. Similarly, young and 'fast' heroines like Talfourd's Atalanta are foregrounded as coquettish and flirtatious, refusing to conform to the conventional ideal of middle-class wives and mothers. I will then consider topical references to mid-nineteenth-century politics in classical burlesques, emphasising their lack of didactic intentions.

Finally, in the third section, constituting the fifth chapter of this thesis, I claim that classical scholars misread the composition of classical burlesque audiences. They assumed that burlesques were regularly performed in neighbourhood theatres and attracted working-class patrons, whose radical political views resonated with those embedded in burlesque performances. By contrast, drawing on a range of empirical and more speculative evidence, I will argue that a considerable portion of the burlesque public may have been composed of upper- and middle-class young gentlemen, who lived a 'fast' and mildly dissipated lifestyle. These upper and middle-class gentlemen were educated enough to know the classical sources used in burlesque and affluent enough to attend West End theatres, where classical burlesques were regularly staged. As such, they had the necessary foreknowledge to understand all the parodies embedded in burlesque performances. In addition, the 'fast' gentlemen of the age were familiar with the lifestyle adopted by male burlesque characters: 'fast' spectators may have possibly enjoyed all the homosocial pastimes, like drinking and gambling, presented on the burlesque stage. Although there is occasional evidence demonstrating the presence of spectators from lower social strata and of women among the burlesque public, the genre seems not to have spoken for a working-class, radical, audience.

In conclusion, I will argue that the performances of classical burlesques sent up the conventional gender paradigms, without seriously proposing their political subversion. This thesis throws doubt on classical scholars' claims that classical burlesques seriously endorsed the early campaigns for women's rights, by re-evaluating the (lack of) political alignment of classical burlesque authors, the inherent comicality of burlesque performances, and the composition of classical burlesque audiences. Although parodying

the gender classification established by the middle classes, classical burlesques *humorously* staged unconventionally 'fast' characters and possibly appealed to that section of 'fast' spectators who rejected the value of respectability despite belonging to the upper and middle classes.

**SECTION 1**  
**CLASSICAL BURLESQUE AUTHORS**

**CHAPTER 1**  
**THE LIVES AND WRITINGS OF CLASSICAL BURLESQUE AUTHORS**

**Introduction**

This section, comprised of one chapter, aims at illustrating the ways in which the identities of classical burlesque authors were arguably misread in modern scholarship. Rather than providing comprehensive portraits of dramatists' lives, classical scholars have exclusively attempted to highlight their more or less direct involvement in politically radical causes. For example, in 'Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre', Hall equates the Bohemianism displayed by classical burlesque authors not only with their disaffection with middle-class values but also with their militant rebelliousness. She divides the burlesque authors of the age into two categories: those who attended university, like Talfourd and Burnand, and those who did not, like Byron and Brough. Despite their difference in background, Hall contends that classical burlesque authors were all 'mildly rebellious'.<sup>1</sup> In order to demonstrate her point, Hall mentions that Frank Talfourd was the son of the radical MP Thomas Noon Talfourd, a strong supporter of male suffrage, and draws attention to the political sympathies of Robert Brough, whose radicalism is encapsulated in his collection of poems, the *Songs of the Governing Classes*. Hall considers Brough's *Songs* and Talfourd's lineage as evidence of a politically subversive spirit radiating from the community of Bohemian burlesque authors. Yet, she specifies that the dramatists' political stance did not inform the content of their works for the stage. In fact, Hall claims that it was the insouciant tone adopted in classical burlesques that chiefly signalled their authors' political alignment towards issues such as gender and class.<sup>2</sup>

Other scholars arguably interiorised Hall's claims concerning the rebelliousness of burlesque authors. For instance, Monròs-Gaspar comments on the radicalism of Talfourd's burlesque *Electra*, which foregrounds 'the attempt of a Victorian strong-minded young lady to be involved in politics'.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in relation to 'Medea

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<sup>1</sup> E. Hall, 'Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 5 (1999), 336-366 (p. 351).

<sup>2</sup> E. Hall, 'Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre', p. 352.

<sup>3</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 38.

Transposed', Macintosh repeatedly refers to Brough's political radicalism and, accordingly, to the radical undertones of his burlesque *Medea; or, The Best of Mothers with a Brute of Husband*, which is seen as openly foregrounding Medea as a supporter of the early campaign for women's independence.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Richardson argues that Brough's classical burlesques manifest a form of 'disreputable classicism', which aims to 'glorify not generals, but those cast off by contemporary society'.<sup>5</sup> From Richardson's perspective, Brough lived a seedy Bohemian lifestyle, utterly disregarding respectability, which exacerbated his anger at the British aristocracy and informed his career as a playwright. In her doctoral thesis, Villalba Lázaro builds upon such arguments, describing Brough as the son of a Chartist who became a 'left-wing activist from his youth'.<sup>6</sup> From her perspective, by virtue of such a strong political affiliation, Brough's *Medea* raises 'unambiguous socio-political concerns'<sup>7</sup>, which aim at radically subverting mid-Victorian Britain's class system.

Drawing on a range of studies which describe the underworld of London's Bohemia – including Bratton's *The Making of the West End Stage*, Schoch's *Not Shakespeare*, and James Gatheral's *The Bohemian Republic* –, this chapter aims at comprehensively sketching the lifestyle of classical burlesque authors.<sup>8</sup> Firstly, it will outline their collective rejection of the middle-class ideal of masculinity. In the nineteenth century, middle-class masculinity was founded on two pillars: firstly, middle-class men must have a profitable profession. Men's ability to earn a living through work is the first element that, historically, differentiated male members of the middle classes from the landed aristocracy.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, within their means economically, men must have supported a domestic establishment that included both family and dependants. In *A Man's Place*, Tosh establishes the crucial importance of domesticity for middle-class men from the 1830s to

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<sup>4</sup> Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, p. 113.

<sup>6</sup> Villalba Lázaro, 'Victorian Medeas', p. 101

<sup>7</sup> Villalba Lázaro, 'Victorian Medeas', p. 100. Emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> I am here referring to Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*; Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*; James Gatheral, *The Bohemian Republic: Transnational Literary Networks in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Davidoff and Hall argue that 'the single greatest distinction between the aristocracy and the middle class was the imperative for members of the latter to actively seek an income rather than expect to live from rents and the emoluments of office while spending their time in honour-enhancing activities such as politics, hunting or social appearances'. See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 20. Moreover, Davidoff and Hall observe how work became increasingly important in the construction of the masculine identity of the members of the middle classes. Specifically, '[t]heir masculine self [was] more deeply implicated in what they did rather than in who they were in terms of kinship or religious loyalties'. See Davidoff and Hall, p. 229.

the 1870s. The home, which since the end of the eighteenth century had become distinctively detached from the workplace, became a status symbol speaking for a man's level of income and his moral rectitude.<sup>10</sup> The man, who after marriage became responsible for his wife and children, acquired in the domestic space the respected position of head of the household. Moreover, in order to avoid alienation, men needed the comforts of domesticity: the affections and nurturing cares of wives, together with the joys of children and family time, were considered crucial to bring balance into men's lives.<sup>11</sup> As the following sections of this chapter illustrate, Bohemian burlesque authors arguably manifested their disaffection with middle-class values by neglecting both income and conventional domestic life. Bohemia will also be foregrounded as a space favouring social encounters. Bohemian burlesque authors and mid-Victorian swells attended the same places of entertainment despite their different approaches to the assertion of male identity, which was respectively based on either disregarding or cherishing fashion and status. Such encounters arguably inform the parodic portrayals of male social types featured in classical burlesques.

This chapter will also evaluate the degree of political involvement of Bohemian burlesque authors in regard to gender politics. Although there is historical evidence which frames Brough as radical, it is hardly possible to ascertain other burlesque authors' potential degree of activism. Nor is Brough's political affiliation enough to posit a collective political sentiment spread across the community of Bohemian dramatists. In fact, a close analysis of the memoirs, novels, and farces written by Bohemian burlesque authors will reveal a surprisingly conventional portrait of mid-Victorian gender roles.

Finally, this chapter will consider how satirical journals like *Punch* and *Fun*, to which burlesque authors contributed, caricatured the ambitions of independent women, namely those who were described as strong-minded and 'fast'. After having broadly defined the social status of strong-minded and 'fast' women, this chapter will evaluate the ways in which they were portrayed by the contemporary satirical press. The caricatures of strong-minded and fast women will be considered as possibly neutralising the threats they may have posed to mid-Victorian normative gender classification. Despite rejecting middle-class values, Bohemian burlesque authors seem not to have openly endorsed the early campaigns for women's rights either in their memoirs, novels, the satirical press, or in other genres of drama.

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<sup>10</sup> John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Tosh, *A Man's Place*, p. 47.

## 1.1 Burlesque Authors and London's Bohemia

### 1.1.1 Defining Bohemia

As stated in the Introduction to this section, in order to shed light on the possible political beliefs of classical burlesque authors, it is necessary to describe their Bohemian lifestyle. Hence, this chapter starts with a definition of the realm of London's Bohemia, espoused by William M. Thackeray in his novel *The Adventures of Philip* (1862), and quoted by journalist Edmund Yates in his memoir. With Thackeray's words, Yates remembers his entrance into London's Bohemian community as such:

[a] pleasant land, not fenced with drab stucco like Belgravia or Tyburnia: not guarded by a large standing army of footmen: not echoing with noble chariots, not replete with polite chintz drawing-rooms and neat tea tables; a land over which hangs an endless fog, occasioned by much tobacco: a land of chambers, billiard rooms, and oyster-suppers: a land of songs: a land where soda-water flows freely in the morning: a land of tin dish-covers from taverns and foaming-porter: a land of lotos-eating (with lots of cayenne pepper), of pulls on the river, of delicious reading of novels, magazines, and sauntering in many studios: a land where all men call each other by their Christian name; where most are poor, where almost all are young, and where, if a few oldsters enter, it is because they have preserved more tenderly and carefully than others their youthful spirits and the delightful capacity to be idle.<sup>12</sup>

Thackeray starts describing a space as mysterious as London's Bohemia by emphasising what it is not, in order to communicate its elusiveness. Bohemia is not a bourgeois space: to the topographically precise delimitation of the residential areas of Belgravia and Tyburnia, Thackeray opposes Bohemia's lack of boundaries. The fog that surrounds Bohemia, metaphorically related to the smoke of tobacco, vaguely blurs its borders. Thackeray then moves on to highlight what Bohemia is, employing a series of images that condense the places where Bohemians meet, what they do, and, finally, who they are. Bohemia seems to be embodied in the reiterated actions of smoking, eating, drinking, and reading in supper- or billiard-rooms. However, and maybe most of all, Bohemia exists by virtue of the relationship that keeps its inhabitants together: discarding their family names, living in poverty and thus being free from any material difference in status, Bohemians share their young and idle spirits in fraternal communion.

This romanticised version of Bohemia, espoused by two insiders, is often contrasted with the moralising views of Victorian society which find their way into the press of the time. For example, in 1868, a journalist writing for the *Daily News* writes that 'the creed

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<sup>12</sup> Edmund Yates, *Edmund Yates: His Recollections and Experiences*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1884), I, 300-301.

of the Bohemian is simple selfishness – a deliberate abandonment of duty, and devotion to pleasure as the only good'.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in the *Sporting Gazette*, Bohemians are portrayed as 'seedy cadgers for drinks, who, on the strength of some remote and not very clearly defined relationship to art, literature, or the drama, loaf about the bars of the taverns [...]'.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, according to this journalist, the so-called artists described above correspond to an extreme fringe of Bohemianism, dedicated to 'dissipation, debauchery and general irregularity'.<sup>15</sup> Yet, he believes, there is also a more moderate version of Bohemianism, adopted by those men who choose to conduct a respectable and decent life, even if they reject social conventions. Therefore, what the journalist seems to condemn is the lack of a clear-cut distinction between the extreme and moderate wings of Bohemia.<sup>16</sup>

According to the sources examined above, both insiders and outsiders recognise the indefiniteness of the lines encircling London's Bohemian community. Its nebulousness is then alternatively constructed in narrations as either inherently fascinating or dangerously debauched. Originally, the word Bohemian derived from the French word for gypsy – *bohémien* – and was popularised by the publication of Henry Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de la Bohème*, which is a landmark in the establishment and circulation of Bohemian imagery both within and beyond French borders.<sup>17</sup> Together with Murger's renowned accounts, Thackeray, who in his years of residence in Paris became acquainted with the artistic life of the city, is considered responsible for the importation of the term Bohemia into England, which he used in his novel *Vanity Fair*.<sup>18</sup> The literary constructions of Bohemia's mythology contribute to its vagueness: as Schoch observes, Bohemia's elusiveness is a vital necessity, since as soon as it is fully discovered by outsiders – or as soon as it is exhaustively narrated in accounts – Bohemia ceases to exist.<sup>19</sup> Schoch believes that Bohemian writers do not identify Bohemia with a *place*, which is defined as

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<sup>13</sup> 'Literature', *Daily News*, 7 September 1868, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> 'BOHEMIANISM', *Sporting Gazette*, 19 February 1876, p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Murger's description of his group of penniless friends living in the Latin Quarter of Paris was published serially in the periodical *Corsaire Satan* between 1845 and 1846. It was then united under the title of *Scenes of Bohemian Life* in 1851 and adapted for the stage in 1849 with the collaboration of vaudeville writer Théodore Barrière. See Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 94 and Christopher Kent, 'The Idea of Bohemia in Mid-Victorian England', *Queen's Quarterly*, 80 (1973), 360-369 (p. 361).

<sup>18</sup> Kent, 'The Idea of Bohemia in Mid-Victorian England', p. 361.

<sup>19</sup> Schoch distinguishes between a 'higher' Bohemia, which is embodied in the fashionable members of London clubs, and a 'lower' Bohemia, more closely linked to its gypsy roots. This second wing is identified as being more resistant to narration. See Richard Schoch, 'Performing Bohemia', *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film*, 30: 2 (Winter 2003), 1-13 (p. 9).

‘a bounded and named region’<sup>20</sup>, but with a *space* – ‘a site of experience’, a ‘cultural space for the experiences of unconventional artists, writers, and performers’.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Bratton reads the geographical disembodiment of London’s Bohemia as one of the chief differences between French and British Bohemianism. While the Bohemian lifestyle developed in Paris in the 1830s and 1840s is clearly located around the neighbourhood of Montparnasse, London’s Bohemia is not automatically linked to a specific area of the British metropolis. According to Bratton, it was ‘a city of the mind’.<sup>22</sup>

Since it seems to be chiefly embodied in its dwellers, Bohemia becomes visible only through their habits and attitudes being marked as an alternative to bourgeois norms and conventions. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Yates clearly characterises Bohemian territories as different from those of the bourgeoisie, insofar as Bohemian men renounce family ties and the ease of a regular income. In this way, the pillars sustaining the identity of the middle classes are inevitably undermined. Yates describes how Bohemians ‘worked only by fits and starts, and never except under the pressure of necessity’.<sup>23</sup> Not only does the Bohemians’ inability to provide for the needs of their families contradict middle-class work ethics, but it also suggests the drastically reduced importance of the family itself, which comes to be no longer conceived as the fundamental unit of aggregation of Victorian society. Since ‘the middle classes were distinguished from the aristocracy and gentry because they worked regularly for a living [...]’<sup>24</sup>, Bohemian attitudes to work collapse social distinctions. Similarly, altering the balance of the family unit meant subverting the ‘structure that predated civil society’<sup>25</sup> and undermining its natural reproduction.

However, the rejection of middle-class norms hints at the existence of anxieties that are not only social but also gender related. As Bratton suggests, Bohemians are entangled in a class identification paradox which is linked to their masculinity: the involvement of women in the Bohemian universe would have threatened male sexual control and, therefore, it would have erased the separation from the working classes who are, by definition, sexually licentious. Hence, Bohemians strive to construct an all-male universe in which female presence – and the temptations it entails – are, at least ideally, thoroughly

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<sup>20</sup> Schoch, ‘Performing Bohemia’, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Schoch, ‘Performing Bohemia’, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> Yates, I, 299.

<sup>24</sup> Tosh, *A Man's Place*, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Tosh, *A Man's Place*, p. 29.



banned.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Bratton notes that Bohemians' professional involvement in the arts poses an inherent threat to their male identity. If the stereotypical middle-class man asserted his masculinity in the public sphere of work, competing with other men to earn financial support for his family, the Bohemian writer neither works in the public sphere nor works to earn money; on the contrary, he strives to produce a work of art, which is often accomplished in the privacy of the domestic space.<sup>27</sup> In rejecting the lifestyle of the middle-class *paterfamilias*, Bohemians feel the need to reinstate their masculinity through the exclusion of women, which becomes visible in homosocial spaces of aggregation such as taverns or clubs. The club, the all-male institution *par excellence*, functions as a vicarious home, carrying in itself all the comforts of the normative domestic space: it satisfies both practical needs (such as eating) and emotional necessities (such as enjoying the companionship of fellow members).<sup>28</sup> In effect, the club becomes a liminal space – at the intersection of public and private – in which men are able to create their own version of domesticity, which is not subject to the domain of the female sex, and which is devised to accommodate Bohemian's artistic and professional pursuits.<sup>29</sup>

### 1.1.2 London's Bohemia: Experiencing and Mapping the City

Despite Bohemia's acknowledged topographical disembodiment, London's Bohemians often account for a distinctive perception of the city. Gustave Strauss, author of the *Reminiscences of an Old Bohemian*, describes the British capital 'as a veritable leviathan city'.<sup>30</sup> By associating his first visit to the metropolis with an encounter with the all-engulfing biblical monster, the 'old Bohemian' conveys the feeling of estrangement that possesses an individual when he meets the massiveness and

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<sup>26</sup> According to Bratton, this constitutes another difference existing between British and French Bohemianism. On the one hand, 'Parisian Bohemia included the notion of middle-class young men gaining sexual maturity by keeping house with "grisettes", young women workers in the city whose pre-marital sexual openness reflected an ancient peasant morality rather than that demanded by and for the bourgeoisie. Moreover, some high-profile French writers living in this world were themselves female [...]'. On the other hand, Bratton observes that British Bohemia was entirely populated by men. See Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> As Bratton argues, British Bohemianism places itself at the intersection of two crosscurrents: '[w]hile manliness meant success in competition with other men in the world of work and public endeavour, it was also felt that bourgeois masculinity included a particular relation to the domestic sphere, as the breadwinner for a home, wife and children'. See Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 96.

<sup>28</sup> Amy Milne-Smith, *London Clubland: A Cultural History of Gender and Class in Late Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> Bratton asserts that Bohemian men 'share out the feminine attributes among themselves, recreating domesticity, depriving any women in their sphere of even that degree of agency'. See Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 101. Similarly, Amy Milne-Smith states that men found refuge in all-male clubs since 'while men were the head of the household in theory, in practice it was often women who ruled the roost'. See Milne-Smith, p. 128.

<sup>30</sup> Gustave L. M. Strauss, *Reminiscences of an Old Bohemian* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1883), p. 16.

crowdedness of London. Yet, London is the city where he longs to return after his trips, since it makes him feel ‘as a new-born man’.<sup>31</sup> In a similar fashion, in the preface to his *Recollections*, Yates alludes to the ‘exhausting ordeal of London’<sup>32</sup>, to the tiring demands entailed by living a metropolitan life. Retrospectively, Yates recalls the overwhelming experience of ‘launching [...] into the pleasures of London life’ during his youth.<sup>33</sup> George Sims, in his *Sixty Years of Recollections of Bohemian London*, recalls how the city he used to live in during his Bohemian youth was ‘a more disorderly London, a less healthy London’.<sup>34</sup> He adds that ‘the night life of London [...] was apparently given up to drinking and rowdyism, and a rollicking and full-flavoured conviviality that the present generation would consider outrageous’.<sup>35</sup> The double attitude expressed by these notable Bohemians towards their city is torn between the fascination for the pleasures it offers and the awareness of its inherent dangers.

The binomial association between London and its plethora of amusements dates back to the Regency period, insofar as it is the foundation of Pierce Egan’s literary and dramatic phenomenon *Life in London, or the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq. and his Elegant Friend Corinthian Tom in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis*.<sup>36</sup> Published serially from September 1820, as a book in July 1821, and adapted in several versions for the stage, *Life in London* narrates the exploration of the British capital as experienced by three main characters: Corinthian Tom, a distinguished gentleman son of a self-made man; Jerry, a member of the rural gentry; and Bob Logic, a drunkard who acts as a sort of guide to the pair.<sup>37</sup> As is made clear from the very opening of the book, *Life in London* is conceived as a tool to let the audience experience the pleasures of London life without incurring any of its perils. To convey this message, Egan uses the metaphor of the *camera obscura*, an optical tool that transforms into discreet

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<sup>31</sup> Strauss, p. 367.

<sup>32</sup> Yates, I, viii.

<sup>33</sup> Yates, I, 100.

<sup>34</sup> George Sims, *My Life: Sixty Years of Recollections of Bohemian London* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1917), p. 399.

<sup>35</sup> Sims, p. 315.

<sup>36</sup> As Gardner notes, Egan estimated that during the 1820s there were around sixty imitations of *Life in London*. In 1823, Egan’s work was translated into French. Among the stage adaptations, William Moncrieff’s enjoyed a run of 300 nights. Stage versions of *Life in London* appeared also in the United States and ‘by the end of the 1820s, there were Tom and Jerry mugs, handkerchiefs, and all of the tat that one might associate with a modern phenomenon such as The Simpsons’. See John Gardner, ‘De-Radicalising Popular Literature: From William Hone to Pierce Egan’, in *The Regency Revisited*, ed. by Tim Fulford and Michael E. Sinatra (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 177-194 (pp. 183-184).

<sup>37</sup> Roger Sales, ‘Pierce Egan and the Representation of London’, in *Reviewing Romanticism*, ed. by Philip W. Martin and Robin Jarvis (Basingstoke: Macmillan Academic and Professional, 1992), pp. 154-169 (pp. 158-159).

scenes the life of real London dwellers as well as assuring the safety of the viewers/readers.<sup>38</sup>

As John Gardner notes, the adventures of Tom, Jerry, and Bob are heterogenous:

[n]o pastime in London seems to be more worthy of attention than another: see a fight; take part in a fight; visit a Turner exhibition; listen to Coleridge; go to a cockfight; gather with dustmen, members of parliament, and barristers and bet on Jacco the monkey fighting with dogs; go to Carlton Palace; visit a man at Newgate just before he's hanged. All of this is part of "the spectacle".<sup>39</sup>

Tom, Jerry, and Bob wander around the streets of London, from the most to the least respectable, and they meet people that represent the entire social spectrum. Egan seems to reproduce his idea of the socially mixed crowd of London inhabitants and their pastimes, all of which are worth the attention of the three characters and, accordingly, of the reader who follows in their footsteps.<sup>40</sup> For this reason, *Life in London* has been defined as a 'guidebook for tourists who are anxious to experience the pleasures of metropolitan life'.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the accounts of mid-nineteenth-century Bohemian life offer a tour of the places of entertainment where urban artists, writers, and dramatists met and associated. If we take, for example, Yates' memoir as a case study, we discover that in Chapter IV the author retraces his steps around the city, wandering from pleasure gardens to theatres, from clubs to gambling houses, from taverns to exhibitions.

Yates' reconstruction focuses on the early 1850s, when he starts conducting a lifestyle 'of a less sober and more Bohemian character'.<sup>42</sup> The author recalls, among the pleasure gardens, his preference for Cremorne, located in the neighbourhood of Chelsea, since it was cheaper and closer than Vauxhall. Then, he lists a series of exhibition spaces, such as the Coliseum and the Diorama, both situated on the east side of Regent's Park, and adds the Polytechnic, based in an area between Regent Street and Cavendish Square. At the time of Yates' youth, gambling houses were illegal. Yet, the author asserts that he attended 'private, very private establishments'<sup>43</sup> where he played the games of roulette and French hazard. Specifically, he mentions Berkeley in Albemarle Street, Morris's in Jermyn Street, and Goody Levy's in Panton Street. Yates stresses how visitors needed

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<sup>38</sup> Sambudha Sen, *London Radical Culture and the Making of the Dickensian Aesthetic* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012), p. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Gardner, p. 189.

<sup>40</sup> Gardner, p. 191.

<sup>41</sup> Sales, p. 157.

<sup>42</sup> Yates, I, 135.

<sup>43</sup> Yates, I, 163.

first to know about the existence of these places and then to observe a code that would have allowed them access:

[t]he *modus operandi* was pretty much the same everywhere. You pulled a bright-knobbed bell, which responded with a single muffled clang, and the door was opened silently by a speechless man who closed it quickly behind you. Confronting you was another door [...]: in its centre a small glazed aperture, through which the visitor, in his temporary quarantine was closely scrutinized.<sup>44</sup>

In this passage, Yates opens to his readers a previously exclusive world, and in this sense the narrator operates in a similar way to that of *Life in London*, where the secret codes of behaviour of sporting and gambling establishments are unveiled.<sup>45</sup>

According to Yates, the favourite pastime of young men who wanted to enjoy the nightlife of London at mid-century was attending supper-and-singing taverns: the Coal Hole in the Strand, Cider Cellars in Maiden Lane, and most of all Evans's in King Street, were renowned for the humorous songs that guests enjoyed while eating, smoking, and drinking. Another tavern was The Garrick's Head in Bow Street, where a form of entertainment called 'The Judge and Jury Society' took place. These parodic re-enactments of court procedures were, according to Yates, 'full of grossness and indecencies'.<sup>46</sup> Finally, in the life of a Bohemian man, a consistent part was devoted to the theatre. In his early Bohemian days, Yates recalls having visited most of the West End theatres – specifically, he names Her Majesty's, Covent Garden, Drury Lane, Haymarket, Lyceum, Princess's, Adelphi, Olympic, St James's, and Sadler's Wells – but his knowledge of the East End is more limited. Yates clearly remembers the Surrey and the Victoria Theatre in south London, but neither the Grecian nor the Pavilion.

If, starting from this last consideration, we examine the locations of the places of entertainment that Bohemian Yates reportedly attended, we can observe that they are situated in the West End of London. The West End is approximately identified with the area 'immediately west of Temple Bar, bounded by the river Thames to the south, by Oxford Street to the north but extending as far as Kensington to the west'.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, while during the Regency period Egan's *Tom and Jerry* provided an account of more diversified places and people populating London, even including prostitutes, the voice of

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<sup>44</sup> Yates, I, 163-164.

<sup>45</sup> Sales, p. 157.

<sup>46</sup> Yates, I, 172.

<sup>47</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, p. 174. Bratton maps this area too, devoting a chapter of *The Making of the West End Stage* to describe the wanderings of a fictional man and a fictional woman in the streets of the West End. See Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, pp. 17-44.

Bohemian Yates seems to be more geographically and socially exclusive. This does not imply that the West End of London was uniformly rich and fashionable. On the contrary, Bratton underlines how, for example, the area of Covent Garden was generally insalubrious: hosting some crumbling buildings that provided shelter to the poorest inhabitants of London and characterised by marshy land rising from the water, Covent Garden did not become healthier or cleaner after the installation of the elegant market building and the clearance of the slums that happened in the 1850s.<sup>48</sup> Evans's supper room, for instance, was located in the streets running behind Covent Garden theatre, whose fortunes were slowly decaying. However, even if Yates includes in his account places that are not entirely respectable, such as the aforementioned Evans's late-night entertainments, illegal gambling houses, or pleasure gardens, he refrains from narrating encounters with the lower strata of society or venturing too far off the area here described.

Yates' preoccupation with maintaining a clear demarcation from the working classes' lifestyle seems to contradict Bohemians' *credo* of rejection of bourgeois concerns and commodities. Yet, Yates' willingness to maintain a certain respectability may be regarded as a purely British characteristic of Bohemia, where the categories 'Bohemian' and 'gentleman' are not perceived to be mutually exclusive. To reinforce this argument, Christopher Kent illustrates how a great part of the Bohemian characters created by the pen of Thackeray are gentlemen either by birth or education.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, he underlines that, with the reform and expansion of universities in the mid-nineteenth century, more and more men educated in literature or in the arts moved to London in search of employment and thus came in contact with Bohemia.<sup>50</sup>

The ambivalence of the phenomenon that might be called 'gentlemanly Bohemianism' is made visible in the institution of the club. According to Barbara Black, the many rules and regulations that club members needed to observe manifest the tension between the hedonistic pleasures these venues offered (such as smoking, drinking, and gambling) and their desire to foster gentlemanly respectability.<sup>51</sup> Some clubs were patently more regulated and less Bohemian than others despite their artistic vocation. The Garrick, for example, observed a strict policy for the admission of new candidates.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, its

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<sup>48</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>49</sup> Kent, 'The Idea of Bohemia in Mid-Victorian England', pp. 365-366.

<sup>50</sup> Kent, 'The Idea of Bohemia in Mid-Victorian England', p. 368.

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Black, *A Room of his Own: A Literary-Cultural Study of Victorian Clubland* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), p. 47.

<sup>52</sup> Black describes in detail the process of admission to the Garrick Club. According to her reconstruction, new members had to be both nominated and seconded by older members. The General Committee, which needed the presence of at least seven members, could then discuss the admission of a new member on the

growing sophistication becomes evident through the observation of its premises: it was originally located in King's Street, in a building that had formerly hosted an hotel, and which featured, according to Percy Fitzgerald's reconstruction, both a dining and a smoking room. In 1864, the Club moved to Garrick Street in a building especially designed to accommodate its needs.<sup>53</sup>

The Savage Club, defined by Kent as 'arch-bohemian'<sup>54</sup>, also had its set of regulations that, according to the compiler of its history, sounded very 'business-like'.<sup>55</sup> Theoretically, admission to the Club was to be granted to 'working men in literature and the arts'<sup>56</sup> and five contrary votes were enough to deny one's application no matter the total number of members discussing it. However, in the early days of its life, elections to the Club were summarily conducted using simple slips of paper that often resulted in the automatic acceptance to the circle. Moreover, the payment of fees was treated in such a casual way that the Club did not consider it necessary to have a treasurer until 1864, seven years after its foundation.<sup>57</sup> The limited economic means of the Savage Club are clearly reflected in the choice of its premises: from 1857 to 1881, the Club migrated from one tavern or hotel to the other. Its peregrinations help in the task of further defining the area of London that could have approximately corresponded to Bohemia. Aaron Watson writes:

[...] that portion of [London] which is most frequented by men of letters is still practically bounded by St Paul's on the one hand and by Charing Cross on the other. From this spot, where you look down from the gigantic steps of the great cathedral, and over the statue of Queen Anne, and away towards Fleet Street and the teeming Strand, stretches the kingdom of Bohemia.<sup>58</sup>

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basis of his profession. After the communication of the positive decision, the new member had only one month to pay both the subscription and the entrance fee, corresponding respectively to six guineas and ten guineas. The decision regarding the admission was taken with the help of a 'blackballing' machine: one black ball excluded a candidate if seven members were present. There were various reasons, both personal and professional, for being rejected: 'it might be that a member did not like the proposer or the seconder, did not care for the profession of the candidate, did not want a vacancy filled by someone not that member's friend, or found the candidate decidedly unclubbable'. See Black, pp. 47-48.

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed description of the premises of the Garrick Club see Percy Fitzgerald, *The Garrick Club* (London: Elliot Stock, 1907), pp. 2-3.

<sup>54</sup> Kent, 'The Idea of Bohemia in Mid-Victorian England', p. 363.

<sup>55</sup> Aaron Watson, *The Savage Club: A Medley of History, Anecdote and Reminiscence* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1907), p. 34.

<sup>56</sup> In compiling the history of the Club, Watson problematises this label, which was interpreted in a very loose way: it was meant to guarantee admission also to those people who produced notable works of art without being regularly employed in the field. See Watson, p. 33.

<sup>57</sup> Watson recalls that 'the payment of subscriptions by the early Savages has usually been treated as a joke of the *lucus a non lucendo* character [...]. As we have seen, one of the members told Edmund Yates that the subscription was "just whatever the members choose to owe"'. See Watson, p. 31.

<sup>58</sup> Watson, p. 5.

After its original location in the Crown Tavern in Vinegar Yard, the Savage Club moved within the area described above. From April 1858, the Club rented a room for the cost of twenty pounds per year at the Nell Gwynne Tavern. Subsequently, it migrated to Catherine Street in the premises of an ancient theatre. In 1860, the Savage Club was installed in the Lyceum Tavern and, after three years, it changed its location to the Gordon Hotel in Covent Garden, where it remained for the following three years.<sup>59</sup> After a two- or three-year period of permanence at Ashley's Hotel, the Club moved again to Evans's in Covent Garden and then to the Caledonian Hotel in Adelphi Terrace. The vagrant spirit of the Savage Club perfectly embodies its Bohemian vocation, while the final choice of the Club's independent collocation at Lancaster House in the Savoy traces the growth of its gentlemanly aspirations.

### 1.1.3 Bohemians, Gentlemen, and their Collective Identities

Schoch defines mid-Victorian burlesque as 'the Bohemian theatrical form *par excellence*', since it was 'hastily composed, barely remunerative, and with no pretence of lasting significance'.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, it is arguable that dramatists who chose to write in this genre conducted – and often narrated in their memoirs – Bohemian lifestyles. Blanchard, Lemon, Byron, Talfourd, Leicester Buckingham, Burnand, and the Brough brothers feature in and are the authors of accounts portraying the Bohemian community that sustained mid-nineteenth-century theatrical activities. They were all members of clubs such as the Garrick, the Savage, and the Arundel that, as previously observed, congregated in the vicinities of West End theatres.<sup>61</sup>

The scattered memories of Blanchard effectively convey his assiduous frequenting of London's Bohemian clubs. Born in 1820, Blanchard represents an older generation of Bohemian authors: on the 16 October 1857, he joins the Savage Club and starts attending their dinners at the Crown tavern; in addition, on the 26 May 1860, Blanchard attends the inaugural dinner of the Arundel Club, being one of its founding members.<sup>62</sup> Yet, the club was only part of Blanchard's Bohemian activities, since he often attended more than one

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<sup>59</sup> The movements of the Savage Club premises are described by Watson, pp. 28-37.

<sup>60</sup> Schoch, 'Performing Bohemia', p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> The Arundel was another Bohemian club based in Salisbury Street, Strand. It was reportedly founded by burlesque writer Talfourd and attended by drama critics as well as writers. 'The wit combats of John Oxenford and James Davison, the theatrical and musical critics of the *Times*, sometimes attracted also Laman Blanchard, the veteran pantomime-writer and the *Daily Telegraph* stage oracle'. See Thomas H. S. Escott, *Club Makers and Club Members* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1914), pp. 265-267.

<sup>62</sup> Edward L. Blanchard, *The Life and Reminiscences of E. L. Blanchard*, 2 vols (London: Hutchinson, 1891), I, 181-182, 240.

theatrical performance per night, after having worked on his dramatic creations during the day.

As Bratton observes, Blanchard's career was that of a true Bohemian, since he was a 'hand-to-mouth [...] writer for and about the stage'.<sup>63</sup> Blanchard estimates his revenue for the years between 1860 and 1867, which seems to have spanned between three and four hundred pounds a year, including both his writing of burlesques and pantomimes for several London theatres and articles for various periodicals. While his contribution to nineteenth-century periodicals seems to have been regularly paid with an average of one or two pounds per piece, the income generated by his dramatic authorship was much more uncertain. As John Russell Stephens observes, 'Blanchard made journalism the financial mainstay of his life'.<sup>64</sup> In fact, in his analysis of the professionalism of nineteenth-century dramatic authors, Stephens argues that it was hardly possible for mid-nineteenth-century playwrights to earn a living solely from their writing for the stage. Stephens mentions the case of Burnand, a burlesque author born in 1836, as he summarises the limited economic expectations of mid-nineteenth-century dramatists.<sup>65</sup> Burnand narrates that for his first burlesque, *Dido* (1860), he was offered by the managers of St James's Theatre twenty-five pounds for the first twenty-five performances, to which one extra pound would have been added for every additional performance. The tone with which this anecdote is narrated leads to the inference that the managers might have taken advantage of Burnand's inexperience, convincing him to accept an inferior amount of money to that they would have offered a more professionally mature author. Burnand reportedly agreed on the terms proposed by the managers because, as he remarks, he was only a 'commencing dramatist'.<sup>66</sup> Burnand's naiveté arguably corroborates his Bohemianism, which becomes manifest in his apparent disregard of financial matters. Burnand registers a change of income after the staging of his most successful burlesque, *Black Eye'd Susan* (1866), and yet the 'thousand pounds'<sup>67</sup> earned by dramatic authors writing at the beginning of the twentieth century seemed impossible for him and his colleagues such as the Broughs or Talfourd.

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<sup>63</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 103.

<sup>64</sup> John Russell Stephens, *The Profession of the Playwright: British Theatre, 1800–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> Stephens, pp. 22–23.

<sup>66</sup> Francis Burnand, *Records and Reminiscences Personal and General*, 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1904), I, 373.

<sup>67</sup> Burnand, *Records*, II, 53–54.



A similar sentiment of indifference towards income and status seems to have animated Talfourd. None of the sources considered so far traces the amount of money that Talfourd earned; yet, he reportedly cared so little for both his health and appearance that he never wore warm clothes in winter despite the cold. Marie Wilton narrates an anecdote according to which Brough, worried by his friend's poor health, accompanied Talfourd to buy woollen undervests. Faced with the choice of buying light or dark colours, Talfourd was advised by the shop assistant to opt for the darker ones, since they would have demanded less washing. Talfourd was careless enough to wear dirty and old-fashioned clothes, as well as to 'dine when others breakfasted, breakfast when other men dined'.<sup>68</sup> Burnand, who met Talfourd for the first time at the Arundel Club, registered how for him 'time was no object'<sup>69</sup>, because of his predilection for staying up late at night. Such a view is confirmed in Blanchard's notes, where Talfourd is often quoted as his companion on promenades to theatres, clubs, and other sorts of nightly entertainments.<sup>70</sup>

The description of such a disorderly lifestyle, negligent of both appearance and status, contrasts with Talfourd's privileged social background. He was the son of Thomas Noon Talfourd, judge, member of Parliament and dramatic author himself. Talfourd *père* was elected to Parliament in Reading in January 1835 as a member of the radical wing of the liberals. He was a supporter of male suffrage and actively encouraged the Infant Custody Act of 1839. His name is generally connected to *Ion* (1836), a Greek tragedy he successfully adapted in English for Covent Garden Theatre.<sup>71</sup> His son was educated at Eton and at Oxford University. There, he founded the Oxford Dramatic Amateurs, for whom he wrote and realised his first burlesque *Macbeth Travestie*. Its premiere, staged on the occasion of Henley-on-Thames regatta in 1847, was so successful as to require another private performance of the amateurs in front on Talfourd *père*'s circle of friends, including Charles Dickens and Albert Smith among others.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, Talfourd enjoyed the privileges of a gentlemanly education and of well-bred acquaintances before venturing into the realm of Bohemia.

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<sup>68</sup> Burnand, *Records*, I, 387.

<sup>69</sup> Burnand, *Records*, I, 387.

<sup>70</sup> For example, Blanchard describes the night of the 24 December 1855 spent in company with Talfourd: '[g]o to Strand and see first performance of pantomime, *Black-eyed Susan*, with Talfourd in private box. Then to club [...]'. See Blanchard, I, 148.

<sup>71</sup> 'Talfourd, Sir Thomas Noon (1795–1854) writer, judge, and politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-26951>> [accessed 18 November 2019].

<sup>72</sup> Amanda Wrigley, *Performing Greek Drama in Oxford and on Tour with the Balliol Players* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2011), p. 23.

Burnand shared the same advantages and had a parallel life experience: after having attended Eton, he went to Cambridge University where he founded the Cambridge Amateurs Dramatic Club. His father, a London stockbroker, introduced him to typical Bohemian pastimes, such as attending theatrical performances and smoking cigars.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, his family's relative economic prosperity allowed him to experience the 'Tom-and-Jerryness'<sup>74</sup> of metropolitan life during the summer holidays of his youth. Burnand, in company with older friends, started attending assiduously London taverns and especially Evans's, of which he became an 'habitué'.<sup>75</sup> Burnand's long-term acquaintance with Paddy Green, Evans's master, facilitated his entrance into the circle of theatrical authors and managers when, as an eighteen-year-old inexperienced author, he was introduced to John Baldwin Buckstone, a renowned comedian and playwright who was, at the time, managing the Haymarket Theatre.<sup>76</sup> Although Buckstone did not accept the farce that young Burnand proposed, this anecdote proves the importance of the connections established in the premises of Bohemia.

Talfourd and Burnand embody a version of gentlemanly Bohemianism that combines in each burlesque author a privileged social background with Bohemian choices and behaviour. This leads us to interrogate the authenticity of their Bohemian vocation and to question whether their flaunted Bohemianism is a narrative creation, a performance of their masculinity, or a genuine rejection of material goods. The lack of first-hand evidence concerning Talfourd's life makes it hard to judge the earnestness of his Bohemianism. In contrast, Burnand's memoir is more explicit in highlighting his increasingly casual connection with London's Bohemia. In 1861, shortly after his marriage with the actress Cecilia Ranoe, Burnand admits that he stopped attending clubs regularly, insofar as he 'had others to think about'.<sup>77</sup> This declaration, which conveys the author's preoccupation to both provide and be present for his wife and children, contrasts with the disregard of

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<sup>73</sup> Burnand recalls that his father 'began to make a companion of [him] during the holidays'. See Burnand, *Records*, I, 129-130.

<sup>74</sup> After the huge popularity of Egan's *Life in London*, Tom and Jerry's name entered into common usage to signal 'rowdy or drunken behaviour, esp. as considered typical of young men of the Regency period'. See 'Tom and Jerry, n.', *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/203080](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/203080)> [accessed 22 November 2019]. Burnand uses this term in his memoir to signal his juvenile lifestyle. See Burnand, *Records*, I, 167.

<sup>75</sup> Burnand, *Records*, I, 290.

<sup>76</sup> Burnand, *Records*, I, 293. For an introduction to Buckstone's career, see 'Buckstone, John Baldwin (1802-1879)', actor, playwright, and theatre manager', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-3876>> [accessed 7 April 2020]. According to Gatheral, Burnand was perceived as an 'Upper Bohemian interloper' into the network of Lower Bohemians, formed by Talfourd, the Broughs, Buckingham and Byron. See Gatheral, pp. 133-134. However, this chapter highlights that Burnand was not the only dramatic author with an upper- or middle-class background.

<sup>77</sup> Burnand, *Records*, I, 387-388.

family ties typical of Bohemia. However, as a gentleman, Burnand seems to strive to maintain a balance between his career for the stage, his family and the time spent in company of his ‘*confrères*’.<sup>78</sup>

Byron also had a middle-class background. Son of Henry Byron, British consul in Port-au-Prince and second cousin to the poet Lord Byron, he was educated at home by his grandfather on his mother’s side. Byron started his career as a clerk to a surgeon, but soon became an actor in provincial theatres with little success. In 1858, he entered the Middle Temple to become a barrister, whilst experimenting with burlesque writing. After the success of *Fra Diavolo Travestie*, Byron relinquished his career as a barrister to become eventually ‘the most prolific playwright of the mid-Victorian period’.<sup>79</sup> According to Wilton, for whom he wrote several burlesques to be staged at the Strand, Byron was ‘a Bohemian to the core’.<sup>80</sup> He was a very active member of London’s Bohemian clubs. For instance, Watson lists Byron as one of the first members of the Savage Club.<sup>81</sup> Finally, Byron’s life was characterised by a distinctively Bohemian restlessness: according to John H. Barnes, the dramatist ‘had a perfect mania for changing his places of residence [...] for he never seemed to be six months in the same home’.<sup>82</sup> For example, in 1866, he left London and moved to Liverpool to manage the Theatre Royal and, in the last part of his life, he toured several theatres acting in his own pieces.<sup>83</sup>

The life experience of Brough is markedly different from that of Talfourd, Burnand, and Byron, because of his less privileged background. Son of a brewer and wine merchant, Robert Brough and his three brothers were educated privately in Newport, Wales. Reportedly, Brough enhanced this basic education with the study of foreign languages. When his family moved to Manchester, Brough chose to devote his life to a literary career, establishing a local version of the satirical journal *Punch* that was called the *Liverpool Lion*. In 1848 he moved to London, where he started writing for the stage

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<sup>78</sup> In the first volume of his memoir, Burnand uses this word to refer to the community of mid-nineteenth-century dramatic authors and critics. See Burnand, *Records*, I, 376.

<sup>79</sup> Jim Davis, ‘Introduction’, in *Plays by H. J. Byron*, ed. by Jim Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 1-32 (p. 1). See also ‘Byron, Henry James (1835–1884), playwright and actor’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://0-www-oxforddnb.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-4280>> [Accessed 15 June 2021].

<sup>80</sup> Marie and Squire Bancroft, *The Bancrofts: Recollections of Sixty Years* (London: Murray, 1909), p. 16.

<sup>81</sup> Watson, p. 20.

<sup>82</sup> John H. Barnes, *Forty Years on the Stage: Others (Principally) and Myself* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1914), p. 23.

<sup>83</sup> While in Liverpool, Byron managed two more theatres other than the Theatre Royal. See ‘Byron, Henry James (1835–1884), playwright and actor’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://0-www-oxforddnb.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-4280>> [accessed 15 June 2021].

and where he entered in close contact with London's Bohemia. Specifically, Brough was one of the founding members of the Savage Club in the account of Watson, who believes that he suggested the name for the new-born association.<sup>84</sup> According to his fellow 'savage' Yates, Brough had a 'deep vindictive hatred of wealth and rank and respectability', which 'was largely increased by poverty, by ill-health, by an ill-regulated life'.<sup>85</sup> Both Yates and George A. Sala go as far as labelling Brough as a republican and a reformist.<sup>86</sup> This extreme political position becomes visible in the *Songs of the Governing Classes* (1855), a collection of satirical poems centred on fictional representatives of the aristocracy. In his poems, Brough exposes the injustice embedded in the privileges granted to the British aristocracy and conveys his hope for a democratic revolution.<sup>87</sup>

Gatheral shows that it was not only Brough who was perceived as aligned with radical political positions. In fact, he believes that the network of Bohemian dramatists and journalists who gathered at the Savage Club and contributed to the periodical the *Train*, edited by Yates, was politically progressive in general. Yet, Gatheral clarifies that such a perception must be contextualised in the conflict between Upper and Lower Bohemia, which started in the mid-nineteenth century. Whilst Yates, Sala, and Brough represented 'Lower Bohemia', the network of university-educated journalists like James Hannay who contributed to the *Idler* belonged to 'Upper Bohemia'.<sup>88</sup> It was the conservative members of this second faction that, according to Yates, framed the contributors to the *Train* as '[r]adicals, scoffers, [and] ribalds'.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Sala states that Hannay was a 'staunch conservative', whilst he, Henry Vizetelly, and Augustus Mayhew were perceived as the 'fiercest of Radicals'.<sup>90</sup> In Sala's opinion, Brough was 'an even more irreconcilable democratic Republican'.<sup>91</sup> Although, as Gatheral suggests, the rivalry between Upper and Lower Bohemia may have shed light on the possible political affiliation of the members of the Savage Club, Brough is the only burlesque writer who openly manifests his

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<sup>84</sup> Watson, p. 19.

<sup>85</sup> Yates, I, 314-315.

<sup>86</sup> Yates, I, 315 and George A. Sala, *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala*, 2 vols (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1895), I, 273-274.

<sup>87</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of Brough's collection of poems see Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, pp. 115-116. Brough's preface to the 1855 edition of the *Songs of the Governing Classes* encapsulates the explicit political affiliation of the author, who claims that 'to the institution of aristocracy in this country (not merely to its "undue preponderance" but to its absolute existence) is mainly attributable all the political injustice'. See Robert Brough, *Songs of the Governing Classes* (London: Henry Vizetelly, 1855), pp. 6-7.

<sup>88</sup> Gatheral, pp. 120-122.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Gatheral, p. 121.

<sup>90</sup> Sala, *The Life and Adventures*, I, 18.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

radicalism. Other Bohemian journalists and dramatic authors either avoid expressing their political stance or condemn Brough's extreme position. For instance, commenting on the *Songs of the Governing Classes*, Yates states that Brough's opinions were 'dangerous and uncalled for'.<sup>92</sup> Judging from Yates' remark and from the lack of expression of a political stance in the memoirs of other Bohemian dramatists, Brough's radicalism seems to be an isolated sentiment.

Robert Brough serially published his semi-autobiographical novel, *Marston Lynch*, in the Bohemian periodical the *Train*, whose first number was issued on the 1 January 1856. Brough's novel perfectly summarises the Bohemian lifestyle that the author seems to have conducted: when the protagonist falls ill and is unable to fulfil his writing engagements, his drunken, reckless, Bohemian friends help him and his family to survive. The Bohemian community of which Brough was part might have informed the portrait of the brotherhood featured in his novel. Moreover, the fate of Marston Lynch sadly resonates with the circumstances of Brough's death. As Sala indicates, the author strove to earn his living through burlesque writing: the short-lasting popularity of every burlesque piece, the performance of which was concentrated around holiday seasons, could not guarantee a regular source of income.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, Brough seems to have died poor, with no legacy to economically support his widow and their three children. Consequently, the members of the Savage Club decided to organise benefit performances in Manchester and Liverpool, raising a sum of one thousand pounds, to remember their 'brother' and sustain his family.

Brough's collaboration with the *Train's* editorial board exemplifies the intimate connection that burlesque authors had with the press of the time: as previously noted, Blanchard contributed to the *Era* and *The Daily Telegraph*; Byron was the editor of *Fun*, a satirical magazine rival to *Punch*; Burnand was a regular contributor to both *Punch* and *Fun*; Lemon, apart from writing several burlesques, was also the founder and editor of *Punch*. The fact that Bohemian artists resorted to writing for the press was not just dictated by financial necessity. As Black argues, the life of clubs, Bohemian institutions *par excellence*, thrived on the same premises as those of an editorial board: the sharing of personal information was vital for both the maintenance of deep human connections and the strengthening of professional collaborations. The two institutions developed a

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<sup>92</sup> Yates, I, 316.

<sup>93</sup> George A. Sala, 'Memoir of the Author', in Robert Brough, *Marston Lynch: His Life and Times, His Friends and Enemies, His Victories and Defeats, His Kicks and Halfpence, a Personal Biography* (London: Ward and Lock, 1860), pp. v-xi (p. viii).

mutually beneficial relationship, whereby ‘clubs needed publicity and news just as much as the press relied on the clubs, which provided journalists with a robust readership hungry for gossip’.<sup>94</sup>

Both in clubs and in editorial boards, professional bonds were made and cemented through oral communication. In effect, as Clement Scott argues, one of the unwritten requirements to become a club member was that of being a good listener.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, the members of the so-called ‘Punch brotherhood’ – the journalists and illustrators that gravitated around the editor Lemon from 1841 to 1870 – met and exchanged opinions at their mythologised weekly dinners.<sup>96</sup> In his memoir, Burnand recalls that as a young boy he saw Lemon and his staff sitting at Evans’s every Wednesday, at ‘the table in the corner, just to the right of the platform, on which the piano stood’.<sup>97</sup> In their earliest days, the *Punch* dinners had no explicit agenda and were attended by external artists too. However, when the magazine was purchased by the publishing company Bradbury and Evans in 1842, the meetings started to be scheduled differently: dinners moved from taverns to the business’ premises in Bouverie Street, they were opened to *Punch* staff only, and they were centred on the design of the full-page political cartoon featuring in every number that was called the Large Cut. The growing exclusivity of staff reunions contributed to the creation of the myth surrounding the work of the brotherhood. At the same time, the ritualistic recurrence of the dinners helped in cementing their collective identity.<sup>98</sup>

Patrick Leary hypothesises the existence of a process of ‘multi-vocal creation’<sup>99</sup> in the writing and design of *Punch* articles and cartoons: even if each author maintains his individuality and responsibility, the brainstorming sessions with colleagues – or brothers – inevitably influences every production. It is hardly possible to extend this theory to the process of burlesque writing, since the circumstances in which authors met were entirely casual and had no shared purpose. Nevertheless, the sense of belonging to a distinctively male, Bohemian, and restricted community naturally leaves its mark on the activity of mid-Victorian burlesque writers. Sometimes, their sharing of ideas is visible and results in co-authored plays; in other cases, burlesque writers concretely benefited from their

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<sup>94</sup> Black, p. 103.

<sup>95</sup> Clement Scott, *The Drama of Yesterday and Today*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1899), II, 330.

<sup>96</sup> Lemon was co-founder together with Henry Mayhew of *Punch* magazine, then he became sole editor from 1845 to 1870. See Patrick Leary, *Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* (London: British Library, 2010), p. 12.

<sup>97</sup> Burnand, *Records*, I, 244-245.

<sup>98</sup> For the evolution of *Punch* weekly dinners see Leary, p. 17.

<sup>99</sup> Leary asserts that ‘the Large Cut [which] has always been seen as “authored” by an artist and as expressing the *Punch* viewpoint was in fact created by means of a multi-vocal process in which elements of oral, print, and visual culture all participated’. See Leary, p. 8.

mutual connections with printers and stage managers, thus helping each other in their professional achievements. Finally, even when evidence of cooperation is not materially retrievable, the collective experience of male identity that Bohemian burlesque authors had still seems to transpire through their writings. Hence, it is only by focussing on the communal perception of gendered identities as conceived by classical burlesque authors that wider claims on the political stance of the genre in regard to gender politics can be made. As illustrated in this section, and reiterated in the following ones, the Bohemian background of classical burlesque authors can hardly be considered as synonymous with shared radical sentiments towards the issues of women's rights. Such a thesis inevitably questions the received interpretation of classical burlesque as a theatrical genre embedding politically progressivist messages.

#### 1.1.4 Bohemia as a Site of Encounters

Despite belonging to a relatively closed community, Bohemian burlesque authors were likely to have encountered different social types in their urban peregrinations. Theatres, song-and-supper rooms, pleasures gardens, and clubs were regularly attended, perhaps most notably, by mid-Victorian swells. The term 'swell' hints at a specific social referent: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as colloquial for 'a fashionably or stylishly dressed person; hence, a person of good social position, a highly distinguished person'.<sup>100</sup> Several scholars have engaged in the definition of the term swell. According to Schoch, mid-Victorian swells were identifiable with the young and educated sons of those middle-class families who relocated to the residential suburbs of London in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>101</sup> In *Victorian Babylon*, Lynda Nead notes that swells had a strong interest in fashion, displaying 'an extravagant taste for clothes and accessories', and were 'liable to flout conventional manners and behaviour', insofar as they aimed at being recognised as representatives of an higher social class than the one they truly occupied.<sup>102</sup> Subsequently, in a lecture delivered at Gresham College titled *Le Habit Noir: Men in Black*, Nead acknowledges the existence of two types of swells: 'the snorting, drawling over-dressed swell [which] is clearly a type of aristocratic masculinity' and 'cheaper, lower-class

<sup>100</sup> 'swell, n.' *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/195716](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/195716)> [accessed 22 July 2021].

<sup>101</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 134.

<sup>102</sup> Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 132.

versions’, who imitate the fashion of upper-class swells.<sup>103</sup> Peter Bailey refines further the definition of the social category of swells, illustrating three different types. Firstly, there was the swell who ‘was defined in terms of dress, and where this was a meticulous and obsessive preoccupation which marked him off from the common herd, we may talk of the swell [...] as dandy’.<sup>104</sup> Secondly, in a more ‘boisterous and obtrusive variant’<sup>105</sup>, the swell was identified with the rake or man about town, who enjoyed drinking and seducing women in company of his male friends. Finally, the term swell came to be associated with the notion of ‘counterfeit’<sup>106</sup>, which designated men at the bottom of the respectable class, such as clerks or apprentices, who aspired to improve their social status through the display of a genteel taste in terms of clothes and manners.

On account of their affected manners and stylish clothes, all types of swell were the target of parody across nineteenth-century media. For example, Bailey focuses on a specific class of music hall performers who, from the 1860s onwards, staged and described the swell’s lifestyle in parodic songs.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, Nead surveys a series of caricatures published by *Punch*, which repeatedly ridiculed the swell’s manners throughout the 1850s. In ‘A Most Alarming Swelling’, published in May 1850, four fashionable swells are portrayed walking down a street (Figure 3).<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Lynda Nead, *Fashion and Visual Culture in the 19th Century: Le Habit Noir: Men in Black*, online video recording <<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/le-habit-noir-men-in-black>> [accessed 15 March 2022].

<sup>104</sup> Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 108.

<sup>105</sup> Bailey, pp. 108-109.

<sup>106</sup> Bailey, p. 109.

<sup>107</sup> To the analysis of swell songs, such as Champagne Charlie (1866), Bailey devotes an entire chapter of his book *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*. See Bailey, pp. 101-127.

<sup>108</sup> ‘A MOST ALARMING SWELLING!’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 11 May 1850, p. 184. This caricature is discussed also in Nead, *Le Habit Noir: Men in Black*.



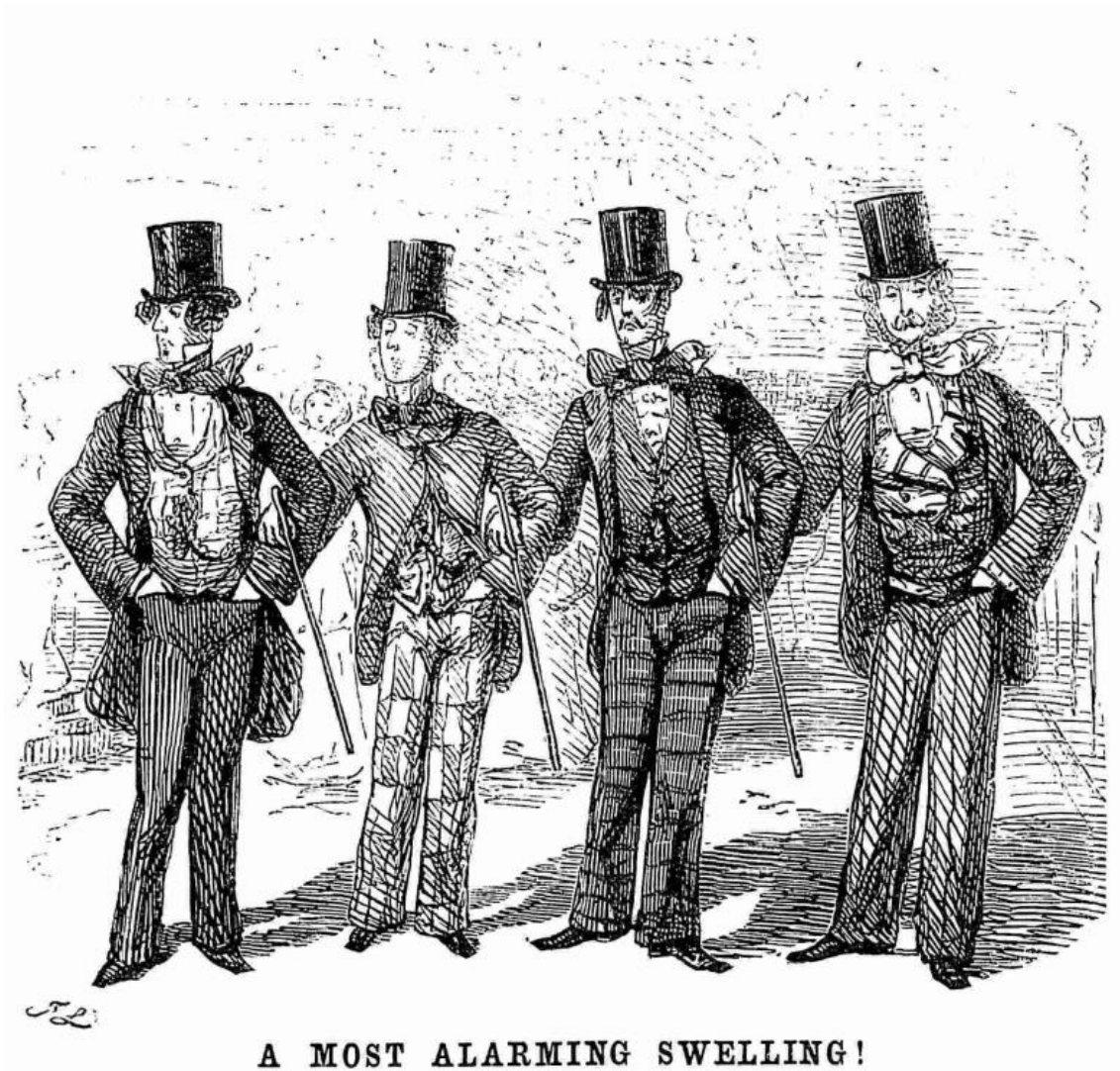


Figure 3. 'A MOST ALARMING SWELLING!', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 11 May 1850, p. 184

As Nead argues, their disdainful expression and nonchalant pose humorously encapsulate their arrogance. In 'The Moustache Movement', two lower-class swells imitate the style of the upper-class swells situated behind them (Figure 4).<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> 'THE MOUSTACHE MOVEMENT', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 21 January 1854, p. 30. This caricature is discussed also in Nead, *Le Habit Noir: Men in Black*.



### THE MOUSTACHE MOVEMENT.

"MY EYE, TOM. WHAT A 'ORRID BORE IT MUST BE FOR THE HORRIFER SWELLS, NOW WE'VE TOOK TO WEARIN' OUR MOOSTARSHERS. THE GALS CAN'T TELL HUS FROM THEM, NOW!"

Figure 4. 'THE MOUSTACHE MOVEMENT', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 21 January 1854, p. 30

The line spoken by one of the subjects portrayed in the foreground – 'The gals can't tell hus from them, now!' – humorously exposes lower-class swells' superficiality and absurd aspiration to improve their social position.

Despite being described – and caricatured – in multiple ways, all mid-Victorian swells crucially shared a marked interest in fashion as a status marker, which apparently situates them at the antipodes of the nonchalant rejection of social conventions professed by mid-Victorian Bohemians. Yet, Bohemian burlesque authors and swells enjoyed the same pleasures offered by London's nightlife. According to Nead, 'the swell was most at home in the new leisure spaces of the Victorian city'.<sup>110</sup> She believes that, especially at Cremorne, the swells satisfied their need 'to look and to be looked at' thanks to the gas

<sup>110</sup> Nead, *Le Habit Noir: Men in Black*.

lights which lit the gardens and the dancing platforms at night. Nead supports her argument by describing an 1862 illustrated cover of the music to the Cremorne Polka, included in her book *Victorian Babylon*, as celebrating the figure of the swell. She states that:

three fashionably dressed men link arms and, with their backs turned to the platform, perform an elegant, drunken saunter towards the louche, bearded gentleman seated on the right. They seem involved in their own self-conscious display, with their dress and behaviour as much a part of the spectacle as the dancers in the crystal circle.<sup>111</sup>

Hence, despite embodying different shades of mid-Victorian masculinity, and possibly belonging to different social classes, Bohemians and swells inhabited the same socio-cultural space, which becomes a site of complex encounters.

Gatheral sheds light on some of the implications of such encounters. Firstly, from his perspective, Bohemian burlesque authors participated in the process of diffusion of London's 'fast' subculture among the swells and men about town who wished to enjoy the pleasures of a 'fast' lifestyle. The attribute is defined by the *OED* as indicating people who, from the end of the eighteenth century, were 'extravagant in habits; devoted to pleasure, dissipated; usually implying a greater or less degree of immorality'.<sup>112</sup> '[D]rinking, slang, and prizefighting'<sup>113</sup>, as well as attending theatrical performances, were the essential pastimes cultivated by 'fast' men in the 1850s and 1860s. According to Gatheral, the musical repertoire of the Broughs' early burlesques such as *The Enchanted Isle* (Adelphi Theatre, 1848) appropriated the drinking songs popularised at Evans's and at the Cyder Cellars, thus favouring the encounter between gentlemanly audiences and London's 'fast' subculture.<sup>114</sup> Secondly, Gatheral observes that the encounters between Bohemian dramatists and swells informed the content of their burlesques. Bohemian burlesque authors often 'held up a burlesque mirror'<sup>115</sup> to those male members of the audiences who ventured into Bohemian places of entertainment. For example, in *Camaralzaman and Badoura* (Haymarket Theatre, 1848), the Brough brothers humorously portrayed the character of Danasch, a noble genie who reminisces

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<sup>111</sup> Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 132-133 and Nead, *Le Habit Noir: Men in Black*.

<sup>112</sup> 'fast, adj.', *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/68420](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/68420)> [accessed 20 May 2020].

<sup>113</sup> Schoch identifies 'drinking, slang, and prizefighting' as the essential elements of mid-Victorian 'fast' life. He follows Burnand's reconstruction of his lived experience as a 'fast' man. See Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 131 and Burnand, *Records*, I, 130-131.

<sup>114</sup> It is necessary to note that Gatheral frames such encounters as potentially interesting different social classes, insofar as song-and-supper rooms, whose songs were popularised by burlesques, might have been also attended by the lower strata of nineteenth-century society. Gatheral, p. 103.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

on stage about his nights spent at the Coal Hole. In Gatheral's words, 'Danash's descent from grace'<sup>116</sup> parodies the manner in which swells and gentlemen explored Bohemian London.

This background on Bohemian burlesque authors' encounters with mid-Victorian swells paves the way for subsequent investigations: more specifically, Chapter 5 will focus on classical burlesque audiences, characterised by the presence of swells and men about town; while Chapter 3 will discuss the parodic portraits of masculinity included in classical burlesques, paying particular attention to the characters who send up the habits of nineteenth-century swells.

### 1.2 Erasing Women from London's Bohemia

Despite having been framed as a site of encounters, London's Bohemia has been presented in the previous paragraphs as an exclusively masculine space. Bratton argues that dramatic authors, writers, and artists banned women from London's Bohemia in order to guarantee its respectability. Differently from the realm of Bohemia in France, where young artists enjoyed the freedom of sexual experimentation with the so-called *grisettes*, British Bohemians felt the need to maintain their gentlemanly reputation and moral integrity.<sup>117</sup> Hence, according to Bratton, they created an alternative domestic balance without their female partners: the club, which became the quintessential form of Bohemian gathering, acted as a substitute for the conventional middle-class home, from which women were denied access.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, Kent underlines that it was a common perception in the mid-nineteenth century that, in Britain, Bohemia was not as sexually lascivious as in France. Kent focuses on the fictional accounts of British Bohemianism to strengthen his claim, arguing that Bohemian novels such as Edward M. Whitty's *Friends of Bohemia* (1857) and Sala's *The Seven Sons of Mammon* were perceived as conforming to 'the rules of British literary hypocrisy in all matters pertaining to sex'.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Bratton, for example, states that '[i]n depicting London's Bohemia [...] writers could make no acceptable excuse for a link between artistic freedom and sexual experimentation, and therefore strove to conceal or deny it completely'. See Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>118</sup> Bratton believes that British Bohemians were much more concerned with the notion of respectability than their French counterparts. Specifically, she argues that 'British Bohemian authors do not wish to construct the life they describe as one of unredeemed squalor, nor be seen to rely upon prostitutes and grisettes, as their Parisian counterparts are allowed to do.' See Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 101.

<sup>119</sup> Specifically, Kent quotes a review of the two novels written by Justin McCarthy for the *Westminster Review*, which emphasises the lack of 'moral eccentricities' in accounts of British Bohemianism. See Christopher Kent, 'British Bohemia and the Victorian Journalist', *Australasian Victorian Studies Journal*, 6 (2000), 25-35 (p. 32).

Kent quotes the remarks of some ‘insiders’ to the world of Bohemia, such as *Punch* illustrator George Du Maurier, who described the *Punch* brotherhood as ‘a clean, honest wholesome, innocent, intellectual and most industrious’<sup>120</sup> sample of British Bohemian life. Hence, both in the lived experience of Bohemian artists and in the fictional accounts of their lives, the presence of women seems to be constantly denied, together with the threats they may have posed to morality.

As far as Bohemian burlesque authors are concerned, their accounts and (auto-)biographies testify to the same effort towards the erasure of female presence. The only women that burlesque authors mention are either gifted performers or their own wives. The constant female presence in Blanchard’s fragmentary memoir is Carina, née Caroline Cadette Bollin, whom he loved since childhood and eventually married in 1874.<sup>121</sup> As Scott argues in the Preface to Blanchard’s memoir, the dramatist’s late-age marriage with Carina, and the time they spent at home at the Adelphi Terrace, constituted ‘the crown of a long and trying’<sup>122</sup> existence. Hence, Blanchard’s Bohemian life, in which ‘friendship, nature and tobacco were the solace and [...] reaction’<sup>123</sup> to solitude, is framed by Scott as an unhappy phase, which is overcome through marriage. The words in which Blanchard narrates his experience do not deny Scott’s account: the dramatist praises his wife for her nurturing and caring capabilities, such as the treatment of his old mother.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, Blanchard recalls enjoying the time spent with Carina in the peacefulness of the domestic space.<sup>125</sup> Therefore, Blanchard’s life after his marriage to Carina seems to suggest the author’s detachment from Bohemianism.

Burnand explores further the idea of refusing a complete Bohemian life in order to fulfil domestic commitments. In his *Records*, Burnand explicitly states that:

[t]he fact that I was married and had others to think about, prevented me from becoming a regular clubbiter, which meant, at that time, a person very “irregular” as regards home-

<sup>120</sup> Kent, ‘British Bohemia and the Victorian Journalist’, p. 32.

<sup>121</sup> Principally remembered for having promoted emigration and employment for women, Carina spent part of her life in Ireland and New Zealand. She married Blanchard on her return to London in 1874. See ‘Howard [née Bollin; other married names Alpenny, Blanchard], Caroline Cadette (1821–1907), businesswoman and promoter of emigration and employment for women’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-55111>> [accessed 24 April 2020].

<sup>122</sup> Clement Scott, ‘Preface’, in Edward L. Blanchard, *The Life and Reminiscences of E. L. Blanchard*, I, v-xv (p. vii).

<sup>123</sup> Scott, ‘Preface’, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>124</sup> According to Blanchard, it was Carina who sat at his mother’s bedside, shortly before her death. See Blanchard, II, 446.

<sup>125</sup> For example, Blanchard recalls having ‘pleasantly’ spent the Christmas Eve of 1878 because of the sole presence of Carina. See Blanchard, II, 473.



coming habits, and spurred me on to work which left me small leisure for amusement. I still had “before me a divided duty”.<sup>126</sup>

In this passage, Burnand admits the importance of his regular presence in the home: Burnand did not attend clubs as much as a true Bohemian man would have done, because he felt the need to spend time with his wife and children. For example, Burnand recalls celebrating Christmas with his family and spending their holidays in Brighton.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, Burnand acknowledges his financial responsibilities as head of the household. When he started writing dramatic pieces for the London theatres, Burnand was married to the comic actress Cecilia Ranoe, with whom he had five sons and two daughters.<sup>128</sup> In order to financially support them, Burnand undertook for a short period of time both the career of dramatist and that of barrister. Although he considered writing for the stage more ‘attractive’<sup>129</sup>, Burnand also practiced the law in order to guarantee a basic income to his wife and children, whose needs were placed before his personal inclinations. Therefore, even though Burnand devotes the largest part of his autobiography to describing his Bohemian circle of friends and their pastimes, he also frames his domestic duties as those of a conventional *paterfamilias*.

In Burnand’s *Records*, several female performers are mentioned exclusively in praise of their histrionic qualities. For example, the author remembers Wilton being ‘quite a young but very rising and *piquante* actress’<sup>130</sup> in her first cross-dressed impersonations. Similarly, Rosina Ranoe, sister of Cecilia, is remembered for acting the role of William in Burnand’s burlesque version of *Black Eye’d Susan* (1866) with the required ‘spirit’.<sup>131</sup> Even though this is not mentioned in Burnand’s autobiography, Rosina will be Burnand’s second wife after the death of Cecilia in 1870 and, with her, the author will have two more sons and four daughters.<sup>132</sup> The fact that both Burnand’s wives were actresses leaves open the possibility that the author and his family lived a Bohemian lifestyle. However,

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<sup>126</sup> Burnand, *Records*, I, 387-388.

<sup>127</sup> Burnand recalls that he enjoyed Christmas family gatherings both as a child and as a father. See Burnand, *Records*, I, 34. Burnand also remembers that he used to ‘treat’ himself and his wife with a holiday in Brighton. See Burnand, *Records*, II, 54-55.

<sup>128</sup> ‘Burnand, Sir Francis Cowley (1836–1917), playwright and humorist’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-32183>> [accessed 10 May 2020].

<sup>129</sup> Burnand, *Records*, I, 388.

<sup>130</sup> Burnand remembers having seen both Wilton’s performance as Cupid in Talfourd’s *Atalanta* and as Belphegor’s son in *Belphegor*. See Burnand, *Records*, I, 288.

<sup>131</sup> Burnand, *Records*, II, 36.

<sup>132</sup> ‘Burnand, Sir Francis Cowley (1836–1917), playwright and humourist’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-32183>> [accessed 10 May 2020].

the few moments of domesticity portrayed by Burnand attest to his willingness to frame both his private life and his partner as conventionally respectable.

For those burlesque authors who left no reminiscences or memoirs, it is more difficult to evaluate the nature of their interactions with women. Talfourd, for example, is said to have married the second daughter of a solicitor, Frances Louisa Morgan in 1861, just a few months before his death.<sup>133</sup> As far as Byron is concerned, it is known that he married his first wife Martha Foulkes in January 1856.<sup>134</sup> In the memoir written with his wife, Squire Bancroft recalls how Mrs Byron attended the theatre in the company of her husband; how the couple toured around Birmingham and Liverpool with the Prince of Wales's theatrical company in the season 1865-1866; and how they moved to Liverpool when Byron started managing the Theatre Royal in 1867.<sup>135</sup> Shortly after Martha Foulkes' death, Byron married his second wife Eleanor Mary.<sup>136</sup>

The private life of Lemon is equally obscure. Lemon met his wife, Helen (Nelly) Romer, sister of the famous soprano Emma Romer, at the beginning of his career on the London stage: in 1838, Lemon was collaborating with Nelly's father, composer Frank Romer, on an adaptation of *Rob of the Fen*, which was staged at the English Opera House in the same year. Lemon and Nelly Romer got married in 1839 and they had three sons and seven daughters.<sup>137</sup> The couple was intimately acquainted with Mr and Mrs Charles Dickens, with whom they spent holidays and shared their love of the theatre. For example, Mrs Lemon and Mrs Dickens performed with their husbands in the amateur performances they organised at Knebworth.<sup>138</sup> The cousins of Lemon's wife, Annie and Elizabeth

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<sup>133</sup> 'Talfourd, Francis [Frank] (1828–1862), playwright', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-26950>> [accessed 10 May 2020]. Mrs Talfourd was a 'sweet' and 'well trained' soprano. See 'The Royal Alhambra', *Era*, 26 February 1865, p. 10. According to the *Sunday Times*, after her husband's death, Mrs Talfourd gave annual charity concerts at Margate to sustain the Home of the Motherless Girls. See 'The Music Halls', *Sunday Times*, 29 October 1865, p. 3.

<sup>134</sup> 'Byron, Henry James (1835–1884), playwright and actor', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-4280>> [accessed 10 May 2020].

<sup>135</sup> Marie and Squire Bancroft, *Mr and Mrs Bancroft on and off the stage*, I, 178, 206-207, 221.

<sup>136</sup> 'Byron, Henry James (1835–1884), playwright and actor', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-4280>> [accessed 10 May 2020].

<sup>137</sup> 'Lemon, Mark (1809–1870), magazine editor and playwright', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-16432>> [accessed 10 May 2020].

<sup>138</sup> The fact that both Mrs Lemon and Mrs Dickens took part in the amateur theatricals organised by their husbands is testified by a letter that Dickens wrote to Bulwer Lytton in 1850. He remembers that Mrs Dickens could not act because of a sprained ankle. Therefore, Mrs Lemon offered to take her part. Mrs Lemon acted the roles of Mrs Humphries in the farce *Turning the Tables* and that of Tib in *Every Man in His Humour* (Knebworth, 19 and 20 November 1850). See *The Unpublished Letters of Charles Dickens to Mark Lemon*, ed. by Walter Dexter (London: Halton & Truscott Smith, 1927), pp. 58-61.

Romer, who were gifted singers on the English stage, respectively married William and Robert Brough. Bratton hypothesises that neither Lemon nor the Broughs credited their wives enough for their ‘competence and high earning power’<sup>139</sup>: coming from a theatrical family and being performers themselves, Nelly, Annie, and Elizabeth might have supported their husbands both intellectually and financially. Bratton believes that Bohemian dramatic authors had ‘an investment in suppressing the presence of women, both to fend off bourgeois suspicion of their respectability and to bolster the essential masculinity of themselves as writers’.<sup>140</sup>

According to Gatheral, the fact that Bohemian burlesque authors often married lower-class female performers, sometimes from the same family (such as the Romer or the Ranoe sisters), signals the establishment of a Bohemian theatrical network in which women were actively involved. He shows how the peculiar status of actresses, as independent and resourceful working women, came to be perceived as similar to that of the French *grisette*. For instance, in 1859, the *Saturday Review* stated that the women who choose to pursue the acting career may well have ‘belong[ed] to the large class of female operatives whom, for want of a better name, we may call “grisettes”’.<sup>141</sup> Judging the extent to which the wives of Bohemian burlesque authors were involved in their husbands’ professional network is hardly possible, given the apparent lack of evidence concerning their private lives. It is equally not possible to ascertain whether burlesque authors’ families adopted a respectable façade to hide their Bohemianism or vice versa. What is arguable is that, when (and if) they wrote their reminiscences, Bohemian burlesque authors did not frame their wives as Bohemian. As illustrated in this section, they emphasised instead female respectability.

A similar downplaying of women’s possible involvement in the theatrical world of Bohemia is evident in Brough’s novel *Marston Lynch*. Lucy, the female protagonist, is married to Marston, a poor satirical journalist and dramatic author. When the journal he writes for ceases its publications and his manuscripts are refused by theatres, Marston falls severely ill, leaving Lucy and her new-born with no regular income. Lucy is afraid to ask for help from Marston’s Bohemian friends because, as the narrator suggests:

[s]ome of them, Marston had occasionally brought home for a cigar and a chat; but they had usually stopped so late, consumed so much gin-and-water, and spoken such dreadful profanation of men and things that Lucy had been accustomed to hold in the highest

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<sup>139</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>140</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 106.

<sup>141</sup> Gatheral, pp. 111-112.



veneration, that the poor little woman looked upon them with something like pious horror.<sup>142</sup>

Lucy's fear of Marston's friends stems from her lack of acquaintance with Bohemia: despite being married to a journalist and dramatic author, Lucy has only had sporadic contact with her husband's world. Moreover, when she did meet the few Bohemian men Marston brought into the house, Lucy was terrified by their smoking, drinking, and swearing habits. However, Marston's friends show their affection fulfilling writing commissions, lending money, and helping Lucy with her daily domestic chores. Specifically, four Bohemian men move into Lucy's house, where they write and smoke, but also cook and nurse Marston and his baby. Since she hosts and benefits from the presence of these Bohemian men, Lucy is said to become 'an absolute little queen of Bohemia, without knowing it'.<sup>143</sup> According to Bratton, Lucy's lack of awareness contributes to the infantilization of her character: with a condescending tone, Lucy is portrayed as weak and defenceless, thus attracting the 'tenderness and pity'<sup>144</sup> of Bohemian men.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, Lucy is described as a 'pet vivandière – the daughter of a ragged regiment'<sup>146</sup> and therefore compared to the protagonist of Gaetano Donizetti's opéra comique *La Fille du Régiment* (1840): like Donizetti's *vivandière*, who was found as a child and raised by a regiment of Napoleon's army, Lucy is metaphorically adopted by a circle of Bohemian men.<sup>147</sup> Their sense of accomplishment in taking care of Marston's wife is described by the narrator, who addresses the male readers of the novel as follows:

[m]asculine reader of mine, have you ever lived in a remote Indian station, or hunted in the back woods of America, or been a long sea voyage in a ship without female passengers, or existed for a length of time, under any circumstances that did not permit intercourse with the society of chaste and cultivated females? If so, you will be able to appreciate the delight of my Bohemians at finding themselves permitted to enjoy the friendship, and minister to the happiness, of a pure-hearted and accomplished little lady.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> R. Brough, *Marston Lynch*, p. 321.

<sup>143</sup> R. Brough, *Marston Lynch*, p. 329. Also quoted in Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 101.

<sup>144</sup> R. Brough, *Marston Lynch*, p. 329.

<sup>145</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 101. Bratton adds that 'Brough's Lucy Lynch is not shown with this barbed hostility, but she has no power, is not an actress or a writer herself, and she entirely fails to understand the creative world into which she is thrown by her husband; the part she plays for the Bohemians is confined to that of mascot, a cherished talisman of domestic values'. Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 106.

<sup>146</sup> R. Brough, *Marston Lynch*, p. 329.

<sup>147</sup> Burton D. Fisher, *Donizetti's La Fille du Régiment: Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series* ([Miami]: Opera Journeys, 2005).

<sup>148</sup> R. Brough, *Marston Lynch*, p. 329.

The narrator believes that Bohemian men, like sailors and soldiers, are denied the company of women. Therefore, when they meet one, Bohemian men feel the need to perform their gentlemanly duty and guarantee her happiness. For this reason, Marston's friends are bound to help and support Lucy and her family. Despite having been described as a queen of Bohemia, Lucy is ultimately framed, in the patronising tone typical of mid-nineteenth-century social discourse, as paradoxically *little*: she naively ignores that Bohemian men 'idolize'<sup>149</sup> her, she is incapable of helping her husband on her own, and, as such, she is trapped in the mid-nineteenth-century conventional gender stereotype, whereby women are simultaneously compared to awe-inspiring queens and helpless children.

Brough engages in a conventional portrayal of womanhood not only in *Marston Lynch*, but also in his farce *Crinoline*, first performed at the Olympic Theatre in December 1856. The farce satirises mid-Victorian women's fashion: Mrs Coobiddy, the wife of a respectable middle-class man, decides to wear a crinoline, a stiff petticoat holding out her skirt, despite her husband's dislike of such an accessory. In fact, Mr Coobiddy ludicrously considers the crinoline to be a reasonable motivation for a man to seek legal separation from his wife. Threatened by her husband's reaction, Mrs Coobiddy hides her crinoline in a room of their house. Her strange behaviour makes Mr Coobiddy suspicious, as he believes that she is hiding a lover. Mr Coobiddy's display of jealousy convinces his wife to reveal the truth and happiness is eventually restored.

As a reviewer writing for the *Era* observes, with *Crinoline*, Brough caricatures women's frivolous concerns over fashion. Indeed, Mrs Cobbidy is conventionally portrayed as the quintessential mid-Victorian wife, 'who has never done anything very naughty, who has obeyed her husband as in duty bound, and who, truth to say, stands in considerable awe of her liege lord and master'.<sup>150</sup> However, 'woman is a woman all the world over and Mrs Coobiddy is fired by an ambition for hoops'.<sup>151</sup> It is arguable that Brough employed Mrs Coobiddy's innate frivolity to satirise mid-Victorian women's aspirations to independence. Mr Coobiddy states that if his wife decided to wear a crinoline, he would let her 'enjoy her independent liberty within the territories of her horsehair' and he would relish his 'single blessedness, at a considerable distance outside the frontier'.<sup>152</sup> From his perspective, women appear as animated by a ridiculously strong

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> "'Crinoline" at the Olympic', *Era*, 21 December 1856, p. 11.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Robert Brough, *Crinoline: An Original Farce in One Act* (Boston: Spencer, 1856), p. 5.

desire to claim their independence by dressing fashionably. As such, they are humorously foregrounded as interested in nothing more serious than their appearance.

The evaluation of Lucy's figure in *Marston Lynch* and the caricatural portrayal of female vanity in *Crinoline* seem to be crucial when approaching the issue of female representation in Brough's classical burlesques: Brough has been univocally portrayed as radical, revolutionary, and as supporting the causes of women's rights as they emerged during the mid-nineteenth century in his writing for the stage. As already noted in the Introduction to this chapter, classical scholars have unanimously portrayed Brough's classical burlesque *Medea* as supporting the causes of women's rights. For example, Hall and Henry Stead state that '[i]n his transparently republican *Songs of the Governing Classes* and his burlesque *Medea; or The Best of Mothers, with a Brute of Husband*, Brough created an imaginary world of theatre in which to foster cynicism about the class system and champion greater egalitarianism'.<sup>153</sup> Macintosh argues that Brough sympathetically portrayed *Medea* as a mid-Victorian abandoned wife, suffering from poverty and starvation because of her neglecting husband.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, Richardson claims that 'the myth of *Medea* was the perfect vehicle for radical politics', which Brough used to 'advance the cause of the abandoned family'.<sup>155</sup> From Villalba Lázaro's perspective, Brough's *Medea* raises serious concerns over the resolution of conjugal conflicts in the mid-Victorian period, through portraying a 'vulgar, poor, abandoned woman, a barbarian among Greeks [...] struggling against her unprivileged position'.<sup>156</sup> Finally, according to Monròs-Gaspar, Brough's *Medea* is permeated by 'the open criticism against the lack of legislation protecting women in general and wives in particular'.<sup>157</sup> Yet, the conventional portrait of Lucy in *Marston Lynch* and the caricature of women's aspiration for independence in *Crinoline* testify to a more complex picture which must be taken into consideration.

Lemon, on the contrary, has been widely recognised as more conservative in his view of gender roles. For example, Leona W. Fisher states that 'although Lemon championed liberal causes, he was a cautious middle-class moralist'.<sup>158</sup> More specifically, Bratton observes that Lemon's writings often 'include very weak, silly women whom we are

<sup>153</sup> Edith Hall and Henry Stead, 'Introduction', in *Greek and Roman Classics in the British Struggle for Social Reform*, ed. by Edith Hall and Henry Stead (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 1-19 (p. 12).

<sup>154</sup> Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', pp. 96-97.

<sup>155</sup> See Richardson 'A Conjugal Lesson', p. 57 and Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, p. 125.

<sup>156</sup> Villalba Lázaro, 'Victorian Medeas', pp. 125.

<sup>157</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 14.

<sup>158</sup> Leona W. Fisher, 'Lemon, Mark', in *Victorian Britain (Routledge Revivals): An Encyclopaedia*, ed. by Sally Mitchell (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 446.

expected chivalrously to laugh at and to love'.<sup>159</sup> According to Bratton, *The Ladies' Club*, a farce performed in 1841 at the Olympic Theatre, perfectly exemplifies this point, insofar as it ridicules the absurd aspiration of women who try to appropriate men's spaces. The female protagonists of the piece form a female club because they feel neglected by their menfolk, who spend all their time at clubs. Led by the central character Mrs. Fitzmyth, they infiltrate their husbands' club, overhear their vaguely immoral conversations, and form an exclusively female association to discuss how to punish them. As Fisher interestingly notes, Lemon prevents the audience from sympathising with the female characters through the figure of zeugma, which entails that a single word refers to two or more other words in the same sentence. For example, the character of Mrs Mortar is introduced as 'descending the chromatic scale, and the stairs, at the same time'; that of Mrs Derby is said to arrive 'in tears, and a hackney coach'; and Mrs Twankay 'in a rage, and ... a bonnet!'.<sup>160</sup> The close association between women's strong feelings and frivolous details undermines their credibility and the earnestness in their pursuit of forming an all-female club.

In addition, Lemon foregrounds women's lack of cohesion: despite sharing their interest in punishing men, the members of the Ladies' Club end up attacking each other's husbands for their secrets, thus giving credit to the stereotype of innate female rivalry. As Fisher argues, '[s]illy, irrational, argumentative, and competitive, these women (who began with a legitimate complaint) have been set up by Lemon to undermine their own just cause'.<sup>161</sup> Lemon's farce ends with the conventional restoration of order: once the husbands discover the existence of the Ladies' Club, where their secrets are disclosed, they promise to increase their presence in the house. Thus, having lost its primary function, the Ladies' Club ceases to exist.

Although not explicitly referring to the underworld of London's Bohemia, Byron's three-volume novel *Paid in Full* (1865) sketches the struggles of Horace, a medical student who becomes a moderately successful writer for the stage as he entertains a simultaneous relationship with two women. Horace marries in haste Priscilla, the daughter of the surgeon who mentors him. Priscilla's father refuses to financially support the couple, forcing Horace to face poverty whilst trying to make a name for himself in the theatrical industry. Like Brough's Lucy Lynch, Priscilla is depicted as the perfect

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<sup>159</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 106.

<sup>160</sup> All these examples are quoted in Leona W. Fisher, 'Mark Lemon's Farces on the "Woman Question"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 28 (Autumn 1988), 649-670 (pp. 653-654).

<sup>161</sup> L. Fisher, 'Mark Lemon's Farces', p. 654.

housewife. Despite having lived a comfortable life before her marriage, Priscilla quickly adapts to the unfavourable circumstances which have led her husband to indigence. Praised for her pragmatism, Priscilla is defined as a ‘piece of domestic clockwork’<sup>162</sup>: she is a very skilled sewer, who impeccably mends her husband’s old clothes; she keeps a ‘neat and painfully spick-and-span’<sup>163</sup> house; and she cooks delicious meals for both her husband and his guests. Yet, unlike Lucy, Priscilla loathes her husband’s involvement with the theatrical profession. She admittedly hates ‘all persons connected with the stage’<sup>164</sup>, which is perceived as being tainted by immorality. For this reason, Horace loses affection for Priscilla: in Horace’s eyes, his wife is endowed with sensibility and ‘common sense’<sup>165</sup> but lacks imagination and a sense of humour.

Estranged from his wife, Horace cultivates an extra-conjugal relationship with Julia Mellington, the favourite soubrette of the Criterion Theatre. Julia is described as possessing all the qualities that Priscilla lacks. Specifically, she has ‘very little of the domestic heroine in her disposition’<sup>166</sup> but is moved by a ‘genuine love of her art’.<sup>167</sup> The juxtaposition between the two female characters is encapsulated by their contrasting hairstyles: the narrator observes how ‘Priscilla dressed her hair [...] in a severe and bygone fashion, braiding it closely to the head in a tight and uncompromising manner, whilst Miss Mellington allowed her ample locks to wander out on to the shoulder’.<sup>168</sup> The rigid and modest Priscilla is juxtaposed to the charming and artsy Julia. Nevertheless, Byron’s novel does not present Julia as a thoroughly Bohemian woman despite her artistic inclinations. Byron’s *Paid in Full* strives to emphasise Julia’s respectability, neither framing her as careless nor as sexually available. She is not only depicted as a hard and dedicated worker, but also framed as generous and devoted to her family, as she financially supports her poor mother with the money she makes from the stage. Moreover, Julia is portrayed as chaste: she refuses the improper advances of her fans and contemplates leaving the stage after having been indecently approached by an insolent man.<sup>169</sup> With the character of Julia, Byron closely approached the description of a woman directly involved in the male-dominated world of London’s Bohemian artists. Yet, the

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<sup>162</sup> Henry J. Byron, *Paid in Full: A Novel*, 3 vols (London: J. Maxwell, 1865), I, 171.

<sup>163</sup> Byron, *Paid in Full*, III, 114.

<sup>164</sup> Byron, *Paid in Full*, II, 101.

<sup>165</sup> Byron, *Paid in Full*, II, 104.

<sup>166</sup> Byron, *Paid in Full*, II, 117.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Byron, *Paid in Full*, II, 22.

<sup>169</sup> Julia is said to have brought ‘her earnings home to her mother like an angel’. See Byron, *Paid in Full*, II, 111. Moreover, the actress gives voice to her indignation after having been approached by an insolent man backstage at the Criterion Theatre. See Byron, *Paid in Full*, III, 196-198.

emphasis placed on the actress' respectability arguably betrays the author's concern with the Victorian notion of propriety. Julia's work ethic and chastity deprive her of the carelessness and sexual freedom which distinguished Bohemian women.

Byron also deals with the issue of marriage in several of his comedies. For example, in *Cyril's Success* (Globe Theatre, 1868) he stages the humorous struggles of Cyril Cuthbert, a successful writer of novels and extravaganzas, who spends all his time in the company of his male friends drinking and smoking cigars at their club, and Mrs Cuthbert, his devoted but neglected wife. On the occasion of their wedding anniversary, Cyril, as customary, goes out with his friends, and invites Major Treherne to take his wife to the Opera. Mrs Cuthbert sadly accepts the offer, naively unaware of the rumours that such conduct would spark. It is Treherne who maliciously opens her eyes, observing that 'people are pretty sure to [...] remark [...] that Cyril Cuthbert must be rather weak-minded to permit his wife to be seen at the Opera'<sup>170</sup> with another man. As soon as she returns home, Mrs Cuthbert receives a visit from her old schoolmistress, Mrs Grannett, who has heard about Cyril's misconduct. Mrs Grannett talks Mrs Cuthbert into suspecting her husband of infidelity and, consequently, divorcing him. As a separated woman herself, Mrs Grannett illustrates to Mrs Cuthbert the advantages of being independent: after having left her husband on the ridiculous grounds of 'incompatibility of cookery'<sup>171</sup>, Mrs Grannett has been able to 'go wherever [she chooses], without asking leave; dress as [she likes], without consulting anybody else's taste; have [her] own opinion, regardless of the feelings of a tyrant'.<sup>172</sup> After such a persuasive speech, Mrs Cuthbert is determined not to be pitied and leaves her house, abandoning Cyril. However, her determination vanishes as soon as Cyril demonstrates his innocence and promises to be a more caring husband. Indeed, at the end of Byron's comedy, not only are Cyril and Mrs Cuthbert happily reunited, but also Mrs Grannett makes up with her husband, as they reconcile their differences in matters of cooking.

Byron's *Cyril's Success* was considered by the *Morning Post* as 'inculcating a sound social moral by a process as pleasant as impressive'<sup>173</sup> on the issue of marital unhappiness and divorce. Mrs Cuthbert's 'good sense and good feelings'<sup>174</sup> lead to the couple's final reconciliation, despite Major Treherne's and Mrs Grannett's attempts to corrupt her

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<sup>170</sup> Henry J. Byron, *Cyril's Success: An Original Comedy in Five Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1870), p. 27.

<sup>171</sup> Byron, *Cyril's Success*, p. 32.

<sup>172</sup> Byron, *Cyril's Success*, p. 33.

<sup>173</sup> 'NEW GLOBE THEATRE', *Morning Post*, 30 November 1868, p. 2.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

morals. Mrs Cuthbert is presented as being sadly aware of her husband's misconduct; yet, she is determined not to cause any scandal or petition for a divorce. In fact, Mrs Cuthbert's conduct is radically influenced by Major Treherne, a malicious *roué*, and Mrs Grannett, a 'mischievous old woman'.<sup>175</sup> Whilst the comedy's finale humorously sanctions Cyril's mildly dissipated lifestyle, it also signals the prevailing of Mrs Cuthbert's sensibility over the absurdity of Mrs Grannett's advice in matters of divorce.

Byron deals again with issues of marital unhappiness in *Married in Haste*, a comedy first performed at the Haymarket Theatre in 1875. Ethel, a middle-class lady passionate about painting, falls in love and hastily marries her drawing master, Augustus, who is supposed to inherit a large sum of money from his uncle, Percy Pendragon. Offended by his nephew's lack of attention, Pendragon refuses to leave him his riches. Hence, the newlywed couple is soon left in poverty. Absorbed by the pleasures of London life, Augustus neglects his wife, who starts selling her own paintings. Angered by Ethel's success, Augustus forbids her to engage in such professional activity. Ethel's resentment grows stronger as soon as she suspects Augustus' infidelity. Ethel discloses her jealousy and describes the miserable conditions of ill-treated wives to her husband's friend Gibson Greene saying:

[y]ou're too much the easy-going man of the world – content to look at life through the clouds of a club cigar. You pride yourself on a placid, passionless frame of mind, and *amble* through existence like a comfortable but utterly uninteresting cob. As life's panorama unfolds before you; you sit in the stalls, as it were, and blandly *endure* the entertainment. There are thousands such; but I am a woman, and wilful, excitable – say even headstrong, if you please – and when slighted, ill-treated, neglected, *wronged*, a – suppressed volcano.<sup>176</sup>

With such a statement, Ethel summarises the mid-Victorian dichotomy which opposed men, animated solely by reason, to women, driven instead by instincts and passions.<sup>177</sup> Convinced by her mother, who has heard rumours about Augustus' attachment to Lady Lister, Ethel decides to leave Augustus. As soon as she moves back in with her parents, Ethel discovers that they are financially ruined. Therefore, she starts selling her paintings to a mysterious benefactor who appreciates her abilities. The man, who is Augustus' uncle

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Henry J. Byron, *Married in Haste: An Original Comedy in Four Acts* (London: Samuel French, [188?]), p. 37.

<sup>177</sup> The widespread belief in the weakness of the female mind contributed to cementing the association between women and emotional instability. Unable to rationalise the fluctuations of their feelings, Victorian women were described in John Elliotson's medical book *Human Physiology* as responding to the Latin motto *Varium et mutabile semper femina*: moved by their sensations and feelings, they were painted as inconstant and volatile. See Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 18.

in disguise, favours the couple's reconciliation: after having proven his love and faithfulness, Augustus asks for Ethel's forgiveness, and balance is finally restored.

Although pursuing a professional career as a painter and being determined to separate from her husband because of his mistreatments, Ethel is portrayed by Byron in a highly conventional way. Firstly, Ethel puts her artistic ability to the service of others: she is a loving wife and a devoted daughter, who sells her paintings not to achieve independence from her family but to sustain both her beloved husband and father. Indeed, she states that she is 'very sorry'<sup>178</sup> for her professional success, which she only pursues to help Augustus in the hope of sharing with him 'long delightful hours passed side by side at the pleasant labour [they] so loved'.<sup>179</sup> Secondly, like Mrs Cuthbert's in *Cyril's Success*, Ethel conforms to the stereotype of the passionate mid-Victorian woman, as she resolves to abandon Augustus because of her unrestrained jealousy, which is fostered by her mother's unjustified suspicions.

If compared to those written by Byron, Burnand's comedies deal less directly with issues of women's independence. Burnand often stages stock comic female characters: for instance, he humorously portrays scheming mothers determined to find the perfect love match for their sons and daughters (e. g. Mrs Crumbley in *Proof Positive* and Mrs Sauder in *The Humbug*) and young girls eventually marrying for love despite their families' desires (e. g. Ethel and Maud Crumbley in *Proof Positive* and Gertrude and Beatrice Kegg in *The Humbug*).<sup>180</sup> One notable exception to this pattern is Burnand's comedy *Betsy*, an adaptation of the French comedy *Bébé*, first performed at the Criterion Theatre in 1879, which features a separated woman, Madame Polenta, as a secondary character. *Betsy* deals with the romantic misadventures of a young gentleman named Dolly.<sup>181</sup> Dolly's education is thoroughly managed by his over-protective mother, who plans for him to be educated at home by a tutor, Mr Dawson, so as to preserve his boyish innocence. Yet, Dolly is not as innocent as he seems: he smokes, enjoys London's nightlife with his friend Dick, and courts a young woman, Nellie. Polenta is Mr Dawson's former wife, who did not tolerate Dawson's assiduous attendance at his club and left him. Polenta is initially presented as flirtatious: she is described as a 'grass widow [...] who

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<sup>178</sup> Byron, *Married in Haste*, p. 36.

<sup>179</sup> Byron, *Married in Haste*, p. 32.

<sup>180</sup> See Francis Burnand, *Proof Positive: A Comedy* (Privately printed for the author, 1870) and Francis Burnand, *The Humbug: A Comedy in Two Acts* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1867).

<sup>181</sup> According to the *Era*, Burnand had eliminated from his comedy all the inconvenient details from the French comedy *Bébé*, as they may have caused offence. See "BETSY' AT THE CRITERION", *Era*, 10 August 1879, p. 5.



looks as green as grass, and attracts the donkeys'<sup>182</sup> and is said to entertain a mysterious relationship with Captain McManus, a reformed Bohemian. Yet, Polenta is also humorously foregrounded as concerned with propriety: she insists on chaperoning Nellie in her secret visit to Dolly's house, ultimately favouring the protagonists' union.

In conclusion, the literary and theatrical productions of the Bohemian burlesque authors covered in this section arguably display their conventional attitude towards the representation of women. In their memoirs, Blanchard and Burnand describe their wives as domestic angels. Brough portrays Lucy Lynch as a naïve queen of Bohemian artists in his novel *Marston Lynch* and satirises women's claim to independence in his farce *Crinoline*. Similarly, in his farce *The Ladies' Club*, Lemon satirises women's appropriation of the masculine institution of clubs. In his novel *Paid in Full*, Byron emphasises the respectability of the two female protagonists, and, in his comedies, he portrays loving wives who inevitably regret separating from their husbands out of jealousy. In a similar fashion, Burnand's comedy *Betsy* humorously foregrounds the concerns over propriety displayed by a separated woman, Madame Polenta. The mildly conservative attitude conveyed by these dramatists in publications like novels, memoirs, comedies, and farces will be taken into consideration when approaching their comic portrayal of gender roles in classical burlesques.

### 1.2.1 Independent Women outside Bohemia: Strong-Minded Women

As this overview of their memoirs, novels, and plays has shown, Bohemian burlesque authors seem to have denied the presence of women in London's Bohemia. However, in their works for the stage, they often engaged with the representation of unconventional women. Monròs-Gaspar argues that a large number of female characters in Victorian classical burlesques are ascribable to the category of strong-minded women. The label hints at a specific socio-political referent and is defined by the *OED* as an attribute 'applied to women having qualities or behaviour conventionally regarded as masculine, or opposed to the legal restrictions on, and society's prevailing attitudes towards, women'.<sup>183</sup> Hence, not only was the strong-minded woman diametrically opposed to the conventional stereotype of the womanly wife and mother, but she also defied the usual gender classification observed by the Victorians.<sup>184</sup> Because of the threat posed to the

<sup>182</sup> Francis Burnand, *Betsy: A Comedy in Three Acts* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1900), p. 27.

<sup>183</sup> 'strong-minded, adj.', *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/191819](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/191819)> [accessed 10 May 2020]. Also quoted in Monròs-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 34.

<sup>184</sup> According to Helsing, Sheets and Veeder, the strong-minded woman is 'the stereotype of the unnatural woman: mind rules heart in man, but heart should dominate mind, even to total unselfconsciousness, in

normative juxtaposition separating the masculine from the feminine, women who showed ‘intelligence, but also will, passion, resolution, self-consciousness and independence of judgement’<sup>185</sup> were derogatorily labelled as strong-minded. Specifically, this happened when women ventured into the public sphere of action, undertaking professional careers as governesses, nurses, or intellectuals.<sup>186</sup> For example, as Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder recall, Carlyle regarded the novelist George Eliot as a strong-minded woman.<sup>187</sup> Similarly, a journalist writing for the *Era* believed that some contributors to *The Ladies’ Companion* were ‘strong-minded women’, who ‘ape[d] the scribe’ and neglected their ‘mission for [...] the concoction of frivolous stories’.<sup>188</sup>

However, strong-minded women were principally identified with the early campaigners for the recognition of women’s rights. The *Caledonian Mercury*, which provided press coverage of the Women’s Rights Convention, held in 1852 at Syracuse, portrayed some of the American female attendees and lecturers as the ‘Strong-Minded Women of America’<sup>189</sup>, since they championed the causes of female enfranchisement, equal educational opportunities, and legal representation. Similarly, the political engagement of the English activist Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon was recognised as symptomatic of strong-mindedness.<sup>190</sup> Specifically, Bodichon intervened in the parliamentary debate over divorce and property legislation with the support of her all-female committee, which featured among its members Bessie Rayner Parks, Mary Howitt, Eliza Flower, Anna Murphy Jameson, and Elizabeth Sturch Reid. The committee raised a twenty-six-thousand-signature petition intended to amend the legislation that determined married women’s rights over property, which was presented by Lord Brougham to Parliament in March 1856. In 1857, Parliament discussed a Married Women’s Property Bill, which was strongly opposed by the Conservative MP Alexander James Beresford-Hope, who dismissed the question as an absurd demand brought forward

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woman’. See Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin L. Sheets, William R. Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883*, 3 vols (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), III, 89.

<sup>185</sup> Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder, III, 93.

<sup>186</sup> Monros-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, p. 35. For a broader discussion of all the professional careers undertaken by strong-minded women in mid-Victorian Britain see Ellen Jordan, *The Women’s Movement and Women’s Employment in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 87-144.

<sup>187</sup> ‘When George Henry Lewes writes [...] to explain to a disapproving Carlyle his reasons for leaving England with Marian Evans [George Eliot], Carlyle, unappeased, marks the envelope “G.H. Lewes and ‘Strong-Minded Woman’”. See Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder, III, 92.

<sup>188</sup> ‘THE MAGAZINES, &c.’, *Era*, 9 November 1851, p. 11.

<sup>189</sup> ‘THE STRONG-MINDED WOMEN OF AMERICA’, *Caledonian Mercury*, 4 October 1852.

<sup>190</sup> Monros-Gaspar believes that Bodichon was a ‘real life impersonation’ of strong-mindedness. See Monros-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, p. 34.

by a group of ‘strong-minded women’.<sup>191</sup> Similarly, the attorney general, Sir Richard Bethell, believed that a reform of married women’s rights over property would have dangerously placed British women in an independent and strong-minded position. Holcombe recalls that, despite the opposition, the bill passed, but it was soon left aside to discuss the more pressing issue of divorce, which resulted in the 1857 Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act.<sup>192</sup> Twenty years later, the efforts of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy to support the 1884 Guardianship of Infants Bill, which was intended to guarantee equal rights over the custody of children to both parents, were similarly branded as promoted by ‘strong-minded women’.<sup>193</sup>

Not only widely used to describe the ancestors of the New Woman of the *fin de siècle*, the attribute strong-minded also developed as delineating a distinct literary type. As Monròs-Gaspar notes, the character of the strong-minded woman appears in popular novels of the Victorian period. For example, in Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), the anonymous character of the strong-minded woman is portrayed as unmarried and unattractive, with ‘a dreary face and a bony figure and a masculine voice’.<sup>194</sup> Yet, according to Kelly Hager, ‘the most independent, strong-minded’ female character in Dickens’ production is perhaps Betsey Trotswood, David Copperfield’s aunt. Betsey, a woman of rigid figure and countenance, separated from her violent husband, reverted to her maiden name, and lived as a single woman ‘in an inflexible retirement’.<sup>195</sup>

Furthermore, it is arguable that the heroines of the sensation novels popularised in the 1860s shared some of the characteristics defining strong-minded women. As Lynn Pickett observes, it was an essential feature of sensation fiction to portray at least one

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<sup>191</sup> The words of James Beresford-Hope are quoted in Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), p. 92.

<sup>192</sup> For a more detailed account of the debates concerning property and the involvement of female activists in the 1850s see Holcombe, *Wives and Property*, pp. 57-93. Holcombe also states that ‘another of Madame Bodichon’s great interests now was women’s suffrage’. With an all-female association called the Kensington Society, Bodichon raised a petition aimed at the enfranchisement of women which was presented to Parliament by John Stuart Mill. Although women were not granted the right to vote with the 1867 Reform Act, ‘women’s suffrage committees and societies were springing up all over the country’. See Holcombe, *Wives and Property*, pp. 114-117.

<sup>193</sup> The Conservative MP Charles Warton described the Guardianship of Infants Bill as a measure ‘promoted by strong-minded women’. His words are quoted in Griffin, p. 137.

<sup>194</sup> Quoted in Monròs-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, p. 34. Moreover, Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder read the protagonists of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Alfred Tennyson’s *The Princess* (1847), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1874) alongside the stereotype of the strong-minded woman. See Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder, III, 94-110.

<sup>195</sup> Kelly Hager, ‘Estranging David Copperfield: Reading the Novel of Divorce’, *ELH*, 63 (1996), 989-1019 (p. 1008). Hager believes that Dickens has an ambivalent attitude towards Betsey Trotswood: despite presenting her as an independent woman, he also underlines that Betsey has an enduring affection for her husband. See Hager, pp. 1003-1009.

female protagonist as ‘assertive, transgressive and a creature of passion’.<sup>196</sup> Marian Halcombe, one of the heroines of Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1860), constitutes a perfect example to illustrate this point. She is described as follows by the male protagonist Walter Hartright:

[t]he lady is ugly! [...] The lady’s complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression— bright, frank, and intelligent— appeared [...].<sup>197</sup>

Like the Dickensian characters mentioned above, Marian Holcombe is said to possess heavily masculinised features. Her expression betrays intelligence, which she uses to question and reject the normative expectations around virtuous womanhood: for instance, she is admittedly unable play any musical instrument, but she can play chess, backgammon, and billiard like a man.<sup>198</sup> On account of her assertiveness and unconventional interests, Marian can be regarded as embodying strong-mindedness.

Although he does not explicitly use the term, the character of Bertha in Lemon’s most famous novel *Falkner Lyle* (1866) seems to be another example of the strong-minded woman stereotype. Having married Lyle for no reason but to satisfy her vanity, Bertha finds the domestic commitments unbearable: despite being expected to stay at home when her husband works late, she cannot tolerate any limitation to her freedom. Therefore, Bertha rebels against her husband’s request to avoid social gatherings, attends an evening reception alone, and encourages malicious gossip. Falkner Lyle, who understands that his wife was flirting with another man, sees his honour compromised. He shows patience in trying to mend his relationship with Bertha, especially for the sake of their daughter, since he considers a legal separation as a ‘dreadful alternative’.<sup>199</sup> However, Bertha decides to legally divorce her husband and fight for the custody of her daughter. The anger and effort required in the battle against Falkner erode Bertha’s original beauty, transforming her

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<sup>196</sup> Lynn Pickett, *The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel* (Northcote: British Council, 2011), p. 9. The distinction between the heroine of the sensation novel and the strong-minded woman is not clear-cut. Helsinger, Sheets and Veeder believe that there is a crucial difference between the two: the protagonist of sensation fiction commits criminal and erotic acts with which strong-minded woman do not concretely engage. However, both types of women are strong-willed. See Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder, III, 112.

<sup>197</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 49-50.

<sup>198</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 51.

<sup>199</sup> Mark Lemon, *Falkner Lyle; Or, The Story of Two Wives*, 2 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1866), I, 169.

into a ‘basilisk’<sup>200</sup>, ‘a sorceress’<sup>201</sup>, a ‘tigress’<sup>202</sup>. The character of Bertha is juxtaposed to Ethel, a pious and nurturing woman who dutifully suffers the mistreatments of her husband. The narrator describes Ethel as having ‘firmness of character’<sup>203</sup>, but he also specifies that her strength does not imply any sign of strong-mindedness.

Contrasting Bertha’s and Ethel’s married lives, Lemon directly engages with the debates concerning women’s rights that emerged in the late fifties. Firstly, Lemon shows the contradictions inherent in the introduction of the legislation on divorce: Bertha is not a wronged wife who needs to be freed from a violent or unreasonable husband. The separation she desires is presented merely as a way to be completely free, satisfy her immoral instincts, and live according to her passions. Ethel, on the contrary, could rightfully benefit from divorce: she is married to an impenitent gambler, renowned for cheating at cards, who loses all the couple’s savings. Yet, Ethel chooses to be a dutiful wife, enduring financial hardships, and helping her husband to abandon gambling. Secondly, Lemon shows the risks entailed by allowing women to petition for the custody of their children. Bertha demands to take care of her daughter but proves to be unable to fulfil her maternal duties: she leaves the baby girl with a drunken nurse, in a state of ‘comparative neglect’.<sup>204</sup> Therefore, Lemon seems to give voice to the fears of the conservative members of nineteenth-century society who, like the Attorney General involved in the parliamentary debates of 1857, thought that the greater the rights granted to women, the greater the risk of them becoming strong-minded. From their point of view, women like Bertha would have shown unreasonable determination and willingness to satisfy their passions, at the cost of endangering their offspring.

Being so widespread, the stereotype of the strong-minded woman soon became the target of satire. In the mid-Victorian period, *Punch*, the magazine edited by Lemon and to which Burnand regularly contributed, parodied the character of the strong-minded woman in several articles and cartoons. The strong-minded women featuring in *Punch* are often depicted with masculinised features: for example, a cartoon appearing in November 1855 shows a strong-minded governess being accused by her pupil of having moustaches (Figure 5), while another cartoon published in July 1848 portrays a strong-minded mother-in-law dressed in men’s clothes (Figure 6).<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Lemon, *Falkner Lyle*, I, 195.

<sup>201</sup> Lemon, *Falkner Lyle*, I, 297.

<sup>202</sup> Lemon, *Falkner Lyle*, I, 191.

<sup>203</sup> Lemon, *Falkner Lyle*, I, 16.

<sup>204</sup> Lemon, *Falkner Lyle*, I, 204.

<sup>205</sup> ‘HOW VERY EMBARRASSING’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 3 November 1855, p. 174.



### HOW VERY EMBARRASSING.

*Gustavus.* "MAMMA, DEAR! ARE MOUSTACHIOS FASHIONABLE?"

*Mamma.* "WELL, GUS, I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY, BUT I BELIEVE THEY ARE."

*Gus.* "OH! THEN, IS THAT THE REASON WHY MISS GRUMPH WEARS 'EM?"

*MISS GRUMPH, as well as being strong-minded, is rather masculine in appearance.*

Figure 5. 'HOW VERY EMBARRASSING', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 3 November 1855, p. 174



## THE MODEL MOTHER-IN-LAW.



SHE is a tender creature, and requires the nicest care and the hottest luncheons to keep her in good temper. She has only *one* child, a daughter, but she is passionately fond of her. She “only lives to see her dear child happy” —and everybody else miserable. To insure this, it is necessary to be constantly with her. Accordingly, she “brings her things” some day before dinner, and takes possession of the best bedroom, only to stop for a week. Her weeks, however, never have a Saturday. She has no knowledge of time, as measured by the week, month, or year, but is sadly put out if supper is not brought up precisely

to the minute. But JULIA always required a mother’s care. She was

Figure 6. ‘THE MODEL MOTHER-IN-LAW’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 15 July 1848, p. 29

Her face is characterised by sharp features and a disproportionately big nose. The article accompanying the caricature explains that, like a perfect strong-minded woman, the mother-in-law ‘is always telling people a bit of her mind’<sup>206</sup> and poking her long, pointed nose in other people’s concerns.

Apart from their looks, *Punch* also parodied strong-minded women’s interests and political struggles. In April 1852, an article entitled ‘Lecture at the Strong-Minded Women’s Club’ ironically described a fictional all-female association, where members discuss the ridiculous issue of smoking. Strong-minded women believe that smoking is the basest of men’s vices, since it causes ‘[l]assitude, great expense, drunkenness, injury to one’s clothes, carpets, and curtains – departure of everything like comfort – headaches, latch-keys, late hours, and total wreck of everything like domestic happiness!’<sup>207</sup> In order to demonstrate this point, one of the women decides to smoke a cigar. The consequences

<sup>206</sup> ‘THE MODEL MOTHER-IN-LAW’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 15 July 1848, p. 29.

<sup>207</sup> ‘LECTURE AT THE STRONG-MINDED WOMEN’S CLUB’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 24 April 1852, pp. 170-171.

of her experiment are hilariously dramatic: the woman turns ‘very pale, [sinks] down her chair’<sup>208</sup> and falls severely ill. The article is accompanied by a caricature which portrays a strong-minded woman dressed in men’s clothes, who is smoking a cigar so big that it needs to be placed on a support (Figure 7).



Figure 7. 'LECTURE AT THE STRONG-MINDED WOMEN'S CLUB', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 24 April 1852, p. 170

The cartoon alludes to the inability of women to metaphorically ‘hold’ cigars: no matter how strong-minded they claim to be, women seem to be too weak to smoke like men.

In an article published in March 1859, *Punch* similarly commented on the strong-minded women’s battle for enfranchisement. Instead of discussing this matter seriously, female activists for the right to vote end up talking about the likenesses of the male members of Parliament. Moreover, they are said to abandon the meeting as soon as their husbands, tired of waiting, threaten to go to their club. Consequently, the journalist reporting on this ‘Great Reform Meeting’<sup>209</sup>, held by and for women, ironically observes that ‘it is difficult to say to what precise results the proceedings had arrived’.<sup>210</sup> Ultimately, *Punch* articles and cartoons ridicule the figure of the strong-minded woman

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> ‘GREAT REFORM MEETING’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 19 March 1859, p. 117.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.



endowing her with a masculinised physical appearance, diminishing the earnestness of her pursuits and denying her abilities.

Similar strategies are used in the satirical magazine *Fun*, founded in 1861 by Byron and to which Brough often contributed. A fictional correspondent called Snodgrass, after the character of the so-called poet in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837), writes in March 1861 that 'the preference that strong-minded women show for blue stockings arises entirely from the fact of their requiring less washing than white ones'.<sup>211</sup> The joke capitalises on the supposed lack of domestication of the women writers known as Bluestockings. A few years later, a satirical poem warned the gentlemen reading *Fun* against the possibility of marrying a strong-minded woman. The author of the poem, who had made such a mistake, narrates that he was 'bullied and snubbed'<sup>212</sup> by his strong-minded wife and, most of all, that he was denied the possibility of leaving the house despite his love for the theatre. In these caricatures, the strong-minded woman emerges as naturally incompetent and unreasonably despotic. These tropes, which recur in nineteenth-century satirical magazines, anticipate some of the themes and parodical strategies that will be used to ridicule the strong-minded women featuring in classical burlesques.

### 1.2.2 Independent Women Outside Bohemia: The Girl of the Period

Whilst, as noted in the previous section, the strong-minded woman asserts her independence by pursuing an intellectually stimulating career and fighting for the recognition of equal rights, a different kind of freedom is claimed by her frivolous sister, the Girl of the Period.<sup>213</sup> Memorably portrayed by Eliza Lynn Linton in an essay published in the *Saturday Review* in March 1868, the Girl of the Period:

[...] is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face, as the first articles of her personal religion – a creature whose sole idea of life is fun; whose sole aim is unbounded luxury; and whose dress is the chief object of such thought and intellect as she possesses. Her main endeavour is to outvie her neighbours in the extravagance of fashion. No matter if, in the time of crinolines, she sacrifices decency; in the time of trains, cleanliness; in the time of tied-back skirts, modesty; no matter either, if she makes herself a nuisance and an inconvenience to every one she meets; – the Girl of the Period has done away with such moral muffishness as consideration for others, or regard for counsel and rebuke. It was all very well in old-fashioned times, when fathers and mothers had some authority and were

<sup>211</sup> 'A BRUTE', *Fun*, 28 September 1861, p. 13. It is arguable that the joke quoted above is not only aimed at strong-minded literary women but also at male writers, who are identified with the dubiously talented Arthur Snodgrass.

<sup>212</sup> 'A WIFE WITH A WILL OF HER OWN', *Fun*, 25 September 1869, p. 34.

<sup>213</sup> Helsinger, Sheets and Veeder refer to the strong-minded woman as the 'serious sister' of the 'frivolous Girl of the Period'. See Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder, III, 89.

treated with respect, to be tutored and made to obey, but she is far too fast and flourishing to be stopped in mid-career by these slow old morals; and as she lives to please herself, she does not care if she displeases everyone else.<sup>214</sup>

Linton attacks a new generation of young women who, in the 1860s, demanded increasing liberties to dress fashionably, wear cosmetics, and amuse themselves. From her rigidly conservative point of view, Linton juxtaposes the modern Girl of the Period to the English lady of the past: if the former lives to please herself, the latter is characterised by self-forgetfulness. The ‘fair young English girl’<sup>215</sup> dreams about marrying a man with whom she identifies all her desires and aspirations. On the contrary, the Girl of the Period considers marriage as a mere opportunity to exploit the financial resources of a husband, who is expected to pay for her luxuries and satisfy her absurd cravings. For her vanity, the Girl of the Period is associated with the *demi-mondaine*, whose opulence and pleasures she admires.

Despite her apparent frivolity, the Girl of the Period has been regarded as embodying a seriously controversial and an unsettling figure. Specifically, Christina Boufis underlines how the parallelism drawn by Linton between the *demi-mondaine* and the Girl of the Period is highly significant. Linton states that ‘[w]hat the *demi-monde* does in its frantic efforts to excite attention, she [the Girl of the Period] also does in imitation’.<sup>216</sup> In order to expose herself and be admired, Linton believes that the Girl of the Period *emulates* the prostitute in matters of dress and make up. Not only does this affirmation question the morality of a new generation of independent young ladies, but it also raises the issue of fashion as a status marker. In the Victorian era, clothes were generally regarded as indicating women’s position in society. Yet, as Boufis argues, the Girl of the Period deliberately imitates the *demi-monde*, blurring the distinction between respectable girls and prostitutes walking in the streets of Victorian London.<sup>217</sup> Therefore, the Girl of the Period’s seemingly harmless claim to dress fashionably and paint her face threatens

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<sup>214</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton, ‘The Girl of the Period’, in *The Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1883), I, 1-10 (p. 3).

<sup>215</sup> Linton, ‘The Girl of the Period’, p. 1.

<sup>216</sup> Linton, ‘The Girl of the Period’, p. 4.

<sup>217</sup> Specifically, Boufis quotes and discusses ‘Costume and Its Morals’, another essay written for the *Saturday Review*, where Linton complains about the extravagance of modern dresses, since they failed to clearly indicate women’s position in society. Boufis concludes that the Girl of the Period’s ‘imitation of dress reveals [...] that the visible signs of class consciousness were becoming increasingly unstable. In her emulation of the forms of female deviance – namely the indulgence in “pleasure” and “display” – the Girl complicates the tropes of respectability the Victorian used to categorize women’. See Christina Boufis, ‘“Of Home and Birth and Breeding”: Eliza Lynn Linton and the Girl of the Period’, in *The Girl’s Own: Cultural Histories of the Anglo-American Girl*, ed. by Claudia Nelson and Lynne Vallone (London: University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. 98-123 (p. 100-104).

the rigid classification of English society. In particular, the Girl of the Period manages to hide her true character, denying the ‘tropes of respectability’<sup>218</sup> the Victorians employed to distinguish virtuous women from fallen ones.

Not only vain and frivolous, for the modernity she embraces, the Girl of the Period is also described by Linton as ‘far too fast’.<sup>219</sup> When applied to women, the term ‘fast’ was used to denote general coarseness and disregard of female propriety and decorum. In July 1860, the *Saturday Review* gave a detailed definition of the nineteenth-century ‘fast’ girl. According to the journalist, the ‘fast’ girl appropriates distinctively male pastimes, such as smoking, drinking, and gambling. If she lives in the capital and is acquainted with fashionable society, the ‘fast’ girl is increasingly prone to indecency: specifically, she develops the habit ‘of talking with men on subjects which are scarcely proper, and in language which is still more doubtful’.<sup>220</sup> She indulges in gossip and allows the men who surround her to ignore ‘the line that separates the impure woman from the pure’.<sup>221</sup> Finally, the ‘fast’ girl generally walks around the city at night, unescorted, raising suspicions around her morality in the passers-by. Linton’s Girl of the Period, being described as ‘fast’, possesses all these characteristics: she gossips and uses slang, she indulges in typically male vices and claims the right to explore the city, enjoying its multiple opportunities for leisure, without a male chaperone. Therefore, not only does the Girl of the Period challenge the normative notion of female respectability *aesthetically*, but she does so also through the adoption of unconventional and ‘fast’ *behaviours*.

Linton is commonly held responsible for having invented a catchphrase which described the modern girl of the 1860s. Her article generated a true cultural phenomenon: published in the form of a pamphlet, Linton’s ‘The Girl of the Period’ sold more than forty thousand copies; while almanacs, valentines, bonnets, and other items of merchandising capitalised on the popularity of the character.<sup>222</sup> In addition, the Girl of the Period permeated literary creations: Boufis observes that in 1857, Margaret Oliphant had already identified the ‘young woman of the period’<sup>223</sup> as the ‘fast’ heroine of sensation fiction. Oliphant explicitly refers to the literary creations of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, whom she considers responsible for inventing the ‘fair haired demon of modern

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<sup>218</sup> Boufis, p. 104.

<sup>219</sup> Linton, ‘The Girl of the Period’, p. 3.

<sup>220</sup> ‘DECENCY’, *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 28 July 1860, pp. 104-105.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> Boufis, p. 98.

<sup>223</sup> According to Boufis, Oliphant was the first to use the label ‘woman of the period’, but it did not become a catchphrase. See Boufis p. 109. See also Margaret Oliphant, ‘NOVELS’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, September 1867, 257-280.

fiction'.<sup>224</sup> Specifically, the heroine of *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), being endowed with angelic beauty, is accused of misleading the readers' expectations around her respectability. Hence, Oliphant seems to address the same issue that troubled Linton's approach to the Girl of the Period: by rejecting the shared codes of female representation, the protagonist of Braddon's sensation novel complicates the binary distinction separating the angel from the demon, the English lady from the 'fast' girl, and the virtuous heroine from the wicked villainess.

The same argument has been recently developed by Pickett, who states that the female protagonists of Braddon's works are 'for one reason or another, not what they seem. Most of her sensation narratives are structured around women with something to hide, some secret in the past which makes their present life a sham or masquerade'.<sup>225</sup> For example, Pickett argues that Lady Audley is a 'Lady Macbeth in the shape of a feminine ideal'<sup>226</sup>: behind her angelic appearance and her fictitiously submissive attitude, she is a cold and calculating character, capable of abandoning her child and committing murder. The reverse seems to happen in the case of *Aurora Floyd* (1863). Portrayed like the prototypical Girl of the Period, Aurora is a dark-haired pre-Raphaelite beauty, who uses coarse language and enjoys horseracing. However, Aurora finds redemption in marriage and motherhood.<sup>227</sup> Although respectively narrating the processes of moral corruption and redemption of the female protagonists, Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* fundamentally foreground the undecipherability of women's true nature: like Linton's Girls of the Period, Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd are metamorphic and deceitful, resisting the dictates of conventional representation.

On account of her widespread popularity, the Girl of the Period rapidly became the target of parody.<sup>228</sup> In 1868, *Fun* published a 'Modern Eclogue' that humorously

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<sup>224</sup> According to Oliphant, '[w]icked women used to be brunettes long ago, now they are the daintiest, softest, prettiest of blonde creatures; and this change has been wrought by Lady Audley, and her influence on contemporary novels'. See Oliphant, 'Novels', p. 263.

<sup>225</sup> Pickett, p. 79.

<sup>226</sup> Pickett, p. 80.

<sup>227</sup> According to Pickett, Aurora Floyd 'is ultimately rescued for domestic womanhood by an ordeal of suffering and maternity'. Aurora denies her identity as a Girl of the Period when she becomes a mother. Moreover, her 'disruptive femininity is contained by the threatened loss of her home and husband, and she is brought within the boundaries of the womanly behaviour she has hitherto despised and refused'. Pickett, p. 87.

<sup>228</sup> It is necessary to specify that I will analyse only parodies included in *Punch* and *Fun*, because classical burlesque authors like Lemon, Burnand, Byron, and Brough are directly involved with these publications. However, other magazines such as *Tomahawk* and *Judy* published humorous portraits of the Girl of the Period. See, for example, "'THE GIRL OF THE PERIOD!' OR, PAINTED BY A PRURIENT PRUDE', *The Tomahawk: A Saturday Journal of Satire*, 4 April 1868, p. 139 and 'THE GIRL OF THE PERIOD', *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*, 7 November 1888, p. 225. Moreover, according to Kristine Moruzi, the *Girl of the Period Miscellany*, published in July 1869, played a key role in transforming

condemned the Girl of the Period's desire for self-display, framing her as a 'compound of vanity, slang and dyed hair', who 'lives but to wear / A dress that shall make people turn round and stare'.<sup>229</sup> The magazine also capitalised on the Girl of the Period's obsession with fashion when, in August 1868, a satirical cartoon portrayed a young lady being accused of coiffing her hair 'like a snail' (Figure 8).<sup>230</sup>



Figure 8. 'A HINT FOR GIRLS OF THE PERIOD', *Fun*, 15 August 1868, p. 235

In her defence, the girl clarifies that, with such a hairstyle, she could not have been accused of being 'fast'.<sup>231</sup> In the same year, *Punch* published a humorous letter where Mrs Punch described a meeting of Girls of the Period. Gathered to discuss the issue of female enfranchisement, the young ladies sketched instead the portrait of the perfect politician, listing a series of essential characteristics: the Girls of the Period would have supported a handsome man, able to dance and read poetry, religious, strongly opposed to

Linton's Girl of the Period into 'a figure of fun'. See, Kristine Moruzi, *Constructing Girlhood through the Periodical Press, 1850-1915* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 53-81.

<sup>229</sup> 'THE GIRL OF THE PERIOD', *Fun*, 11 April 1868, p. 49.

<sup>230</sup> 'A HINT FOR GIRLS OF THE PERIOD', *Fun*, 15 August 1868, p. 235.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

the improvement of women's condition in society, and not over-clever. His chief function would have been that of defending the Girls of the Period from the attacks of 'those horribly critical figures who find fault with [them], and want [them] to leave off chignons and Sensational novels'.<sup>232</sup> Being merely concerned with sensation literature and fashion, *Punch's* Girls of the Period are painted as utterly frivolous.

Before Linton's invention of the tag 'Girl of the Period', *Punch* had already parodied the character of the 'fast' young lady in a satirical poem published in August 1860. *Punch's* 'fast' young lady is considered free to discuss 'all that men discuss, / never mind how scandalous'<sup>233</sup>, she wears extravagant clothes, and enjoys typically male pastimes, such as horseracing and betting. Furthermore, the 'fast' young lady is not interested in any manifestation of romantic love, which she considers 'a bore'<sup>234</sup>. Yet, she would surrender to marriage with 'a wealthy man'<sup>235</sup>, able to pay for her 'bills, porte-monnaie store, / [and] wardrobe stock'.<sup>236</sup> The 'fast' girl's aversion to marriage is also encapsulated in a cartoon published by *Punch* in October 1864 (Figure 9).

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<sup>232</sup> 'MRS. PUNCH'S LETTERS TO HER DAUGHTER', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 3 October 1868, p. 143.

<sup>233</sup> 'FAST YOUNG LADIES', *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 18 August 1860, p. 67.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.



**FAST YOUNG LADY,**

IN PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH HER LOOKING-GLASS.

“IF I SHOULD MEET AS GOOD LOOKING A FELLA AS YOURSELF, I ’LL  
TURN BENEDICK.”

Figure 9. ‘FAST YOUNG LADY, IN PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH HER LOOKING-GLASS’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 8 October 1864, p. 150

A young woman is sketched in the foreground: she admires herself in the mirror while holding a top hat and a cane. In the background, a trophy, a portrait of a horse, and a stuffed fox indicate the woman’s propensity for recreational activities generally associated with men. The caption accompanying the cartoon reports the words uttered by the ‘fast’ lady, who says that ‘if [she] should meet as good looking a fella as [her]self, [she]’ll turn Benedick’.<sup>237</sup> Apart from the use of slang words, the caption is significant

<sup>237</sup> ‘FAST YOUNG LADY, IN PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH HER LOOKING-GLASS’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 8 October 1864, p. 150.

for the use of the name Benedick, which hints at Shakespeare's character in *Much Ado About Nothing*. At the beginning of Shakespeare's comedy, Benedick swears celibacy; yet he entertains a romantic relationship with a female character named Beatrice.<sup>238</sup> The parallelism between Benedick and the 'fast' young lady suggests that she indulges in flirting with men despite advocating a strong opposition to love and marriage. Moreover, by making clear that only a man as beautiful as herself could draw her attention, the 'fast' girl is foregrounded as irremediably narcissistic.

In the parodies analysed above, the 'fast' Girl of the Period is reduced to a vain, frivolous, and flirtatious creature, who is ready to marry only for economic interest. The caricatures appearing in the satirical press of the 1860s arguably sought to neutralise the danger posed by such an unconventional character to nineteenth-century society: as Linton made explicit, the Girls of the Period were perceived as problematically confusing the Victorian perception of female (im-)morality. In addition, Nead argues that the parodic representations of the 'fast' Girl of the Period played a crucial role in the political debates for the recognition of women's rights taking place in the 1860s. She claims that, when female activists started to fight for gender equality, the Girl of the Period was construed 'as a counter figure of weak, superficial femininity, incapable of equality and without the discernment or intelligence to vote'.<sup>239</sup> Hence, she was often 'mobilised [...] both by those who opposed female equality and by those who supported it and condemned the way that young women had been seduced by fashion'.<sup>240</sup> As will be discussed in the chapters that follow, classical burlesque authors exploit similar themes and strategies to those employed in *Punch* and *Fun* to parody the notion of female 'fastness'. In effect, although none of the satirical articles or caricatures analysed in this chapter are explicitly attributed to Bohemian burlesque authors, their active participation in both *Punch*'s and *Fun*'s editorial boards arguably signals that they shared, or even shaped, the ethos of such journals. Ultimately, despite possibly acknowledging the threats posed by strong-minded and 'fast' ladies to the mid-Victorian social order, the satirical portraits of independent women outside Bohemia analysed here reveal that neither *Punch* nor *Fun* gave voice to the alleged political radicalism attributed to their editors and contributors by modern

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<sup>238</sup> The name 'Benedick' entered in common usage as a 'generic term for newly married bachelors of long standing'. See Sheldon P. Zitner, 'General Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. by Sheldon P. Zitner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), pp. 1-78 (p. 28).

<sup>239</sup> Lynda Nead, *Fashion and Visual Culture in the 19th Century: The Girl of the Period*, online video recording <<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/fashion-and-visual-culture-in-the-19th-century-the-girl-of-the-period>> [accessed 23 February 2022].

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*



classical scholars. The following chapters of this thesis will evaluate whether, as products of the same socio-cultural milieu, the caricatures of strong-minded and ‘fast’ ladies published in satirical journals bear resemblance to those featured in classical burlesques.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the connections between classical burlesque authors and the underworld of London Bohemia. The reminiscences of dramatists like Blanchard and Burnand, together with the testimonies of journalists like Yates and Sala, revealed the existence of a closed community which revolved around Bohemian clubs and places of entertainment. All burlesque authors belonged to the same Bohemian circle, were acquainted with the same journalists, and contributed to the same periodicals, namely *Punch* and *Fun*. The communitarian spirit which characterised London’s Bohemia at mid-nineteenth century is considered by Bratton as signalling Bohemian men’s insouciant rejection of middle-class domesticity: gathering in homosocial places like clubs, Bohemian burlesque authors arguably established vicarious familial networks outside their conventional homes. In addition, this chapter has illustrated how Bohemian burlesque authors’ peregrinations around London’s places of entertainment facilitated their encounter with mid-Victorian swells. Such connections with different representatives of mid-nineteenth-century society will be considered as crucially informing the caricatural portraits of the male heroes of classical burlesques.

Although this chapter has acknowledged the possibility that women played a role in London’s Bohemian community, it has also shown that burlesque authors strove to erase the visible presence of their wives from Bohemia. In their memoirs, Blanchard and Burnand admittedly relinquished a thoroughly Bohemian lifestyle to enjoy the company of their caring wives. Such a conventional portrait of gender roles is not limited to burlesque authors’ memoirs but is also extended to their novels. For instance, even if he was considered a radical, Brough frames the character of Lucy, the wife of the Bohemian protagonist of *Marston Lynch*, as following the normative nineteenth-century social discourse: with a patronising tone, Brough foregrounds Lucy as childlike and defenceless. In a similar fashion, Byron’s *Paid in Full* emphasises the respectability of Julia, the lover of Horace, a Bohemian playwright. Despite being a soubrette, Julia is chaste and devoted to her mother. Although not dealing with the underworld of London’s Bohemia, Lemon’s *Falkner Lyle* conveys the mildly conservative stance of the author towards gender equality issues: Bertha, a divorced strong-minded woman, is framed as unreasonable and

selfish. Bohemian burlesque authors arguably adopt a similar standpoint in their comedies and farces. Lemon and Brough satirise women's aspirations to independence in farces such as *The Ladies' Club* and *Crinoline*. Likewise, Byron's comedies stage loving and caring wives, who regret their temporary separations from their neglectful husbands. Burnand's comedies mainly feature stock comic female characters. Yet, when portraying a separated woman in *Besty*, Burnand emphasises her adherence to the mid-Victorian value of propriety.

Finally, this chapter has considered the satirical portrait of women appearing in journals like *Punch* and *Fun*, which classical burlesque authors either edited or to which they contributed. Focussing specifically on strong-minded women and 'fast' ladies, this chapter has highlighted the ways in which women's ambitions to independence and equality were caricatured: strong-minded and 'fast' ladies appear either as parodically masculinised or as extremely flirtatious and empty-minded. More than supporting the determination of strong-minded and 'fast' women, it is possible that such parodic portraits were aimed at neutralising the serious threats they posed to the mid-Victorian social order. The following chapters of this thesis will evaluate whether the gender representations of the classical burlesques written by Bohemian dramatists embrace similar parodic conventions to those witnessed in *Punch* and *Fun*, starting from the premise that, as argued in this chapter, Bohemian burlesque authors did not explicitly manifest their political affiliation either in their memoirs, novels, comedies, farces, or in the satirical press.

## SECTION 2

### CLASSICAL BURLESQUES IN PERFORMANCE

#### Introduction

As previously argued, since the resurgence of interest in Victorian classical burlesques in the late 1990s, the genre has been unanimously considered by scholars as endowed with politically progressive undertones in terms of gender politics. In general, Hall states that ‘several burlesques do subtly take the side of women in ancient myths’.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, Macintosh reads the burlesques which rewrote the story of Medea as advocating the rights of divorced women in the mid-nineteenth century. Similarly, Richardson and Villalba Lázaro consider Brough’s *Medea* as an expression of the radical political position of the author. Finally, Monròs-Gaspar constructs her anthology of Victorian classical burlesques around the notion of strong-mindedness as defined in the previous chapter of this thesis: the protagonists of Blanchard’s *Antigone Travestie*, Talfourd’s *Alcestis* and *Electra*, and Brough’s *Medea* are perceived as ‘prominent figures of Greek tragedy [who] deliver a deeply rebellious view of the roles of women in society’, since they ‘render burlesque apt testimony to the social progress of women throughout the 1840s and 1850s’.<sup>2</sup>

The political undertones allegedly emerging from the classical burlesques are, almost exclusively, concerned with issues of marital unhappiness and divorce. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, the reformation of the divorce law and the rights of legally separated women were two of the main issues discussed in mid-Victorian parliamentary debates, which were also covered in detail by the press of the time. Strong-minded women and political activists exposed the contradictions inherent in the institution of marriage, which was rhetorically presented as the pinnacle of domestic bliss, even though it systematically hid cruelty and inequality between spouses. For instance, Mill and his wife Harriet Taylor condemned the light sentences given to violent husbands in a series of essays sent to the *Morning Chronicle* between 1850 and 1851.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the petition

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<sup>1</sup> E. Hall, ‘Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre’, p. 352. Hall connects the partiality of burlesque to women’s rights causes to the unauthenticated presence of female audience members among the burlesque public. The fifth chapter of this thesis will deal more explicitly with the issue of classical burlesque audiences.

<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion on the *Medea* burlesques see Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, pp. 75-99, Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, pp. 117-125 and Villalba Lázaro, ‘Victorian Medeas’, pp. 99-134. For Monròs-Gaspar’s analysis of strong-mindedness as appearing in classical burlesques see Monròs-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, pp. 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, p. 28.

presented to Parliament in 1856 by the strong-minded women belonging to the circle of the activist Barbara Bodichon denounced the physical and moral abuses suffered by mid-Victorian wives, who were framed as victims of both beatings and robberies, since the properties they acquired automatically passed into the hands of their husbands.<sup>4</sup> Deaf to the complaints of female activists, Parliament approved the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act in 1857, in a form which granted few rights over property to legally separated women. Furthermore, the lack of legal protection for abandoned wives was interpreted as the reason driving desperate women to commit infanticide. In July 1856, the British press reported the story of Maria Tarrant, a twenty-five-year-old woman deserted by her husband who was arrested and sentenced to death for having strangled her child. A petition for clemency was presented to the court, which reprieved Tarrant from the death penalty.<sup>5</sup> The hopeless circumstances which prompted Tarrant and many other women to murder their offspring were to be found in the unequal legislation system: as the Petition for Reform of the Married Women's Property Law (presented to Parliament on the 14 March 1856) summarizes, 'the law, in depriving the mother of all pecuniary resources, deprives her of the power of [...] providing for [her children's] moral and physical welfare'.<sup>6</sup>

According to Monròs-Gaspar, parliamentary debates, divorce, and infanticide cases were often referred to in the classical burlesques performed in the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>7</sup> Greek and Roman heroines were portrayed as clearly refusing to be trapped in the stereotypical roles of self-effacing wives and mothers, displaying self-interest, determination, and outspokenness. After having been betrayed and deserted by their philandering husbands or lovers, the female protagonists of classical burlesques rebel against the limitations imposed on women's behaviour through the direct denunciation of both legal and social inequalities and through the pursuit of revenge against the perpetrators of gender-based injustice. Accordingly, classical scholars have widely regarded classical burlesques as showcasing and subtly fostering the causes of strong-minded women living in the mid-nineteenth century.

However, as the previous chapter indicated, classical burlesque authors seem to have held a rather traditional view of the role of women in Victorian society. Despite their

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Holcombe reports in full the petition presented before Parliament in 1856. See Holcombe, *Wives and Property*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>5</sup> Monròs-Gaspar treats Tarrant's case as exemplary to describe the rise in public awareness of infanticide. See Monròs-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesques', p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Holcombe, *Wives and Property*, p. 238.

<sup>7</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 29.

Bohemian lifestyle, classical burlesque authors sought to describe their wives as conventionally respectable in their autobiographies. Similarly, their novels and farces praised virtuous female characters, while caricaturing the deviance of unconventional women. Moreover, both *Punch* and *Fun*, to which classical burlesque authors contributed either as editors or journalists, conveyed a mildly conservative attitude when parodying the looks and habits of strong-minded women and ‘fast’ young ladies. In the light of this background, it is necessary to reconsider the rebelliousness of classical burlesque female protagonists. More explicitly, it seems essential to question why classical burlesque authors would have embedded ‘radical overtones’<sup>8</sup> in their burlesques featuring strong-minded women and ‘fast’ young ladies when they seemed to espouse more conventional attitudes in other literary productions. Indeed, it is possible that classical burlesque authors constructed a respectable façade to hide the possible debauchery of their private lives and the liberalism of their political beliefs. Nevertheless, as the next three chapters seek to demonstrate, some scholars of classical burlesques may have overestimated the subversive force of female characters through focussing on texts and overlooking those performative elements which undermined the seriousness with which these characters could be taken.

This section comprises three chapters, each focussing on single yet interrelated elements which influenced the performance of gender in classical burlesques, namely its acting style (Chapter 2), use of cross-dressing (Chapter 3), and use of language (Chapter 4). Although relying on contemporary documents – mainly burlesque scripts, performance reviews, and personal reminiscences –, this investigation is bound to include a certain degree of speculation. This is principally due to the fundamentally transient nature of performance as an object of investigation. In addition, as Postlewait argues, all historical sources are inherently partial: whether based on direct observation or on hearsay reports, no piece of evidence exhaustively describes an historical event and has absolute reliability.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, whilst proposing an evidence-based investigation, this section refrains from tracing a unified narrative describing how gender was performed on the classical burlesque stage. As it attempts to reconcile ‘careful scholarship and detailed

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<sup>8</sup> Monrès-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Postlewait, ‘The Nature of Historical Evidence: A Case Study’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, ed. by David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 231-245.

research [...] with imaginative speculation'<sup>10</sup>, this section offers informed hypotheses – based on both the availability and reliability of evidence – rather than definitive descriptions of the ways in which gender was represented and performed in mid-Victorian classical burlesques. Finally, in order to prevent editorial choices from influencing the analyses which follow, this section references multiple editions of mid-Victorian classical burlesques when available. More specifically, Monròs-Gaspar's and Davies' contemporary critical editions are compared to their nineteenth-century sources.

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<sup>10</sup> Jim Davis and others, 'Researching Theatre History and Historiography', in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. by Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 86-110 (p. 97).

## CHAPTER 2

### BURLESQUE ACTING STYLE

#### Introduction

Schoch argues that ‘the success of any [burlesque] performance rested primarily with actors who were called upon to execute an impressive range of histrionic skills in a comparatively brief performance’.<sup>1</sup> Schoch postulates the complexity of burlesque acting, basing his claim on a series of contemporary documents highlighting the skills that performers had to possess in order to act convincingly in burlesque. In an article published in the *Illustrated Times* in April 1864, for instance, dramatist Thomas W. Robertson states that any burlesque heroine must:

sing the most difficult of Donizetti’s languid, loving melodies, as well as the inimitable Mackney’s ‘Oh, Rosa, how I lub you! Coodle Cum’. She can warble a drawingroom ballad of the ‘Daylight of the Soul’ or ‘Eyes Melting in Gloom’ school, or whistle ‘When I was a-walking in Wiggleton Wale’ with the shrillness and correctness of a Whitechapel bird-catcher. She is as faultless on the piano as on the bones. She can waltz, polka, dance a *pas seul* or a sailor’s hornpipe, La Sylphide, or the Genu-wine Transatlantic Cape Cod Skedaddle, with equal grace and spirit; and as for acting, she can declaim à la Phelps or Fetcher; is serious, droll; and must play farce, tragedy, opera, comedy, melodrama, pantomime, ballet, change her costume, fight a combat, make love, poison herself, die, and take one encore for a song and another for a dance, in the short space of ten minutes.<sup>2</sup>

Robertson humorously emphasises the heterogeneous qualities that female performers showed on the mid-Victorian burlesque stage, which ranged from singing, dancing, and acting in both a serious and comic manner. The very coexistence of seriousness and comicality was considered an essential feature of successful burlesque performances by Burnand. In ‘The Spirit of Burlesque’, he states that the most gifted burlesque actors managed to ‘[utter] nonsense as if it were sense’ and to use ‘sudden transitions of manner and inflection of voice as shall give a comic touch to situations which in themselves are serious’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, from Burnand’s perspective, ‘the true burlesque actor is *rara avis*’, as he/she would have needed a ‘strong perception of the ridiculous’<sup>4</sup>, so as to balance the serious and the grotesque in his/her interpretations, without resorting to mere buffoonery.

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<sup>1</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxix.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Our Feuilleton’, *Illustrated Times*, 23 April 1864, p. 11. Also quoted in Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxx.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Burnand, ‘The Spirit of Burlesque’, *Universal Review*, October 1888, 163-183 (p. 177). Also quoted in Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxix.

<sup>4</sup> Burnand, ‘The Spirit of Burlesque’, p. 176.

As one of the most prolific burlesque authors of the mid-Victorian period, Burnand might have wished to foreground – and perhaps overstate – the degree of complexity involved in burlesque acting. Burnand’s essay aims at dignifying burlesque by giving it ‘a place in dramatic art – not a high place, but within the art and not outside it’, and by refuting the theses of those among his contemporaries who dismissed burlesque as a ‘stupid and barren’ theatrical genre.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Burnand was not the only one who denied the mediocrity of burlesque acting. Apart from Robertson’s previously quoted testimony, George H. Lewes’ *On Actors and the Art of Acting* also alludes to the histrionic challenges faced by burlesque performers. He believes that ‘burlesque acting is the grotesque personation of a character, not the outrageous defiance of all character; the personation has truth, although the character itself may be preposterously drawn’.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of this background, it is arguable that burlesque performers aimed at creating absurd effects through their mastery of several skills, which included both comic and serious singing, dancing, and acting. The following sections of this chapter attempt at evaluating how the acting styles of low comedians, character actresses, and young and attractive actresses affected classical burlesque performances of gender. Their comicality has been largely neglected by modern scholars, who have focussed solely on classical burlesque scripts and have overlooked the consequences that comic techniques of performance had on the significance of classical burlesque subversion of gender norms.

## 2.1 Low Comedians

Analysing Lemon’s and Brough’s burlesque versions of Ernst Legouvé’s tragedy *Medea*, Macintosh argues that the male low comedians who interpreted the roles of the female protagonist – namely Edward Wright and Frederick Robson – acted in a naturalistic way.<sup>7</sup> From her perspective, both actors managed to give voice to the sufferings of the mythological heroine, abandoned by her philandering husband Jason in a state of absolute poverty, and to her exceptional determination to be revenged. Macintosh argues that Wright and Robson seriously portrayed the ‘process of Medea’s

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<sup>5</sup> According to Burnand, Bodham Donne, Licensor of Plays, was one of the fiercest opposers to burlesque. See Burnand, ‘The Spirit of Burlesque’, pp. 172-174. According to Bodham Donne, ‘burlesques [...] are offences against public taste and morals’. He considers the popularity of burlesques as an ‘epidemic nuisance’ equally affecting theatrical managers, actors and audiences. Donne believes that ‘to the actors, [...] burlesque is baneful, inasmuch as it accustoms them to regard under a distorted aspect the very highest matter of their art’. See William Bodham Donne, *Essays on the Drama* (London: Parker & Son, 1858), pp. 82-83.

<sup>6</sup> George H. Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (London: Smith, 1875), p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, p. 83.



hardening'<sup>8</sup>, emphasising with pathos the penury of her situation. For example, in both burlesques, Medea appears on stage as a beggar, closely following Legouv e's tragic reinterpretation of her story. Similarly, in both burlesques, Medea is portrayed as committing infanticide after Jason's announcement of his intention to claim custody of their children.<sup>9</sup> According to Macintosh, Wright's and Robson's sympathetic interpretations of such passages seriously resonated with the issues faced by mid-Victorian women who were 'experiencing inequalities with regards to access to divorce'<sup>10</sup> and who were struggling to protect their properties and children from the claims of their estranged husbands.

Starting from the premise that both Wright and Robson acted in a serious way, Macintosh argues that Lemon's and Brough's *Medea* burlesques denounced the perpetration of gender-based injustice in the mid-Victorian period. Yet, as previously illustrated, even though burlesque acting may have been characterised by moments of pathos, it still aimed at creating absurd and ridiculous effects. In this section, I argue that Macintosh misunderstands the low comedians' pathetic rendering of strong-minded women's sufferings as showcased by mid-Victorian classical burlesques like Lemon's and Brough's *Medea*. The following analyses will show that, rather than acting in a serious way, low comedians may have caricatured the excessively strong passions of mythological heroines, alternating some moments of tragic pathos with others of drollery.

In order to reappraise the humour embedded in low comedians' performances of classical burlesque heroines, it is necessary to understand how nineteenth-century critics and commentators framed their acting styles. Wright, who performed as the female protagonist in Lemon's *Medea*, was a member of the Adelphi company who had had considerable success acting in both farces and burlesques. In his *Recollections*, Yates describes Wright as:

[t]he low comedian, indeed, for never have I seen such a laughter-compelling creature: face, figure, manner were irresistible; without uttering a word he would, across the footlights, give the audience a confidential wink, and send them into convulsions. In words and actions he was broad, sometimes to the verge of indecency, and to this baseness he was

<sup>8</sup> Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> For Medea's entrance on stage as beggar, see the stage direction in Robert Brough, 'Medea; or, The Best of Mothers with a Brute of Husband', in *Victorian Classical Burlesques*, pp. 135-206 (p. 152); Robert Brough, *Medea; or, The Best of Mothers with a Brute of Husband* (London: T. H. Lacy, [1856(?)]), p. 11; Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fols 8<sup>r</sup>-8<sup>v</sup>. For Jason's decision to claim custody of the children and Medea's reaction, see R. Brough, 'Medea', I. 2. 144-173 and I. 3. 85-117; R. Brough, *Medea*, pp. 22-23, 31-32; Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fols 14<sup>v</sup>-16<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 80.

encouraged by a large portion of the audience; but when he chose there was no more genuinely and legitimately comic artist.<sup>11</sup>

According to Yates, Wright was ‘stupid, coarse, ignorant and essentially common’.<sup>12</sup> He openly displayed such qualities on stage and exploited them to achieve comic effects. Yates believes that the actor’s greatest success was the role of Master Grinnidge, the travelling showman in Buckstone’s *The Green Bushes* (1845), which made him fall ‘helpless, spineless, across the front of the box, almost sick with laughter’.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in *Reminiscences of an Old Bohemian*, Strauss defines Wright as ‘the king of comedy, farce, and burlesque’.<sup>14</sup> In his opinion, Wright’s power as a low comedian lay in the unique naturalness with which he took ‘astonishing liberties with the public’, as shown in his memorable impersonations of Master Grinnidge, Paul Pry (1851-1852) and Tattlebat Titmouse in R. B. Peake’s adaptation of Farren’s novel *Ten Thousands a Year* (1842).<sup>15</sup> Both Yates and Strauss recall that Wright’s popularity went hand in hand with that of Paul Bedford, another low comedian with whom Wright used to share the Adelphi stage. Bedford was a ‘big, jovial, red-faced, mellow-voiced, brainless comedian’<sup>16</sup> who started his career on the stage as a singer. Bedford was associated with the catchphrase ‘I believe you, my boy’ and with his signature song ‘Jolly Nose’, which he sung with his proverbially powerful voice.<sup>17</sup>

Prior to their performance in Lemon’s *Medea*, Wright and Bedford had already acted cross-dressed roles in burlesques. From 1841 to 1845, for example, Wright and Bedford interpreted respectively the roles of Adalgisa and Norma in William Oxberry’s opera

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<sup>11</sup> Yates, I, 197-198.

<sup>12</sup> Yates, I, 199.

<sup>13</sup> Yates, I, 198. Bratton recalls the long-lasting success of *The Green Bushes*, which *The Times* selected as the epitome of the ‘old school’ kind of entertainments offered at the Adelphi. See Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, pp. 190-191. Yates’ reaction to Wright’s performance is also quoted by Booth, who argues that the leading low comedian of the Adelphi ‘would reduce the audience to paroxysms of laughter at a stroke’. See Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> Strauss, p. 349.

<sup>15</sup> Strauss, p. 349. *Paul Pry* is a comedy written by John Poole (1825), which Wright acted in a revival at the Adelphi for the season 1851-52. *Ten Thousand a Year* was a novel written by Samuel Farren in 1841, which was then dramatized by R. B. Peake for the Adelphi in 1842. See ‘Wright, Edward Richard (1813–1859), actor’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-30030>> [accessed 11 June 2020].

<sup>16</sup> Yates, I, 199.

<sup>17</sup> The song ‘Jolly Nose’ was first sung by Bedford when he acted the role of Blueskin in Buckstone’s *Jack Sheppard* (1839). See ‘Bedford, Paul John (1792–1871), actor’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-1931>> [accessed 2 June 2020].

burlesque *Norma Travestie* (1841).<sup>18</sup> In 1846, Wright was Venus in Charles Selby's *The Judgement of Paris; or the Pas de Pippins*, while Bedford impersonated the goddess Juno. Selby's burlesque capitalised on the popularity of the *pas de déesses* performed by Marie Taglioni, Fanny Cerrito, and Lucile Grahn at the Opera in the same year. Bedford, Wright, and Redmond Ryan caricatured the grace and agility of the three ballerinas.<sup>19</sup> Ten years later, in Lemon's *Medea*, Wright and Bedford were again on the Adelphi stage to play Medea and Glauce, Jason's second wife. Thus, when approaching Lemon's burlesque rewriting of Medea, it is necessary to specify that the role of the heroine was performed by the leading low comedian of the Adelphi, together with his long-standing professional partner as Glauce.

According to his contemporaries, Wright had a reputation for acting in a confidentially comic manner, sometimes verging on vulgarity, in company with his partner Bedford. When commenting on Wright's performance of Medea, Macintosh does indeed acknowledge his professional background and yet claims that despite being 'one of the finest comedians of his generation', he still 'made reviewers see only "the wronged wife, [and] the wretched woman"'.<sup>20</sup> Macintosh bases her argument concerning the seriousness of Wright's performance on a review published in the *Illustrated London News*, in which Wright was described as 'demanding sympathy and forbidding laughter'<sup>21</sup> for his interpretation of Medea. Similarly, a reviewer writing for the *Era* noted that Lemon's burlesque preserved much of the pathos of Legouvé's original, as '[t]he slaughter of the children, and the challenge of Jason, as the murderer, is given by Mr Wright's Medea as impressively as in the original, and the epilogical addition which revives the dead, and establishes mutual satisfaction amongst the living, is hardly funny enough to counteract the force of the previous impression'.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the *Era* also remarked how the male actors performing in Lemon's *Medea*, although preserving some of the pathos of the original tragedy, physically 'towered above'<sup>23</sup> the female roles they performed. The *Sunday Times* more explicitly underlined Wright's skills in burlesquing the pathos of Madame Ristori's

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<sup>18</sup> For a complete list of the roles acted by Wright and Bedford at the Adelphi, see <<https://www.umass.edu/AdelphiTheatreCalendar/msti.htm>>. In *Recollections and Wanderings*, Bedford recalls that his interpretation of Norma with Wright as Adalgisa was a great success. See Paul Bedford, *Recollections and Wanderings of Paul Bedford: Facts, not Fancies* (London: Routledge, 1864), pp. 76-79.

<sup>19</sup> 'THE DRAMA', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 23 August 1846, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> The review is quoted in Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> 'THEATRES, &c.', *Era*, 13 July 1856, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

tragic interpretation of Medea.<sup>24</sup> According to *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, Wright played the heroine's part 'as broad farce throughout'.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the *Morning Chronicle* observed that '[i]t was certainly funny to see Mr Wright's over-acting as Medea'.<sup>26</sup> Although lacking uniformity, the performance reviews here quoted do not frame Wright's interpretation of Medea as an example of naturalistic acting. Instead, it is arguable that the low comedian burlesqued the emotionality of Ristori. The Italian actress was admired by the London public for 'expressing every shade of transitory emotion and the stormy stress of the most vehement passions'.<sup>27</sup> According to Sara Urban, her acting style was founded on the alternation between restraint and release of emotional energy: Ristori seems to have controlled her emotions until the moment of emotional climax, where she abandoned herself to express the character's passions.<sup>28</sup>

Wright may have caricatured Ristori's style, whilst preserving some of the pathos of her original interpretation. For example, in Lemon's burlesque, Medea's entrance on stage emphasises the penury of her situation, closely following Legouv e's tragedy. As a reviewer writing for the *Era* remarks, 'the entrance of Medea, excellently made up by Mr Wright takes place as in the original, the audience seeing the deserted wife crossing the heights with her children in her arms, and slowly advancing to the front, where she drops from fatigue'.<sup>29</sup> Then, the burlesque heroine encourages her sons, who are hungry and tired, to walk towards the city of Corinth, where they will meet their father. Medea persuades her sons to beg for Glauce's help; yet, as soon as one of her children, Apollodorus, does not want to follow her instructions, Medea violently smacks him. The dialogue unfolds as follows:

MEDEA:     [...]     But ere we go to Corinth to your dad  
                               Where meal and drink and all things shall be had  
                               So keep your peckers up  
 APOLLODORUS:     Ma there's a lady  
 MEDEA:             Then we are very near to the town already  
                               But never children throw a chance away  
                               So go and beg I'll tell you what to say  
 APOLLODORUS:     I know I know my lesson ma don't bother  
 MEDEA:             (smacks him) Take that in for not minding of your mother.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> 'Mr Wright burlesqued the high tragedy manner of Madame Ristori most successfully'. See 'Her Majesty's Theatre', *Sunday Times*, 13 July 1856, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> 'PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS', *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, 20 July 1856, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> 'ADELPHI THEATRE', *Morning Chronicle*, 11 July 1856.

<sup>27</sup> 'DRAMA', *Daily News*, 5 June 1856, pp. 5-6.

<sup>28</sup> Sara Urban, "'Fino a che far  l'artista, sar  anche attrice": Uno Studio della Prassi Teatrale di Adelaide Ristori' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Universit  degli Studi di Padova, 2013), pp. 174-176.

<sup>29</sup> 'THEATRES, &c.', *Era*, 13 July 1856, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fols 8<sup>r</sup>-8<sup>v</sup>.

Even though Medea lovingly encourages her children to be strong and confide in the benevolence of their father following Legouv e’s tragedy, the use of slang terms (such as ‘keep your peckers up’) and abbreviations (such as ‘dad’) sets a comic tone to the scene. The humour builds up as Apollodorus impertinently contradicts Medea and culminates when she ludicrously smacks her son on stage. Hence, instead of maintaining the pathetic tone of Ristori’s interpretation, Wright’s speech and comic gesture burlesque her tragic intensity.

The first verbal confrontation between Jason and Medea might have been equally humorous. In Legouv e’s tragedy, Medea tries to convince Jason not to abandon her by listing all the crimes they complicitly committed (namely the theft of the golden fleece, the murder of Jason’s uncle, and that of Medea’s brother).<sup>31</sup> According to a stage direction, Ristori delivered her lines with an apparently cold tone, repressing her violent passions before the explosion of her anger.<sup>32</sup> In Lemon’s burlesque, Wright’s Medea tries to seduce Jason: she addresses her estranged husband with humorously diminutive terms such as ‘ducky’ with ‘pretty eyes’, asks him to embrace her, and proposes to forget the past ‘and live like lovebirds’.<sup>33</sup> Instead of reminding the audiences of all the crimes that Medea committed for the benefit of Jason, and thus possibly eliciting their sympathy, Wright’s cross-dressed heroine adopted a flirtatious attitude rendered humorous by the slang epithets addressed to Jason, which undercut the tragic solemnity displayed by Ristori’s Medea in her attempt at reconciliation.

As previously noted, Wright was not the sole low comedian whose interpretation of Medea had been framed as naturalistic. Robson, who acted as the strong-minded heroine of Brough’s *Medea* at the Olympic Theatre in 1856, has been also regarded as performing in a powerfully serious manner. Yet, a thorough appreciation of how Robson’s contemporaries perceived his acting style might help to reappraise the degree of comicality embedded in his interpretation of Medea. According to both Sala and Mollie Sands, Robson started acting at the Grecian Saloon, which he left in 1850 for an engagement at the Theatre Royal in Dublin. In 1853, Robson joined the company of the Olympic Theatre, where he showed his gifts as a burlesque actor performing Macbeth in Talfourd’s *Macbeth Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare* (April 1853) and

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<sup>31</sup> Ernst Legouv e, *Medea; Tragedia in Tre Atti e in Versi*, trans. by Giuseppe Montanelli (Paris: L evy, 1856), pp. 59-61. Medea’s listing of the crimes she committed to help her husband Jason is conventional. For example, see Euripides, ‘Medea’, in *Cyclops; Alcestis; Medea*, ed. and trans. by David Kovacs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 275-400 (475- 491).

<sup>32</sup> Legouv e, p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fols 14<sup>r</sup>-14<sup>v</sup>.

Shylock in Talfourd's *Shylock; or, The Merchant of Venice Preserved* (July 1853). In 1854, when the Wigans became managers of the Olympic and confirmed Robson's place in the theatre's company, the low comedian acted in Planché's fairy extravaganza *The Yellow Dwarf and the King of Gold Mines*.<sup>34</sup>

As Schoch observes, nineteenth-century dramatic critics often praised 'the striking originality of Robson's acting in which he neither belittled the dignity of the role [...] nor lowered himself to perform a mere slavish caricature of contemporary actors [...]'.<sup>35</sup> Differently from other low comedians of the age, Robson was reportedly able to excite laughter without vulgarity, embedding a certain degree of seriousness in his comic performances. As a reviewer writing for *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper* observed with reference to his burlesque interpretation of Macbeth, Robson:

is as extravagant as a comic actor can be – fences with true Victoria relish – dances as if he wanted to catch “flies” at the top of the theatre – and strikes the most daring penny-a-sheet theatrical attitudes. And yet in all his extravagance there is a quiet earnestness, as if he were not the least conscious of the fool he was making of himself, but was perfectly serious in the entire thing. For instance, there is a comical gravity in his fear that at times is half tragic. [...] Mr Robson has made a hit, and the burlesque has reason to be largely indebted to him.<sup>36</sup>

Similar appreciation was shown for Robson's *Yellow Dwarf*, which Queen Victoria herself reportedly admired: the role of the villain in Planché's burlesque version of Madame d'Aulnoy's fairy tale allowed Robson to combine tragic passions with the comicality of burlesque.<sup>37</sup>

The comic power of Robson's acting was said to lie in the abrupt transitions between the different passions which moved his characters. The case of Shylock in Talfourd's burlesque constitutes a perfect example through which to illustrate this point. As Schoch argues, Robson embodied the fluctuation between Shylock's desperation at Jessica's flight with his money and his excitement at Antonio's financial ruin. The manifestation

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<sup>34</sup> Apart for performing in extravaganzas and burlesques, Robson also acted in farces. For example, in 1853, he performed the role of Jem Baggs in Henry Mayhew's *The Wandering Minstrel*. For a more comprehensive account of the beginning of Robson's career and his greatest successes at the Olympic Theatre see Mollie Sands, *Robson of the Olympic* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1979); 'Robson [Brownbill], (Thomas) Frederick (1821–1864), actor', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-23902>> [accessed 4 June 2020], and George A. Sala, *Robson: A Sketch* (London: J.C. Hotten, 1864).

<sup>35</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 98.

<sup>36</sup> 'THEATRES', *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, 8 May 1853, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of Robson's interpretation of the *Yellow Dwarf* see Paul Buczkowski, 'J. R. Planché, Frederick Robson, and the Fairy Extravaganza', *Marvels & Tales*, 15 (2001), 42-65 (pp. 48-50).

of such passions culminated with the actor's signature song 'Tippety Witchet'.<sup>38</sup> Not only did the song belong to the comic repertoire of the well-known clown of the Regency era Joseph Grimaldi, but it was also exploited by Robson to show Shylock's passions in a humorous way.<sup>39</sup> In the first stanza, Shylock adopted a 'pugilistic'<sup>40</sup> attitude imagining a boxing match against Lorenzo, who was responsible for stealing his daughter; in the second, he cried at having been abandoned and robbed by Jessica; finally, in the third stanza, Talfourd's Shylock rejoiced, insofar as he has started contemplating revenge upon Antonio. According to Schoch, the compression of these emotions in the short span of time dedicated to the song had an 'overpowering effect upon the audience'<sup>41</sup>, who were invited, almost simultaneously, to both laugh and cry.

Because of the success of his previous impersonations, Robson's distinct acting style was already familiar to London audiences when Brough's *Medea* was staged in July 1856. In fact, a reviewer writing for the *Daily News* confessed that '[w]hen the rumour first was started in theatrical circles that Mr. Robson was going to play *Medea* everyone cognisant of dramatic matters saw at once that the part was his exact *metier*'<sup>42</sup>, for it allowed the actor to transition between contrasting passions. Sala, for example, believed that Robson magisterially rendered '[t]he love, the hate, the scorn of the abandoned wife of *Jason*, the diabolic loathing in which she holds *Creüsa*, the tigerish affection with which she regards the children, whom she is afterwards to slay [...] through the medium [...] of doggerel and slang, with astonishing force and vigour'.<sup>43</sup> Although Brough's burlesque was a direct caricature of Legouvé's tragedy *Medea*, Robson's interpretation was generally perceived to have gone beyond the mere parody of Madame Ristori's acting style. In fact, the low comedian was said to have reached tragic depths when he acted the role of *Medea*.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> For the text and analysis of Robson's song in Talfourd's *Shylock* see Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 98-101.

<sup>39</sup> See 'Grimaldi, Joseph [Joe] (1778–1837), actor and pantomimist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://0-www-oxforddnb-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-11630>> [accessed 16 September 2021].

<sup>40</sup> For the change of emotions here discussed, see the stage directions accompanying the song in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 101.

<sup>41</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 102.

<sup>42</sup> 'DRAMA', *Daily News*, 15 July 1856, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Sala, *Robson: A Sketch*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>44</sup> A reviewer writing for *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper* observed that Robson was '[a] little comic at times, truly, but tragic in the main'. See 'PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS', *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, 20 July 1856, p. 12. According to the *Daily News*, Robson showed 'a tragic force and energy unknown since the days of the elder Kean'. The *Daily News* also reports that Ristori witnessed Robson's performance, and that she was 'most amused' by his interpretation. See 'DRAMA', *Daily News*, 15 July 1856, p. 6.

Hall and Macintosh argue that the Robson ‘won more sympathy for Medea than any previous actor on the British stage’<sup>45</sup>, because of his ability to balance humour and pathos. Similarly, Villalba Lázaro claims that Robson was ‘an unusual actor with a unique tragic scope’, which enabled him to realise a ‘masterful imitation of Ristori’s pathos’.<sup>46</sup> In order to support their thesis, Hall, Macintosh and Villalba Lázaro recall that Robson’s Medea was admired by eminent intellectuals such as Professor Henry Morley and Dickens. The former acknowledged that Robson ‘reached the climax of success in personating jealousy by a wild mingling of the terrible with the grotesque’<sup>47</sup>, whilst the latter considered Robson’s interpretation as more convincing than Ristori’s. Specifically, Dickens states that Robson’s interpretation:

points the badness of ——’s [Ristori’s] acting in a most singular manner, by bringing out what she might do and does not. The scene with Jason is perfectly terrific; and the manner in which the comic rage and jealousy does not pitch itself over the floor at the stalls is in striking contrast to the manner in which the tragic rage and jealousy does. He has a frantic song and dagger dance, about ten minutes long altogether, which has more passion in it than Ristori could express in fifty years.<sup>48</sup>

From this extract, Dickens’ appreciation of Robson’s Medea emerges as at least partially motivated by his utter dislike for Ristori’s acting style: in fact, more than earnestly praising Robson, Dickens may have used the low comedian’s successful performance as a means to critique Ristori. Nevertheless, ignoring the biases of contemporary commentators, Macintosh goes as far as arguing that the widespread recognition of Robson’s tragic acting style signals the seriousness of burlesque as a genre. She believes that when Lewes commented on Ristori’s Medea, which ‘triumphed over the impressions previously received from Robson’s burlesque imitation’<sup>49</sup>, tragedy and burlesque became intermingled in the critic’s perception, by virtue of the ‘uncanny resemblance of the two actors as they performed Medea’.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Macintosh recalls

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<sup>45</sup> E. Hall, ‘Medea and British Legislation before the First World War’, p. 60 and Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Villalba Lázaro, ‘Victorian Medeas’, pp. 131-132.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Morley, *The Journal of a London Playgoer 1851-1866* (London: Routledge, 1866), p. 159. The same passage is also quoted by Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, pp. 83-84 and referred to by E. Hall, ‘Medea and British Legislation before the First World War’, p. 58.

<sup>48</sup> See *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey and Kathleen Mary Tillotson, 12 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), VIII: 1856-1858, p. 171. Dickens’ letter is also quoted by E. Hall, ‘Medea and British Legislation before the First World War’, p. 60 and referred to by Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, p. 83.

<sup>49</sup> Lewes, p. 166. Lewes’ words are also quoted by Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, p. 85.

<sup>50</sup> Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, p. 86. In order to show the resemblance between Ristori and Robson, Macintosh includes two portraits in her discussion. See Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, pp. 87-88.



Burnand's early encounter with burlesque at Cambridge with the Amateurs, who reportedly 'mistook tragedy for burlesque, and burlesque for tragedy'<sup>51</sup>, because of Robson's performances.

However, as Schoch makes extensively clear, the comparison of Robson's histrionic qualities with those of a tragic actor can also be interpreted as 'deceptive compliment[s]'<sup>52</sup>, insofar as they may be undermining, instead of reinforcing, the value of burlesque. When Morley commented on Robson's *Shylock*, for example, he observed that '[t]he only regret in observing his execution of Mr. Talfourd's *Shylock* is that he had not made trial of Shakespeare in preference'.<sup>53</sup> Morley arguably implied that the development of Robson's genius was prevented by his choice to act in burlesques instead of tragedies. Similarly, in an obituary published in the *Era*, Robson's intensity was compared to that of Edmund Kean. However, the journalist remarked that Robson was 'not ambitious. Already his triumphs in farce and burlesque had exceeded his fondest hopes [...]'.<sup>54</sup> This statement hints at the possibility that Robson might have reached Kean's status and success, if only he had abandoned farces and burlesques, and establishes Kean as the ideal against which Robson's acting qualities were evaluated. In 1883, a journalist writing for the *Theatre* exposed the deceptive nature of the compliments paid to Robson during his engagement at the Olympic stating that:

[i]n those days it was urged that Robson was wasting his time on burlesque, that he could do far greater and nobler things, that he ought to be playing real *Shylock* instead of the sham one. What nonsense! Robson could never have mastered *Shylock* in its entirety. He could flash but he could not sustain. He was a brilliant parodist but not a creator. But they were golden days for that.<sup>55</sup>

With these words, the journalist recognises Robson as an excellent parodist and acknowledges his contribution to the theatrical genre of burlesque. In its golden days, when burlesque was attacked 'because it was senseless and formless; because it was not really amusing but miserably dull'<sup>56</sup>, Robson was portrayed as capable of elevating such

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<sup>51</sup> Francis Burnand, *The "A.D.C.": Being Personal Reminiscences of the University Amateur Dramatic Club, Cambridge* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1880), p. 22. Macintosh quotes this passage in Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 86. It is perhaps meaningful to note that Macintosh omits part of the original quotation. Specifically, she does not mention that Burnand believes that Robson had tragic acting qualities, as displayed in his interpretation of *Shylock* and *Medea*, but also that he 'instantly return[ed], however, to burlesque'. See Burnand, *The "A.D.C."*, p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 101.

<sup>53</sup> Morley, p. 61. Also quoted in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 101.

<sup>54</sup> 'FREDERICK ROBSON', *Era*, 17 June 1882, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> 'BLUE BEARD; OR, THE HAZARD OF THE DYE', *Theatre*, 2 April 1883, p. 240.

<sup>56</sup> 'BLUE BEARD; OR, THE HAZARD OF THE DYE', *Theatre*, 2 April 1883, p. 239.

a trivial theatrical genre into tragedy. Yet, the journalist argues that, instead of dignifying burlesque, Robson had the merit of providing audiences and dramatic critics with ‘some of the very merriest evenings at the play’.<sup>57</sup>

As far as *Medea* is concerned, Robson was undoubtedly praised for having been faithful – or even superior – to Ristori’s acting style, as he managed to interpret the character with the necessary degree of pathos. Such comments may have induced modern scholars to overestimate what Macintosh terms burlesque’s ‘degree of seriousness’<sup>58</sup>, which seemingly brought closer tragedy and burlesque in the perception of mid-nineteenth-century audiences. However, burlesque was *not* tragedy. On the contrary, burlesque exposed the ways in which tragedy was performed.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, no matter how he resembled the tragedienne, Robson was *not* a tragic actor like Ristori. As Schoch observes referring to Robson’s interpretation of Shylock, ‘[t]o claim that Shylock as a scripted character in Talfourd’s play only burlesqued its Shakespearian original while Shylock as *characterised* by Robson in a performance of Talfourd’s play incarnated that same Shakespearian original is to misunderstand the nature of burlesque’.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, to read Robson’s performance as *Medea* as a serious interpretation of the role means erasing the parodic intention of burlesque as a genre.

Some scholars partially acknowledge the comicality embedded in Robson’s performance of *Medea*. For example, Richardson perceives the actor’s interpretation of *Medea* as erasing the political significance embedded in Brough’s burlesque. He claims that ‘*Medea* was an undisputed triumph – but as a burlesque, not as a piece of political theatre; many of the reviews, too, called it Robson’s success alone, one carried off *in spite of his script*’.<sup>61</sup> Thanks to the histrionic skills of the low comedian, Richardson believes that Brough’s ‘politics got lost in laughter’.<sup>62</sup> However, it seems hardly possible that Brough wrote a burlesque without realising its potential in performance. In effect, several elements in the script of Brough’s *Medea* arguably signal the intended ironic deconstruction of the heroine’s passionate nature. For example, when *Medea* describes

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Macintosh, ‘*Medea Transposed*’, p. 86.

<sup>59</sup> As Schoch argues, ‘[t]o coerce the burlesque into merging with its own antecedent is to disable the very means through which the burlesque exercises its singular critique’. For this reason, Schoch believes that Shakespearian burlesques perform the ‘not Shakespeare’, which corresponds to a space where it is possible to think about what performing Shakespeare meant. See Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 102.

<sup>60</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>61</sup> Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, p. 123. Emphasis mine.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

the love she felt for Jason, Robson's pace in delivering the lines may reveal his parodic intentions:

MEDEA: [...] I sacrificed my duty as a daughter;  
 Betray'd my native town to fire and slaughter;  
 Robb'd my fond father, killed my aged mother;  
 Also (but that's not much) my little brother.  
 I stuck at nothing criminal or awful  
 To serve the wretch! And now, his consort lawful  
 He leaves— in search of some vile minx to match him.  
 (*with sudden calm*) You can't conceive how I should like to catch him.<sup>63</sup>

In this passage, Medea hints at her traditional flight from Colchis, her home country, after having helped Jason steal the Golden Fleece from the custody of her father Aetes. She also remembers having killed her mother and her little brother to serve the hero.<sup>64</sup> Despite all her sacrifices, Jason has abandoned Medea to search for another wife. In the light of this background, Jason's abandonment appears as aggravated: Medea is presented as the murderer of classical tradition, who betrayed and killed her family because of her love for the Greek hero. Moreover, with the inclusion of this speech, Brough presents his Medea as following Legouvé's interpretation: she is the woman who loved so intensely as to be ready to commit crimes to satisfy Jason's needs.<sup>65</sup> Simultaneously, Robson's listing of Medea's crimes was engineered to have a comic effect in performance. Instead of a serious condemnation of Jason's crime, the rhyming couplets confer a mock-heroic tone to Robson's speech. In addition, Brough, who included in his manuscript some of the stage directions reported in Monros-Gaspar's edition of the text, wanted the actor to start talking 'fiercely'.<sup>66</sup> Medea's angry tone was likely to have built an emotional climax while recording the gravity of the woman's crimes. Yet, in the last line of Medea's speech, the intensity of the heroine's passion is suddenly broken. Instead of signalling the apex

<sup>63</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', i. 1. 235-242 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> As previously noted, in the classical sources, Medea lists all the misdeeds she committed to help her husband, Jason. For example, see Euripides, 'Medea', 475- 491. Legouvé maintains Medea's speech in Legouvé, pp. 59-61. However, neither in Euripides' nor in Legouvé's tragedy, does Medea mention having murdered her mother.

<sup>65</sup> In Legouvé's tragedy, Orpheus says: 'After debasing her with thy guilty passion, thou then did'st turn the ungovernable love she bore thee to the advantage of thine own fell ambition!'. He frames Jason as Medea's seducer and, subsequently, as the mandator of Medea's crimes. See Legouvé, pp. 15-17.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Brough, *Medea; or, the Best of Mothers with a Brute of Husband*, British Library Add. MS 52960 (K), fol. 17<sup>r</sup>. In both Monros-Gaspar's and Lacy's edition of the play, the stage direction which describes Robson's intervention as fierce is not included. The inclusion of such a note in the manuscript may signal Brough's awareness of the comic potential inherent to Robson's transition between contrasting tones of delivery.

of Medea's aggressiveness, the sudden calm with which Robson communicates that his character intends to be revenged may have had a comic effect.

A similar comic contrast between Robson's tone and the ferocious implications of Medea's words is retrievable in the heroine's illustration of the savage laws governing Colchis. Medea explains with 'increasing mildness'<sup>67</sup> that she is 'the daughter of a nation / a little backward in civilisation'.<sup>68</sup> The heroine narrates that, according to the Colchian legal system, prisoners are eaten, whilst parents who interfere with their children's schemes are boiled.<sup>69</sup> The tranquillity with which Medea describes the disproportionate cruelties perpetrated in her home country suggest a form of deadpan humour which might have amused the Olympic audiences. The contrast between Robson's nonchalant tone and the ferocity of Medea's words might have caricatured her savagery. Instead of being rationally involved in the world of male politics as the strong-minded women of the mid-nineteenth century, Medea is so disconcertingly calm in describing her irrational impulses to violence that she becomes ridiculous.

In the light of such a reading, Medea's final monologue, which has generally been interpreted as signalling the heroine's alignment with the political agenda of strong-minded women, acquires new significance. In an appeal to the Olympic audience, Medea refuses to repent her crimes:

MEDEA:     *(leading [her children] forward C.)* What can a poor, lone, helpless woman do—  
My plot destroyed— my damages made good,  
They'd change my very nature if they could.  
Don't let them— rather aid me to pursue  
My murd'rous career the season through;  
Repentance is a thought that I abhor,  
What I have done don't make me sorry for.  
Even for my least pardonable crime—  
Which I'll explain in a familiar rhyme.<sup>70</sup>

In the conventional happy ending of Brough's burlesque, the dead are revived (namely Creusa and Medea's sons). Thus, the significance of the heroine's revenge is erased.

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<sup>67</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', I. 1. 188. Lacy's edition of Brough's burlesque mentions that Medea described the savage laws of Colchis with 'increasing wildness', instead of 'mildness', as hypothesised by Monròs-Gaspar. Such a change in tone would impact on the comicality of the performance. Instead of suggesting a form of deadpan humour, the aggressiveness of Medea's tone would contrast with the humorous diminution enabled by expressions such as 'a nation / a little backwards in civilisation'. The manuscript version of the burlesque is of dubious interpretation. See R. Brough, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (K), fol. 14<sup>r</sup> and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', I. 1. 201-202 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 13.

<sup>69</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', I. 1. 204-208 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 13.

<sup>70</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', I. 3. 150-159 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 34.

Macintosh believes that, with this speech, Brough 'is deliberately situating Medea at the forefront of the early campaign for women's independence'.<sup>71</sup> Specifically, she assumes that Medea's resistance to the happy ending forced on her story is 'an unequivocal call for endorsement of all that the New Woman stood for'.<sup>72</sup> If seriously interpreted, Medea's words might have been read as an invitation to support increasingly independent women. However, as this section has shown, Robson's interpretation of Medea was inherently comic, as was his resistance to the final resolution of the dramatic action if the trope of the happy ending in burlesques is considered. The audiences of the Olympic Theatre saw the low comedian who, with his nonchalant tranquillity, once again confirmed Medea's familiarity with violence. Robson periphrastically diminished Medea's infanticide as her least pardonable crime, while absurdly presenting her murders as the natural consequences of the loneliness and poverty entailed by Jason's abandonment. The ironic diminution of the gravity of Medea's action, together with the comic impact of cross-dressing, arguably prevented the character from truthfully claiming agency for her crimes and, therefore, being seriously identifiable with a politically active strong-minded woman.

Like Robson's Medea, the protagonist of Burnand's *Dido* (St James's Theatre, 1860) is animated by strong passions. In his autobiography, Burnand describes Dido's role as a 'burlesque part as Robson would have played'.<sup>73</sup> The low comedian Charles Young reportedly accepted the title role in Burnand's burlesque precisely because it would have given him the chance to show his histrionic skills in caricaturing the shifts in female passions as Robson would have done. Young was an English minor low comedian who 'established his reputation as a perfect burlesque actor'<sup>74</sup> in Australia. After having successfully managed the Queen's Theatre in Melbourne from 1851, Young and his wife returned to England in 1857. According to a journalist writing his obituary for the *Illustrated Sydney News*, Young's 'Australian reputation [...] had preceded him'<sup>75</sup>, thus ensuring his engagement, successively, at the Strand, Sadler's Wells, the Lyceum, and the St James's theatres. The journalist believes that Young's:

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<sup>71</sup> Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Burnand, *Records*, I, 372. Burnand seems to recognise the similarity between the roles of Brough's Medea and his Dido. In fact, he feels the need to specify that he had not seen Robson's interpretation before writing his epic burlesque. See Burnand, *Records*, I, 366. The circumstances of Young's acceptance of Dido's role are described in Burnand, *Records*, I, 372.

<sup>74</sup> 'THE LATE CHARLES YOUNG. COMEDIAN', *Illustrated Sydney News*, 28 February 1874, p. 10.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

excellent voice, musical knowledge, and masterly and artistic dancing, combined with much natural wit, and a keen appreciation of the ludicrous, made him unapproachable in burlesque. None knew better than he when to take the necessary “one step from the sublime” &c., and the effect was often electric. His burlesque specialties of the male gender were tyrants or sycophants; while, in the “female” line, his idea of a shrew was humanly perfect.<sup>76</sup>

In this obituary, Young’s skills in burlesque acting are celebrated: he is implicitly compared to Robson, who was renowned for having brought closer the sublime and the ridiculous in his burlesque performances, whilst being described as an unrivalled singer and dancer.<sup>77</sup>

When acting in Burnand’s *Dido*, Young arguably showed the London audiences his ability to caricature serious emotions. According to the *Standard*, he managed to interpret all the shades of Dido’s personality, including ‘the proud Queen’ and ‘the loving woman’.<sup>78</sup> Young’s parodic rendering of Dido’s intense emotionality is evident from the beginning of the burlesque, when the Queen of Carthage falls suddenly in love with Aeneas. As the introduction to the play makes clear, Dido, recently widowed, has made a vow to her deceased husband: ‘if she ever fell in love with any one after his death, she would with her own hand light her funeral Pyre’.<sup>79</sup> For this reason, Dido had refused to marry Iarbas, King of Getulia. Yet, as soon as she sees Aeneas landing on the African shores, the queen falls ‘violently’<sup>80</sup> in love with him, following the classical tradition. As soon as Aeneas is brought before Dido, the Queen is moved by the hero’s account of his journey and, according to a stage direction, she ‘display[s] great emotion’.<sup>81</sup> Then, she soliloquises in an aside and humorously conveys her feelings saying:

DIDO: That lustr’ous,  
 eye, that noble *mien*, *means* summ’at,  
 I’ll question him, and by that *means* I’ll come at  
 The truth. With sudden love I’m struck I fear!  
 I feel it, oh! I feel it, here! here! here!  
 Shall he be king? for such an one I’ve sighed, oh!  
 (*meditates, then takes out a coin.*)

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> According to Strauss, ‘Robson was, indeed, an actor of the highest stamp: in him the extremes of the sublime and the ridiculous came very near meeting’. See Strauss, p. 201.

<sup>78</sup> ‘ST. JAMES’S THEATRE’, *Standard*, 13 February 1860, p. 6.

<sup>79</sup> Francis Burnand, *Dido* (London: T. H. Lacy, [1860(?)]), p. 2. Burnand’s *Dido* was revived in 1865 as *Dido, the Celebrated Widow* at the New Royalty Theatre. See Francis Burnand, *Dido, the Celebrated Widow* (London: T. H. Lacy, [1865(?)]). In this thesis, I analyse the first version of the burlesque, as performed as the St James’s Theatre in 1860. Hence, all subsequent references are to be considered to the first version of the burlesque.

<sup>80</sup> Burnand, *Dido*, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> Burnand, *Dido*, p. 20.

Heads, “Yes.” Tails, “No.” (*tosses*) Heads! It’s all  
 Up with Dido.  
 Oh, rapture, joy!<sup>82</sup>

Young might have humorously exaggerated the intensity of Dido’s love by framing it as almost physically painful. The actor might have touched the parts of his body where he reportedly ‘felt’ such passion. Despite its superficially emotional tone, it is interesting to note that the puns and the doggerel rhymes included in the first half of Dido’s speech already signal the humorous deconstruction of her feelings. A stage direction informs the readers that Young paused to meditate on whether Dido should respect her vow of celibacy or break it, marrying Aeneas. Instead of signalling an emotional climax, Dido’s pause marks a sudden change in tone: Young tosses a coin on stage, so as to resolve the Queen’s internal conflict. Such a ridiculous gesture strikingly contrasts with the intensity of Dido’s passion and with the solemnity of her meditation, thus emphasising the absurdity of her decision-making process.

In addition, in order to parody Dido’s intense feelings, Young exploited his mastery over singing and dancing, which according to the *Daily News*, were the actor’s *forte*.<sup>83</sup> After having discovered Aeneas’ plan to elope with her sister Anna, Dido is devoured by jealousy. Animated by exceptional determination, she refuses to give in to sadness and summons her strength to achieve a memorable revenge. Singing to the tune of the popular song ‘The Ship’s Carpenter’, Young describes how a woman abandoned by her lover generally acts and, by contrast, how she is planning to behave:

DIDO:       When a man tries this game on a widow like me,  
                   She takes it the same as the previous she.  
                   He leaves, but the lady what to do quite well knows,  
                   She don’t sit and cry, to her lawyer she goes,  
                   Who sends a letter to the gentleman in question,  
                   Stating the following unpleasant facts: –  
                   Diddle doddle diddle, &c. &c.

Now, tho’ I won’t make this a law case, ‘cos why,  
 ‘Cos I’m not quite so fond of the law as to try;  
 But vengeance I’ll take, and he’ll find it no fun,  
 I’m a Nemesis, Furies, all rolled into one.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Burnand, *Dido*, p. 20. A closer analysis of the language of burlesque will be included in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

<sup>83</sup> ‘DRAMA’, *Daily News*, 13 February 1860, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> Burnand, *Dido*, p. 28.

Dido anachronistically refers to the issue of breach of promise of marriage, according to which a man who changed his mind after having promised to marry a woman could be legally held accountable for damages. As Ginger S. Frost observes, in the 1830s, ‘a variety of writers recognised the inherent humour and drama of the action and began to fictionalize the cases’<sup>85</sup> of breach of promise. In 1832, Buckstone wrote a farce entitled *Breach of Marriage*, centred on a bachelor who regrets having proposed to a widow who was thought to have murdered her first husband. Then, in 1836, Dickens narrated in *The Pickwick Papers* the humorous case of Martha Bardell, who sued Samuel Pickwick for breach of promise, despite having deliberately misunderstood his intentions. Pickwick vs. Bardell’s case became so famous that it was repeatedly adapted for the stage.<sup>86</sup> Hence, Dido’s reference to the issue of breach of promise suggests a connection with an established popular comic scenario.

In addition, the hyperbolic fury displayed by Dido contrasts with her actual revenge plan. Dido sets her mind to accomplish a revenge worthy of mythological creatures like Nemesis and the Furies and Young reportedly acted in a ‘fiendlike manner’<sup>87</sup> whilst singing on stage. Yet, Dido admits that she merely wants to frighten Aeneas instead of physically harming him.<sup>88</sup> The discrepancy between Young’s embodied interpretation of Dido’s fury and her eventual leniency was likely to have excited the laughter of the audience. The burlesque scene dedicated to the building of Dido’s wrath ends with a statement that seemingly encapsulates the heroine’s strong-mindedness: after having refused to give Aeneas one last kiss, Dido claims that her ‘vengeance cannot cease’.<sup>89</sup> The serious significance of such a comment is undermined by the burlesque musical score: when the orchestra starts playing the cheerful melody of a tarantella, Young and Clara St Casse, who played Aeneas, dance and leave the stage in opposite directions. Overall, Young’s acting style arguably prevented Dido’s identification as a politically active strong-minded woman of the age, battling against gender-based inequality in matters of marriage legislation: the vigour with which Young embodied the heroine’s passions contrasted with moments of absolute drollery, such as the dance of a tarantella, which was more likely to have amused the St James’s audiences.

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<sup>85</sup> Ginger S. Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> Frost, pp. 1-4.

<sup>87</sup> Burnand, *Dido*, p. 28.

<sup>88</sup> After having captured Aeneas, the guards retire at Dido’s command. See Burnand, *Dido*, p. 32.

<sup>89</sup> Burnand, *Dido*, p. 33.



The analyses of Wright's, Robson's, and Young's interpretations of classical burlesque heroines highlight the degree of comicality embedded in low comedians' burlesque performances. Although incorporating some moments of pathos, Wright, Robson, and Young are not as identifiable with tragic actors as Macintosh suggests. Conversely, low comedians arguably relied on the parodic imitation of tragic acting styles, on sudden shifts between contrasting passions, whose intensity was sometimes ridiculously exaggerated, and on exceptional singing and dancing skills, so as to create absurd effects and excite the laughter of the audiences. As such, the claims of independence and political engagement verbally professed by such characters may hardly be taken as serious: the low comedians' embodied performances arguably ridiculed the exceptional determination of the strong-minded classical heroines here portrayed.

## 2.2 Character Actresses

The role of the strong-minded heroine was also sometimes performed by actresses specialising in character roles who, as Hall suggests, repurposed the stock comic character of the termagant wife henpecking her husband for classical burlesque audiences.<sup>90</sup> The character of Clytemnestra in Talfourd's *Electra* and the protagonist of Talfourd's *Alcestis* will be used to illustrate how, in some instances, the strong-minded women of classical burlesque are foregrounded as no more than stereotypical caricatures of viragos.

Talfourd's *Electra in a New Electric Light* was staged at the Haymarket Theatre on the 25 April 1859. Clytemnestra, the murderous usurper of Agamemnon's throne and 'unnatural mother'<sup>91</sup> of Orestes and Electra, is described as a 'strong-minded'<sup>92</sup> lady who dominates her weak husband Aegisthus. The role of Clytemnestra was acted by a female member of the Haymarket company, Mrs Wilkins, renowned for acting comic roles such as that of Widow Green in Sheridan Knowles' comedy *The Love Chase*, which was revived at the Haymarket in March 1858. A reviewer commenting on her performance of Widow Green described Mrs Wilkins as 'fat, fair, and forty-five', with 'fine teeth, [and] merry, sparkling eyes'.<sup>93</sup> Because of her age and her appearance, Mrs Wilkins was considered to possess all the necessary pre-requisites to act comic roles.

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<sup>90</sup> Hall recognises that 'domineering wives are stock characters' in burlesque. See E. Hall, 'Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre', p. 352.

<sup>91</sup> Frank Talfourd, 'Electra in a New Electric Light', in *Victorian Classical Burlesques*, pp. 207-280 (p. 212) and Frank Talfourd, *Electra in a New Electric Light* (London: T. H. Lacy, [1859(?)]), p. 3.

<sup>92</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', p. 210 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> 'HAYMARKET THEATRE', *Morning Chronicle*, 9 March 1858, p. 3.

In Talfourd's *Electra*, Mrs Wilkins acted with the renowned low comedian Henry Compton, who played the role of Clytemnestra's submissive husband Aegisthus. The burlesque opens with Aegisthus' regret at having murdered Agamemnon. Aegisthus confesses being tormented by 'nightly visions'<sup>94</sup> during which 'Agamemnon's shade / Calls on his son for vengeance'.<sup>95</sup> He fears that Orestes and Electra might wish to avenge their father. Clytemnestra finds her husband's fears ridiculous: she believes that Aegisthus has lost his 'common sense'<sup>96</sup>, despite the fact that he had 'not much to start with'<sup>97</sup>, and is determined to 'bend'<sup>98</sup> Electra's behaviour to serve their interests.

The juxtaposition between Aegisthus' hesitation and Clytemnestra's unscrupulousness concerning Agamemnon's murder recalls the contrasting attitudes of Macbeth and his wife towards the assassination of King Duncan.<sup>99</sup> In Talfourd's *Macbeth Somewhat Removed From the Text of Shakespeare*, the male protagonist was interpreted by Robson, while his wife was performed by Elizabeth (Mrs Alfred) Phillips, an actress specialising in character roles.<sup>100</sup> Like Clytemnestra, Talfourd's Lady Macbeth is endowed with determination, as she forces her husband, who feels 'out of sorts'<sup>101</sup>, to kill King Duncan. In parallel, like Aegisthus, Macbeth immediately regrets the murder he committed and refuses to progress with his wife's criminal plan as he lacks the courage to do so.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', I. 1. 68 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 7.

<sup>95</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', I. 1. 68-69 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 7.

<sup>96</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', I. 1. 54 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 7.

<sup>97</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', I. 1. 54 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 7.

<sup>98</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', I. 1. 78 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 7.

<sup>99</sup> In a footnote accompanying the text, Monròs-Gaspar observes that the juxtaposition between the weak Aegisthus and the strong Clytemnestra recalls the relationship between Macbeth and his wife. See Talfourd, 'Electra', p. 223.

<sup>100</sup> Written while he was still at Eton, Talfourd's *Macbeth Travestie* was first staged on the occasion of the 1847 Henley-on-Thames regatta, where the author himself performed the role of Lady Macbeth. In 1848, the play opened at the Strand Theatre and the burlesque actor Edwin Yarnold was cast as the female protagonist. Under the pseudonym of Oxoniensis, Talfourd commented on Yarnold's performance in a letter written to the *Theatrical Times*, where he revealed that he wished for the role of Lady Macbeth to be played by Bedford. In April 1853, after the staging of Charles Kean's *Macbeth* at the Princess's Theatre, Talfourd's burlesque was revived at the Olympic Theatre as *Macbeth Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare*. Schoch recalls the genesis of Talfourd's *Macbeth* in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 108. For Talfourd's opinion on Yarnold's performance of Lady Macbeth see Oxoniensis, 'The Physiology of Burlesque and its Authors', *Theatrical Times*, 6 May 1848, 148. Elizabeth Phillips was a comic actress and playwright born in 1822. She acted at the Strand Theatre during William Farren's management, where she appeared in some of her own dramatic pieces (such as *The Bachelor's Vow*). After the death of the renowned comedian Julia Glover, she 'succeeded in her line of business', acting parts such as that of Mrs Heidelberg in *The Clandestine Marriage*. In 1854, she moved to Australia. See 'The Late Mrs Alfred Phillips', *The Australasian Sketcher*, 2 September 1876, p. 90. For a more specific description of Elizabeth Phillips' career as a playwright, see Katherine Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 84-85.

<sup>101</sup> See Frank Talfourd, *Macbeth Travestie* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1850), p. 12.

<sup>102</sup> See Talfourd, *Macbeth Travestie*, p. 13.

Not only does Clytemnestra show her strength of mind in dealing with the consequences of Agamemnon's murder, but she also bullies her husband with absurd requests. For example, she forces Aegisthus to join a hunting trip as 'idle men are always in the way at home'.<sup>103</sup> Aegisthus childishly begs his wife to let him avoid hunting and promises to be 'quiet'<sup>104</sup> around the house. Faced with Clytemnestra's refusal, Aegisthus appeals to his wife's compassion arguing that, in case of rain, he would catch a fever. Clytemnestra proves to be inflexible: she is determined to get rid of her husband despite his absurd excuses. Eventually, Clytemnestra's tyrannical attitude enrages Aegisthus: the man believes he could petition for divorce on the grounds of cruelty and says:

AEGISTHUS:            This cat-and-dog life can't go on much longer,  
                                  The cat has proved so very much the stronger.  
                                  Would that we lived in times some yet may see,  
                                  When married folks can separated be—  
                                  I could prove cruelty 'mongst other wee sins,  
                                  And sue for a divorce, for divorce reasons.<sup>105</sup>

Such a declaration reverses the power relations between married couples: although the contemporary debates concerning divorce legislation framed women as in need of legal protection against the abuses of men, Talfourd humorously suggests that, in some cases, men are those being bullied by their termagant wives. Hence, while Aegisthus adopts the jargon of the wronged woman, Clytemnestra is foregrounded as ridiculously tyrannical rather than politically aligned with the battles for the recognition of women's rights.

A similar argument could be developed in relation to the role of Alcestis in Talfourd's *Alcestis, the Original Strong-Minded Woman*, which was acted by Elizabeth Leigh Murray. Daughter of the playwright Henry Lee and wife of the renowned low comedian Henry Leigh Murray, Elizabeth started her London career at the Olympic Theatre under Madame Vestris. Then, she joined the Strand Theatre company, where she acted alongside her husband: for example, in February 1850, they performed respectively Jupiter and Apollo in the classical burlesque *Diogenes and his Lantern*.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', i. 1. 154 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 10.

<sup>104</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', i. 1. 155 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 10.

<sup>105</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', i. 6. 34-39 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 35.

<sup>106</sup> For the biographical information on Mrs Elizabeth Leigh Murray see Francis Talfourd, 'Alcestis, the Original Strong-Minded Woman', in *Victorian Classical Burlesques*, pp. 87-134 (p. 91) and 'Murray, Henry Leigh [real name Henry Leigh Wilson] (1820-1870), actor actress', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-19612>> [accessed 30 June 2020].

Presented as ‘the original strong-minded woman’<sup>107</sup> in the title of Talfourd’s burlesque, Alcestis is endowed with a domineering personality emerging when she scolds her servant Phaedra, who is caught flirting with a stranger while working.<sup>108</sup> Like Clytemnestra, Alcestis is married to ‘an individual weak in intellect’<sup>109</sup> named Admetus and played by Henry Compton. Admetus does not have the courage to face Orcus, the god of Death, who has come to take away his life. He trembles, cries, and begs the god to let him fetch ‘A hair and tooth brush in a sac-de-nuit’<sup>110</sup> in order to delay his departure. In contrast, Alcestis shows firmness of character and promptly decides to die in her husband’s place. Offended by Admetus’ cowardice, who has ‘nothing to do but cut capers gay’<sup>111</sup>, the strong-minded heroine states that she regrets having married a ‘milksoy’<sup>112</sup> and ‘spoony’<sup>113</sup> man who has transformed her life into a ‘curse’.<sup>114</sup> The manifestation of Alcestis’ regret at having married Admetus has generally been regarded as a denunciation of the constraints imposed on women by marriage.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, Alcestis’ sacrifice loses its significance if seen as motivated by her proud and despotic temperament. Irritated by her husband’s hesitations, Alcestis admittedly takes his place not to fulfil her duty as the perfect wife, but to gain the reputation of ‘heroine’<sup>116</sup> and ‘martyr’.<sup>117</sup>

Alcestis, like Clytemnestra and Lady Macbeth, appropriates the role of decision maker in the burlesque. The classical heroines considered here tyrannize over the other characters and emphasise the ineptitude of their husbands through ridicule. As previously noted, the juxtaposition of a despotic wife and a weak husband was a staple of comedy and farce. Hence, rather than reading their determination as signalling their desire for emancipation, the strength displayed by the heroines of classical burlesques interpreted

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<sup>107</sup> The epithet ‘strong-minded’ is used in the title of Monrès-Gaspar and Lacy’s edition of Talfourd’s burlesque, but not in the manuscript version. See Frank Talfourd, *Alcestis Travestie*, British Library Add. MS 43028 and Frank Talfourd, *Alcestis, the Original Strong-Minded Woman* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1850). Talfourd’s Alcestis is also described as ‘strong-minded’ in the first performance of the burlesque reviewed by the *Era*. See ‘THEATRES, &c.’, *Era*, 7 July 1850, p. 12.

<sup>108</sup> Talfourd, ‘Alcestis’, I. 1. 341-348 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, p. 16.

<sup>109</sup> Talfourd, ‘Alcestis’, p. 90 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, p. 3.

<sup>110</sup> Talfourd, ‘Alcestis’, I. 1. 148 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, p. 10.

<sup>111</sup> Talfourd, ‘Alcestis’, I. 1. 212 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, p. 12.

<sup>112</sup> Talfourd, ‘Alcestis’, I. 1. 360 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, p. 16.

<sup>113</sup> Talfourd, ‘Alcestis’, I. 1. 365 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, p. 17.

<sup>114</sup> Talfourd, ‘Alcestis’, I. 1. 367 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> According to Monrès-Gaspar, Alcestis ‘must have unequivocally heightened the female audience’s empathy’ as she ‘evokes the disillusionment of arranged marriages, the legal vulnerability of children and the unequal opportunities for women to overcome their mind-numbing existences’. See Monrès-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, p. 33.

<sup>116</sup> Talfourd, ‘Alcestis’, I. 1. 216 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, p. 12.

<sup>117</sup> Talfourd, ‘Alcestis’, I. 1. 218 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, p. 12.

by character actresses might be regarded as conventional, as it merely repropose a stock comic trope on the burlesque stage.

### 2.3 Young Actresses

Classical scholars comment on the conventional casting of young actresses in classical burlesques, emphasising their sexual attractions. Focussing especially on their cross-dressed performances, Hall claims that burlesque actresses showed their shapely legs dancing on stage, thus playing to the male members of the audiences. In support of her thesis, Hall mentions that Morley attributed the success of Burnand's *Ixion* to the skills of 'good-looking girls [dressed] as immortals lavish in display of leg'.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, Monròs-Gaspar observes that the display of female bodies, chiefly achieved by female-to-male cross-dressing, satisfied the erotic voyeuristic desire of burlesque spectators.<sup>119</sup> Macintosh focuses more extensively on the role of the female performer on the burlesque stage arguing that, whatever the role she was cast to play, 'the Victorian actress herself could be construed as the archetypal New Woman'.<sup>120</sup> Referencing Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford's foundational study *The New Woman and her Sisters*, Macintosh claims that 'by working for the stage the actress was twice removed from the life of the average Victorian woman: both by dint of having a career and by having a career moreover that subjected her to the public gaze'.<sup>121</sup> Macintosh arguably goes too far in associating – perhaps inaccurately – mid-Victorian actresses with the social category of New Women, which was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and characterised by a distinctive political activism. Yet, she brings to the fore the unconventional position and the relative degree of freedom enjoyed by female performers in mid-Victorian society.

Considering classical scholars' observations as a starting point, this section evaluates the acting style of young and attractive female burlesque performers who were cast for the roles of mythological heroines such as Electra, Eurydice, and Proserpine. On the one hand, the following analyses show that the sexualisation of the actresses' bodies was not exclusive to cross-dressed performances. In fact, burlesque scripts and performance reviews testify to the ongoing objectification of female performers in non-cross-dressed roles, as a means of implicitly parodying the assertiveness and witticism displayed by

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<sup>118</sup> Quoted in E. Hall, 'Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre', p. 349.

<sup>119</sup> Laura Monròs-Gaspar, 'Classical Myths on the Victorian Popular Stage: The Figure of Cassandra' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Universitat de València, 2009), pp. 303-304.

<sup>120</sup> Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 78.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

such female characters on stage. On the other hand, it is arguable that, instead of being passive objects of desire, burlesque actresses might have *knowingly* flaunted their sexuality. As illustrated below, several performance reviews emphasise the actresses' skills in portraying coquettish characters on the classical burlesque stage. Simultaneously, a close evaluation of the actresses' repertoire may evidence their specialisation in such a line of business. Therefore, this section will argue that female performers, thanks to their professional competences, might have had a certain degree of agency in caricaturing independent, assertive, and witty female characters for the classical burlesque stage.

Eliza Weekes acted as the female protagonist of Talfourd's *Electra*, first performed at the Haymarket Theatre in April 1859. She joined the Haymarket Theatre company in September 1858, when she performed Madame Galochard in Selby's farce *The King's Gardener*.<sup>122</sup> On the occasion of her London debut, a reviewer writing for the *Era* appreciated her 'prepossessing' and 'pleasing figure', as well as her 'clear and melodious'<sup>123</sup> voice. Similarly, the *Sunday Times* noted her 'archness', 'vivacity' and 'agreeable countenance'.<sup>124</sup> In April 1859, when she interpreted the 'strong-minded daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra'<sup>125</sup>, Weekes was mainly complimented on her charming appearance. Together with Fanny Wright who acted as Pylades, Maria Ternan as Orestes, and Louise Leclercq as Chrysotemis, Weekes participated in what the *Illustrated London News* termed an extraordinary 'constellation of beauty and vivacity'<sup>126</sup> displayed on the Haymarket Theatre's stage. Moreover, a reviewer writing for *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper* specifically appreciated Weekes' 'lowest limbs' as revealed by the scanty costume she was wearing, claiming that she 'more than sustain[ed] her reputation'.<sup>127</sup>

The emphasis placed by the press on the appearance of the young actress foregrounds the distinctively masculine perception of classical burlesque as a show in which female performers were 'turned into sexual commodities'.<sup>128</sup> Davis argues that numerous factors contributed to the perception of the actress' body as erotically charged. Firstly, the career of the actress was perceived as similar to that of the prostitute, insofar as both female

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<sup>122</sup> 'DRAMATIC AND MUSICAL CHRONOLOGY FOR 1858', *Era*, 9 January 1859, p. 13. Monrès-Gaspar quotes the same article in Monrès-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 213.

<sup>123</sup> 'THEATRES, &c.', *Era*, 3 October 1858, p. 10.

<sup>124</sup> 'Miss Eliza Weekes, a young country actress, who has regularly "taken her degrees" at the provincial theatres', *Sunday Times*, 3 October 1858, p. 3.

<sup>125</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', p. 212 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 3.

<sup>126</sup> 'The Theatres, & C.', *Illustrated London News*, 30 April 1859, p. 419.

<sup>127</sup> 'PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS', *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, 1 May 1859, p. 7.

<sup>128</sup> T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. 143.

workers ‘provided entertainment’<sup>129</sup> to gratify the paying customer’s desires using their bodies. The geographical vicinity of theatres to the prostitutes, who walked the streets of London’s West End, fostered this association.<sup>130</sup> Secondly, the costumes and movements of female performers on stage might have foregrounded their sexual attractions.<sup>131</sup>

If analysed from this perspective, Weekes’ interpretation of Talfourd’s *Electra* acquires additional meaning. Monròs-Gaspar recognises the crucial importance of *Electra*’s costume: the Greek heroine appears on stage ‘unkempt, uncinctured, with her stockings torn’<sup>132</sup>, since she is mourning the death of her father Agamemnon. According to Monros-Gaspar, ‘the rags and the slovenly appearance that mark [*Electra*’s] mourning become pejorative signs of the clichéd nineteenth-century strong-mindedness’.<sup>133</sup> Yet, apart from visually signalling her rebellious spirit, the heroine’s costume also revealed the lower limbs of the actress and arguably facilitated her sexualisation. Throughout the Victorian period, the legs of actresses were often fetishized: as Davis argues, ‘female legs have no inherent sexual meaning, but their referent is obvious when the custom is to obscure their existence’.<sup>134</sup> Many burlesque actresses, such as Madame Vestris and Priscilla Horton, were complimented on their shapely legs. It is against such a backdrop that the journalist writing for *Lloyd’s Illustrated Newspaper* evaluated Weekes’ legs when she appeared in Talfourd’s burlesque. This performance review arguably signals that the costume which signifies *Electra*’s strong-mindedness according to Monròs-Gaspar was in fact more prominently associated with the sexual objectification of the actress’ body.

A similar argument could be developed to analyse Ada Swanborough’s interpretation of the female protagonist in Byron’s *Orpheus and Eurydice*, staged at the Strand Theatre on the 26 December 1863. Swanborough, a member of the theatrical family who successfully managed the Strand Theatre from 1858 to 1885, had a long career as a comic

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<sup>129</sup> T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. 83.

<sup>130</sup> According to Davis, theatres were linked to prostitution ‘by their locations in particular neighbourhoods’. In fact, ‘in the evening the street market of prostitution shifted to the theatre districts. Prostitutes shared the Haymarket with Her Majesty’s, the Pavilion, Comedy, Criterion, and Theatre Royal Haymarket, and were most in evidence between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m., just as the theatres emptied. Yet, towards the end of the century, the area of street prostitution moved towards the Strand’. See T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. 83.

<sup>131</sup> Davis summarises the centrality of performers’ costumes in eroticising their bodies as such: ‘[f]emale performers were commodified as the wearers of revealing costumes, but it was the revealed parts, not the costumes themselves that were the real spectacle: the places where the costumes were not took focus over where they were’. See T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. 112. For a broader discussion on the importance of costumes see T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, pp. 108-115.

<sup>132</sup> Talfourd, ‘*Electra*’, i. 1. 83 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 7.

<sup>133</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, p. 38.

<sup>134</sup> T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. 112.

actress.<sup>135</sup> She debuted in October 1861 at the age of sixteen, when she performed in the comedietta *Is This the King*, translated from the French by T. L. Greenwood.<sup>136</sup> With the Strand Theatre company, she acted in numerous burlesques written by Byron: for example, in the Christmas extravaganza *Puss in a New Pair of Boots* (1861), Swanborough ‘looked quite charming as the disinherited youth’<sup>137</sup>; in December 1862, she performed ‘the fair Lady Rowena’<sup>138</sup> in the burlesque *Ivanhoe*; and, in April 1863, she featured in *Ali Baba; or, the Thirty-Nine Thieves* as the chief of the robbers.<sup>139</sup> Hence, when she acted the role of Eurydice, Swanborough was already known to the Strand’s public for her burlesque interpretations.

In Byron’s *Orpheus*, Swanborough embodied Eurydice’s distinctive wit. As soon as she reaches Hades and meets Pluto, Eurydice jokes about the King’s manifestation of love: according to the Greek heroine, Pluto’s strange feelings might have been indigestion caused by eating a ‘tart’<sup>140</sup>, insofar as he is the ‘King of Tart-arus’<sup>141</sup>. Similarly, she confesses that despite having ‘crossed one Styx’, she did not expect meeting a ‘monarch crossed as two’.<sup>142</sup> The pun constructed on the name of the infernal river framed Pluto as ‘crossed as two sticks’<sup>143</sup>, an idiom hinting at his bad temper. Pluto describes Eurydice as ‘cut[ing] jokes, like a fellow in a play’<sup>144</sup>, thus exposing her lack of adherence to the mid-Victorian conventional portrait of respectable femininity.

The potential threat to normative femininity posed by Eurydice appears to be neutralised by the sexualisation of the actress. A reviewer writing for *The Times* defined Swanborough’s Eurydice as ‘charming’.<sup>145</sup> In addition, according to the *Era*, the actress, a ‘fair representative of Eurydice, looked charmingly, acted with greatest animation [...]. The classic costume in which she is arrayed sets off the fine proportions of her figure to great advantage’.<sup>146</sup> As with Talfourd’s *Electra*, Eurydice’s costume seems to have emphasised the body of the actress, facilitating its sexualisation. The satirical journal *Fun*

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<sup>135</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Swanborough’s management of the Strand Theatre and its association with Victorian burlesque see Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, pp. 149-151, 199-204.

<sup>136</sup> ‘Births, Deaths, Marriages and Obituaries’, *Era*, 16 December 1893, p. 11.

<sup>137</sup> ‘The Christmas Pantomimes, Burlesques, &c.’, *Times*, 27 December 1861, p. 6.

<sup>138</sup> ‘BOXING-NIGHT AT THE THEATRES’, *Era*, 28 December 1862.

<sup>139</sup> ‘Easter Amusements’, *Times*, 7 April 1863, p. 12.

<sup>140</sup> Henry J. Byron, *Orpheus and Eurydice; or, The Young Gentleman who Charmed the Rocks* (London: T. H. Lacy, [1863(?)]), p. 23.

<sup>141</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, p. 24.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> ‘The Christmas Pantomimes, Burlesques, &c.’, *Times*, 28 December 1863, p. 7.

<sup>146</sup> ‘THE CHRISTMAS PANTOMIMES AND BURLESQUES’, *Era*, 3 January 1864.



also commented on Swanborough's semi-classical costume, stating that 'Miss Ada Swanborough is a vision of female loveliness only to be dreamed of, and such a dazzling display of feminine symmetry as the looped-up robes of the daughters of Young Greece reveal can hardly be looked at without winking'.<sup>147</sup> It is likely that the review published in *Fun* satirised the audience's expectations around classical burlesque: the humorous exaggeration of the effects that Swanborough's show of legs had on the spectators testifies to their inclination to read the actress' body as sexualised. As such, the review cancels any possibility of gender confusion: even though Eurydice displayed intellectual capabilities like a 'fellow in a play'<sup>148</sup>, her erotically charged body univocally framed the character as a young and charming woman.

Whilst the revealing costumes worn by Weekes and Swanborough contributed to the sexualisation of the actresses, they also arguably allowed them to move freely on stage. Dancing was indeed an important component of burlesque performances. Talfourd's *Electra* featured a 'ballet divertissement', which according to the *Daily News* 'relieved the action', and which the *Morning Chronicle* described as 'clever and piquant'.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, Byron's *Orpheus* is interspersed with several dance numbers: for instance, Orpheus and Eurydice dance in the first scene of the burlesque, just before sitting at their dinner table, and Proserpine, Pluto, and several minor characters dance to the tune of a polka, charmed by Orpheus' music.<sup>150</sup> Such an argument is supported by Davis' observations concerning the costumes worn by early nineteenth-century ballerinas. Davis notes that the costumes worn by the danseuses of Romantic ballet, which were characterised by uncorsetted tops and flowing skirts that gradually shortened throughout the century, were universally adopted 'by the corps de ballet of the music halls and the choruses of pantomime, burlesque, and extravaganza after the 1850s'.<sup>151</sup> According to Davis, such costumes undoubtedly allowed dancers to enhance choreographic effects, whilst they 'worked [...] to please the ubiquitous voyeur'.<sup>152</sup>

Not only costumes and movement, but also the acting styles of female burlesque performers facilitated their sexualisation. This is perfectly exemplified by the performance of Maria Simpson, who played Proserpine in Byron's *Orpheus*. Simpson

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<sup>147</sup> 'AT THE PLAY', *Fun*, 16 January 1864, p. 173.

<sup>148</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, p. 24.

<sup>149</sup> 'EASTER MONDAY', *Daily News*, 26 April 1859, p. 3; 'HOLIDAY AMUSEMENTS', *Morning Chronicle*, 26 April 1859, p. 3.

<sup>150</sup> See Byron, *Orpheus*, pp. 8, 32-33.

<sup>151</sup> T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. 110.

<sup>152</sup> T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, p. 109.

was another young actress whose career was closely associated with the burlesques staged at the Strand. Simpson's first engagement was for the 1858 Christmas pantomime at Drury Lane, where she 'piquantly and seductively'<sup>153</sup> acted the role of the Queen of the Forest. Subsequently, she joined the Strand Theatre company and, like Swanborough, she acted in several burlesques written by Byron: in 1859, she appeared in *The Maid and the Magpie*; in 1860, she acted cross-dressed in *The Miller and his Men*, which Byron composed jointly with Talfourd; in the same year, she was the protagonist of Byron's *Cinderella*.<sup>154</sup> As Cinderella, Simpson 'looked and sang so well'<sup>155</sup> that the reviewer writing for the *Sunday Times* understood why the Prince Charming chose her as a bride.

In Byron's *Orpheus*, Proserpine is informed by the three Furies that her husband, King of Hades, has fallen in love and kissed the recently dead Eurydice. Proserpine, enraged, rushes on stage and conveys her determination to divorce her husband on the grounds of infidelity. In fact, she reveals that Pluto has had 'twenty-one'<sup>156</sup> flirts during their marriage, thus proving himself to be an impenitent philanderer. Left alone on stage, Proserpine communicates her decision to display her 'strength of mind'<sup>157</sup> in a short monologue. The daughter of Ceres compares her sufferings to 'Medea's jealousy and hate'.<sup>158</sup> Therefore, she decides to follow Medea's pattern of behaviour when she says 'I'll be revenged too'.<sup>159</sup> Yet, Proserpine's vengeful declarations are radically undermined by her flirtatious behaviour. When she sees Orpheus, who has descended to the underworld to save his beloved Eurydice, she immediately professes her admiration for the 'sweet youth'.<sup>160</sup> Although verbally despising married women flirting with men, she engages in a coquettish conversation with the poet. Orpheus confesses his love for Proserpine and invites her to kiss him. With faux naïveté, Proserpine attempts to resist Orpheus' romantic behaviour whilst commenting, in asides, how she has been captured by his 'impudence'<sup>161</sup> and 'smart remarks'.<sup>162</sup> The heroine unwillingly adopts the behaviour expected of respectable married women, warning Orpheus against her jealous husband and declaring she should 'leave in pique'.<sup>163</sup> Despite her initial refusal,

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<sup>153</sup> 'CHRISTMAS', *Era*, 2 January 1859.

<sup>154</sup> 'THE EASTER THEATRICALS AND MUSIC', *Era*, 15 April 1860.

<sup>155</sup> 'The Christmas Entertainments', *Sunday Times*, 30 December 1860, p. 3.

<sup>156</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, p. 28.

<sup>157</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, p. 29.

<sup>158</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, p. 29.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, p. 29.

<sup>161</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, p. 31.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, p. 31.

Proserpine kisses Orpheus ‘for a joke’.<sup>164</sup> In the light of her flirtatiousness, Proserpine’s indignation at Pluto’s affair with Eurydice appears to be ridiculous. As a result, despite assuming the role of the terrible avenger, Proserpine loses credibility and her strong-mindedness is undermined: her threats emerge as hilariously empty, since they are formulated by a knowingly flirtatious character.

Proserpine’s rival, Eurydice, is foregrounded as consciously flirtatious too. In the *Dramatis Personae*, she is presented as ‘a reformed flirt’<sup>165</sup>, as she has seduced numerous men in her past but discarded them for the love of Orpheus. In the first scene of Byron’s burlesque, despite refusing to kiss him, Eurydice accepts a gift from one of her suitors, Aristaeus.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, when she arrives in the underworld, she entertains Pluto with her jokes and declares herself to be open to his advances, although reminding him that he is a married man, singing to the tune of a duet taken from *La Sonnambula*. At the end of their song, Eurydice accepts a kiss from Pluto who is seen advancing towards her. As soon as Proserpine rushes on stage and discovers her husband’s duplicity, Eurydice pretends to be offended by Pluto’s impudent conduct and slaps his face.<sup>167</sup> Hence, it is arguable that Swanborough’s performance endowed the character of Eurydice with a humorous double attitude towards men, who seem to be coquettishly encouraged and abruptly rejected.

In Talfourd’s *Electra*, Weekes embodies the female protagonist’s desire for a romantic partner. The young heroine states she needs a ‘young man’<sup>168</sup> to accomplish her revenge against Clytemnestra. Such a declaration has a double meaning: on the one hand, Electra refers to her brother, Orestes, who is traditionally bound to avenge the murder of his father; on the other hand, Electra might be seen as expressing her desire for a lover. In fact, after Electra’s request, Pylades appears on stage. Electra is immediately attracted to the charming friend of Orestes, whom she describes as ‘good looking’.<sup>169</sup> After having met Pylades, Electra changes from her torn rags into elegant clothes.<sup>170</sup> Her metamorphosis is simultaneously connected to her joy at the upcoming revenge and to the vanity excited by her love for Pylades.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, p. 4.

<sup>166</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, pp. 9-11.

<sup>167</sup> Byron, *Orpheus*, pp. 26, 37.

<sup>168</sup> Talfourd, ‘Electra’, i. 3. 112 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 18.

<sup>169</sup> Talfourd, ‘Electra’, i. 3. 113 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 18.

<sup>170</sup> In a stage direction, Electra is described as ‘handsomely dressed – her hair neatly arranged, and her manner joyous’. See Talfourd, ‘Electra’, p. 251 Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 28.

Ultimately, the performances of Simpson, Swanborough, and Weekes as Proserpine, Eurydice, and Electra are characterised by the simultaneous adoption of assertive attitudes, which signal the characters' independence, and flirtatious behaviours. Together with their costumes and movements, Simpson's, Swanborough's, and Weekes' coquettish acting styles arguably contributed to the sexualisation of the actresses' bodies whilst implicitly framing their characters as frivolous and empty-headed. In Byron's *Orpheus*, Proserpine's determination to divorce her philandering husband and Eurydice's cleverness are undermined by their flirtatiousness. Similarly, despite her willingness to be involved in the revenge plan against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Talfourd's Electra is distracted by the charms of Pylades. Hence, instead of supporting women's political battles as hypothesised by classicists, classical burlesques such as Byron's *Orpheus* and Talfourd's *Electra* humorously foreground independent female characters as superficial, echoing the caricatures of strong-minded women published in the satirical press of the time. Indeed, as noted in the first chapter of this thesis, mid-Victorian strong-minded and 'fast' ladies, who were determined to fight for the recognition of women's rights in terms of divorce legislation and political representation, were humorously foregrounded as extremely flirtatious in the pages of *Punch* and *Fun*. In a similar fashion, Proserpine, Eurydice, and Electra are comically portrayed by young actresses as simultaneously independent and coquettish.

### 2.3.1 Young Actresses' Skills and Agency in Burlesque Acting

As discussed above, the embodied burlesque performances of Simpson, Swanborough, and Weekes were characterised by the flaunting of the actresses' feminine charms. Following Gail Marshall, one might argue that such performances were modelled by contemporary – and exclusively male – playwrights, who exploited actresses' feminine attractions to captivate the audiences.<sup>171</sup> Marshall theorises the existence of a 'Galatea aesthetic'<sup>172</sup> whereby the actress, like a marble statue, is chiselled and fashioned by her male creator, Pygmalion, who metaphorically embodies the playwrights' willingness to satisfy the voyeuristic desires of male audiences. As an object at the behest of both dramatists and spectators, the Victorian actress is seen by Marshall as 'imitative and

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<sup>171</sup> Marshall generally considers Victorian actresses' bodies as being 'rather at the behest of her spectators, and those who model[led] her, her manager, playwright, costumier, than under her own control'. See Gail Marshall, *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 56.

<sup>172</sup> Marshall, p. 5.

derivative, necessarily speaking words given to her by a usually male author'<sup>173</sup>, whilst unconsciously exposing her body on stage. Marshall claims that late-nineteenth-century female performers like Ellen Terry began to challenge the Galatea aesthetic by engaging more actively in theatrical performances. Yet, Marshall's utter denial of actresses' conscious complicity in the theatrical activities of the mid-Victorian period is arguably oversimplistic, especially in the light of recent studies which have reconsidered the degree of agency that mid-Victorian female performers had over their own careers. For example, scholars like Davis and Bratton have highlighted how some mid-Victorian actresses distinctively shaped the West End and its forms of entertainment, focussing on their ventures into the management of theatrical venues. Some of these actresses, like Marie Wilton and Pattie Oliver, had a background in burlesque acting and specialised in roles which sometimes emphasised their sexual attractions.<sup>174</sup> According to Bratton, the career of mid-Victorian theatre manageresses is not to be perceived as in contrast with their experience as sexualised burlesque actresses. In fact, Bratton states that Wilton and Oliver 'were to carry the creative package away and develop it further'.<sup>175</sup> Whilst managing respectively the Prince of Wales's and the Royalty Theatre, Wilton and Oliver successfully repurposed the creative skills they learnt as burlesque actresses.

It is arguable that burlesque acting enabled some female performers to develop a set of skills which, together with other factors, influenced the progression of their careers. Whilst little is known about Weekes, there is more evidence to discuss how burlesque acting may have contributed to the professional success of Simpson and Swanborough.<sup>176</sup> Simpson, one of the favourite actresses engaged at the Strand in the 1860s, married William H. Liston and managed with him the Olympic Theatre from 1869 to 1872. It is likely that Simpson, who was by then known as Mrs W. H. Liston, benefited from her first-hand knowledge of burlesque when, for instance, she was entrusted with the supervision of W. S. Gilbert's *The Princess* (1870). For this production, she was granted the 'highest commendation'<sup>177</sup> by the press of the time. In 1874, Mrs W. H. Liston became

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<sup>173</sup> Marshall, p. 30.

<sup>174</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 203. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Wilton's cross-dressed performances were not always sexualised. In some instances (e. g. her performance of Pippo in Byron's *The Maid and the Magpie*), she arguably embodied the androgyny of boys.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Weekes is known to have performed as the shepherd Sylvanus in the 1859 Christmas pantomime *Valentine's Day; or, Harlequin and the Fairy True Lover's Knot* and as the Dowager in the 1861 Christmas pantomime *Little Miss Muffet and Little Boy Blue*, both staged at the Haymarket Theatre. See 'Drury Lane', *Sunday Times*, 1 January 1860, p. 3 and 'BOXING NIGHT AT THE THEATRES', *Era*, 29 December 1861, p. 10.

<sup>177</sup> 'Olympic Theatre', *Times*, 10 January 1870, p. 7.

the directress of the Criterion Theatre, where she supervised the staging of *opéra bouffes* such as *Les Prés Saint Gervais*, composed by Charles Lecocq, which premiered in November 1874. An article published in the *London and Provincial Entr'acte* acknowledged Mrs Liston's professional development, describing her as 'a lady whose experience is as extensive as her judgement'.<sup>178</sup>

Swanborough's abilities in burlesque acting were equally praised by the press of the time. According to the *Morning Post*, she realised a 'very clever piece of acting'<sup>179</sup> in Byron's *Orpheus*, as she framed Eurydice as a 'pretty wife and reformed flirt'<sup>180</sup>; while the *Era* appreciated the actress' 'graceful animation', especially when she sang 'the duets and songs allotted to her with equal skill and effect'.<sup>181</sup> In 1875, Swanborough acted in a comedietta entitled *Weak Woman* written by Byron and staged at the Strand.<sup>182</sup> In reviewing her performance, a journalist writing for the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* vividly captured the actress' professional growth. Having started as a 'pretty blonde damsel' with 'agreeable features' and a 'small voice'<sup>183</sup>, Swanborough gradually developed her acting and singing skills in burlesque. According to the journalist, she was 'intelligent and painstaking' in cultivating her 'taste, [her] considerable emotional power, and [her] capacity to give point to what we may term "comedy-dialogue"'.<sup>184</sup> In addition, Swanborough's singing voice 'grew stronger' and she became 'one of the most enjoyable vocal attractions at the Strand'.<sup>185</sup> Hence, while it is not possible to accurately estimate Swanborough's degree of agency in burlesque acting, it seems equally inaccurate to treat her performances as mere displays of her charms.

Overall, the sexual attractions of the young actresses performing as Proserpine and Eurydice in Byron's *Orpheus* were emphasised both by their costumes and by their flirtatious behaviour. Simpson and Swanborough flaunted and exploited their charms in ways which implicitly undermine the assertiveness and witticism of the female characters they embodied. However, this section has argued that their performances of coquettish heroines were no mere vehicles of sexualisation. In fact, burlesque acting arguably equipped certain female performers with a set of skills they may have actively developed

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<sup>178</sup> 'Criterion', *London and Provincial Entr'acte*, 19 December 1874, p. 4.

<sup>179</sup> 'THE CHRISTMAS AMUSEMENTS', *Morning Post*, 28 December 1863, p. 2.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> 'THE CHRISTMAS PANTOMIMES AND BURLESQUES', *Era*, 27 December 1863, p. 14.

<sup>182</sup> Charles Pascoe, *Our Actors and Actresses: The Dramatic List of Living Actors and Actresses of the British Stage* (London: David Bogue, 1880), pp. 326-327.

<sup>183</sup> 'Miss Ada Swanborough', *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 2 January 1875, p. 323.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

and knowingly repurposed in their subsequent careers, as was the case with Marie Wilton and Pattie Oliver.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated how the acting styles of both male and female burlesque performers contributed to caricature and, therefore, humorously undermine the strong-mindedness of female characters. Low comedians such as Wright, Robson, and Young parodied the acting styles of tragic actors, suddenly shifting between moments of pathos and drollery. Instead of acting their roles with tragic seriousness as Macintosh suggests, low comedians alternated their manner of delivery to amuse the audiences of the burlesques in which they appeared. Character actresses such as Mrs Wilkins and Mrs Leigh Murray played the roles of strong-minded women as stock comic types: they arguably emphasised Clytemnestra's and Alcestis' bullying personalities as they tyrannised over their henpecked husbands. Finally, young actresses, namely Weekes, Simpson, and Swanborough, implicitly caricatured the assertiveness of Electra, Proserpine, and Eurydice endowing them with a humorously flirtatious attitude. In addition, this chapter has illustrated how such performances of coquettish burlesque characters did not only contribute to the objectification of the bodies of young and attractive actresses, but also endowed some female performers with specific competencies they may have subsequently exploited.

To conclude, contrary to what classical scholars have suggested, strong-minded female characters were not played in a serious way in any of the categories examined above. Consequently, the comicality of the acting styles of classical burlesques drastically downplays the seriousness of any claim concerning their alignment with matters of gender politics and ideology. The following chapter, which deals with cross-dressing, will investigate further how cross-dressing impacted on the comicality of burlesque performances.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER AND CROSS-DRESSING

##### Introduction

In order to fully appreciate how the inherent comicality of classical burlesque impacted on the performance of gender, this chapter aims at re-affirming the importance of cross-dressing as a parodic practice. Classical scholars tend to dismiss both female-to-male and male-to-female cross-dressing as standard features of burlesque performances. For example, Hall claims that ‘transvestitism was routine in burlesque’.<sup>1</sup> Whilst actresses were cast to perform male roles in breeches, revealing their bodies and perhaps playing to the male audiences, ‘older female roles, like Clytemnestra and Medea, began systematically to be taken by men’.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Monròs-Gaspar argues that cross-dressing was one of the ‘staples of Victorian burlesque, and on some occasions the characters less in tune with the Victorian ideals of femininity were precisely the ones performed by mature, well-known actresses and men’.<sup>3</sup> She reads Blanchard’s *Antigone* (Strand Theatre, 1845) as staging a strong-minded female protagonist who, despite being performed by the renowned low comedian George Wild, seriously strove to be involved in the male-dominated world of politics, thus subverting the normative expectations around gender roles. Monròs-Gaspar claims that cross-dressing had no consequence on the staging of Antigone’s rebellion against the mid-Victorian gender paradigm, which confined women within the domestic sphere. She believes that the very standardisation of cross-dressing in classical burlesque performances empties such practice of any serious significance.

Macintosh considers cross-dressing as the distinctive hallmark of burlesque performances, as it encapsulates the characters’ ‘deviancy from and disjunction with an original or a norm’.<sup>4</sup> Like Monròs-Gaspar, Macintosh argues that male-to-female cross-dressing did not prevent actors from performing the roles of women in a naturalistic way. This is the premise from which Macintosh analyses Wright’s interpretation of Medea in Lemon’s *Medea; or, A Libel on the Lady of Colchis* and Robson’s performance of the female protagonist in *Medea; or, The Best of Mothers with a Brute of Husband*. As previously noted, Macintosh claims that Wright and Robson acted the role of Medea in a

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<sup>1</sup> E. Hall, ‘Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre’, p. 348.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, p. 83.



convincingly serious way, endowing their performances with political undertones, as the two low comedians advocated for the rights of divorced women in mid-Victorian society.<sup>5</sup> From Macintosh's perspective, cross-dressing did not affect Wright's and Robson's *quasi* tragic interpretations and did not undermine their critical interventions in mid-Victorian gender discourse. She argues that, among nineteenth-century critics, Fitzgerald was the only one who found Robson's cross-dressed performance of Medea unconvincing. Fitzgerald frames cross-dressing as a 'perversion [which] is always intruding', taking 'the whole thing out of the range of possibility'.<sup>6</sup> In his opinion, Robson did not give life to 'a ridiculously angry and fiercely jealous woman', but was performing 'merely as a disguised man, going through grotesque antics'.<sup>7</sup> Whilst the previous chapter has already disputed Macintosh's thesis concerning the seriousness of low comedians' acting style, this chapter will evaluate how male to female cross-dressing enriched the comicality of their burlesque performances.

Female-to-male cross-dressing has been generally recognised as non-mimetic, meaning that the gender of the performer was clearly recognisable behind that of the character she was cast to perform. More specifically, according to Macintosh, '[n]aturalist representation of the male, at least, was not apparently the aim of the breeches role'.<sup>8</sup> As previously noted, burlesque actresses performing in breeches showed their shapely legs dancing on stage, thus flaunting their attractions at the audiences. Monròs-Gaspar observes that the display of female bodies entailed by female-to-male cross dressing satisfied the erotic voyeuristic desire of burlesque spectators.<sup>9</sup> Yet, classical scholars also claim that, when performing cross-dressed, burlesque actresses enjoyed exceptional freedom: instead of being trapped in crinolines and corsets, they wore costumes which gave their bodies freedom of movement, making it easier for them to dance. Thus, they transgressed the normative expectations around Victorian women's appearance.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As discussed previously, Macintosh argues that burlesque acting was, in some sense, similar to tragic acting. As such, the male low comedians who acted cross-dressed as Medea in Lemon's and Brough's burlesques 'played their roles all too naturalistically'. They portrayed Medea as exposing the unjust treatment of mid-Victorian abandoned wives. Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', pp. 83-86.

<sup>6</sup> Percy Fitzgerald, *Principles of Comedy and Dramatic Effect* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1870), p. 181. Also quoted in Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Fitzgerald, *Principles of Comedy*, p. 181.

<sup>8</sup> Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, 'Classical Myths on the Victorian Popular Stage: The Figure of Cassandra', pp. 303-304.

<sup>10</sup> Monròs-Gaspar claims that 'breeches roles also allowed women to defy social conventions and act and dress with the same liberties as men'. See Monròs-Gaspar, 'Classical Myths on the Victorian Popular Stage', p. 304. Similarly, Macintosh argues that cross-dressed female actresses 'enjoyed a freedom of movement that the normally restricted female body could never hope to share'. See Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 83.

This chapter aims to explore the consequences that female-to-male cross-dressing had on the representation of masculinity in classical burlesques, a factor that has been neglected by classical scholars. In addition, it investigates further the seductive – and potentially transgressive – implications of female-to-male cross-dressing. I will argue that this practice contributed to ‘etherealising’<sup>11</sup> martial masculinity. The term, employed by Carolyn Williams in *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody*, hints at the softening of the martial masculinity stereotype as enabled by female interpretations. Actresses endowed muscular heroes with feminine grace, which humorously contrasted with the stereotypical appearance of men possessing strength and courage, intended as qualities which came to be increasingly associated with normative masculinity in the mid-nineteenth century. Furthermore, following from Chapter 1, this chapter investigates how female-to-male cross-dressing impacted on the staging of nineteenth-century swells in classical burlesques, focussing on actresses’ embodiment of swells’ affected manners and obsession for stylish clothes. Simultaneously, female-to-male cross-dressing may have empowered female performers. As the following analyses will show, not only did actresses performing in breeches charm the audiences with their captivating figures and gestures, but they also displayed their abilities in burlesque acting. Thus, as argued in the previous chapter of this thesis, they exposed and – possibly claimed agency over – their status as highly skilled professionals working on the mid-Victorian stage.

Finally, this chapter focuses on the cross-dressed performances of boys in classical burlesques, another area of investigation which has been neglected by classicists. Several theatre scholars have engaged in the analysis of the effects that female-to-male cross-dressing had on the performance of boys. Focussing on pre-adolescent female performers who played boys across a variety of theatrical genres, Marlis Schweitzer argues that girl actresses ‘offered appealing representations of *boyhood*’, as they ‘queered evolving conceptions of gender, urging audiences to resist binary thinking if only for the duration of their onstage performances’.<sup>12</sup> In his comprehensive study of cross-dressing across the centuries, Laurence Senelick argues that female-to-male cross-dressing was generally exploited in Victorian extravaganzas and burlesques to flaunt attractive female bodies, although certain actresses, like Vestris, ‘created an aura, if not an illusion, of

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<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 236.

<sup>12</sup> Marlis Schweitzer, *Bloody Tyrants & Little Pickles: Stage Roles of Anglo-American Girls in the Nineteenth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020), p. 8.

boyishness'.<sup>13</sup> In her seminal article 'Mirroring Men', Bratton offers an in-depth investigation of cross-dressed actresses playing boys, claiming that they embodied an androgynous form of fascination which combined and transcended both masculinity and femininity.<sup>14</sup> In the light of these perspectives, this chapter further aims at investigating the cross-dressed performances of boy roles in classical burlesques, evaluating whether the performances of actresses were mere vehicles of titillation, or perhaps allowed for the embodiment of androgynous qualities. Ultimately, not only does this chapter question the reading of cross-dressing as an endemic and therefore insignificant phenomenon of classical burlesque performances as implied by classical scholars, but it also complements their investigations by discussing the consequences of the cross-dressed staging of men and boys.

### 3.1 The Masculinisation of Women through Cross-Dressing

This section argues that male-to-female cross-dressing altered the appearance of unconventionally strong and independent female characters in a significant way: indeed, cross-dressing endowed female characters with a clearly discernible masculinised appearance. Hence, some of the female characters featured in classical burlesque seem to be caricatured in a similar way to that displayed in the satirical press and in Victorian novels, where strong-minded and 'fast' women were portrayed and described as possessing heavily masculinised features, which ridicule their intervention in the male-dominated sphere of politics.<sup>15</sup> The grotesque appearance of classical burlesque female characters arguably contributes to undermining their claims to independence and equality, thus neutralising the threats posed to the conventional gender classifications of the age.

Classical burlesque scripts repeatedly drew the audiences' attention to the strong-minded protagonists' caricatural appearance. For example, in Brough's *Medea*, Creusa observes that the heroine looks 'worn and ill. That face proclaims a mind distress'd and harried'.<sup>16</sup> It might be argued, following Hall's, Macintosh's, and Monròs-Gaspar's analyses, that Medea's face was shown as scarred by the misery brought by her peregrinations, the pain suffered for her crimes, and the resentment felt for having been

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<sup>13</sup> More specifically, Senelick refers to Vestris performance as Macheath in John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* in 1833. See Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 245.

<sup>14</sup> Bratton, 'Mirroring Men', pp. 235-252.

<sup>15</sup> The caricatural appearance of strong-minded and 'fast' ladies is discussed in depth in the first chapter of this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', I. 1. 228-229 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 14.

abandoned by her husband.<sup>17</sup> Yet, what the mid-nineteenth-century audiences concretely saw in the face of Brough's Medea was Robson (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Photograph of Frederick Robson as Medea, nineteenth century (Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum)

The actor, who was only five feet tall, was known to have a disproportionately big head for his small hands, feet, and body.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is arguable that Creusa's remark, apart from eliciting sympathy for Medea's sufferings, also had a comic effect. Similarly, in the second scene of Brough's burlesque, when Medea confronts her husband Jason for

<sup>17</sup> According to Hall, Medea is presented as a nineteenth-century beggar. See E. Hall, 'Medea and British Legislation before the First World War', p. 60. Similarly, Macintosh argues that 'Brough places great emphasis on the penury to which Medea and the children have been reduced, as they too are forced to beg for their survival'. See Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 96. Finally, from Monròs-Gaspar's perspective, Brough's *Medea* 'adheres to Legouvé in attenuating Medea's responsibility for killing her offspring'. Medea was presented as driven to infanticide by the mistreatments she suffered. See Monròs-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Sands, p. 20.

the first time, she describes her traits as ‘altered [...] / Through suffering, a little worn and livid’.<sup>19</sup> The look on Medea’s face signals, on a verbal level, the denunciation of Jason’s mistreatments. However, on a performative level, these lines might also be read as a humorous reference to the grotesque appearance of the impersonator. Jason is so surprised by the sudden appearance of Medea on stage that he pretends not to recognise her. Hence, the burlesque heroine reveals her identity uttering the same words spoken by Ristori in Legouvé’s *Medea*, which are ‘Giasone io son Medea’.<sup>20</sup> In Legouvé’s tragedy, this line signals a moment of emotional climax, as it encapsulates the painful estrangement between the protagonists, whilst powerfully affirming Medea’s identity as an individual. In Brough’s burlesque, the same sentence as delivered by Robson may hint at the humorous consequences entailed by cross-dressing. Jason, who was interpreted by Julia St George, defines the encounter with Medea as ‘bew’lderin’’<sup>21</sup>, possibly alluding to the confusion generated not only by his former wife’s unexpected arrival in Corinth but also by Robson’s grotesque appearance. Simultaneously, the bitterly ironic tone with which Robson said ‘Giasone io son Medea’ might have further enhanced the ludicrous nature of his cross-dressed performance.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, Medea’s caricatural appearance had humorous consequences for the staging of her revenge. As Macintosh observes, Medea’s emotional turmoil should have closely followed Legouvé’s tragedy: according to the indications included in the acting edition of the burlesque, before killing her sons, Robson’s Medea should have been portrayed as torn between rage and maternal love.<sup>23</sup> Robson’s appearance was central to the process of downplaying Medea’s determination to be revenged. Before stabbing her offspring, Robson’s Medea recreated Ristori’s famous tableau (Figure 11): the heroine of Brough’s burlesque ‘falls sobbing on her knees, embracing her two children, who have knelt on each side’.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> R. Brough, ‘Medea’, I. 2. 122-123 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Legouvé, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> R. Brough, ‘Medea’, I. 2. 126 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> According to a stage direction, Robson spoke ‘with bitter irony’. See R. Brough, ‘Medea’, I. 2. 126 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, p. 97.

<sup>24</sup> R. Brough, ‘Medea’, p. 181 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 33.

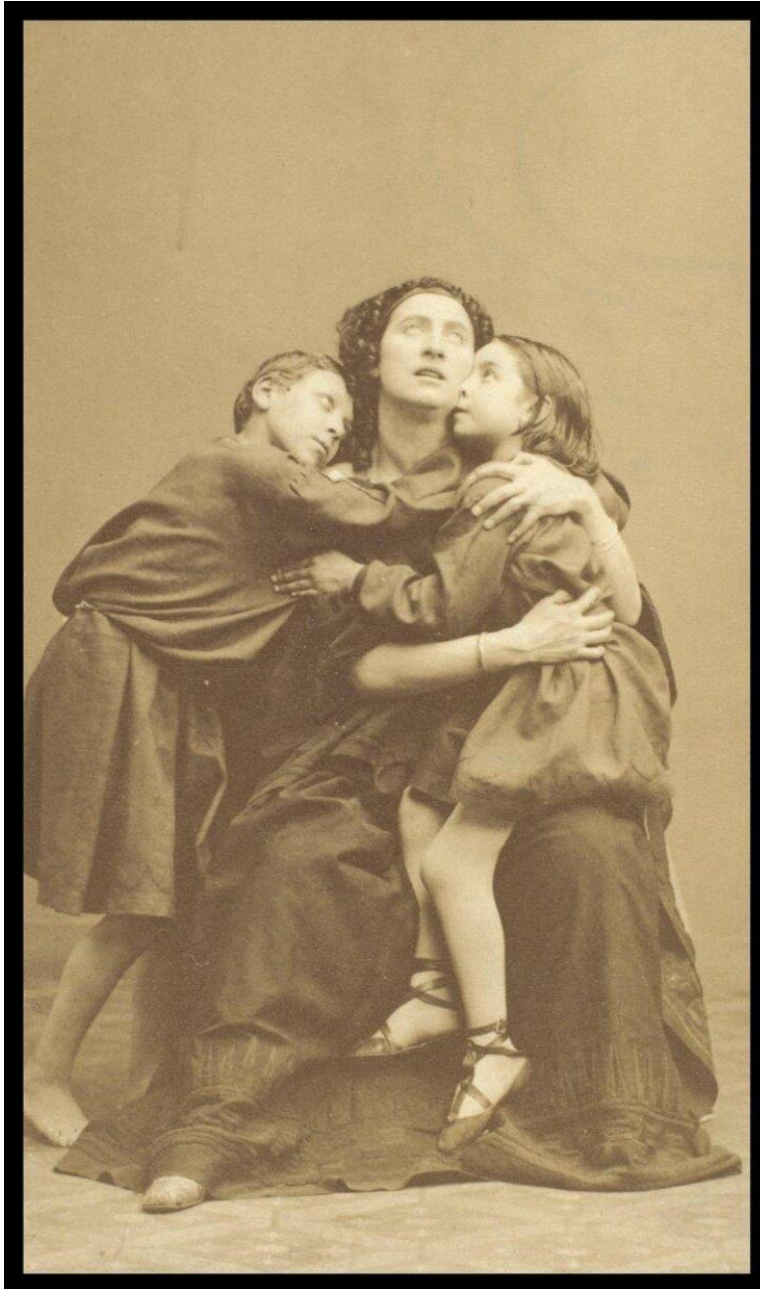


Figure 11. Photograph of Adelaide Ristori as Medea in *Medea*, nineteenth century (Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum)

The Olympic audiences might have laughed at Robson, a short and grotesquely disproportionate male actor, who attempted to mimic Ristori's statuesque attitude while holding the two female performers who acted the role of Medea's sons. A similar effect might have been caused by Brough's original caricature of Medea's infanticidal plans. Before having resolved to stab her sons, Medea envisages hitting them with a shoe, hidden

under her dress. Witnessing Robson lifting his robe, ominously showing a boot, and running behind the boys may have been decidedly humorous.<sup>25</sup>

In *Medea; or, A Libel on the Lady of Colchis*, Lemon uses a similar strategy to caricature the appearance of the female protagonist. At the beginning of his burlesque, Jason is forced by Orpheus to confess the reasons why he wants to desert his first wife. Jason says that he no longer finds Medea attractive: specifically, '[h]er temper grew so bad and then her face / all of its beauty scarcely left a trace'.<sup>26</sup> Orpheus, in accordance with Legouvé's tragedy, shows his sympathy towards Medea, arguing that '[a] woman's face grow's haggard who reflects / All day upon her husband's base neglects'.<sup>27</sup> Both Jason's and Orpheus' lines humorously hint at the ugliness of Wright's face acting cross-dressed as Medea, who is endowed with distinctively masculinised traits. In addition, Orpheus defines Medea as a 'wopper'<sup>28</sup>, referring not only to her cumbersome presence but also to Wright's physical appearance. In effect, the low comedian was said to have 'tower[ed] above'<sup>29</sup> the woman he impersonated. Although Medea had not appeared on stage yet, it is arguable that the discussion between Jason and Orpheus built on the expectations of the Adelphi audiences, who were about to witness Wright's cross-dressed performance.

Furthermore, Lemon's burlesque humorously recasts the traditional rivalry between Medea and Creusa as a physical confrontation between two cross-dressed performers. As part of her revenge plan, Medea traditionally gifts Creusa with a poisonous veil. Jason's second wife dies as the veil bursts into flames.<sup>30</sup> In Lemon's version of the myth, Medea attempts to kill Creusa by applying an 'enchanted fluid'<sup>31</sup> to her face. With such a gesture, Medea admittedly wants to scar Creusa's beautiful features, to see if Jason still finds her attractive. Whilst referring to Creusa's beauty, Medea also humorously hints at the physique of Bedford. The actor, who interpreted the role of Jason's second wife, was the long-standing professional partner of Wright. The comic duo's interpretation of Medea's revenge may have excited the laughter of the Adelphi audiences. In effect, the public saw Wright's physical aggression towards Bedford, whose appearance was rendered even more grotesque through the application of a black liquid to his cheeks.

<sup>25</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', I. 3. 53-61, 84-89 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fol. 5<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fol. 6<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> 'THEATRES, &c.', *Era*, 13 July 1856, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> See Legouvé, p. 150.

<sup>31</sup> Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fol. 16<sup>r</sup>.

The *Medea* burlesques were not the only ones which cast male actors as strong-minded women. As previously noted, Bedford played Norma in Oxberry's *Norma Travestie*. In the burlesque, the terrible avenger of Bellini's opera, whose plot closely resembles *Medea*'s story, is deserted by Pollio because he finds her 'too fat [...] coarse and crummy!'.<sup>32</sup> *Dido*, which was Burnand's first burlesque for the London stage, featured Young in the role of the Carthaginian queen, who is described as a woman of strong-passions.<sup>33</sup> According to a reviewer writing for the *Era*, Young impersonated the 'stern-looking' queen with modesty despite being a 'big man'.<sup>34</sup> In April 1860, Young acted the role of the strong-minded Lucrezia Borgia in Buckingham's burlesque of Donizetti's opera.<sup>35</sup> The script of Buckingham's *Lucrezia Borgia* capitalises on the gender subversion entailed by cross-dressing when Johnny, who corresponds to the character of Captain Gennaro in Donizetti's original opera, wonders whether Lucrezia could be resembling 'He-be'<sup>36</sup>, referring not only to the mythical cupbearer of the gods but also to a *he*. Finally, Burnand's burlesque *Sappho; or, Look before you Leap*, which was published in 1865 in *Beeton's Book of Burlesque* for private performances, advises potential readers that the strong-minded Greek poetess should have been interpreted by a man, after the fashion of the actor Felix Rogers who played the goddess Minerva in Burnand's *Ixion* (New Royalty Theatre, 1863).<sup>37</sup> *Sappho* was to be portrayed as a middle-aged, 'wretched'<sup>38</sup> school mistress and, accordingly, she should have been endowed with the unpleasantly masculine looks stereotypically associated with strong-minded women. *Sappho*'s

<sup>32</sup> William Oxberry, *Norma Travestie* (London: Samuel French, 1841), p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Anna describes her sister Dido as moved by '[s]entiments somewhat strong'. See Burnand, *Dido*, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> 'THEATRES, &c.', *Era*, 19 February 1860, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> The character of Lucrezia Borgia is described in the *Dramatis Personae* as a strong-minded woman. See Leicester Buckingham, *Lucrezia Borgia! At Home and all Abroad* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1860), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Buckingham, p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> The circumstances of the first performance of Burnand's *Sappho* are rather obscure, insofar as the Lord Chamberlain's Plays Collection seems not to hold the manuscript of this burlesque. Schoch considers Burnand's *Sappho* as an unsuccessful attempt to bring classical burlesque to the East End. See Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxviii. *Sappho* was revived at the Theatre Royal in Belfast in February 1866 and saw Felix Rogers in the title role. See 'Advertisements & Notices', *Belfast News-Letter*, 8 February 1866. In June 1866, *Sappho* was presented as Burnand's 'latest burlesque' to be performed at the Standard Theatre in London, with Rogers as the protagonist. See 'Multiple Classified Advertising Items', *Sunday Times*, 10 June 1866, p. 4. Finally, in July 1866, *Sappho* was staged at the Marylebone Theatre. See 'Advertisements & Notices', *Era*, 22 July 1866, p. 8. In *Beeton's Book of Burlesque*, Burnand advises the men who are willing to perform the role of *Sappho* to imitate Frederick Rogers, who interpreted Minerva in *Ixion; or, the Man at the Wheel* (1863). See Francis Burnand, 'Sappho; or, Look Before you Leap!', in *Beeton's Book of Burlesques: Containing Five Burlesques Specially Written for Performance in the Theatre Royal Back Drawing-Room*, ed. by Samuel O. Beeton (London: S. O. Beeton, 1865), pp. 74-110 (p. 79). Minerva, being the goddess of wisdom, ventures in the male-dominated spheres of knowledge and culture. Therefore, cross-dressing frames her as a stereotypically masculinised strong-minded woman.

<sup>38</sup> Burnand, 'Sappho', p. 93.



unattractiveness is humorously underlined, for example, when she invites Phaon to kiss her cheek, but he immediately draws back.<sup>39</sup>

Similar caricatural strategies are adopted in William Brough's burlesque *Joan of Arc*, first performed at the Strand Theatre on the 29 March 1869. Joan of Arc, described as 'a Girl of the Period, a strong-minded woman, who ignores Matrimony'<sup>40</sup>, was interpreted by the male actor Thomas Thorne.<sup>41</sup> In Brough's burlesque, Joan of Arc refuses to be trapped in the Victorian institution of marriage, in order to focus her energies on the masculine pursuit of war. Yet, she falls in love with Lionel, an ally to the English army. Imprisoned by Lionel, Joan declares she would be his captive 'for *better and for worse*'<sup>42</sup>, implying her willingness to marry the enemy. The heroine's sudden change of mind concerning marriage humorously undermines her determination: Brough's Joan of Arc condemns the Victorian institution of matrimony up until the point when she falls in love with Lionel.

The game of gender reversal displayed in the performance of Brough's burlesque was likely to have had humorous effects, thus undermining further the strong-minded women's rejection of marriage. In fact, rather than seeing on stage a Girl of the Period professing her right to oppose marriage, the audiences of the Strand Theatre witnessed the performance of a man claiming to be a woman endowed with manly courage, who fell in love with a cross-dressed actress performing the role of Lionel. In addition, Thorne's cross-dressed impersonation arguably caricatured the Girl of the Period in a similar way to that adopted by the satirical press. As illustrated in Chapter 1, *Punch* and *Fun* masculinised 'fast' girls' appearance by portraying them as dressed like men in order to signal their enjoyment of traditionally male pastimes. Likewise, through cross-dressing, Brough's burlesque masculinises Joan of Arc: the soldier costume worn by Thorne, who interpreted the role of Joan, humorously hinted at her unconventional participation in the Anglo-French war staged in the burlesque. Thorne humorously enacts what Garber terms a 'double drag'<sup>43</sup> process: he is a man, performing the role of a woman who, like a modern Girl of the Period, is represented as wearing male clothes and

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<sup>39</sup> Burnand, 'Sappho', p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> William Brough, *Joan of Arc! A New and Original Historical Burlesque* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1869), p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Thorne is principally remembered as the lessee of the Vaudeville Theatre. Yet, before venturing into management, he was also a comic actor. In 1864, he was introduced to the audiences of the Strand Theatre as the protagonist of Byron's farce *Timothy, to the Rescue*. Previously, he was 'a favourite comedian of the Surrey'. See 'The Theatres', *Illustrated London News*, 4 June 1864, p. 555.

<sup>42</sup> W. Brough, *Joan*, p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> Garber, pp. 177-179.

engaging in distinctively male activities. Yet, at the end of the burlesque, after having been found guilty of sorcery, Brough's Joan of Arc is sentenced to relinquish her armour and dress like a woman.<sup>44</sup> In a comic rewriting of Joan of Arc's historical execution, Thorne is humorously condemned to dress in female clothes. As such, Brough's burlesque may have implicitly satirised the Girl of the Periods' claim to dress in ways which disregarded mid-Victorian morality and decorum.

Ultimately, if analysed as a holistic phenomenon, it seems impossible to dismiss cross-dressing either as a mere staple of burlesque, as Monròs-Gaspar argues, or as a dispensable accessory of burlesque performances. In other words, it would be limiting to interpret cross-dressing as a simple humorous technique added to enrich the appeal of burlesque which, according to Macintosh, would otherwise be close to the seriousness of tragedy. On the contrary, cross-dressing seems to emerge as an integral part of the burlesque caricature of strong-minded and 'fast' women. Burlesque scripts playfully allude to the heroines' unattractiveness and lack of femininity and pay particular attention to the 'size' of the cross-dressed male actors who were far too large, or disproportionate, for the female roles they performed. Thus, burlesques arguably perpetuate a distinct image of the strong-minded woman and the 'fast' lady as masculinised, which spectators might also have encountered in the pages of *Punch*. From this perspective, the political activism attributed to the strong-minded and 'fast' heroines of classical burlesques appears to be humorously undermined.

### 3.2 Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing: Ethereal Masculinity and Titillation

As indicated in the Introduction to this chapter, this section primarily aims at evaluating the consequences that female-to-male cross-dressing had on the representation of masculinity in classical burlesques. It is arguable that female-to-male cross-dressing contributed to humorously diminishing the physical strength of ancient heroes. This is perfectly exemplified in both Lemon's and Brough's *Medeas*, where the role of Jason was acted cross dressed respectively by Miss Wyndham and Julia St George. In Lemon's burlesque, Wyndham, whose physicality was gracefully slim (Figure 12), exposes the vacuity of Jason's heroism when she ironically invites Orpheus to 'feel [Jason's] biceps'.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> W. Brough, *Joan*, p. 32.

<sup>45</sup> Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fol. 3<sup>v</sup>. In order to have an idea of the slim physicality of Miss Wyndham, it is possible to observe a picture of the actress included in 'Miss Wyndham', *Illustrated London News*, 19 February 1859, p. 172.



Figure 12. 'Miss Wyndham', *Illustrated London News*, 19 February 1859, p. 172

By emphasising her feminine body features, Wyndham humorously highlighted Jason's lack of physical strength. Similarly, in Brough's *Medea*, Jason's physical prowess, as humorously embodied by St George, is underlined by Orpheus, who describes the hero as endowed with 'heart and muscle strong'.<sup>46</sup>

The connection between spiritual and physical strength established in Brough's burlesque recalls the principles of Muscular Christianity that were developed during the

<sup>46</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', i. 1. 67 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 7. St George was a celebrated burlesque actress of the time. Her popularity is confirmed by the fact that, in 1854, she was already defined as 'the star of the Lyceum burlesque'. See 'THE DRAMA MUSIC, &c.' *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 28 May 1854, p. 9.

1850s. Although in 1856 the label Muscular Christianity did not yet exist, Kingsley had already published his early novels, which encapsulated a new vision of Victorian masculinity that reconciled physical virility with self-discipline.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, in 1855, Kingsley's *Brave Words for Brave Soldiers and Sailors* appeared in the form of an anonymous pamphlet which was dispatched to the soldiers fighting in the Crimean War. Kingsley tried to dignify the bravery of British soldiers stationed at the Black Sea by comparing it to the courage of Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup> From Kingsley's perspective, the endurance of both physical and spiritual hardships faced by the soldiers in Crimea would have been rewarded with eternal life. He envisaged a new form of heaven, which was 'no longer a place for the spiritual elect but for the heroic working man'.<sup>49</sup> After having highlighted what Louise Lee calls 'The Crimean Beginnings of Muscular Christianity'<sup>50</sup>, it is significant to note that, in Brough's *Medea*, Jason frames himself as a 'soldier'<sup>51</sup> whose military mission is that of defeating the giant menacing Creon's kingdom. After having fought the creature, Jason sings 'The British Grenadiers'<sup>52</sup>, a popular war song which clearly describes the appalling conditions of the Crimean War:

JASON:        They talk of queer provisions,  
                   Of trench work in the cold,  
                   Of tents in bad conditions,  
                   And huts that water hold.  
                   But with such to check a warrior's zeal,  
                   The task as vain appears  
                   As to cow, or to row, or to bow wow wow  
                   The British Grenadiers.<sup>53</sup>

As Richardson notes, the term 'cold' immediately transports the song to the severe climate that British soldiers endured in Crimea. Similarly, the denunciation of the lack of material provisions that the burlesque soldier makes echoes the reports of the disastrous

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<sup>47</sup> The tag 'Muscular Christianity' was coined in a review of Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (1857) written by T. C. Sandars for the *Saturday Review*, which placed emphasis on the 'association between physical strength, religious certainty, and the ability to shape and control the world around oneself'. See D. Hall, 'Muscular Christianity', p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Lee believes that the outbreak of the Crimean War triggered Kingsley's reflections around militarism, which would be later associated with 'Muscular Christianity'. See Louise Lee, 'Deity in Dispatches: The Crimean Beginnings of Muscular Christianity', in *Religion, Literature and the Imagination: Sacred Worlds*, ed. by Mark Knight and Louise Lee (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 57-74 (p. 57).

<sup>49</sup> Lee, p. 74.

<sup>50</sup> The phrase is taken from the title of Lee's chapter. See Lee, p. 57.

<sup>51</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', i. 1. 56 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> The song is sung by Jason in R. Brough, 'Medea', i. 2. 98-117 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', i. 2. 98-105 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 21.

conditions of the war by Russell, the correspondent of the *Times* in Crimea.<sup>54</sup> Through the character of Jason, Brough seems to deconstruct the celebratory rhetoric of the Crimean War undermining the principles of Muscular Christianity that Kingsley had already identified in *Brave Words*. Firstly, Jason's spiritual strength is denied by the perverse nature of his military mission: Jason is fighting the giant to secure the benevolence of Creon, the father of the woman he wants to marry despite being already wedded to Medea. Secondly, Jason's physical strength is erased insofar as the heroic body of the male is, in reality, the body of a woman who pretends to be fit, muscular, and ready for war.

Jason is not the only hero of antiquity whose muscular heroism was undermined through cross-dressing. Talfourd's *Atalanta; or, the Three Golden Apples*, staged at the Haymarket Theatre on the 13 April 1857, features a cross-dressed male protagonist, who may be read as humorously undermining the principles of Muscular Christianity, as they were being developed and adopted for the education of mid-Victorian boys in public schools. The burlesque humorously rewrites Atalanta's legend as narrated in Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Atalanta decides not to marry any of her suitors, because an oracle she consulted foresaw that the choice of a husband would have ruined her. To preserve her unmarried status, Atalanta devises a trick: she will marry the man who runs faster than her. Hippomenes, captured by the woman's beauty, decides to run against Atalanta and prays Venus to help him win both the race and the woman's heart. The goddess gives Hippomenes some golden apples to be dropped along the race. Atalanta, whose attention is caught by the shiny surface of the golden apples, stops to pick them up and loses the race against Hippomenes, whom she finally marries.<sup>55</sup>

Hippomenes, whose role was performed cross-dressed by Ellen Ternan, is described as a young gentleman passionate about sports. According to the stage direction that describes the setting of Scene II, the walls of Hippomenes' library are decorated with sporting pictures and fencing foils. Hippomenes lists, among his accomplishments, a full scholarship in the fields of riding, wrestling, fencing, and running.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>54</sup> According to Richardson, Jason's song 'made the Crimean connection inescapable'. He observes that the connection is sustained by Jason's costume, which was 'as close as the (rather elastic) conventions of classical burlesque allowed to that of a British redcoat'. See Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, p. 118. Brough's satirical depiction of the Crimean War will be expanded in *The Siege of Troy* (1858). Rachel B. Davies supports this claim by focussing specifically on a burlesque character reminiscent of William Russell. See Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, pp. 258-259.

<sup>55</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Frank Justus Miller, revised edn by G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), x. 560-739.

<sup>56</sup> Frank Talfourd, *Atalanta; or, The Three Golden Apples* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1857), p. 10. For the description of Hippomenes' library and his entrance on the burlesque stage see Talfourd's *Atalanta*, p. 9.

Hippomenes is said to have received a privileged education. The hero's mother, Queen Merope of Scyros, entrusts the upbringing of her son to a private tutor, the Paidagogos. In his company, Hippomenes recalls having enjoyed the works of Livy, Homer, Ovid, and Hesiod, thus implying an ability to read both Greek and Latin.

The regular practice of sports and a solid grounding in the classics were the two pillars that sustained British education in the second half of the nineteenth century. From the 1830s onwards, sports were introduced in public schools and universities as tools to discipline boys and young men. The pioneering work of Thomas Arnold at Rugby matched the emphasis placed on Christian values, communicated through daily sermons, alongside physical activities. From Arnold's perspective, sports served several goals: they implemented leadership skills, encouraged teamwork, and drained dangerous energies – especially sexual – from the bodies of the students. Moreover, the aesthetic cult of the body and sporting competitions were seen as reflecting the principles of Greek and Roman culture lying at the core of schools' academic curricula.<sup>57</sup> The association of Christian values with sporting activities was cemented in the late fifties with the birth of the doctrine of Muscular Christianity: through their writings, Charles Kingsley, Thomas Hughes and others, such as J. M. Ludlow and F. D. Maurice, emphasised the importance of the harmony between bodily and mental strength.<sup>58</sup> Hughes fictionalised and commented on Arnold's educational system in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, one of the novels regarded as containing the principles of Muscular Christianity and published only two weeks after the premiere of *Atalanta*.<sup>59</sup>

Talfourd arguably experienced the pressures exercised on students to foster their intellectual and physical development whilst attending Eton and the University of Oxford. Likewise, he supposedly witnessed the birth and diffusion of Muscular Christianity principles in the years of his activity for the London stage, since the tag 'Muscular Christianity' was both created and debated by the press between February and March 1857. Hence, by staging the educational path followed by Hippomenes, he would have satirised and implicitly contested its efficacy in building the character of young men by nourishing in parallel their minds and bodies. The failure of Hippomenes' educational path may have been visually encapsulated by Ternan's performance, as she embodies his lack of muscular fitness. Firstly, the physical prowess that Hippomenes theoretically

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<sup>57</sup> Nancy F. Anderson, *The Sporting Life: Victorian Sports and Games* (Oxford: Praeger, 2010), pp. 48-51.

<sup>58</sup> For a definition of the basic principle of Muscular Christianity see D. Hall, 'Muscular Christianity', pp. 7-8.

<sup>59</sup> For the publication date of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* see 'Multiple Classified ads.', *Morning Post*, 29 April 1857, p. 8.

possesses seems to be drastically limited in practice. In a scene that parodies *Romeo and Juliet*'s balcony scene, Ternan tries to climb up a wall but falls down onto broken glass. Likewise, when Hippomenes is advised by Cupid to steal some golden apples growing from a tree, he admits 'I'm no climber – I'm quite sure to slip'.<sup>60</sup> Finally, Hippomenes fails to prove his physical strength in the race against Atalanta: rather than displaying his ability, Hippomenes tricks Atalanta, dropping the golden apples that elicit her curiosity and delay her run. Ultimately, Hippomenes appears to deny the possession of any moral virtue, insofar as he relies on deception to win a race he should have won with physical skills. Thus, Hippomenes arguably parodies the principles of Muscular Christianity.

Another classical burlesque which humorously undermines muscular heroism is Robert Brough's *The Siege of Troy*. The burlesque was staged in 1858 at the Lyceum Theatre and featured three cross-dressed epic heroes, namely Paris, Achilles, and Hector. In her comprehensive study of epic burlesques, Davies highlights that Brough's *Siege of Troy* was a spectacularly ambitious piece, as it combined a parodic rewriting of the *Iliad* with a comic reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, whilst alluding to the contemporary Crimean War. Specifically, Davies notes that the costumes worn by the burlesque characters imitate and expose the inadequacy of the uniforms worn by the British Army in the extremely cold climate of Crimea.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Justine McConnell acknowledges that Brough's *Siege of Troy* was an impressive production, featuring a long list of characters dressed in splendid costumes, which she believes exemplified Brough's anti-imperialistic and radical stance. According to McConnell, who overlooks the convention of happy endings in burlesques, the final resolution of Brough's piece emphasised the futility of the war.<sup>62</sup> After the revival of the dead, Greeks and Trojans appear together on the burlesque stage to ask for the favour of the public, regardless of their rivalries.

Neither Davies nor McConnell consider cross-dressing as meaningful in their analyses of Brough's *Siege of Troy*. Davies explicitly acknowledges that her study focuses solely on the burlesque script and on its press coverage, drastically neglecting the piece's performative dimension. Yet, the use of female-to-male cross-dressing has a crucial

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<sup>60</sup> Talfourd, *Atalanta*, p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> For general references to the Crimean War in Robert Brough's *Siege of Troy*, see Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, pp. 258-259. For more specific description of the costumes worn by the performers who acted in Brough's *Siege of Troy* see Robert Brough, 'Iliad; or, The Siege of Troy', in *Victorian Epic Burlesques*, pp. 135-218 (p. 218).

<sup>62</sup> Justine McConnell, 'Epic Parodies: Martial Extravaganzas on the Nineteenth-Century Stage', in *War As Spectacle: Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Display of Armed Conflict*, ed. by Anastasia Bakogianni and Valerie M. Hope (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 257-269 (pp. 263-266).

function in undermining the mid-Victorian martial masculinity stereotype. Firstly, Brough plays with the lack of heroism displayed by the character of Paris as performed by Miss Portman. The Trojan prince is described as possessing an exceptional ‘sense of beauty’<sup>63</sup>, which he aims at protecting from the dangers of the conflict. Instead of fighting Menelaus, Paris runs away helped by the goddess Venus. He is seen joining his family on stage ‘coolly fanning himself’.<sup>64</sup> Paris asks his wife to send some ‘clean white gloves’ to his dressing room, to be worn after having ‘whiten[ed] and deodoris[ed]’ his hands.<sup>65</sup> Then, he asks for a bath to be prepared and for ‘an uncorck’d flask of fragipanni’<sup>66</sup>, alluding to a perfume of red jasmine. Both Priam and Helen comment on Paris’ attitude: the former scorns him by addressing him as a ‘puppy effeminate’, while the latter almost regrets having left Menelaus for a ‘coxcomb so effeminate’.<sup>67</sup> Priam’s and Helen’s words resonate with the feminine appearance and attitude Portman displayed whilst acting as Paris.

A similar effect is achieved with the staging of Achilles, the invincible Greek warrior performed *en travestie* by Miss Talbot. Achilles appears on stage ‘fanning himself with a pocket handkerchief’ and ‘magnificently dressed in the style of a Greek guardsman’.<sup>68</sup> His interest in fashion is emphasised throughout the burlesque: firstly, Achilles is said to have invented ‘the thin silk umbrella’<sup>69</sup>, then he is seen asking Ulysses if he likes the ‘new pith helmet’<sup>70</sup> he is wearing on stage. McConnell believes that, by foregrounding Achilles’ invention of the silk umbrella, Brough transforms the traditionally invincible warrior of the *Iliad* into a modern tailor. In her opinion, Achilles’ profession undermines his martial strength. Indeed, tailors were traditionally perceived as effeminate. In her study of eighteenth-century horsemanship entitled *Becoming Centaur*, Monica Mattfeld argues, for instance, that tailors emerged as figures of comedy whose effeminacy was often sent up as a lack of chivalrous masculinity in the entertainments staged at Astley’s amphitheatre.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> R. Brough, ‘Siege of Troy’, p. 139 and Robert Brough, *The Siege of Troy* (Winchester: printed for the proprietor by Hugh Barclay, [1858(?)]), p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> R. Brough, ‘Siege of Troy’, p. 172 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 21.

<sup>65</sup> R. Brough, ‘Siege of Troy’, i. 4. 117 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 21.

<sup>66</sup> R. Brough, ‘Siege of Troy’, i. 4. 120 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 21.

<sup>67</sup> R. Brough, ‘Siege of Troy’, i. 4. 101, 121 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> R. Brough, ‘Siege of Troy’, p. 149 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> R. Brough, ‘Siege of Troy’, i. 1. 82 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> R. Brough, ‘Siege of Troy’, i. 5. 36 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 29.

<sup>71</sup> Monica Mattfeld, *Becoming Centaur: Eighteenth-Century Masculinity and English Horsemanship* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016), p. 187.



However, instead of exploring the consequences of Achilles' potential effeminacy, McConnell focuses on the social implications of his profession. She claims that Brough portrayed the character of the Greek hero as having a distinctively working-class background and foregrounded his anxious attempts at climbing up the social ladder.<sup>72</sup> McConnell notes that the warrior scolds his mother Thetis for employing slang expressions such as 'Shiver my Timbers', which he considers inappropriate to his station. More specifically, Achilles says:

ACHILLES: I wish you'd raise your style of conversation  
 More to the level of my earthly station.  
 Sea phrases may at home be all quite well;  
 But recollect I'm not an ocean swell.  
 It's hard a grown man, by the seaside stopping,  
 Cannot escape from the maternal Wapping,  
 But must a mother recognize whom no man  
 Can doubt for what she is – a bathing woman.<sup>73</sup>

McConnell argues that, with such words, Achilles 'berates her and laments his working-class roots, in terms that are in keeping with contemporary London, and a more poverty-stricken area of East London'.<sup>74</sup> Yet, McConnell ignores that, whilst being foregrounded as a working-class tailor, Achilles is simultaneously presented as the son of a wealthy goddess. In fact, Thetis offers money and jewels when her son asks for help. With her univocal interpretation of Brough's burlesque as a piece of social criticism, McConnell projects an idea of consistency which was alien to burlesque, a theatrical genre characterised by a doubleness which increased its comicality. The dialogue between Thetis and Achilles unravels:

ACHILLES: I want to serve out Agamemnon.  
 THETIS: His crime? (My own sea lawyer I'll employ –  
 A shark of practice keen.) To vex my boy  
 What has he dared?  
 ACHILLES: (*blubbing*) He – He ---  
 THETIS: Take, I *entreat*, heart.  
 ACHILLES: (*bursting into tears*) He called me out of names, and stole my sweetheart.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> McConnell, pp. 265-266.

<sup>73</sup> R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', I. 2. 86-94 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 16. Also quoted in McConnell, pp. 265-266.

<sup>74</sup> McConnell, p. 265.

<sup>75</sup> R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', I. 2. 111-115 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, pp. 16-17.

In this extract, Achilles emerges as a spoiled child asking his over-protective mother to solve his personal problems. In fact, the hero convinces Thetis to ask Zeus and the Olympian gods to favour the Greek army in the upcoming war. Such an interpretation acquires further significance if read alongside the fact that, in Brough's burlesque, Achilles is described as a 'swell'.<sup>76</sup> The character of Achilles in Brough's *Siege of Troy* perfectly exemplifies how classical burlesques caricatured the dandyish swell, a mid-Victorian social type which was described in the first chapter of this thesis as obsessed with status and aesthetic appearance. He exaggerates the hero's reliance on his mother's fortune and status, whilst highlighting his concern to appear fashionably dressed. Therefore, Achilles is not only construed as a working-class tailor as McConnell suggests, but he is also humorously presented as the spoiled son of a goddess. Brough's burlesque allows for a simultaneity of targets which works to radically undermine Achilles' traditional heroism. Cross-dressing plays a crucial role in exposing Achilles' lack of martial prowess, insofar as the appearance of Miss Talbot might have perfectly embodied and humorously emphasised both the ridiculous childlike attitude and the overstated – almost effeminate – passion for clothes that Brough attributed to his burlesque version of the Greek hero. As *Reynold's Newspaper* remarked, Achilles was foregrounded as an 'effeminate, bushy-whiskered swell'.<sup>77</sup>

The cross-dressed interpretations of ancient heroes analysed here have been framed as undermining the muscular models of masculinity which came to be perceived as normative at mid-nineteenth century. Yet, as previously noted, such cross-dressed performances also highlighted the body of young and attractive actresses so as to appeal to burlesque audiences. Nineteenth-century performance reviews often highlight the distinctively masculine perception of burlesque as a risqué form of spectacle, whereby the performances of cross-dressed actresses were erotically charged. For example, a reviewer writing for the *Morning Post* observed that 'Miss Fanny Ternan made a very graceful Orpheus'<sup>78</sup> in Brough's *Medea*. Likewise, commenting on Lemon's *Medea*, the *Era* remarked that 'the ladies, in the male attire of the "Corinthian Order", looked very well'.<sup>79</sup> A similar sexualising tone is adopted by a reviewer writing for the *Era*, who praised the 'pretty face and well-developed figure'<sup>80</sup> of Ellen Ternan, who made her debut

<sup>76</sup> Specifically, Achilles is described as 'the heaviest swell ever remembered on the Phrygian coast'. See R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', p. 138 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> 'THE CHRISTMAS AMUSEMENTS', *Reynold's Newspaper*, 2 January 1859, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> 'OLYMPIC THEATRE', *Morning Post*, 15 July 1856, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> 'THEATRES, &c.', *Era*, 13 July 1856, p. 11.

<sup>80</sup> 'THE EASTER AMUSEMENTS', *Era*, 19 April 1857, p. 10.

in London theatres acting as Hippomenes in Talfourd's *Atalanta*. The *Morning Chronicle*, commenting on Brough's *Siege of Troy*, equally complimented the 'beauteous portliness of Miss Talbot' as Achilles and the 'elegance of style, dress and appearance'<sup>81</sup> of Miss Portman as Paris.

As Davis claims, movements and costumes contributed to sexualising further actresses' bodies.<sup>82</sup> In Brough's *Medea*, Jason wore a tunic, a toga, and fleshings, which emphasised St George's legs.<sup>83</sup> In Talfourd's *Atalanta*, the dresses worn by the female performers are described as 'classical and becoming'.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, when performing in breeches, actresses were allowed to move freely, whilst showing their bodies on stage. For example, the race between *Atalanta* and Hippomenes, which according to the *Daily News* was 'the grand feature of the piece'<sup>85</sup>, saw two female performers, Ternan and Oliver, running and showing their legs on the Haymarket stage. Similarly, in Brough's *Siege of Troy*, the cross-dressed Achilles enters on stage dressed 'in the style of a Greek guardsman' which, according to Davies, is characterised by a wide sleeved shirt, a tunic, a kilt, and stockings, which showed the actress' legs.<sup>86</sup> In Scene V of Brough's burlesque, Achilles changes his clothes and wears a pair of pegtop trousers. Cut wide at the hips and narrow at the ankles, pegtop trousers reflected the fashion of the late 1850s.<sup>87</sup> According to a stage direction, whilst asking Ulysses if he likes his trousers, Achilles opens their pockets. Such a gesture simultaneously emphasises the humorous anachronism generated by the clothes worn by the ancient hero and possibly draws the spectators' attention onto the lower limbs of the female performer.

The combination of sexualising male costumes and movements arguably foregrounded cross-dressed actresses as objects of sexual desire. Yet, describing female-to-male cross-dressed performances as mere titillating spectacles is perhaps overly superficial. In fact, as previously argued, mid-Victorian female burlesque performers were highly skilled workers, who developed a distinct set of abilities and sometimes – perhaps knowingly – specialised in cross-dressed roles. For instance, St George's performance as Jason in Brough's *Medea* in 1856 was not her first cross-dressed

<sup>81</sup> 'HOLIDAY AMUSEMENTS', *Morning Chronicle*, 28 December 1858, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> For a broader discussion on the importance of costumes see T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, pp. 108-115.

<sup>83</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', p. 140 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. iv.

<sup>84</sup> 'EASTER MONDAY ENTERTAINMENTS', *Daily News*, 14 April 1857, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', pp. 149, 218 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> 'pegtop, n.', *OED Online* <<https://0-www-oed-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/139776?redirectedFrom=pegtop>> [accessed 22 July 2021]. See also R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', i. 5. 38.

performance on the burlesque stage. She had already acted as the male protagonists of Planché's fairy extravaganzas *The Yellow Dwarf* (1854) and *The Discreet Princess* (1855), next to the low comedian Frederick Robson. In 1858, she also performed as Cupid in Brough's *Siege of Troy*. Burnand refers to St George as 'the [prince] of burlesque and extravaganza'<sup>88</sup> *par excellence*. When reviewing her performance as Jason, a journalist writing for the *Morning Post* considered her interpretation 'worthy of the name she bears'.<sup>89</sup>

Mary Anne Keeley, who performed the role of Hector in Brough's *Siege of Troy*, also made a name for herself acting cross-dressed. Early in her career, she performed the roles of androgynous boys such as Jack Sheppard, in an 1839 adaptation of Ainsworth's novel for the Adelphi Theatre, and Smike, in a stage version of Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*.<sup>90</sup> When she acted as Hector in the *Siege of Troy*, Keeley was fifty-three years old. Not only was she already known by the Lyceum audiences as a successful performer of breeches roles, but she may also have been remembered by regular playgoers as the venue's manageress from 1844 to 1847.<sup>91</sup> The press of the time celebrated Keeley's triumphant appearance as Hector on the Lyceum stage. Several newspapers commented on her spectacular entrance 'in a war chariot drawn by three ponies', which was 'greeted with every demonstration of pleasure'.<sup>92</sup> Keeley's performance humorously domesticated Hector's traditional predilection for horses by transforming him in a Rarey showman. The actress reportedly engaged in a 'hippodromean' spectacle in which she mimicked the gestures of John Rarey, a nineteenth-century horse-tamer, and which 'elicited loud laughter'.<sup>93</sup>

Other journalists remarked on Keeley's 'verve and intelligence'<sup>94</sup> in burlesquing the martial masculinity stereotype as embodied by Hector, overemphasising his warlike personality. For instance, as soon as he enters on stage Hector rapidly throws away his weapons to get ready for the upcoming battle, and abruptly commands the clearance of Troy's ramparts saying:

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<sup>88</sup> Burnand, *The "A.D.C."*, p. 114.

<sup>89</sup> 'OLYMPIC THEATRE', *Morning Post*, 15 July 1856, p. 5.

<sup>90</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 133. In the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Keeley's interpretation of Jack Sheppard and Smike are considered 'the greatest successes of her career'. See 'Keeley [née Goward], Mary Anne (1805–1899), actress', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://0-www-oxforddnb-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-15240>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

<sup>91</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 174.

<sup>92</sup> 'CHRISTMAS AMUSEMENTS', *Daily News*, 28 December 1858, p. 5.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> 'HOLIDAY AMUSEMENTS', *Morning Chronicle*, 28 December 1858, p. 6.

HECTOR: Quick! A new spear, sword, shield and helmet – fly!  
I broke this lath on Agamemnon’s head; (*Throws hilt away*)  
[..] Mother, be quiet! Vanish everyone,  
And leave these ramparts clear, lest I compel you:  
We’re going to have it hot, that I can tell you.<sup>95</sup>

According to the *Sunday Times*, Hector’s brusque and despotic manners, which were supposedly exaggerated by Keeley’s embodied performance, contributed to the caricatural transformation of the great epic hero into a ‘Trojan bully’<sup>96</sup> who intimidates the other characters of Brough’s burlesque.

Moreover, according to the *Morning Chronicle*, Keeley managed to burlesque Hector’s heroic ardour through the sudden transition between pathetic and comic moments. Such a shift is noticeable in the scene burlesquing Hector’s parting from Andromache. The dialogue unfolds as follows:

*Enter ANDROMACHE (R.), followed by a Nurse, with ASTYANAX in a pretty, classic-shaped perambulator,*

ANDROMACHE: (*embracing him*) My lord!  
HECTOR: Andromache!  
ANDROMACHE: You are not hurt?  
HECTOR: Not even scratch’d, my darling.  
ANDROMACHE: My desert  
Scarce merits this. This rapture after pain  
How many times may I enjoy again?  
HECTOR: Come, come!  
ANDROMACHE: The bitter watching on the walls;  
The agony, as ev’ry helmet falls;  
The straining eyes with sick’ning film oppress’d,  
Afraid to see that ’tis my Hector’s crest  
[...]  
HECTOR: What you! A soldier’s wife!  
Is this the way to nerve me to the strife,  
When Greeks and gods their blows have ’gainst struck now?  
Be a real Trojan - think yourself in Luck now,  
To own a husband who can fight for Troy.  
ANDROMACHE: (*presenting the child*) Doesn’t he grow?  
(*The child turns his head away*)  
HECTOR: He scarcely grows polite.  
What! Of his daddy can’t he bear the sight,  
ANDROMACHE: “The babe clung, crying, to his nurse’s breast,  
Scared by the dazzling plume and nodding crest”  
He doesn’t like that thing, nor I - remove it.  
HECTOR: Since such distinguish’d judges disapprove it,

<sup>95</sup> R. Brough, ‘Siege of Troy’, i. 4. 155-156, 161-163 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 22.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Christmas Entertainments at the Theatres’, *Sunday Times*, 2 January 1859, p. 6.

Behold the evil floor'd! (*Kisses the child, who this time submits*)  
 That's better, rather.  
 Now let me talk to you, sir, as a father.  
 Tread in my shoes. Of course, you 'll wait a bit;  
 At present they 're in use, and wouldn't fit;  
 But when they 're yours, to keep them clean, with care  
 Avoid the gutters, and walk on the square.  
 Unbribed to learn your duty make a rule;  
 That is, don't cry for halfpence going to school.  
 Defend the little uns'; bullies' threats despise;  
 But mind, hit no one under your own size.  
 Enjoy each holiday with cheerfulness,  
 But never get yourself into a mess.  
 To gain your class's head become a martyr,  
 Not for the prize of ribbon, star, or garter,  
 Or bust, slab, monument, which oft truth garbles  
 (I hope my boy will never cheat at marbles);  
 And when your task is done, your prayers are said,  
 Like a good boy go cheerfully to bed.  
 Follow rough Hector's rule – you'll need no other –  
 To make you grow a man – before your mother.<sup>97</sup>

The journalist writing for the *Morning Chronicle*, where this dialogue is quoted in full, observes a sudden change in tone corresponding to Hector's attempt to kiss Astyanax. Before that moment, Keeley incorporated some tragic pathos and 'poetic beauty'<sup>98</sup> in her performance of Hector, who was foregrounded as a loving husband comforting his wife. Then, when the child refuses Hector's kiss, Keeley emphasised the 'humorous quaintness'<sup>99</sup> of the lines she delivered, which include a series of anachronistically practical pieces of parental advice. The sudden transition between Hector's moving display of affection and his absurd concerns over Astyanax's education allowed the 'humour of the burlesque [to be] in full swing'.<sup>100</sup>

Lewes perfectly describes Keeley's mastery over both the comic and pathetic acting registers. In his opinion, Keeley was 'an excellent melodramatic actress'<sup>101</sup>, capable of moving her audiences to tears, as well as a gifted performer of farce and low comedy. In both pathetic and humorous roles, she was 'always closely imitative of daily life'.<sup>102</sup> Lewes considers Keeley as endowed with acumen and intelligence, allowing her to

<sup>97</sup> R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', I. 4. 187-239 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, pp. 23-24. It is meaningful to note that the lines 'The babe clung, crying, to his nurse's breast, / Scared by the dazzling plume and nodding crest' are taken from Alexander Pope's translation of the *Iliad*. See Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. by Alexander Pope and ed. by Steven Shankman (London: Penguin, 1996), vi. 596-597.

<sup>98</sup> 'HOLIDAY AMUSEMENTS', *Morning Chronicle*, 28 December 1858, p. 6.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Lewes, p. 85.

<sup>102</sup> Lewes, p. 87.

combine moments of pathos with hints of drollery in some of her roles, such as that of the maid of all work in *Furnished Apartments*, whose interpretation was ‘so grotesque, yet so real, that laughter ended in a sigh’.<sup>103</sup>

On the basis of the performance reviews and commentaries considered here, Keeley’s cross-dressed performance as Hector acquires a distinctive significance. It was not described as sexually charged like the cross-dressed performances of her younger colleagues and while this may be largely due to the relatively mature age of the actress, it is also possible that the treatment she received was connected to her status and capacities as a respected stage performer. Indeed, according to the *Era*, Keeley’s performance as Hector exemplified the ‘perfection of burlesque acting’, as ‘whenever she appeared on the stage she infused life, spirit, and gaiety in the scene’.<sup>104</sup>

Bratton considers Mary Anne Keeley’s cross-dressed performances of the 1830s as crucially influencing her professional development. Amongst other factors, such as her long-standing comic partnership with Robert Keeley, her early cross-dressed performances as Smike and Jack Sheppard contributed to establishing her reputation as one of most gifted comedians of her age, favoured by Queen Victoria.<sup>105</sup> Such an argument may be reinforced further if Keeley’s performance as Hector in Brough’s *Siege of Troy* is considered. This was the actress’ last role before her retirement in 1859 and, as the reviews quoted here demonstrate, it was received warmly by both spectators and critics. Keeley’s very appearance in a cross-dressed role at the end of her professional career seems to suggest that cross-dressed roles were much more than mere voyeuristic spectacles objectifying young women’s bodies.

### 3.3 Cross-Dressed Boys in Classical Burlesque

When acting cross-dressed, female burlesque performers were not always involved in the humorous undermining of muscular heroism. In some instances, they were also cast to perform the role of young boys. As illustrated in the previous section of this chapter, the slim bodies of actresses who played the roles of ancient heroes contributed to the humorous diminution of their muscular strength. Conversely, the young female performers who acted as boys might have achieved more realistic effects with their cross-dressed interpretations. Casting girls to perform boy roles was not a prerogative of burlesque. Increasingly, throughout the Regency and the Victorian period, young

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<sup>103</sup> Lewes, p. 84.

<sup>104</sup> ‘Christmas Entertainments at the Theatres’, *Sunday Times*, 2 January 1859, p. 6.

<sup>105</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, pp. 133-135.

actresses played the principal boys in comic theatrical genres such as pantomimes, extravaganzas, and burlesques, but also performed as boys in comedies, farces, melodramas, and Shakespeare's tragedies. Senelick observes that:

[a]s the male adolescent actor became de-glamourized during the Restoration, real teen-aged boys were viewed as hobbledehoys, awkward and vulgar. A woman could portray such a character with more grace and naturalness. In an era of increasing sentimentality these 'hobbledehoydens', as they might be termed, were better than boys at evoking pathos. More tears might be shed over a waif enacted by a woman (a victim by definition) than over a gangling youth, and the pathetic element was a satisfactory substitute for verisimilitude in male impersonation.<sup>106</sup>

The character of the endangered child, which recurred in many melodramatic plots, was invariably performed by an actress, who realistically embodied his helplessness. Similarly, in Shakespeare's plays, nineteenth-century actresses were cast to play the roles of boys, such as the two princes in the tower in *Richard III*.<sup>107</sup>

Marie Wilton may be considered one of the most famous burlesque actresses specialising in boy roles, as she was the principal burlesque boy of the Strand Theatre company until 1865. Among other roles, Wilton successfully acted cross-dressed as the male protagonist in Byron's *Aladdin; or, The Wonderful Scamp* (1861). Although she admittedly regretted 'being cast constantly as a comedy boy'<sup>108</sup>, Wilton, like some of her contemporaries, may have capitalised on her success as a cross-dressed burlesque actress. As Bratton argues, Wilton's acting career paved the way for her subsequent activity as a theatre manageress and for her success in roles such as Polly in Robertson's *Caste*.<sup>109</sup>

Wilton's best remembered performance as a burlesque boy is perhaps that of the 'saucy and amusing'<sup>110</sup> Pippo in Byron's burlesque *The Maid and the Magpie* (1859), which fascinated Dickens. He comments on Wilton's performance as such:

[w]hile it is astonishingly impudent (must be, or it couldn't be done at all), it is so stupendously like a boy, and unlike a woman, that is perfectly free from offence. I never

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<sup>106</sup> Senelick, p. 246.

<sup>107</sup> Senelick, p. 248.

<sup>108</sup> Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, p. 132.

<sup>109</sup> In *The Economics of the British Stage*, Davis considers Wilton's professional development as perfectly exemplifying the career of nineteenth-century 'wo-managers'. She highlights how, at the Prince of Wales's, Wilton 'had set up a company of economic principles of unprecedented elegance and efficiency' before the involvement of her husband, Squire Bancroft. As such, she challenged mid-Victorian normative expectations around womanhood. As a manageress – and subsequently, as a married woman – Wilton strove to 'demonstrate middle-class decorum', relinquishing cross-dressed burlesque roles and settling into 'more staid lines of business'. See T. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage*, pp. 276-290.

<sup>110</sup> Marie Bancroft, *Gleanings from On and Off the Stage* (London: Routledge, 1892), p. 55.



have seen such a thing. [...] She does an imitation of the dancing Christy Minstrels – wonderfully clever – which, in the audacity of its thorough-going, is surprising. A thing that you *can not* imagine a woman’s doing at all; and yet the manner, the appearance, the levity, the impulse, and spirits of it, are so exactly like a boy that you cannot think of anything like her sex in association with it.<sup>111</sup>

Dickens acknowledges Wilton’s astonishing skills in appropriating a boy’s attitude and stance. The actress embodied Pippo in a manner so convincing as to make Dickens forget that he was witnessing a cross-dressed performance. For this reason, Wilton’s interpretation is described as free from offence, even though it required some audacity. Such comment suggests an alternative reading of the female cross-dressed performer, undermining the assumption that sexual attraction is the basis of her appeal. On account of Dickens’ remark, Wilton’s cross-dressed performance as Pippo may be read along the lines of the framework developed by Bratton in ‘Mirroring Men’: as already noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Bratton believes that, when actresses impersonated boys on the Victorian stage, they complicated the very act of cross-dressing, since they resisted the straightforward binary which opposed and caricatured either men or women, embodying androgynous qualities. From her perspective, whilst some female performers flaunted their attractions performing cross-dressed, others played ‘a slender, diminutive boyishness with less obvious sexual responses in mind’.<sup>112</sup>

This section focuses on boy roles in classical burlesques, in order to evaluate whether the performances of cross-dressed boys allowed for the embodiment of androgynous qualities, as theorised by Bratton, and whether they elicited similar responses to that articulated by Dickens on the occasion of Wilton’s performance as Pippo. Before engaging in such an investigation, it is necessary to note there are not many boy roles in classical burlesque. Being chiefly concerned with the deeds of mythological heroes, classical burlesques generally engage in the humorous diminution of the muscular strength of such warriors. When classical burlesques do feature young men, they are often humorously recast as nineteenth-century swells. Hence, instead of being involved in the potentially realistic depiction of slender and diminutive boys as Bratton posits, classical burlesque actresses primarily engage in the parodic portrayal of swells. William Brough’s *Endymion* (St James’s Theatre, 1860), a humorous retelling of the myth of the boy who fell in love with the moon, perfectly exemplifies this point. In Brough’s burlesque, the

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<sup>111</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VIII, 722. Also quoted by Marie and Squire Bancroft, *Recollections*, p. 17.

<sup>112</sup> Bratton, ‘Mirroring Men’, p. 242.

role of Endymion was acted cross-dressed by a minor actress, Miss Taylor. Taylor's embodied performance may have contributed to humorously de-masculinise Endymion, with the intention of ridiculing the swell's fashionable lifestyle. Such a process is apparent in Scene II of Brough's burlesque, where Endymion and his friend Actaeon are seen entering a forest, equipped with hunting implements. Whilst Actaeon is determined to 'bring down a deer', Endymion says that he has neither experience nor interest in hunting, and he repeatedly complains about 'spoiling [his] clothes'.<sup>113</sup> Endymion's aversion to the pursuit of such manly pastimes is mirrored by his lack of experience in matters of love. He explains that 'men of fashion' like himself 'have long ago foresworn the tender passion', as '[they] can't afford it'.<sup>114</sup> More specifically, he states that he has no intention of finding a wife, as 'the sex who should be *dear*, becomes *expensive*'.<sup>115</sup> He would have to pay for a carriage, diamonds, 'dress and crinoline extensive', spending 'some hundred sterling, at the least'.<sup>116</sup> The pun constructed on the word 'dear' humorously emphasises Endymion's de-masculinisation: he has no intention of shooting any deer and, in parallel, he has no interest in courting women. Unable to understand Endymion's position, Actaeon asks 'Not care for shooting, man? – what's life without it? / All nature shoots. Say what's the earliest thing / Boys learn at school?'.<sup>117</sup> Actaeon, who is 'glad [he is] not a swell at any rate'<sup>118</sup> reveals that Endymion is *not* a true boy. In fact, Endymion might have even been effeminised by the embodied performance of Taylor. For example, Diana humorously refers to him as the 'sleeping beauty'<sup>119</sup>, comparing his looks to those of the female protagonist of the renowned fairy tale.

Hence, Endymion as acted by Taylor openly de-masculinises the stereotype of the mid-Victorian swell. Despite being described as 'the naughty boy who cried for the moon'<sup>120</sup>, the character of Endymion is not characterised by that gender ambiguity which Bratton attributes to some cross-dressed performances of boys. The comicality of Endymion's role in Brough's burlesque is founded upon a clear demarcation between the gender of the character and that of the performer: Taylor caricatured the youthful masculinity of Endymion by endowing him with her distinct feminine looks.

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<sup>113</sup> William Brough, *Endymion; or, The Naughty Boy Who Cried for the Moon* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1860), p. 12.

<sup>114</sup> W. Brough, *Endymion*, p. 13.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> W. Brough, *Endymion*, p. 12.

<sup>118</sup> W. Brough, *Endymion*, p. 13.

<sup>119</sup> W. Brough, *Endymion*, p. 20.

<sup>120</sup> This is the subtitle of Brough's burlesque.

The iconography of Cupid, the boy god of love, might have enabled classical burlesque actresses to engage in more ambiguous cross-dressed performances. In effect, Cupid is traditionally portrayed with ephebic traits that complicate the distinction between the female and male genders. For example, Correggio's *Venus with Mercury and Cupid*, bought by the National Gallery in 1834, depicts Cupid as a child resembling a cherub (Figure 13).<sup>121</sup>



Figure 13. Correggio, *Venus with Mercury and Cupid* ('The School of Love'), 1525, oil on canvas, 155.6 × 91.4 cm, National Gallery, London

<sup>121</sup> Monròs-Gaspar argues that Correggio's painting signals the pervasiveness of classical culture in an institution like the National Gallery. Monròs-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 3.

The same happens in William Etty's *Venus and Cupid* (1825-35), where the goddess is seen embracing a rosy-cheeked cherub gazing towards the observer (Figure 14).<sup>122</sup>

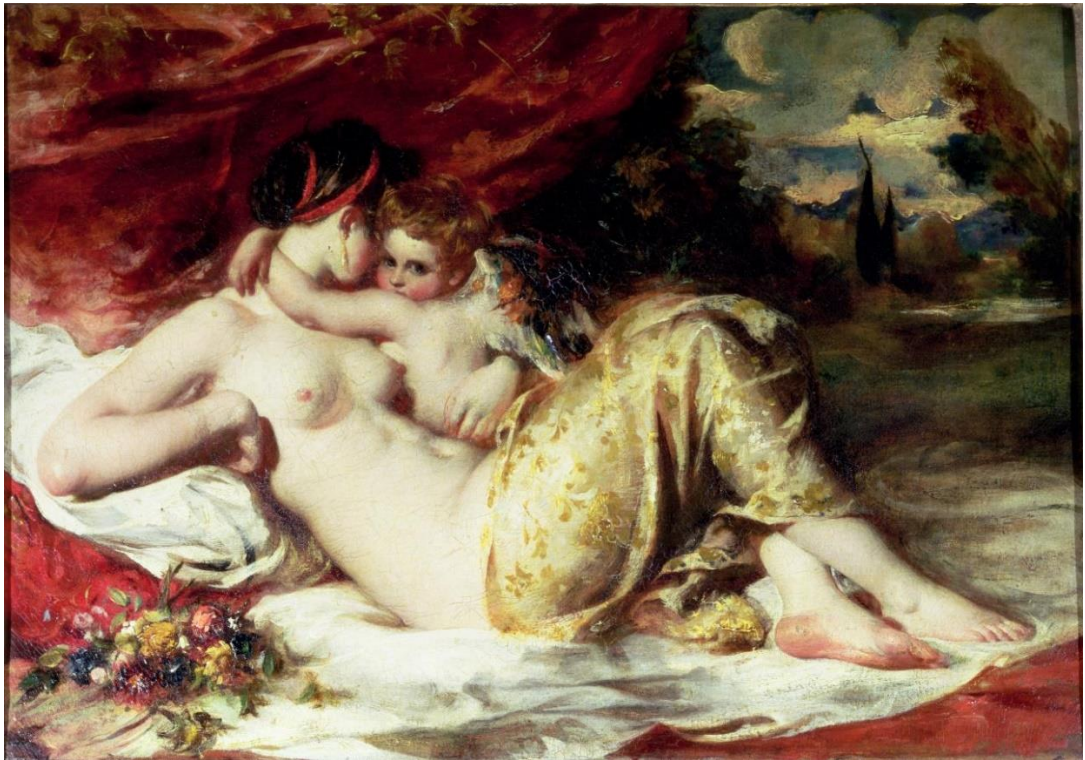


Figure 14. William Etty, *Venus and Cupid*, 1825-1835, oil on canvas, 31.7 x 44.4 cm, York Museums Trust, York

It is with this image in mind that the roles of Cupid in Talfourd's *Atalanta* and Brough's *Siege of Troy*, respectively performed by Wilton and St George, will be discussed.

In Talfourd's *Atalanta*, Cupid is described in the *Dramatis Personae* as a 'combination of "Errors" and "Arrows"'<sup>123</sup>, since he traditionally shoots humans with his bow and arrows to make them fall in love. In so doing, the young god commits a series of 'Errors' which recall his proverbial unruly nature. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, Cupid is described as follows in the words of Helena:

HELENA: Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,  
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.

<sup>122</sup> Erwin Panofsky traces the historical evolution of the image of Cupid from the origins until the Renaissance. He notes that 'the little winged boy armed with bow and arrow' was already pervasively represented in Hellenistic and Roman art. These characteristics survive in the Renaissance representations of the god, whose 'sex unchanged, shrank in size, was deprived of garments and thus developed into the popular *garzone* or *putto* [...]'. See Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes In the Art of the Renaissance* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1967), p. 95.

<sup>123</sup> Talfourd, *Atalanta*, p. iii.

Nor hath love's mind of any judgement taste;  
 Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste.  
 And therefore is love said to be a child  
 Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.<sup>124</sup>

The god's hastiness and mischievousness are mirrored by the actions of Puck in the same play, who has been regarded as an alter ego of Cupid, since he applies the juice of a magic flower to the eyes of the characters to make them fall in love. However, he confuses the people who are intended to be soulmates, thus complicating the plot of Shakespeare's comedy.<sup>125</sup> In the nineteenth century, Puck's role, like Cupid's, was often acted cross-dressed: in Vestris' production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Covent Garden in 1840, a girl (Miss Marshall) impersonated the little creature; likewise, in 1856, the version of Shakespeare's comedy staged by Charles Kean at the Princess's cast young Ellen Terry as Puck.<sup>126</sup> Hence, the eighteen-year-old Wilton performing as Cupid in Talfourd's *Atalanta* seems to follow in the footsteps of more or less young women impersonating men who interpreted mischievous supernatural beings engaged in the matchmaking game.

As soon as he enters on stage in the first scene of the burlesque, Cupid appears equipped with his traditional bow. Venus describes the god with some of the attributes applied to him in Shakespeare's comedy and quoted above: Cupid is a 'naughty boy', busy in orchestrating 'some new mischief', 'for the mere sake of teasing'.<sup>127</sup> However, unlike the Shakespearian precedent, Cupid is not conceived as blind: the god is said to have removed the bandage covering his eyes, thus being able to deliberately pair the most (un)suitable love partners.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, the nuisance he causes is more similar to that provoked by the character of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: firstly, Cupid shoots Hippomenes with his magic arrows and chooses the chaste Atalanta as his partner;

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<sup>124</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. by Peter Holland (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), I. 1. 234-239.

<sup>125</sup> Holland believes that Puck's 'dramatic function aligns him closely with Cupid in the play's mythological schema [...]'. See Peter Holland, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, pp. 1-118 (p. 41).

<sup>126</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Vestris' production see Trevor Griffiths, 'A Neglected Pioneer Production: Madame Vestris' *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Covent Garden, 1840', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 30 (1979), 386-396.

<sup>127</sup> Talfourd, *Atalanta*, p. 7.

<sup>128</sup> Venus observes that Cupid 'used to wing his shafts at random' but now he 'removes the bandage, each day more bold'. See Talfourd, *Atalanta*, p. 7. Cupid's blindness is central to Panofski's investigation: in his study, he outlines how in his ancient portraits Cupid was not conceived as blind. The bandage covering the god's eyes was introduced instead during the Middle Ages and subsequently interpreted as a symbol of the fortuity of love. See Panofski, pp. 105-108.

secondly, he shoots the Paidagogos, so that he falls in love with Atalanta too.<sup>129</sup> Venus underlines the boldness of Cupid's choices and, consequently, she recognises the god's absolute control over the laws of love and attraction. The version of Atalanta's myth narrated by Ovid in *Metamorphoses X* does not feature the presence of Cupid.<sup>130</sup> Hence, Talfourd seems to have introduced a new figure into the burlesque, who is in charge of orchestrating the actions and dynamics of attraction among the other characters.

In the script of Talfourd's burlesque, several elements might be interpreted as implying the naturalness with which Wilton embodied Cupid's boyishness. The god is introduced as Hippomenes' male *confidante*: he diagnoses the hero's amorous sufferings and listens to his complaints; he escorts Hippomenes to the masked ball, supporting his encounter with the guests who constitute the burlesque 'society'; he encourages him to actively pursue Atalanta, infusing moral strength into the hero who is increasingly driven to desperation. Their relationship is visually constructed as distinctively masculine through a series of gestures: for example, right after having introduced himself, Cupid shakes Hippomenes' hand.<sup>131</sup> In Talfourd's version of the classical legend, Cupid is also responsible for devising the ruse of the golden apples to be dropped along the race against Atalanta.<sup>132</sup> Cupid leads Hippomenes' into the Orchard of King Schoeneus, the father of Atalanta, where an 'apple tree bearing the Three Golden Pippins'<sup>133</sup> is situated. According to a stage direction, entrance to the King's Garden is forbidden. However, Cupid persuades Hippomenes to steal the golden apples from the tree. The two characters, who are seen climbing up a tree on stage, are ironically diminished and transformed into petty thieves. Simultaneously, their search for the golden apples is humorously construed as an adventurous experience cementing their companionship. The friendship between Cupid and Hippomenes grows throughout the burlesque: if, at the beginning, Hippomenes refers

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<sup>129</sup> Cupid reports having shot Hippomenes in the first scene of the burlesque, while Cupid touches the Paidagogos 'in the hollow of the left arm' with his arrow in Scene II. See Talfourd, *Atalanta*, pp. 7, 16. The similarity between Cupid's dramatic role in Talfourd's burlesque and that of Puck in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream* is also noted by a reviewer writing for the *Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion*, where it is argued that 'the touch of [Wilton's] silver arrow [was] doing as much mischief as the juice of Titania's flower'. See 'AMUSEMENTS OF THE MONTH', *The Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion, Music and Romance*, 1 May 1857, p. 274. To my knowledge, there is no specific evidence supporting the fact that Wilton's Cupid might have specifically parodied Terry's Puck. However, since Kean's production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* was staged only one year before *Atalanta*, it is possible that Talfourd altered the ancient legend to accommodate the presence of a figure reminiscent of Shakespeare's fairy.

<sup>130</sup> In the classical source, Hippomenes is portrayed as falling in love with Atalanta as soon as he sees her beautiful body. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, x. 578-579.

<sup>131</sup> Cupid also feels Hippomenes' pulse to check his heartbeat, adopting the stance of a doctor. Talfourd, *Atalanta*, p. 12.

<sup>132</sup> In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Venus was responsible for devising the ruse of the golden apples, which she directly picked from a sacred tree on the island of Cyprus. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, x. 644-651.

<sup>133</sup> Talfourd, *Atalanta*, p. 31.



to Cupid as ‘little chap’<sup>134</sup> or ‘weak child’<sup>135</sup> in a desperate effort to diminish and resist his power, after the theft of the golden apples, the hero describes the god as a ‘gentlem[a]n with wings’<sup>136</sup>, placing him on equal footing with the other male characters of the burlesque.

The press of the time commented on Wilton’s performance as Cupid employing ambiguous terms which praised the piquancy and audacity of the actress. The adjectives ‘piquante’, ‘saucy’, ‘arch’, and ‘smart’<sup>137</sup> are the most frequently used across the newspapers and magazines which commented on Talfourd’s *Atalanta*. On the one hand, with such comments, the reviewers might have hinted at the fascinating display of Wilton’s body, which might have been perceived as sexualised: the short robe she wore as a costume showed her legs dancing across the burlesque stage (Figure 15). The *Era*, for instance, noted that Wilton was endowed with a ‘pleasant look and saucy audacity’.<sup>138</sup>



Figure 15. ‘Haymarket Theatre’, *Illustrated London News*, 16 May 1857, p. 476

<sup>134</sup> Talfourd, *Atalanta*, p. 11.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Hippomenes addressed Cupid with this label while the two are running away from the King’s Orchard after having stolen the golden apples. See Talfourd, *Atalanta*, p. 35.

<sup>137</sup> The *Examiner* describes Wilton’s performance as ‘arch and piquante’. See ‘THE THEATRICAL AND MUSICAL EXAMINER’, *Examiner*, 18 April 1857, p. 246. Similarly, according to a reviewer writing for the *Times*, Wilton had become ‘smarter than ever’ to impersonate Cupid. See ‘Easter Amusements, &c.’, *Times*, 14 April 1857, p. 10. The ambiguity of the terminology employed to describe Wilton’s performance is perfectly exemplified by the meaning of the adjective ‘smart’, which has a double connotation: on the one hand, it means ‘lively, active; prompt’; on the other, it corresponds to ‘impudent, cheeky’. See ‘smart, adj.’, *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/182448](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/182448)> [accessed 24 March 2020].

<sup>138</sup> ‘THE EASTER AMUSEMENTS’, *Era*, 19 April 1857, p. 10.

On the other hand, the smartness and audacity attributed to Wilton by the mid-Victorian press may be read alongside the inoffensive impudence which, according to Dickens, characterised her performance as Pippo in *The Maid and The Magpie*. Indeed, according to *Bell's Life in London*, Wilton 'looked the boy-god to life' performing with 'archness and spirit'.<sup>139</sup> Such qualities might have alluded to a more ambiguous form of fascination which Wilton exercised on the audiences of Talfourd's burlesque, which was possibly less reliant on the sexualised display of her feminine attractions and more connected to her extraordinarily convincing embodiment of Cupid's boyishness.

St George's performance as Cupid in Brough's *Siege of Troy* may be interpreted in a similar way. In the script of Brough's burlesque, Cupid's boyish delight in disguise is foregrounded when he first appears on stage 'wheeling a knife-grinding machine, with a tinker's apron, and a patch over his eye'.<sup>140</sup> Cupid's transformation into a Victorian tinker and knife grinder, who offers to mend broken hearts as if they were broken pans, trivialises and humorously diminishes his traditional role as the god of love, whilst foregrounding his masculinity. Male street vendors, such as tinkers and knife grinders, populated nineteenth-century London as observed, for instance, by Dickens and Mayhew.<sup>141</sup> Similarly, Cupid's boyishness is emphasised by his direct participation in the Trojan war: as a 'naughty boy'<sup>142</sup>, Cupid ignores the advice of his mother Venus and fights against the Greek army. He is seen entering on stage 'strutting'<sup>143</sup> with an affected air of dignity and importance, accompanied by Handel's song *See the Conquering Hero Comes*, and 'stab[bing] the Greeks one after another'.<sup>144</sup>

The press of the time widely appreciated St George's vivacity, employing a terminology which is very similar to that used to describe Wilton's performance as Cupid in Talfourd's *Atalanta*. For example, according to the *Morning Chronicle*, St George was 'bright eyed and sweet singing'<sup>145</sup>; the *Sunday Times* described her as 'very fascinating'<sup>146</sup>; and the *Era* remarked that she acted with 'vivacity and effect'.<sup>147</sup> Such

<sup>139</sup> 'EASTER AMUSEMENTS', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 19 April 1857, p. 3.

<sup>140</sup> R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', p. 162 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 14.

<sup>141</sup> See, for example, the character of the tinker in Charles Dickens, *Tom Tiddler's Ground* (New York: Carleton Publisher, 1861) and Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: The London Street-folk* (London: Griffin, Bohn & co., 1861).

<sup>142</sup> R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', I. 4. 294 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 25.

<sup>143</sup> R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', p. 187 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 29.

<sup>144</sup> R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', p. 187 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 29.

<sup>145</sup> 'HOLIDAY AMUSEMENTS', *Morning Chronicle*, 28 December 1858, p. 6

<sup>146</sup> 'Christmas Entertainments at the Theatres', *Sunday Times*, 2 January 1859, p. 6.

<sup>147</sup> 'CHRISTMAS', *Era*, 2 January 1859, p. 11.



remarks might be connected to both the sexualised display of St George's body and to the impudence required to embody Cupid's boyishness in a convincing way.

As implied by the scripts of Talfourd's and Brough's burlesques, Wilton and St George might have *initiated* an exploration of the androgynous when acting as Cupid: both actresses might have realistically embodied the boyishness of the god whilst shaking hands, climbing up trees, dressing up as street vendors, and engaging in fights. However, their performances might have still been characterised by a slightly risqué component. Such a hypothesis is reinforced if Ellen Terry's meditation on her own performance as Cupid in Brough's burlesque *Endymion*, which was revived in Bristol in 1862, is taken into account. Whilst embodying the mischievousness of the boy god, Terry admittedly relied, up to a certain extent, on her feminine charms to play Cupid. She recalls having entered on stage as a 'blind old woman', taken off her cloak, and shown a tunic which 'in those days was considered too scanty to be quite nice'.<sup>148</sup> Ultimately, the ambiguity with which the cross-dressed performances of Cupid analysed here were received prevents the formulation of definitive hypotheses. As Bratton argues, it is only with the male impersonations of late nineteenth century that renowned music hall female performers, who convincingly learned how to smoke and move while wearing gentlemen's clothes, more explicitly explored the potential of performing androgynous boys.<sup>149</sup>

### Conclusion

This chapter has disputed classical scholars' descriptions of cross-dressing as a mere conventional practice characterising classical burlesque performances. In fact, as demonstrated above, cross-dressing has emerged as heavily impacting on the performance of gender as staged by classical burlesques. More specifically, male-to-female cross-dressing endows female characters with a caricatural appearance: strong-minded women and 'fast' ladies such as Medea and Joan of Arc, played by male low comedians such as Robson and Thorne, were humorously masculinised. In this respect, the parodic representation of strong-minded and 'fast' women on the classical burlesque stage resembles that of the satirical press of the time: as argued in Chapter 1, in *Punch* and *Fun*, strong-minded and 'fast' women were portrayed with heavily masculinised features and wearing male clothes so as to ridicule their masculine habits and behaviours. Thus, far from being acted naturalistically as classical scholars suggest, the roles of

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<sup>148</sup> Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life* (Hutchinson: London, 1908), pp. 44-45.

<sup>149</sup> Bratton, 'Mirroring Men', pp. 245-248.

strong-minded and 'fast' ladies as played by cross-dressed actors arguably had a parodic intent. In parallel, this chapter claims that female-to-male cross-dressing contributes to etherealising martial masculinity which, with the diffusion of the ideology of Muscular Christianity, came to be perceived as normative in the mid-nineteenth century: muscular heroes such as Jason, Hippomenes, Paris, and Achilles were transformed into effeminate dandies and swells and therefore ridiculed for their lack of muscular strength and moral rectitude. Furthermore, this chapter has discussed the cross-dressed performance of Mary Anne Keeley as Hector in Brough's *Siege of Troy*. The actress, who was relatively older than her cross-dressed colleagues, caricatured Hector's heroism relying on her comic acting skills.

Finally, this chapter has investigated cross-dressed performances of boys in classical burlesques. In most instances, female-to-male cross-dressing enabled a humorous critique of the swell's fashionable lifestyle. Some cross-dressed boy roles of classical burlesque, such as that of Cupid acted by Wilton and St George, might have been endowed with androgynous qualities. However, the ways in which such performances were received by the press of the time are characterised by an ambiguity which might account for both a titillating component and for an inoffensive form of impudence which is not connected to the sexualisation of the actresses' bodies.

Overall, classical burlesque has widely emerged as exploiting the humorous potential of cross-dressing as a practice. The gender of the performer, together with his/her acting skills and style, contributes to caricature alternatively female or male characters, who are respectively masculinised and feminised. Accordingly, cross-dressing prevents the naturalistic staging of burlesque characters as argued for by classical scholars and inevitably contributes to the setting of a distinctively comic tone to the performance of gendered characters. The following chapter will evaluate how the comicality of classical burlesque performances is further enhanced by the linguistic conventions of the genre.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE LANGUAGE OF BURLESQUE

#### Introduction

In the previous chapters, the comic impact of classical burlesque language on performances has been passingly acknowledged. Rhyming couplets, puns, slang, and topical references have been considered as conferring a comic status on burlesque scenes and conversations which parody the dramatic intensity of their sources. This chapter engages in a more systematic analysis of classical burlesque language, starting from the definition of the humorous processes it enables. Firstly, the language of classical burlesque *domesticates* the characters featured in the sources it rewrites and *localizes* the settings in which they move. Scholars responsible for the shift from a teleological to a more organic history of nineteenth-century theatre, such as Booth and Schoch, describe domestication as a process that aims at bringing past scenes or antique characters closer to nineteenth-century reality.<sup>1</sup> Thus, classical heroes anachronistically appropriate nineteenth-century slang and topical language. In parallel, classical settings, such as the dwelling places of heroes or the ancient temples of gods, are localized in nineteenth-century London and are transformed into spaces devoted to *divertissement* and leisure.

Secondly, the protagonists of classical burlesques are subject to the process of *diminution*, meaning a reduction in their status and importance. As Schoch observes, burlesque matter is transposed ‘from “high” to “low”’<sup>2</sup> in different ways: most of all, it happens through the use of rhyming couplets, puns, slang and, occasionally, vulgar language; sometimes, it involves the concrete transformation of noble characters such as Greek gods or heroes into representatives of humbler social classes. By diminishing the nobility of their sources, burlesque authors aim at creating humorous contrasts: for example, the grandeur of the tasks that burlesque heroes are asked to accomplish contrasts with their humble station in society and with their simple way of describing it.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Booth, some burlesque characters are thoroughly transformed into their modern equivalents, as happens in Buckingham’s *Virginius* (1859), a burlesque of Sheridan Knowles’ tragedy, where the villain Appius is actualised into the Lord Mayor of London. In other cases, characters retain their antiquity while sporadically adopting modern habits or referring to the nineteenth-century historical and cultural context. For example, in Buckingham’s other historical burlesque *William Tell* (1857), Tell’s son reads Chartist’s pamphlets, thus being absorbed into the network of the 1840s political agitators. See Booth, *Prefaces*, p. 184. Similarly, Schoch lists as one of the key features of burlesque the transportation of characters and events from past to present, their speeches and actions being interspersed with topical references to the nineteenth-century cultural substratum. Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 12, 124.

<sup>2</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 12.

Although focussing largely on written scripts, classical scholars have generally neglected the broader implications of the language of classical burlesque. Whilst Macintosh and Richardson totally ignore the issue of classical burlesque language, Hall acknowledges that classical burlesques were characterised by doggerel rhyming verse, incessant puns, and topical allusions.<sup>3</sup> However, when analysing the burlesque representations of *Medea* in ‘Medea and British Legislation Before the First World War’, she fails to incorporate these elements into her discussion.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Monròs-Gaspar lists the essential features of classical burlesque language, but she does not consider them as impacting heavily on the ‘intellectual criticism’ favoured by such plays and which, in her opinion, goes ‘beyond topical allusions and recurrent rhymes’.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, this chapter argues that the distinctive features – namely rhyming couplets, slang, puns, and topical allusions – and effects – domestication, localisation, and diminution – of classical burlesque language play a crucial role in determining the performances’ degree of comicality. As the following analyses will show, the humour of burlesque language essentially undermines the argument developed by classical scholars who framed classical burlesques as potential sources of social criticism. The provisional nature of burlesque scripts theorised by Schoch, according to which actors either added, changed, or eliminated puns and topical allusions in performance, prevents the formulation of any definitive claims on classical burlesque language.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the rhymes, puns, slang, and topical allusions employed in classical burlesques still emerge as essentially contributing to the comic atmosphere of performances, complementing the humorous consequences enabled by performers’ acting styles and cross-dressing.

Furthermore, this chapter will consider the language of burlesque, especially slang terms and topical allusions, as affecting the performance of gendered identities. Specifically, the use of ‘fast’ slang terms and the recurrent references to a ‘fast’ lifestyle enabled the transformation of ancient characters into mid-Victorian ‘fast’ men and

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<sup>3</sup> E. Hall, ‘Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre’, p. 346. Macintosh does not discuss the implication of language in the *Medea* burlesques. See Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, pp. 86-98. Likewise, Richardson’s analysis of Brough’s *Medea* does not include any reference to the language of Brough’s burlesque. See Richardson, *Classical Victorians*, pp. 117-124.

<sup>4</sup> In the article here mentioned, Hall does neither discuss puns, nor slang terms, nor rhyming couplets. See E. Hall, ‘Medea and British Legislation Before the First World War’, pp. 54-61.

<sup>5</sup> Monròs-Gaspar lists the essential features of burlesques both in Monròs-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, p. 9 and in Monròs-Gaspar, ‘Classical Myths on the Victorian Popular Stage: The Figure of Cassandra’, p. 39, while her consideration of the impact of burlesque language is retrievable from the latter source, p. 218.

<sup>6</sup> According to Schoch ‘burlesque texts offered themselves not as inviolable scripts meant to be spoken upon the stage, but as opportunities for endless revisions, deletions, substitutions and additions’. Hence, ‘when we read a burlesque text, even in manuscript, we are not reading anything approximating what was said, heard or enacted in different theatrical stagings of that text’. See Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 49.

women. This chapter argues that the staging of ‘fast’ characters allows for a slightly risqué element in classical burlesque performances, especially when actresses performing cross-dressed appropriate the habits and jargon of ‘fast’ young men and also when they caricature the behaviour of the ‘fast’ young women who claimed independence in the mid-nineteenth century. Finally, and perhaps crucially, the analyses provided by this chapter will highlight how the ‘fast’ language of classical burlesques – and, accordingly, of their performances – humorously sent up middle-class conventions without seriously endorsing their political subversion: despite satirising the middle-class expectations around normative gender roles with an insouciant tone, classical burlesque did not constructively propose a seriously viable alternative to the status quo.

#### 4.1 Rhymes and Puns

Despite their lack of systematic attention to classical burlesque language, classical scholars have unanimously underlined the humour enabled by the linguistic confusion displayed by Brough’s *Medea* in the monologue where she meditates on the preferred method for her revenge against Jason. After he has invited *Medea* to leave Corinth and marry anyone she pleases, for their ‘separation equals a divorce’<sup>7</sup>, *Medea* is left on stage to design her revenge plan:

MEDEA: *Sangue! Sangue! Straziar spezzar suo cuore,*  
Which means, translated, something red and gory.  
*Unche di spavento’s atroce strano*  
Murder in Irish! No – Italiano!  
*Ai! Ai! Dia mow Kephlas flox owrania,*  
*By-ee tiddy moi zeen èté Kurdos –*  
Stop, that’s Euripides! *Du sang! Du sang!*  
*Briser torturer son coeur – oui!* That’s wrong  
I’ve got confused with all these versions jinglish –  
Thunder and turf! – And even that’s not English.<sup>8</sup>

As classical scholars have rightly noted, *Medea*’s linguistic confusion humorously hints at the fact that Legouvé’s tragedy was taken from a Greek source, written in French, adapted into Italian, and performed in front of an English audience.<sup>9</sup> Whilst such analysis perfectly captures Brough’s *Medea* parodic relationship with its tragic precedent, it fails

<sup>7</sup> R. Brough, ‘*Medea*’, I. 2. 138 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> R. Brough, ‘*Medea*’, I. 2. 186-205 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Macintosh, ‘*Medea Transposed*’, p. 85. See also Hall and Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre*, pp. 410-412.

to emphasise the humorous consequences that the language adopted in Medea's monologue had in performance. The sudden shift between different idioms comically encapsulates Medea's over-excitement, as she is said to be giving 'sudden vent'<sup>10</sup> to the passion she suppressed during her dialogue with Jason. Medea's ludicrous inability to formulate a coherent speech is further underscored by the ingenious rhymes between words in different languages (such as 'cuore'-'gore' and 'sang'-'wrong'). Similarly, although she claims to have 'thought'<sup>11</sup> and 'plann'd'<sup>12</sup> her revenge, Medea's decision to stab Creusa is framed as thoroughly serendipitous:

MEDEA: Stone! Ha! A dreadful thought itself suggests.  
 His gallivanting taste that never rests  
 Has led him to make eyes e'en at – Medusa.  
*(reflecting on the rhyme)* 'Dusa!' The deuce, ah! You, sir!  
*(Shrieks.)* Ha, Creusa!  
 Yes, there my path of vengeance lies [...].<sup>13</sup>

Rather than possessing 'cunning'<sup>14</sup> as Macintosh argues, Brough's Medea chooses the ideal target of her criminal plans thanks to a casual rhyme which introduces a pun constructed on the abbreviation of Medusa's name. Its homophone, 'deuce', is a slang term used to describe 'the personification or the spirit of mischief'<sup>15</sup> and is therefore identifiable with Creusa. As she follows her instinctive inclination to violence, which is marked by Brough's absurdly rhyming couplets and puns, Medea is deprived of her traditional scheming capacities and the solemnity of her revenge plan is ridiculed.<sup>16</sup> It is arguable that the formal elements of Medea's monologue in Brough's burlesque enable a humorous metatheatrical reflection, insofar as Brough's version of Medea implicitly dialogues with the one of the source texts, parodying her traditional attributes.

A similar argument could be developed to evaluate the comic impact of Alcestis' monologue in Talfourd's *Alcestis*. According to Monròs-Gaspar, Alcestis' "classical soliloquy" must have unequivocally heightened the female audience's empathy with the

<sup>10</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', i. 2. 168 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', i. 2. 220 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', i. 2. 220 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> R. Brough, 'Medea', i. 2. 210-215 and R. Brough, *Medea*, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Macintosh, 'Medea Transposed', p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> 'deuce, n.2.', *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/51364](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/51364)> [accessed 25 October 2020].

<sup>16</sup> Although in Euripides' tragedy Medea's infanticide is sustained by her *thumos* (her passion), Medea is also the heroine traditionally endowed with *sophia*. In Euripides, 'Medea's *sophia* constitutes 'a rhetorical skill that is at once wise and clever and devises a revenge that is both self-destructive and healing for her'. See Pietro Pucci, *Euripides' Revolution under Cover: An Essay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 18.

heroine', as she 'evokes the disillusionment of arranged marriages, the legal vulnerability of children and the unequal opportunities for women'<sup>17</sup> with a melodramatic tone. With such a statement, not only does Monròs-Gaspar equate the comic acting style of the leading actress, Elizabeth Leigh Murray, with that of melodrama, but she also ignores the role that rhymes and topical allusions played in humorously diminishing the emotional intensity of her speech. Considered 'the very best burlesque soliloquy of its kind'<sup>18</sup> by the Victorian journalist Leopold Wagner, Alcestis' speech unfolds as follows:

ALCESTIS: Oh! sun, and moon, and stars! oh day and night!  
 Oh every thing above an inch in height!  
 Oh Day! as black as black of Day and Martin,  
 To what infernal realms must I be starting!  
 Oh bed I-beg pardon-nuptial couch, I mean,  
 'Twere green though to regret now Gretna Green,  
 Else might I ask, were not the question idle,  
 Why was I ever saddled with this bridal?  
 Or why —but these, alas, are whys too late—  
 Did I with such a milksop link my fate?  
 Why at the altar did we join our hands?  
 Why Hymen e'er unite us in his bands,  
 Those bands which ne'er have played the *heavy waits*,  
 A - merry - key in our *united states*?  
 Why was my heart to be with such a spoony un,  
 A wretched picture of a poor *heart* union?  
 For life with him was nothing but a curse,  
 And though I took him 'for better or for worse,'  
 The world can't surely wonder I forsook him, for  
 I found him such a deal worse than I took him for.  
 Oh parent hearth! oh earth, air, fire, and water!  
 Oh son in petticoats and unmarried daughter!  
 What's to become of you when my sun sets,  
 Props of my house— I may say, *par - a - pets*?  
 They say that beauty's but a snare, if true,  
 They'll be *caught* in it who are *courting* you;  
 But rather may your grace, bewitching *naiveté*,  
 And noble *carriage* be a *handsome's safety*.  
 My Eumelus, too, who is to insert  
 The missing button in his baby shirt [...]?<sup>19</sup>

Alcestis' speech is interspersed with a series of anachronistic references to mid-Victorian daily life, slang terms, and puns which domesticate and diminish the solemnity of her monologue. For instance, she describes her children as '*par-a-pets*', ludicrously referring to them with the endearing term 'pets', whilst emphasising their nature as 'props

<sup>17</sup> Monròs-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Leopold Wagner, 'BURLESQUES: OLD AND NEW', *Time*, November 1886, 584-588 (p. 586).

<sup>19</sup> Talfourd, 'Alcestis', i. 1. 351-380 and Talfourd, *Alcestis*, pp. 16-17.

of [her] house'. Moreover, before descending to the underworld, Alcestis worries about 'the missing button' on her son's shirt. The ridiculous attention to such a detail was likely to have amused the audiences who witnessed Talfourd's burlesque. In addition to such individual elements, it is arguable that the rhyming couplets conferred a general comic tone to Alcestis' speech, which may be considered as reminiscent of the mock-heroic poetic tradition of the seventeenth century. Whilst John Dryden and Alexander Pope employed the form and language of epic poetry to narrate trivial subjects with mock-heroic rhyming couplets, classical burlesques such as *Alcestis* exploit rhyming couplets to humorously juxtapose lines of tragic inspiration with ludicrous ones. For instance, following Euripides' tragedy, Alcestis starts her speech addressing the 'sun, and moon, and stars! oh day and night!'.<sup>20</sup> Yet, in the following line, such elements are humorously diminished and described as 'every thing above an inch in height!'. The comicality of the opening of Alcestis' soliloquy is further enhanced by the topical reference to Day and Martin, a nineteenth-century boot blacking factory, which conveys the sombre atmosphere characterising the day of Alcestis' death.<sup>21</sup> Then, Alcestis' address to 'parent hearth! oh earth, air, fire, and water!' is juxtaposed to the anachronistic mention of her 'son in petticoats and wretched daughter'. In the Victorian era, both girls and boys of the upper and middle classes were usually dressed in petticoats before the age of six.<sup>22</sup> If the humorous progression of such rhyming couplets is considered together with Murray's acting style, which the press of the time described as producing 'roars of laughter'<sup>23</sup>, Alcestis' serious identification as a strong-minded woman, earnestly speaking to the female members of the audience as Monrès-Gaspar hypothesises, seems to be radically undermined.

Together with rhymes, puns were another essential feature of burlesque language which contributed to the comicality of performances. The quality of puns was often considered as crucial to assess the value of burlesques. More specifically, as Schoch notes, 'a bad pun is the surest sign of a good burlesque'.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the aim of puns, which

<sup>20</sup> Alcestis' first words on stage in Euripides' tragedy are 'O Sun! O daylight! O clouds, swirling on your course in the sky!'. See Euripides, 'Alcestis', in *Cyclops; Alcestis; Medea*, ed. and trans. by David Kovacs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 145-275 (244-245).

<sup>21</sup> 'Day, Charles (1782/3–1836), blacking manufacturer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-59284>> [accessed 19 April 2022].

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Robson, *The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> The sentence refers to all the performers playing in Talfourd's burlesque, including Elizabeth Leigh Murray. See 'THE DRAMA', *The Lady's Newspaper & Pictorial Times*, 6 July 1850, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 47.



were often arranged in sequences, was not that of being fully understood. On the contrary, they were arguably meant to bring the performance to the ‘brink of semantic collapse’, leaving the audiences in ‘ecstatic agony’<sup>25</sup> as they attempted to follow ridiculous combinations of words and sounds. For example, in 1859, the *Literary Gazette* commented on the quality of the puns featured in Talfourd’s *Electra* noting that ‘many of these are really smart, more reach a height of superhuman absurdity and hardihood, and communicate their madness to the hearer, who laughs, groans, or gnashes his teeth, as the case may be, frenziedly’.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the *Morning Post* observed that, in Talfourd’s *Electra*, ‘[t]he puns come down in an incessant shower, and provoke such volleys of laughter that the actors, perpetually interrupted by the mirth of the audience, find it no easy matter to fight their way through the text.’<sup>27</sup> Both performance reviews testify to the comic effect achieved by the puns included in Talfourd’s *Electra*, which were reportedly so amusing as to require exceptional efforts from the actors who struggled to deliver their lines. The scene in which Electra recognises her brother Orestes, returning home to avenge the murder of his father, perfectly exemplifies the ingenious comicality enabled by puns:

ORESTES: Now what’s the news at home?  
 Have they been starving you?  
 You look so ill—  
 and who’s this upstart parvenu  
 So unlike our own Agamemnon?  
 ELECTRA: True. He’s very different from the *Pa ve knew*,  
 But I must own, although they treat me vilely  
 From morn to night I’m *rated very highly*.  
 While prying eyes all secrecy deny us,  
 Making the court a court of *nice eye pry us*.<sup>28</sup>

Orestes’ use of colloquial expressions (e. g. ‘what’s the news’) immediately diminishes the emotional intensity of the ‘recognition scene’<sup>29</sup>, which Monrès-Gaspar considers as being essential for the development of Electra’s story. Her speech is interspersed with witty puns: for example, Aegisthus is simultaneously described as very different from Agamemnon, ‘the *Pa ve knew*’, and as a social climber, a ‘parvenu’. In the final lines of her speech, Electra hints at the revenge she hopes to plan with Orestes. After

<sup>25</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> ‘THE DRAMA AND MUSIC’, *The Literary Gazette: A Weekly Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, 30 April 1859, p. 546.

<sup>27</sup> ‘EASTER AMUSEMENTS’, *Morning Post*, 26 April 1859, pp. 5-6.

<sup>28</sup> Talfourd, ‘Electra’, I. 3. 214-221 and Talfourd, *Electra*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>29</sup> Talfourd, ‘Electra’, p. 241.

having warned him against the ‘prying eyes’ possibly spying on them, Electra says she would like to transform the royal court, that of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, into a court of ‘nice eye pry us’, homophone for *nisi prius*, a Latin locution which refers to ‘the hearing of civil causes by the judges in the Assize Court or [...] Crown Court’.<sup>30</sup> The sequence of puns included in Electra’s speech contributes to the generation of a ludicrous effect, which domesticates and diminishes her determination to be revenged. Hence, the humour embedded in the language of Talfourd’s burlesque arguably prevents Electra’s identification as a serious example of nineteenth-century strong-mindedness.

In a similar fashion, Burnand employs a series of puns and topical allusions to undermine the intensity of Dido’s feelings. She suffers from devouring jealousy and discloses her feelings to her sister:

DIDO:            Perhaps you’ll think I’ll sit me down and *sew*,  
                       If *so*, my sister, me you little know.  
                       Bah! *Darn* your needles! Catch me ever sitting  
                       Down with my housewife, pins, and things for knitting  
                       You’ll never see me, Anne, in that condition,  
                       I’ll *buckle* to fulfilling “*Woman’s Mission*”.<sup>31</sup>

In these lines, Dido explicitly rejects the stereotypical portrait of the Victorian housewife, trapped in the menial tasks required by the management of the domestic sphere. Instead of embracing the ‘*Woman’s Mission*’<sup>32</sup> as illustrated in the bestseller written by Sarah Lewis, Dido undertakes an original and unconventional task, which is the active vindication of the wrongs she suffered as an abandoned lover. If literally interpreted, Dido’s statement encapsulates the Queen’s non-conformity to the widespread social prescriptions which relegated women to the care of their houses and families. At the same time, what might verbally be interpreted as a disruptive declaration was arguably undermined by Dido’s embodied performance. Young, the actor who performed the role of the Carthaginian Queen, delivered a series of puns pertaining to the semantic area of knitting. He emphasised the verb ‘*sew*’, which was repeated in the first two lines of Dido’s

<sup>30</sup> ‘*nisi prius*, n.’, *OED Online* <from [www.oed.com/view/Entry/127272](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/127272)> [accessed 8 October 2021].

<sup>31</sup> Burnand, *Dido*, p. 30

<sup>32</sup> *Woman’s Mission* was an English adaptation of Louis Aimé Martin’s *De l’éducation de mères de famille, ou la civilisation du genre humain par les femmes* (1834), which was published in 1839 and attributed to Sarah Lewis. The author defined women’s new exalted position: in accordance with the Victorian rhetoric, ‘Lewis describes women as morally superior to men, and she invests their duties with social, political, and religious significance’. Lewis believes that women are responsible for the regeneration of humankind, a ‘grand and glorious’ destiny to be accomplished within the domestic space. See Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder, I, 3-14. The title of the book became a common phrase used to hint at ‘the influence of women in civilising society, and the angel in the house, and all the rest of the sentimental rubbish’. See ‘MRS. PUNCH’S ORATION’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 15 January 1859, p. 23.

speech; the double meaning of ‘*darn*’, which hints at the activity of mending clothes while being a slang variation for the adverb ‘damn’<sup>33</sup>; and the term ‘*buckle*’, which signifies both ‘to fasten with a buckle’<sup>34</sup> and ‘set oneself to work’.<sup>35</sup> The combination of these puns with the accurate listing of tools like needles and pins was likely to have rendered humorous Dido’s declaration. The solemnity of the Queen’s mission, and her furious jealousy, were undermined by the use of down-to-earth language and puns which were intended to amuse the audiences.

The same humorous technique is employed to caricature Dido’s madness in the final scene of Burnand’s burlesque. Dido is described wandering on the seashore of Carthage, where she gives an incoherent and seemingly meaningless speech encapsulating her maddening anger towards Aeneas:

DIDO: They say I’m mad. (*laughs*) He, he! what does it matter?  
 They tell me I am mad as any hatter.  
 That some weak folks should think so I am glad  
 But why the dickens are the hatters mad?  
 Who was it that in wide-awakes soft dealt:  
 Who was’t described in words a stone to melt,  
 My love ’s black hat as *darkness which was felt*,  
 My hatter  
 Mad as a hare in March. It is the fate  
 Of *hares* to be then in a *rabid* state.  
 I am a hare. A sportsman comes! Hast got  
 A licence? you ’ll be fined if you have not.  
 I am not rubbish, and I won ’t be shot.  
 Oh, as I wander up and down the shore,  
 I fancy I’m a little child once more.<sup>36</sup>

By rewriting the biblical words describing Moses’ encounter with God through a ‘darkness which may be felt’<sup>37</sup> in the book of Exodus, Burnand hyperbolically describes Dido’s unrestrained passions. As a rabid hare, the Queen has regressed to her feral nature and, as a child, she lacks all reasoning capacities. The rhetoric of regression to either a feral or childlike state of being might have already contributed to undermining Dido’s strong-mindedness, as she is identified with those Victorian women whose rebellious temperament was stereotyped as moody, undecided, and subject to fits of madness. At the

<sup>33</sup> See ‘darn, n.1’, *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/47325](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/47325)> [accessed 2 November 2020], and ‘darn, adv. and adj.’, *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/47329](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/47329)> [accessed 2 November 2020].

<sup>34</sup> ‘buckle, v.’, *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/24189](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/24189)> [accessed 2 November 2020].

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Burnand, *Dido*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>37</sup> Exodus x. 21-22.

same time, Burnand interspersed Dido's speech with a series of puns which created a humorous effect. Dido's comparison to a mad hatter is ridiculed through the mention of *felt*, which apart from belonging to the Bible's quotation analysed above, also hints at the material used to make hats. Moreover, Dido overemphasises her identification with a rabid hare by means of the third person pronoun *hers*, whose pronunciation is similar to that of the animal's name. The mention of very common objects and animals, although encapsulating Dido's fury, humorously undermines her pathos.

Overall, the analyses included in this section have shown how rhyming couplets and puns contributed to the establishment of a comic atmosphere on the classical burlesque stage. Such an argument radically contrasts with classical scholars' perception of classical burlesques as revealing melodramatic, or even tragic, undertones, which seriously resonated with the gender-based injustice permeating mid-Victorian society. Whilst *Medea*, *Alcestis*, and *Dido* apparently exposed the unequal treatment to which abandoned or neglected wives were subjected in the mid-nineteenth century, the language of burlesque, emphasised by the comic acting style of performers, ironically undermined the seriousness of their claims.

#### 4.2 Topical References and Slang

Together with rhymes and puns, topical references and slang contributed to the ironic domestication and diminution of classical burlesque characters, who were transformed into mid-nineteenth-century 'fast' men and women in order to create humorous anachronisms. According to Schoch, Victorian burlesques situated their characters within the realm of mid-nineteenth-century 'fast' life by means of references to drinking and sports, together with the adoption of street slang and occasional vulgarities. In *Not Shakespeare*, Schoch offers an in-depth investigation of Shakespearian burlesque 'fast' male characters and evaluates the crucial role played by slang in the process of their domestication. From his perspective, burlesque slang was not a mere 'recitation of vulgarities', but rather a tool employed to achieve the 'public performance of a socio-cultural identity through a particular mode of speech'.<sup>38</sup> In other words, Schoch believes that the use of slang allowed Shakespearian burlesques to stage in a humorous fashion the real lives of those young men about town and swells who in the mid-nineteenth century enjoyed the mildly illicit pleasures offered by London's nightlife. As this section shows,

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<sup>38</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 130. Schoch's argument concerning the performance of 'fast' young men about town's and swells' identity on the burlesque stage will be developed further in the fifth chapter of this thesis, which deals with classical burlesque audiences.

Schoch's argument may be extended to describe classical burlesque adoption of slang and topical references, as such plays 'unashamedly borrowed the *patois* of the newsroom and the boxing ring, to say nothing of the bar, the tavern, and the supper club'<sup>39</sup>, in order to ground mythological characters in the realm of mid-Victorian 'fastness'.

Given their concern with heroic fights, mid-Victorian classical burlesques abound with topical references to boxing matches. In his burlesque version of *Medea*, for instance, Lemon transforms King Creon into the manager of a circus, which is described in a stage direction as containing 'swords, shields and boxing gloves'.<sup>40</sup> Jason is turned into an acrobat who engages in a boxing match with Orpheus in order to prove his physical strength. Starting an 'impromptu tussle', Jason is said to 'punch [Orpheus]' head'<sup>41</sup> on stage. Hall notes that the boxing match between Jason and Orpheus testifies to the spectacular nature of burlesque as a form of entertainment, which habitually borrowed '[p]hysical routines [...] from the circus and sporting competitions'.<sup>42</sup> However, Hall ignores how the specific mention of a boxing match may have grounded Lemon's Jason in London's 'fast' subculture. Indeed, Jason's predilection for fighting acquires such a distinctive significance especially if read against the backdrop of his affirmation of being a 'very fast' man, whilst singing to the tune of the popular drinking song 'Vive la Compagnie'.<sup>43</sup>

A more detailed coverage of a boxing match is given in Talfourd's *Electra*, which stages the physical confrontation between Orestes and a courtier named Lycus. In the fifth scene of the burlesque, the two contestants fight in a boxing ring surrounded by a cheering crowd. Before the beginning of the match, Lycus and Orestes threaten each other:

LYCUS: Are you used to falling?  
 ORESTES: Wrestling with fate long time has been my calling  
 And in my college days I learned the charms  
 Of a good long pull at the Wrestler's Arms.<sup>44</sup>

Lycus employs a slang term pertaining to the area of wrestling: when asking Orestes if he is used to falling, for instance, Lycus refers to the action of keeping a man down for

<sup>39</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 131.

<sup>40</sup> Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fol. 2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fol. 4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> E. Hall, 'Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre', p. 350.

<sup>43</sup> Lemon, *Medea*, Add. MS 52960 (L), fol. 12<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', i. 5. 70-73 and Talfourd, *Electra*, p. 32.

a set amount of time in a boxing match.<sup>45</sup> Orestes interprets Lycus' question in a literal way and, as Monrès-Gaspar notes, he anachronistically refers to 'his own university days when excessive drinking might well have caused him to fall'.<sup>46</sup> Orestes describes his drinking habits with the slang expression 'long pull', meaning 'a long or deep draught of drink'.<sup>47</sup> Hence, the humorous exchange based on the polysemy of the verb 'fall' arguably emphasises the two pastimes which chiefly characterised the lifestyle of mid-Victorian 'fast' men, namely drinking and boxing.

The male protagonist of Burnand's *Paris; or Vive Lemprière* also exemplifies 'fast' men's predilection for drinking, whilst humorously emphasising their mildly loose morals. In the playbill advertising Burnand's burlesque, Paris is described as 'Alexander the Little, Chairman of the "Irregular Rips", and G. M. of the "Jolly Dog Club"' (Figure 16).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The *OED* defines 'fall' as 'the fact of being thrown to the ground, or on one's back, by an opponent. Later more usually: a throw or other move which keeps an opponent on the ground for a specified time, or in a specified position [...], the player who has achieved this being regarded as having won a given bout'. See 'fall, n.2', *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/67826](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67826)> [accessed 15 October 2021].

<sup>46</sup> Talfourd, 'Electra', p. 257.

<sup>47</sup> 'pull, n.1.', *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/154315](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/154315)> [accessed 14 October 2021].

<sup>48</sup> Playbill, *Paris; or, Vive Lemprière*, Strand Theatre, London, 21 May 1866 (Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum).



Figure 16. Playbill, *Paris; or, Vive Lemprière*, Strand Theatre, London, 21 May 1866 (Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum)

Firstly, the attribute 'Alexander the Little' plays with the classical name of Paris, also known as Alexander, and with the process of diminution typical of burlesque: in opposition to the renowned Alexander the Great, the epic hero appears to have shrunk. Secondly, Paris is ascribed to the category of rips, a term that is defined as a colloquial form for a 'disreputable, dissolute, or immoral man; a rake'.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the word 'Rip' – which is written with a capital letter – might also evoke the name of the protagonist of Dion Boucicault's drama *Rip Van Winkle*, whose protagonist is a German man living in the United States, who has significant drinking habits that destabilise his

<sup>49</sup> 'rip, n.6.' *OED Online* <www.oed.com/view/Entry/166189> [accessed 9 January 2020].

marriage.<sup>50</sup> Such reference humorously actualised and debased Paris into a drunken and neglectful husband like Rip Van Winkle. Before being summoned by Mercury to judge the beauty of Olympic goddesses, Oenone, Paris' wife, complains about the fact that her husband goes out every night to drink in company of his male friends, the Jolly Dogs.<sup>51</sup>

For those of the public with a certain theatrical and cultural knowledge, the language employed in the playbill contributes to foregrounding Paris as a 'fast' young man, as it underlines his drinking habits, his spirit of companionship with his male friends, and his dubious morality. Paris' 'fastness' is further emphasised in the corpus of the burlesque, which stages his transformation into an urban swell. The swell Mercury, accompanied by Castor and Pollux, informs Paris of his noble origins: instead of being a humble shepherd, he is the son of Priam, king of Troy.<sup>52</sup> After having discovered the mysterious circumstances of his birth and the task he is required to perform as judge for the gods, Paris is invited to adopt the attitude and behaviour of mid-Victorian swells. Instead of relinquishing his 'fast' habits, he is taught how to refine his manners. Firstly, Paris must change his drinking habits: at the beginning of the burlesque Oenone describes Paris as 'ginny'<sup>53</sup>, a slang term referring to his predilection for gin; yet, as soon as he reaches Mount Ida to judge the most beautiful among the goddesses, he is initiated to the pleasures of champagne. Then, Mercury invites Paris to imitate his style of walking, as he moves to the tune of the popular song 'I'd like to be a swell'.<sup>54</sup>

Paris' transformation into a distinct social type, that of the 'fast' urban swell, is ultimately sent up when he is called to choose the most beautiful among the goddesses.

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<sup>50</sup> *Rip van Winkle* was first performed at the Adelphi Theatre on the 4 September 1865. Boucicault's dramatic adaptation of Washington Irving's story was successful especially thanks to the American actor Joseph Jefferson, who impersonated the protagonist with great credibility. After a fight with his wife, Rip leaves his family and meets a crowd of strangers who persuade him to drink. He falls asleep and returns home after a very long time, finding out the changes that have occurred (his wife has re-married to provide for their daughter, who is about to get married too) and striving to restore order into his life. Donald R. Anderson, 'Renaming American Fault Lines in the Joseph Jefferson Version of Rip van Winkle', *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film*, 30 (November 2003), 14-32 (pp. 19-24).

<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in Boucicault's melodrama, Gretchen describes herself as 'the wife of a jolly dog'. See Dion Boucicault, *Rip Van Winkle as Played by Joseph Jefferson* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1895), p. 32. The reference to Boucicault's melodrama is also reinforced by Paris' adoption of the German accent of Rip Van Winkle when he asks if, referring to his wife: 'is de vild cat come home?'. See Francis Burnand, *Paris; or, Vive Lemprière* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1866), p. 18. The same line is uttered by Rip in Boucicault, p. 89.

<sup>52</sup> In the burlesque, Burnand modifies the revelation of the identity of Paris. Instead of being recognised by his sister Cassandra, on the occasion of the games organised by the king of Troy, Paris is immediately informed by Mercury about his real identity. Conversely, Lemprière's dictionary postpones the recognition of Paris until after his encounter with the goddesses. See 'Paris', John Lemprière, *Bibliotheca Classica; or, A classical dictionary* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1801). The modification here outlined works as a tool to enhance the path of social ascension that Burnand wants to stage.

<sup>53</sup> Burnand, *Paris*, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> Burnand, *Paris*, pp. 20-21.



The scene is reframed as a Victorian *pose plastique* show held on Mount Ida. The gods are assembled there, drinking champagne. Juno, Minerva, and Venus approach Paris and promise him the traditional gifts of glory, wisdom, and love. Then, the three goddesses reunite, and Paris sits, staring a few moments more before choosing the most charming among the celestial beauties posing before him. Paris conveys his disappointment in seeing that the goddesses wear classicising costumes, since female performers were supposed to wear ‘no skirts or boddices’<sup>55</sup> in the recreation of classical scenes. Indeed, mid-Victorian *poses plastiques* or *tableaux vivants* had a dubious reputation, since the semi-nudity of the performers was regarded as a vehicle for sexual excitement and equivalent to pornography by the moralisers of the time.<sup>56</sup> Paris, who seems to be aware of such a view, tries to excuse himself, underlining that he would never disrespect his wife by indulging in voyeurism:

PARIS: Oh, sir, I'm a stickler for propriety;  
I am a married man,  
and couldn't bring My wife—  
MERCURY: Pooh! Paris can stand anything.<sup>57</sup>

Paris' preoccupation with ‘propriety’ is minimised by Mercury, who encourages him to watch the *pose plastique* show and choose the most attractive goddess. Burnand seems here to focus on the dubious morality of the swell: Paris' inclination for voyeurism, which is endorsed by Mercury, conforms to the portrait of the ‘fast’ swell as ‘the rogue male, playing the field and resisting entrapment by marriage’.<sup>58</sup> After having chosen Venus as the most beautiful goddess posing in front of him, Paris abandons his wife Oenone and seduces Helen. Yet, Paris' licentiousness is balanced by the burlesque happy ending: after Helen abandons Paris for ‘some rich Indian prince’<sup>59</sup>, leaving him desperate and in debt, Paris decides to reunite with his former partner Oenone. Even if balance is restored, the hypocrisy embedded within the institution of marriage is made visible, insofar as Paris adheres to the *diktat* of morality not out of sincere willingness, but because external

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<sup>55</sup> Burnand, *Paris*, p. 32.

<sup>56</sup> Brenda Assael, ‘Art or Indecency? Tableaux Vivants on the London Stage and the Failure of Late Victorian Moral Reform’, *Journal of British Studies*, 45 (October 2006), 744-758 (pp. 748-749).

<sup>57</sup> Burnand, *Paris*, p. 32.

<sup>58</sup> Bailey, p. 117. Bailey argues that the swells' promiscuity in music hall songs is almost exclusively verbal. From his perspective, the swell is content when he can narrate his sexual prowess, but his words are hardly ever matched by actions. ‘The swell was [...] cocksure but unconsummating’. See Bailey, p. 118. By contrast, in Burnand's *Paris*, the hero concretely betrays his wife Oenone with Helen of Troy.

<sup>59</sup> Burnand, *Paris*, p. 48. The relationship between Helen and Paris is traditionally the cause of the Trojan war. In the burlesque, the terrible consequences of their union are actualised into the debts that Paris contracts in order to support his wife's fashionable lifestyle. See Burnand, *Paris*, p. 47.

circumstances – his abandonment by Helen – force him to do so. By emphasising Paris’ fake concerns over propriety, and by exposing the hypocrisy of his eventual reunion with Oenone, Burnand’s burlesque perfectly captures the spirit of mid-Victorian ‘fastness’ as opposed to the middle-class notion of respectability. As Schoch argues, nineteenth-century burlesques foregrounded middle-class respectable behaviour as an imposition, amounting to ‘nothing more than a diligently learnt trick’, which ‘entails coercion’<sup>60</sup> to be fully mastered. In Burnand’s burlesque, Paris accepts marriage not as the ideal union of husband and wife, as mid-nineteenth-century rhetorical discourse portrayed it, but as a humorously inescapable choice.

In order to fully appreciate the impact that the adoption of fast language had on the performances of the classical burlesques analysed above, it is necessary to note that the roles of Jason, Orestes, and Paris were all performed cross-dressed. Hence, it is arguable that not only did the staging of ‘fast’ male heroes allow classical burlesques to humorously expose the contradictions embedded in the middle-class ideal of respectable masculinity, but it also conferred a slightly risqué tone to the performance. Miss Wyndham, who played Jason in Lemon’s *Medea*, and Maria Ternan, who acted as Orestes in Talfourd’s *Electra*, might have fascinated the public showing their agile bodies in boxing matches, whilst using language and behaving in ways which may be considered transgressive for mid-Victorian women. For example, the press of the time appreciated the style and spirit with which Ternan engaged in the wrestling match against Lycus.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, *Lloyd’s Illustrated Newspaper* observed that Miss Raynham gave life to a ‘pretty Paris’<sup>62</sup>, acting next to Maria Simpson, Ada Swanborough and Kate Ranoe as the three goddesses.

A similar effect was achieved when female performers acted as ‘fast’ female characters in classical burlesques. Although Schoch focuses only on the ‘fastness’ of men, the first chapter of this thesis has illustrated how the attribute ‘fast’ was often employed to describe young women who enjoyed typically male hobbies, refused marriage, and claimed their right to dress according to the latest fashions. Instead of cultivating the Victorian value of modesty, classical burlesque young female protagonists are often framed as impudent girls, as they appropriate ‘fast’ language and slang to flirt with their suitors. This is evident, for example, in Talfourd’s *Atalanta*. The heroine was described

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<sup>60</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 117.

<sup>61</sup> ‘The Theatres, & C.’, *Illustrated London News*, 30 April 1859, p. 419 and ‘PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS’, *Lloyd’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 1 May 1859, p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> ‘PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS’, *Lloyd’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 15 April 1866, p. 8.

by the *Examiner* as a ‘charmingly fast lady’<sup>63</sup>, as she focussed exclusively on male sports and firmly refused to get married. Atalanta informs her father King Schoeneus of her passion for running, employing a series of slang terms and puns that generate hilarious misunderstandings:

ATALANTA: Oh, pa! such sport! Old Tomasos, our groom,  
You know—the veriest braggart in existence  
Thought he could beat me at the half mile distance!  
I’ve heard that he was once a well-known ped.

KING: (*r., obtusely.*) A ped?

ATALANTA: (*l.*) Pedestrian, I should have said.  
So having, before dressing, time to spare,  
I volunteered to run him then and there;  
The course was from the back door by the laundry  
Twice round the kitchen garden to the pantry.  
Well, we were stripped and ready in a twinkling—

KING: (*alarmed*) Stripped? Gracious!  
[...]

ATALANTA: I made an effort—challenged the old chap,  
And fairly caught him in my second lap!

KING: (*indignant*) I wish *I’d* caught him there! We’ll  
put a stopper  
On such proceedings! “Lap!” it’s most improper.<sup>64</sup>

This extract frames Atalanta as an exemplary ‘fast’ lady not only because of her unconventional passion for running, but also because of her ‘fast’ mode of expression. Firstly, she employs the slang word ‘ped’<sup>65</sup>, as a short for pedestrian, to describe the groom who challenged her. The King, who appears to be irritated by the jargon used by his daughter, is alarmed as soon as he understands that Atalanta changed into sporting clothes in the presence of her rival. Subsequently, when Atalanta reveals that she caught the groom in her second lap, Schoeneus gives voice to his indignation framing his daughter’s behaviour as improper. Talfourd played with the double meaning of the word ‘lap’<sup>66</sup> – which signifies both the turn around the track of a racecourse and the front portion of the body – to generate a playful innuendo regarding Atalanta’s relationships with men. While Atalanta naively explains her experience of a racecourse, King Schoeneus reacts to the double entendre created by his daughter’s words exposing her lack of respectability according to Victorian standards.

<sup>63</sup> ‘THE THEATRICAL AND MUSICAL EXAMINER’, *Examiner*, 18 April 1857, p. 246.

<sup>64</sup> Talfourd, *Atalanta*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>65</sup> ‘ped, n.2.’, *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/139509](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/139509)> [accessed 9 October 2020].

<sup>66</sup> ‘lap, n.1.’, *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/105689](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/105689)> [accessed 9 October 2020] and ‘lap, n.3.’, *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/105691](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/105691)> [accessed 9 October 2020].

Not only humorous, the misunderstanding generated by Atalanta's use of slang and puns might have also been perceived as mildly risqué by the Haymarket audiences. The role of the 'fast' young heroine was interpreted by the charming Pattie Oliver.<sup>67</sup> The public of Talfourd's burlesque might have been intrigued by the performance of a young and attractive actress knowingly discussing an improper subject on stage, openly ignoring the constraints which regulated the behaviour of Victorian ladies. In effect, the *Era* appreciated Atalanta's 'buoyancy of spirit'<sup>68</sup> and 'dashing earnestness'<sup>69</sup>, while the *Daily News* underlined how Oliver was 'at once masculine, vigorous and charming'<sup>70</sup>. The emphasis placed on the charm and vivacity of Oliver's interpretation arguably rendered less threatening Atalanta's 'fastness': the heroine's involvement in typically masculine sports, together with her unconventional mode of expression, facilitate Atalanta's sexualisation, rather than frame the character as inherently subversive.

Whilst Talfourd's *Atalanta* sends up the flirtatiousness of 'fast' young ladies, a 'folly'<sup>71</sup> written by Burnand entitled *The Girls of the Period; or, the Island of Nowarpartickilar* (Drury Lane, 1869) more specifically caricatures the freedom which was increasingly being demanded by the so-called Girls of the Period in the late 1850s and 1860s. Although not intended as a classical burlesque but as a short divertissement, the play features some characters taken from Homer's *Odyssey* and has a parodic purpose, as it abounds in topical allusions to the habits and pastimes of 'fast' ladies. Specifically, Burnand uses the figure of Calypso in order to 'hold up that wonderful creature, the "girl of the period", to derision; or, in other words, to satirise the 'fast' tendencies of the age in one of its most repulsive forms of development'.<sup>72</sup> Calypso is described as 'the Queen of the Girls of the Period in the Nowarpartickilar Island'<sup>73</sup>, as she embodies all the distinguishing traits of this mid-Victorian social type: Calypso refuses marriage, dresses

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<sup>67</sup> Pattie Oliver was twenty-three years old when she performed *Atalanta*. She was previously engaged at the Lyceum under Madame Vestris and at Drury Lane, where she successfully acted as Helen in Sheridan Knowles' *The Hunchback*. After having acted in Talfourd's *Atalanta*, Oliver became the 'leading actress in comedy and burlesque for several seasons at the Strand Theatre'. See 'Oliver, Martha Cranmer [Pattie] (1834–1880), actress', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-20728>> [accessed 16 October 2020].

<sup>68</sup> 'THE EASTER AMUSEMENTS', *Era*, 19 April 1857, p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> 'EASTER MONDAY ENTERTAINMENTS', *Daily News*, 14 April 1857, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Burnand's *The Girls of the Period* is described as 'a folly. In two scenes of prose, rhyme, dance and song'. Unlike a burlesque, which is generally written in rhymed couplets, the play was written in prose and featured an original song, whose music and lyrics were both composed by the author. See Francis Burnand, *The Girls of the Period; or, The Island of Nowarpartickilar* (London: Phillips, 1869), p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> 'THE LONDON THEATRES', *Era*, 28 February 1869, p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Burnand, *Girls*, p. 3.

like a man and claims women's rights to 'row, race, ride, bowl, shoot, and smoke'.<sup>74</sup> She mentors the young wife of Telemachus Brown in her attempt to become a perfect Girl of the Period, after her husband asked her to embrace a 'faster' lifestyle and to neglect 'the house, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker'.<sup>75</sup> Calypso invites Mrs Telemachus Brown and her mother, dressed 'in fast costume'<sup>76</sup>, to a reunion of the Girls of the Period's Club: after having announced that 'to elevate the feminine condition'<sup>77</sup> is the club members' mission, Calypso announces that the organisation of a 'pic-nic'<sup>78</sup> is the first item of their agenda. Rather than witnessing a political discussion on the subject of women's rights as announced, Mrs Telemachus Brown is initiated into hedonistic pleasures: the Girls of the Period guided by Queen Calypso spend their lazy day smoking, eating, and drinking champagne.<sup>79</sup> By exposing the idleness of the Girls of the Period, Burnand humorously diminished their desire for greater independence.

In addition, Burnand seems to ridicule men's fascination with 'fast' women. When Telemachus and his friend Coeleb Robinson visit the island of Nowarpartickilar, they are enslaved by the Girls of the Period. Specifically, Coeleb is forced to entertain the ladies' assembly with a singing exhibition, while Telemachus waits on them.<sup>80</sup> After this experience, Telemachus regrets having expressed the desire for his wife to be transformed into a Girl of the Period. He realises that the carelessness he admired in women entails a thorough neglect of the practical management of the matrimonial home. When Telemachus reminds his wife of her 'duties'<sup>81</sup>, she claims to have embraced the realm of 'pleasures'<sup>82</sup> while puffing smoke in his face. Through Telemachus' regret, Burnand managed to expose the consequences of men's endorsement of the Girls of the Period's battles: if men were to give freedom to 'fast' women, British society, like the Island of Nowarpartickilar, would be dominated by unruliness and dissolution.

The Girls of the Period's dissipated lifestyle is exposed further on the occasion of the velocipede race organised on stage: the 'fast' young ladies guided by Queen Calypso participate in what is anachronistically called the 'Velocipede Derby Galop'<sup>83</sup>, whose

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<sup>74</sup> Burnand, *Girls*, p. 16.

<sup>75</sup> Burnand, *Girls*, p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> Burnand, *Girls*, p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> Burnand, *Girls*, p. 16.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> The Girls are described as eating chicken, drinking champagne, and smoking in Burnand, *Girls*, p. 20.

<sup>80</sup> Mr Coeleb sings 'Lovely Whilhelmina', a song written and composed by Burnand. See Burnand, *Girls*, p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> Burnand, *Girls*, p. 21.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Burnand, *Girls*, p. 23.

rules establish that the winners will have the chance to choose a male partner. While Mrs Brown, who wins the first prize, happily reunites with her husband, Calypso chooses to flirt with Telemachus' 'fast' friend, Coeleb. The Queen goes as far as rejecting Coeleb's marriage proposal.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps inspired by the velocipede craze which exploded in 1869, Burnand seems to exploit the velocipede race organised on Drury Lane's stage to reveal the 'fast' young ladies' free and unconventional approach to the male sex, as they are allowed to choose and seduce any man they like.<sup>85</sup> Instead of emblematising their independence, Burnand's velocipede race sanctions the sexual supremacy of women. While the New Women of the late nineteenth century appropriate the bicycle to signal their emancipation from a patriarchal society, the Girls of the Period's use of the velocipede frames them as seducers in Burnand's satirical play.

Although going beyond the issue of language, the spectacular entertainment represented by the velocipede race has a distinct significance on the staging of *Girls of the Period*. Indeed, by casting female performers and dancers who appeared on Drury Lane's stage dressed in male clothes, smoking, drinking champagne, riding velocipedes, and assertively flirting with men, Burnand seems to have fetishized the Girl of the Period. Her unconventional appearance and vices are transformed into vehicles of sexual titillation to be displayed and savoured in the theatrical space. According to the *Sunday Times*, the actresses personifying the Girls of the Period 'looked very gay in their striking and picturesque dresses'.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, the *Era* praised 'the dance of the chignonned, short-skirted, and handsomely dressed girls'.<sup>87</sup> From the sexualising tone betrayed by such performance reviews, it is arguable that Burnand's 'fast' female characters maintained their distinct gendered identity in spite of the adoption of masculine attitudes, thus titillating the audiences of Drury Lane.

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<sup>84</sup> Calypso says: 'No, Mr Coelebs, I'm very much flattered by the offer, but at present I can't decide – my reign on the Island of Nowarpartickilar is not yet at an end, but you may look in here again, and if you are still of the same mind, then I may perhaps abdicate'. See Burnand, *Girls*, p. 25.

<sup>85</sup> The performance of Burnand's folly actually featured actresses who rode tricycles on stage. See, for example, 'THE LONDON THEATRES', *Era*, 28 February 1869, p. 11. It is arguable that Burnand satirised the velocipede craze which exploded in 1869. According to Andrew Ritchie, in this year, 'velocipede activity exploded with displays and competitions of various kinds'. The Crystal Palace hosted, for example, more than one Velocipede Derby, which reportedly attracted numerous audiences. In terms of gender, Ritchie believes 'women were generally excluded from velocipeding'. He recognises the presence of some women riders in London, but they were performers. In Paris, instead, women riders were allowed to race in competitions. See Andrew Ritchie, 'The Origins of Bicycle Racing in England: Technology, Entertainment, Sponsorship and Advertising in the Early History of the Sport', *Journal of Sport History*, 26 (1999), 489-520.

<sup>86</sup> 'Drury Lane', *Sunday Times*, 28 February 1869, p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> 'THE LONDON THEATRES', *Era*, 28 February 1869, p. 11.

The classical burlesques analysed in this section have shown how slang and topical references domesticated characters, transforming them into mid-Victorian ‘fast’ men and women, and humorously emphasising their non-conformity to the normative ideal of middle-class masculinity and femininity. Instead of aspiring to be *paterfamilias*, the ‘fast’ young men of classical burlesque enjoy drinking and fighting, whilst indulging in voyeurism and neglecting their wives. Likewise, instead of becoming devoted wives and mothers, ‘fast’ young women claim the freedom to flirt, dress, and behave like men. Although the genre satirised the moral values of the middle classes exposing their absurdity, burlesque did not encode a politically progressive attitude. In fact, as Schoch argues, burlesques gave voice to the feeling of disillusionment with the middle-class notion of respectability as expressed by members of the middle class themselves. Jason, Orestes, and Paris embody a humorous version of the real habits that young upper- and middle-class young men cultivated, as they enjoyed the entertainments offered by the city of London. Hence, as Schoch eloquently summarises, ‘burlesque culture arose, then, not as the antithesis of respectability but as its lingering shadow’.<sup>88</sup> The lack of political progressivism in classical burlesque is even more evident if its treatment of ‘fast’ female characters is considered. Both in Talfourd’s classical burlesque *Atalanta* and in Burnand’s classical folly *The Girls of the Period*, the female protagonists epitomise young women’s *dis*-respectability as they adopt a flirtatious attitude and enjoy morally ambiguous pastimes, such as drinking, smoking, running, and riding velocipedes. Yet, as the previous analyses have shown, their subversion of the status quo is not presented as a viable alternative to decent behaviour; ‘fast’ young ladies’ vices are instead ridiculed and fetishized for male enjoyment.

Victorian burlesque’s topical references were not only associated with the realm of ‘fastness’. In fact, they encompassed a variety of aspects of nineteenth-century daily life, ranging from leisure and pastimes (see, for example, the references to Epsom Derby races in Talfourd’s *Atalanta*) to technological progress (see, for example, the references to electricity in Talfourd’s *Electra*), and were widely employed to create humorous anachronisms. Crucially, as Schoch observes, topical references also covered the political issues of the time.<sup>89</sup> For example, as previously noted, Brough alluded to – and even critiqued – Britain’s foreign policy both in *Medea* and in *The Siege of Troy* by means of

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<sup>88</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 146.

<sup>89</sup> In his analysis of Shakespearian burlesques, Schoch argues that burlesques traded in ‘political topicalities’. See Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 151.

topical references to the Crimean war. Specifically, in Brough's *Siege of Troy*, Ulysses directly comments on the Crimean conflict when he says:

ULYSSES: This way, my friends, the town's as good as ours;  
 We've taken any quantity of towers,  
 Redans and Malakoffs, and all the rest:  
 Hector, if not yet slain, is sorely press'd.  
 But let's be first to Aeneas' abode,  
 Where, I'm inform'd, there's lots of siller stow'd.<sup>90</sup>

As McConnell argues, Ulysses humorously conflates the battles of Redan and Malakoff, respectively lost and won by the French-British troops deployed in Crimea in September 1855, anticipating 'the ending of the play where our expectations of a Greek victory are not fulfilled'.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, in Brough's burlesque version of the *Iliad*, neither Hector nor Achilles are killed. On the contrary, the two heroes contribute to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, whereby Hector reportedly saves Achilles from drowning, after he had plunged in the waters of Xanthus and Scamander, the two rivers of the Trojan plain. McConnell reads the happy ending of Brough's burlesque as making 'farcically plain the futility of the war'.<sup>92</sup> From her perspective, not only did the *Siege of Troy* conventionally offer a humorously alternative epilogue to Homer's *Iliad*, but it also foregrounded Brough's utopian dream of peace and his critique of Britain's participation in the Crimean war. McConnell justifies her interpretation by acknowledging Brough's political alignment, as manifested by his *Songs of the Governing Classes*, which condemned the Crimean war as driven by the material interests of the British aristocracy.

However, it seems hardly possible to regard Brough's *Siege of Troy* as overtly political. The previous chapter of this thesis has already evaluated how the cross-dressed performances of Trojan and Greek heroes contributed to undermining the radical messages attributed to Brough's burlesque. Moreover, this section has shown that its topical references to the Crimean war were used to humorously anticipate the burlesque conventional happy ending. In order to analyse the political resonance of the *Siege of Troy*'s topical references, Schoch's analysis of Brough's *The Enchanted Isle*, a burlesque rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, proves to be useful. *The Enchanted Isle* trades in topical references to the revolts which were agitating the South of Italy in 1848: Prospero is recast as Ferdinand II, King of the Two Sicilies, whilst Caliban is presented

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<sup>90</sup> R. Brough, 'Siege of Troy', i. 7. 39-44 and R. Brough, *Siege of Troy*, p. 42.

<sup>91</sup> McConnell, p. 266.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.



as guiding the Sicilian revolutionaries who wanted to expel the Neapolitans from their Island and restore self-governance. Brough's burlesque stages the 'complete victory for the Italian revolutionaries'<sup>93</sup>, envisioning Prospero's abandonment of the island. Nevertheless, Schoch argues that by dramatizing an '*imaginary* turn of events'<sup>94</sup>, Brough confined the play's political radicalism within an aesthetic dimension. Caliban's final plea to the audience to '*keep the piece*'<sup>95</sup> – a pun referring to both the theatrical piece and the political peace – on the Adelphi stage 'discloses that [the burlesque's] radical politics operate entirely within the symbolic order'<sup>96</sup> of the performance and have no empirical grounding. As such, *The Enchanted Isle* can hardly be seen as inciting a revolution.

In a similar fashion, whilst Ulysses' humorous conflation of the battles of Redan and Malakoff anchors the *Siege of Troy* to the reality of the Crimean war, it also presents Brough's politically radical dream of peace as viable only in the *fictional* world imagined by the author. By stating that he 'likes his version best', the character of Homer foregrounds Brough's *Siege of Troy* as providing a mere *narration* of the conflict. Hence, as Schoch observes, Brough's political radicalism emerges as operating within the boundaries of an aesthetic dimension: explicitly presented as the product of the author's imagination, the pacifist message encoded in the *Siege of Troy* cannot be 'transferred from the stage to the stalls'<sup>97</sup> and serve a propagandistic function. Ultimately, according to Schoch, the topical references included in burlesques such as *The Enchanted Isle* and the *Siege of Troy* enabled the humorous juxtaposition of empirical and imagined worlds, thus arguably provoking the laughter of the audiences rather than disseminating a political message.<sup>98</sup>

Topical references to political affairs are also retrievable from classical burlesques written by dramatists who were less open about their political beliefs. For instance, Burnand's *Ixion; or, The Man at the Wheel* (New Royalty Theatre, 1863) stages a rebellion of 'Red Republicans'<sup>99</sup>, loosely modelled on French revolutionaries, in the guise of a prologue. King Ixion is suspected of having murdered his wife's father. Consequently, Queen Dia encourages a mob of republicans to rebel against him. Tondanapameiobomenos, Prosephe, and Podasokus, who are humorously described as

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<sup>93</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 183.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 185.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Schoch states that '[b]urlesque laughter occurs in the space between the audience's empirically ordained reality and the performance's rhetorically imagined reality'. See Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 183.

<sup>99</sup> Francis Burnand, *Ixion; or, The Man at the Wheel* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1863), p. 2.

‘dreadful democrats [...] who demand the right of free speaking in a state of *free-dumb*’<sup>100</sup>, complain about the regime of taxation and political censorship instituted by Ixion. Tondanapameiobomenos even incites the mob to violence when he says ‘Let us break all the windows, and make plain / The “Rights of Man” by reference to *Paine*’.<sup>101</sup> The pun constructed on the word ‘Paine’ refers to Thomas Paine’s political pamphlet *Rights of Man* (1791) which justified revolutionary actions in case of an unfair or tyrannical regime.<sup>102</sup> After having set Ixion’s palace in flames, the mob is stopped by the god Mercury, who facilitates the King’s ascension to Mount Olympus, thus enabling the progression of the dramatic action. Hence, as Hall notes, ‘the red revolutionaries of ancient Thessaly come to an ineffectual end, casually struck motionless by Mercury when their humorous potential has been exhausted’.<sup>103</sup>

Similarly, in Talfourd’s *Pluto and Proserpine; or, The Belle and the Pomegranate* (Haymarket Theatre, 1858) a passing reference is made to the republican peasants working in the corn fields of Sicily. In accordance with the legend narrated in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Proserpine, Ceres’ daughter, is kidnapped by Pluto. Ceres, the goddess of harvests, is so saddened and angered by Proserpine’s abduction that she curses the land, making it sterile. In Talfourd’s burlesque, Ceres’ traditional anger is anachronistically directed towards the red republican peasants who are seen dancing to celebrate their harvest in Scene VI. As the peasants ‘dare make merry when [Ceres] is in tears’<sup>104</sup>, she curses them as such:

CERES:       And used-up rakes ne'er seek their beds at all  
                   Axes fall powerless to lop a twig,  
                   And spades enjoy their “*otium sine dig*”,  
                   Your ploughs you may as of no further use bury;  
                   I'll with the champagne country play old gooseberry ,  
                   'Twill be such *still champagne* that you won't know it,  
                   In vain you may apply yourselves to *mow* it.  
                   Now having made these cursory observations,  
                   To realise your pleasant expectations  
                   Poppies! ye Red Republicans, with whom  
                   I've long waged war, *your* hour of triumph's come!  
                   Rear your proud heads o'er the surrender'd plain,  
                   With poisonous kisses choke the golden grain,  
                   And whisper in the dying ears of corn

<sup>100</sup> Burnand, *Ixion*, p. 2.

<sup>101</sup> Burnand, *Ixion*, p. 8.

<sup>102</sup> For a broader analysis of Paine’s *Rights of Man* see Carine Lounissi, *Thomas Paine and the French Revolution* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

<sup>103</sup> E. Hall, ‘Classical Mythology in Victorian Popular Theatre’, p. 352.

<sup>104</sup> Frank Talfourd, *Pluto and Proserpine; or, The Belle and the Pomegranate* (London: T. H. Lacy, [1858(?)]), p. 28.

'Till Ceres finds the daughter from her torn!  
The land shall of her sorrows be partaker,  
And every *rod* on the earth's back an *acher*.<sup>105</sup>

In this speech, Ceres humorously details the consequences of her curse by means of puns, colloquialisms, and topical references to agricultural tools. For example, the goddess states that peasants' spades will have no use: by shortening the Latin phrase 'otium sine dignitate' to 'otium sine dig', she alludes to the state of undeserved rest from digging that the peasants would enjoy. Similarly, with the slang expression 'play old gooseberry'<sup>106</sup>, Ceres explains that she would destroy the 'champagne country' which will then produce 'still champagne'. Possibly alluding to the peasants' participation in the revolutions which agitated Europe in 1848, Ceres humorously presents such a state of devastation as a victory for the republican countrymen.<sup>107</sup> Yet, such a reference is not further developed in Talfourd's burlesque. Hence, being part of a highly comic speech, Talfourd's topical reference to red republicans may have been only used to enrich the humour of the scene.

Overall, although classical burlesques often alluded to political matters, it is arguable that topical references hardly underscored politically charged undertones. As Hall posits, Burnand's and Talfourd's passing references to red republicans were merely exploited for the comic potential deriving from humorous anachronisms. Likewise, even if Brough's burlesques include more elaborate political references, the comparative analysis of *The Enchanted Isle* and *The Siege of Troy* has suggested how the author's radical beliefs were relegated to the imaginary world of burlesque performances. Therefore, it is ultimately arguable that the language of burlesque, by means of its topical references, enabled the humorous juxtaposition of real and fictional worlds, with no intent to educate or indoctrinate the audience, but rather to amuse them.

### Conclusion

This chapter has acknowledged the comic potential of the language employed in a selection of classical burlesques, focussing on a series of linguistic conventions, such as rhymes, puns, slang, and topical references. Rhyming couplets endowed traditionally

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<sup>105</sup> Talfourd, *Pluto and Proserpine*, p. 29.

<sup>106</sup> 'gooseberry, n.', *OED Online* <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/80031](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/80031)> [accessed 30 November 2021].

<sup>107</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the role played by countrymen in the 1848 revolutions agitating Europe, see Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

heartfelt monologues with a mock-heroic tone. In a similar fashion, the piling up of puns simultaneously complicated and trivialised the meaning of the words uttered on stage by the characters. Medea's, Alcestis', Electra's, and Dido's speeches, which have been regarded by classicists as signalling the genre's sympathy for the causes of strong-minded women, are interspersed with rhymes and puns whose comicality undermines the seriousness of the heroines' claims.

In addition, this chapter has investigated how slang terms and topical references enabled classical burlesques to actualise and domesticate ancient characters into mid-Victorian 'fast' men and women. In the classical burlesques previously analysed, 'fast' men are represented as devoted to the enjoyment of homosocial pastimes and pleasures, such as drinking and engaging in boxing matches, whilst 'fast' women claim their freedom to drink, dress, flirt, and smoke as men would do. On the one hand, the staging of 'fast' characters arguably contributed to titillating the audiences of classical burlesques, as they saw female performers employing slang terms and adopting 'fast' attitudes that the morals of the time would not have sanctioned. On the other hand, the 'fastness' displayed by the characters of classical burlesque implicitly critiqued middle-class respectable manners and behaviours. After Schoch, this chapter has illustrated how the 'fastness' of classical burlesque did not coincide with a serious plea for the subversion of middle-class norms and values governing gendered behaviours. Building on Schoch's work, this chapter has also evaluated the ways in which classical burlesques applied topical references to the political issues of the time, such as the Crimean War and the revolutions sparking in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. Whether limited in scope or more elaborate, political references have emerged as chiefly enabling the humorous juxtaposition of the fictional world of classical burlesques and the material world outside of them, with no explicit intention of indoctrinating the audiences.

In conclusion, the linguistic features examined here significantly impact on the comicality of classical burlesque performances: strong-minded and 'fast' women's verbal claims for independence are continuously ridiculed by means of the rhymes, puns, slang terms, and topical allusions whose amusing effect in performance has been neglected by classical scholars. Hence, although not conforming to the expectations of middle-class respectability, the characters featured in classical burlesques do not seem to propose a serious and politically viable alternative to the mid-Victorian normative gender classification as classicists have argued.

## CONCLUSION

Whilst acknowledging that classical burlesques topically referred to the debates concerning divorce legislation and women's rights happening in the 1850s and 1860s, this section challenges the proto-feminist reading of the genre as subtly supporting strong-minded and 'fast' women's causes, as argued by scholars such as Hall, Macintosh, and Monrès-Gaspar. By focussing on three key areas of investigation – acting style, cross-dressing, and language –, these three chapters highlight how classical scholars possibly neglected the comic impact that classical burlesques had in performance, thus overestimating their serious resonance with the issues of the day including gender politics. Classical scholars may have been misled by the deceptive compliments which compared the intensity of burlesque performers, such as Robson, to that of tragic actors. Yet, contemporary evidence shows that burlesque acting style was founded upon the alternation between droll and pathetic moments, which were not aimed at recreating but intended to parody burlesque sources. Furthermore, both male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressing had a crucial role in parodying the appearance of ancient characters. The male performers who played strong-minded women in classical burlesques endowed them with a grotesque and caricatural appearance. In parallel, the female performers who acted as ancient heroes humorously diminished their physical prowess. Lastly, classical burlesque language, mainly characterised by rhymes, puns, slang, and topical allusions, contributed to setting a comic tone to performances, which arguably undermined the serious significance of strong-minded and 'fast' women's verbal claims to independence.

This section has underlined how classical burlesques may have humorously exposed the hypocrisy of middle-class values, instead of fostering the causes of strong-minded and 'fast' women. The stereotype of respectable middle-class masculinity was ridiculed by foregrounding the 'fast' habits of young swells and men about town. Yet, classical burlesques did not propose 'fastness' as an alternative to decent behaviour. Classical burlesque 'fast' male characters appropriated the habits and pastimes of those young men who belonged to the middle classes and, benefiting from such a privileged status, had the chance to enjoy the pleasures offered by the city of London. The relationship between the 'fastness' displayed on the classical burlesque stage and that of the real swells and men about town who lived at mid-nineteenth century will be further explored in the next section of this thesis, as it informs the investigation of the composition of classical burlesque audiences.

Ultimately, the performances of classical burlesque analysed in this section have emerged as characterised by a comic tone enabled by the combination of distinctively comic acting styles with cross-dressing and linguistic conventions. By conceiving scripts as texts to be performed, and by interrogating additional evidence, this section has questioned classicists' reading of classical burlesque as seriously aligned to contemporary gender politics. Thanks to this shift in focus, classical burlesque's inherent comicality has been re-evaluated and, accordingly, its alleged political engagement has been considerably downplayed.

**SECTION 3**  
**CLASSICAL BURLESQUE AUDIENCES**

**CHAPTER 5**  
**THE COMPOSITION OF CLASSICAL BURLESQUE AUDIENCES**

**Introduction**

This chapter aims at questioning classical scholars' perspectives on the composition of classical burlesque audiences. From the 1990s onwards, scholarship around classical burlesque audiences has unanimously portrayed the genre as attracting lower-middle and working-class patrons, who were allegedly more receptive to the politically radical undertones said to be embedded in performances. Hence, classical burlesques reportedly facilitated the lower classes' access to Greek and Roman antiquity. The methodological shortcomings leading to the formulation of such theses will be discussed in this chapter: instead of substantiating their claims with accumulative evidence, scholars such as Hall and Macintosh rely solely on generic quotations, selected from sources possibly responding to their agenda, which posits classical burlesque political engagement. After having challenged the radicalism of classical burlesques and the progressive political stance of their authors in the previous chapters of this thesis, the composition of classical burlesque audiences is here re-evaluated. In so doing, this chapter builds on the framework developed by Schoch, who considers 'fast' men as the intended patrons of burlesques. As argued in Chapter 4, classical burlesques embraced a 'fast' attitude, transforming ancient heroes and heroines into 'fast' men and women who parodied the standard notion of middle-class respectable masculinity and femininity. Evidence will show that, by virtue of their 'fastness', classical burlesques may have attracted equally 'fast' patrons.

Whilst Schoch thoroughly discards any class-based reception paradigm, this chapter employs class distinctions as a tool to analyse the composition of classical burlesque audiences. Although acknowledging that the mid-Victorian 'fast' gentlemen who may have constituted burlesque target audiences possibly belonged to the middle classes, Schoch argues that the very notion of middle class was not a 'stable and coherent entity', but rather 'a mythologised version of how *all* members of society should conduct their private lives'.<sup>1</sup> He believes that belonging to the middle class was not only a question of

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<sup>1</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 113.

demographics, but also of ethics; in other words, social status may be judged on the basis of people's (dis)belief in middle-class moral values, such as that of respectability. K. Theodore Hoppen's *The Mid-Victorian Generation* offers instead a broader definition of the mid-Victorian class system in Britain, which includes the landed aristocracy, the 'middle sort of people', and the 'workers by hand'.<sup>2</sup> By means of a more detailed investigation of mid-nineteenth-century approximate levels of income and kinds of occupation across the social strata, this chapter interrogates more empirical evidence, such as the price of tickets and cost of transport, as elements which were likely to influence playgoers' access to classical burlesque performances in West End theatres. Such data allow this chapter to go beyond the identification of classical burlesque's *intended* patrons, approaching an evidence-based – albeit relatively speculative – description of the genre's *actual* audiences.

### 5.1 Classical Burlesque Audiences: Existing Narratives

Hall asserts that 'burlesque theatre transcended class barriers'.<sup>3</sup> In this statement, Hall refers to both the cast and audiences of Victorian classical burlesques: firstly, without substantiating her claim with primary evidence, she argues that burlesque actors came from various social classes; secondly, she alludes to the diversity of the burlesque public which, in her opinion, encompassed all strata of society including the proletariat. Specifically, Hall believes that classical burlesque represented a medium through which uneducated spectators belonging to the working and lower-middle classes familiarised themselves with Greek and Roman antiquity. Whilst in terms of performers Hall's statement may be supported by Davis' extensive analysis of the socio-economic background of Victorian actresses, her approach to audiences seems to be much more problematic.<sup>4</sup> As this section seeks to illustrate, Hall fails to demonstrate the presence of the working classes among the patrons of classical burlesques with convincing and accumulative evidence. Nevertheless, her thesis has influenced the works of other classical scholars who have unanimously regarded the genre as potentially demotic. Starting by questioning Hall's methodology, this chapter aims at formulating a new and evidence-based definition of classical burlesque audiences.

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<sup>2</sup> These are the titles that Hoppen chooses for the chapters of his book devoted to the middle and working classes. See Hoppen, pp. 31, 56.

<sup>3</sup> E. Hall, 'Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre', p. 338.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the social background of Victorian actresses see T. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, pp. 3-19.



Firstly, Hall arguably overestimates the incidence of classical burlesques in the repertoires of the East End theatres of London, basing her claim on just a few isolated examples. She remarks that, in 1851, under the management of Benjamin Conquest, the Grecian Saloon staged Wooler's *Jason and Medea*. The venue was in City Road, Shoreditch, and could have accommodated around seven hundred members of the public, possibly belonging to the working and lower-middle classes. In addition, Hall notes that in 1859, sixty thousand people attended the Standard Theatre, in Shoreditch, to witness John Heraud's tragedy *Medea in Corinth*.<sup>5</sup> Hall implies that the success of both Wooler's classical burlesque and Heraud's tragedy testifies to the familiarity of working-class people with plays based on classical contents. As Davis and Emeljanow argue, it is likely that both the Grecian and the Standard Theatre catered for neighbourhood spectators, many of whom may have belonged to the working classes.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, neither of these theatres' repertoires were normally noted for the performance of classical burlesques. According to Henry B. Baker, in the 1830s and 1840s, the Grecian capitalised on 'a good band and chorus, and capable singers and actors to interpret some of the lighter operas of Auber, Boieldieu, and Adolphe Adams'.<sup>7</sup> Then, when Benjamin Conquest started managing the venue in 1851, ballets and *al fresco* entertainments became the chief attractions. In 1857, George Conquest introduced pantomimes and strong melodramas to the repertoire.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, as Allan S. Jackson argues, the regular production pattern of the Standard Theatre during the Douglass' management, which started in 1848, comprised melodramas and Christmas pantomimes.<sup>9</sup> The mounting of an annual opera season complemented the venue's repertoire.<sup>10</sup> Classical burlesques were produced with greater regularity in West End theatres, where the presence of the working classes is much less clearly discernible. As this chapter will demonstrate, there is little evidence of a consistent presence of classical burlesques in East End theatrical repertoires and therefore little to suggest that the working-class theatregoers, who attended East End venues, developed a distinctive taste for this form of entertainment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> E. Hall, 'Classical Burlesque in the Victorian Popular Theatre', pp. 338-339.

<sup>6</sup> Davis and Emeljanow state that 'East End audiences were arguably neighbourhood audiences [but] includ[ed] a wider social mix than many accounts imply'. See Davis and Emeljanow, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Henry B. Baker, *History of the London Stage and its Famous Players (1576-1903)* (London: Routledge, 1904), p. 376.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, *History of the London Stage and its Famous Players*, pp. 377-378.

<sup>9</sup> Allan S. Jackson, *The Standard Theatre of Victorian England* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993), p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> Baker, *History of the London Stage and its Famous Players*, pp. 408-409.

<sup>11</sup> According to the list of classical burlesques compiled by Monrès-Gaspar, only two classical burlesques were performed in East End Theatres in the 1850s and 60s, while three classical burlesques were staged in

Secondly, in her attempt to demonstrate the presence of the working classes in West End theatres on the occasion of classical burlesque performances, Hall largely relies on fairly generic descriptions of audiences realised by nineteenth-century critics and intellectuals. Specifically, she quotes Morley's *Journal of a London Playgoer*, which describes Victorian theatre audiences as including members of the lowest strata of society. As Morley argues, '[t]here is a large half-intelligent population in London that by bold puffing can be got into a theatre. It numbers golden lads and lasses as well as chimney sweeps'.<sup>12</sup> Morley certainly captures the socially mixed nature of Victorian theatrical audiences, on the basis of both gender and class. Nevertheless, he is not specifically referring to burlesque performances either in the East or in the West End of London. Therefore, Morley's generic description fails to provide tangible evidence for the presence of the working classes among classical burlesque patrons.

Equally generic is Hall's mention of an engraving realised by 'Phiz' in the 1850s, which illustrates the social stratification of theatrical audiences in the stalls, boxes, and galleries of a theatre.<sup>13</sup> Lacking any particular connection to burlesque, such a document hardly supports her thesis. In fact, Hall may be referring to an engraving published in the *Illustrated Times* in 1855, which represented a Boxing Day pantomime audience (Figure 17).

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the South of London. See Monrès-Gaspar, 'List of Representative Nineteenth-Century Classical Burlesques', in *Victorian Classical Burlesques*, pp. 46-48.

<sup>12</sup> E. Hall, 'Classical Burlesque in the Victorian Popular Theatre', p. 339. The quotation is taken from Morley, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> E. Hall, 'Classical Burlesque in the Victorian Popular Theatre', p. 339.



GALLERY BOXES; PIT—(DESIGNED BY PERU)  
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Figure 17. 'Christmas Pantomimes', *Illustrated Times*, 22 December 1855, p. 481

The engraving was accompanied by a commentary written by Yates, who describes the arrival at the theatre of different social groups. Yates juxtaposes the chaotic and 'confused mass of shirt-sleeves, fustians, and belcher handkerchiefs, of whistles and cat-

calls, screams, yells and fights'<sup>14</sup> coming from the galleries to the polished appearance and behaviour of the old gentlemen, swells, and children sitting in the boxes. In the pit, Yates imagines that a shopkeeper's family manifested their middle-class antagonism by laughing at the downfalls of the pantomime characters who represented the British authorities. As Jim Davis argues, both Phiz's illustration and Yates' description follow nineteenth-century formulaic accounts of audiences: while hinting at pantomime's cross-class appeal, the stereotypical social stratification of audiences also betrays the condescending and containing tone of the authors.<sup>15</sup> In the light of this, not only does Hall perhaps mistakenly equate pantomime audiences with burlesque audiences, but she also fails to consider the stereotyping process affecting the descriptions of audiences in the Victorian age.

Finally, Hall considers the Adelphi Theatre audiences as exemplifying the cross-class appeal of classical burlesques by arguing that:

[t]he Adelphi Theatre was associated with raucous burlesques, popularly known as 'Adelphi Screammers', and with the unruly fans of Mr Wright, a drag actor specialising in transvestite roles such as Medea in Mark Lemon's *Medea; or, A Libel on the Lady of Colchis* (1856).<sup>16</sup>

Hall seems to suggest that the vulgar nature of the entertainments offered at the Adelphi, and especially of Wright's performance style, attracted working-class spectators. In order to support her claim, Hall refers to James E. Ritchie's *The Night Side of London*, where the stereotypical Adelphi audience is described as enjoying morally objectionable performances.<sup>17</sup> Hall uncritically appropriates Ritchie's patronising tone and automatically associates the coarseness of the burlesques produced at the Adelphi with working-class patrons. Rather than relying on an evidence-based argument, Hall's conclusion seems to be a mere *assumption*: the Adelphi theatrical performances might have attracted spectators belonging to the lowest strata of society, but Hall's remark on the vulgarity of burlesque fails to corroborate this thesis.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Christmas Pantomimes', *Illustrated Times*, 22 December 1855, p. 482. Also quoted in Jim Davis, 'Boxing Day', in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History*, ed. by Tracy Davis and Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 13-31 (p. 26).

<sup>15</sup> J. Davis, 'Boxing Day', pp. 26-27.

<sup>16</sup> E. Hall, 'Classical Burlesque in the Victorian Popular Theatre', p. 338.

<sup>17</sup> Ritchie compares the entertainments staged at Wilton's Music Hall with those offered by the Adelphi Theatre: the former were 'on the score of morality' not 'so objectionable as those I have seen applauded by an Adelphi audience'. See James E. Ritchie, *The Night Side of London* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1869), pp. 174-175.

Overall, the methodology that Hall adopts to investigate the composition of classical burlesque audiences is questionable. She almost exclusively relies on what Lawrence Stone terms ‘strings of selective quotations from favourable sources’<sup>18</sup> and ignores the quantitative data that might inform a more accurate description of classical burlesque spectators. Despite her flawed methodology, Hall’s assumptions have influenced subsequent scholarship in the field of classical burlesques. In her study of the *Medea* burlesques, Macintosh states that ‘along with melodrama, farce, and pantomime, [burlesque] shared a relatively broadly based audience, which was in some ways more open to new ideas than the more socially homogeneous, more solidly bourgeois, audience of the last two decades of the century’.<sup>19</sup> In order to support her claim, Macintosh references Simon Trussler’s *Cambridge Illustrated History of British Theatre*: Trussler argues that, by the 1880s the West End theatres attracted a ‘deeply bourgeois audience which, scornful of the hearty affirmations of melodrama, had come to prefer the enervated emotional shorthand of the “society” style’.<sup>20</sup> From this remark, Macintosh seems to infer that the audiences who attended the West End theatres – whose repertoire included burlesque – prior to the 1880s were more socially diverse and, accordingly, more receptive to politically progressive contents. Like Hall, Macintosh does not provide any accumulative evidence to confirm the social stratification or political attitudes of classical burlesque public, thus drawing conclusions from unjustified assumptions.

The idea of the cross-class appeal of classical burlesques has elicited responses from other classical scholars. Shany Fiske, in *Heretical Hellenics*, briefly references Hall’s work when stating that classical burlesques familiarised a ‘lay audience with Greek tragedy’.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Monrès-Gaspar offers a more extensive interpretation of Hall’s thesis. As previously observed, in the introduction to *Victorian Classical Burlesques*, she envisages a reception scheme according to which the different social strata of Victorian burlesque audiences had different degrees of understanding. If the educated spectators were likely to recognise classical burlesques’ Greek and Roman hypotexts, the less learned members of the public might have been more amused by the topical references and humorous sketches embedded in the performances.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 18. The sentence is also quoted by Davis and Emeljanow, p. 228.

<sup>19</sup> Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’, pp. 84-85.

<sup>20</sup> Simon Trussler, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 256

<sup>21</sup> Shany Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism: Women Writers, Ancient Greece, and the Victorian Popular Imagination* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> Monrès-Gaspar, ‘Why Classical Burlesque?’, pp. 11-12.



At the same time, Monrès-Gaspar suggests that a basic familiarity with classical mythology was more widespread than generally acknowledged. Specifically, she argues that the social classes who had no access to education might have familiarised themselves with classical antiquity by means of cheap publications and other popular forms of entertainment. For example, Monrès-Gaspar notes that the *Penny Magazine* published an account of Aeschylus' tragedies whilst, more generally, mythological dictionaries provided their readers with summaries of Greek and Roman myths.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the equestrian entertainments based on the *Iliad* offered at Astley's Amphitheatre were likely to have been witnessed also by the working classes.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, she argues, 'burlesque audiences covered the entire social spectrum'.<sup>25</sup> Despite being more nuanced, Monrès-Gaspar's assumptions concerning the socially mixed audience of classical burlesque are largely derived from Hall's work. Monrès-Gaspar merely discusses the diffusion of classical knowledge, without providing evidence as to whether and, perhaps, why the lower social classes witnessed classical burlesques.

Davies develops a similar argument in *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, but she offers a more in-depth investigation of both equestrian and theatrical burlesque audiences. Firstly, drawing on a range of nineteenth-century and modern sources, Davies advocates the cross-class appeal of the equestrian entertainments staged at Astley's Amphitheatre. She repurposes Bratton's distinction between circus' 'simple' and 'sophisticated' spectators to describe the diverse equestrian burlesque audiences: according to Davies, the former were not acquainted with classical mythology and enjoyed the spectacles staged at Astley's; the latter were educated and appreciated burlesque references to their classical sources.<sup>26</sup> Yet, education was not necessarily synonymous with a higher social status:

[t]he "simple" spectator could well be lower class and illiterate, and the "sophisticated participant" a classically educated gentleman, but it is worth recalling that autodidacts who had read some accounts of Homer or Virgil, perhaps in a *Penny Magazine*, may well have participated in a more "sophisticated" manner than upper-class spectators enjoying a raucous evening out.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Specifically, she refers to Lemprière's dictionary and Ellen J. Millingtons' *Characteristics of the Gods of Greece*. Monrès-Gaspar, 'Why Classical Burlesque?', pp. 10-11, 52.

<sup>24</sup> She refers, for example, to John Robert O'Neil's *The Siege of Troy* (1858). See Laura Monrès-Gaspar, 'Epic Cassandras in Performance, 1795-1868', in *Epic Performances from the Middle Ages into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Fiona Macintosh, Justine McConnell and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 509-523 (p. 516).

<sup>25</sup> Monrès-Gaspar, 'Parodying Helen', p. 16. A similar view is articulated also in Monrès-Gaspar, *Cassandra the Fortune-Teller*, p. 156.

<sup>26</sup> Davies is inspired by Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, p. 61. See Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>27</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 192.

Like Monrès-Gaspar, Davies claims that cheap publications like *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* and the *Penny Magazine* allowed the literate members of the working classes to gain the necessary classical knowledge to understand a burlesque.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, from Davies' perspective, the style of the playbills advertising Astley's burlesques signals the venue's willingness to cater for both categories of patrons. She notes how classical references and puns reliant on literary knowledge are in smaller font, so as to be read by 'sophisticated' patrons, whilst spectacular elements are advertised in bold and capital letters in order to attract the 'simpler' members of the public.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, certain performance reviews summarised the plot of the classical sources inspiring the burlesques, while others presupposed their readers' familiarity with the classics. In Davies' opinion, 'reviewers wrestling with the thorny problem of how much of the plot to disclose were also articulating, via knowledge of classical mythology, social differences in education'.<sup>30</sup>

Although offering a detailed investigation of its audiences, Davies fails to consider that Astley's Amphitheatre constituted quite a unique venue in the Victorian age. Firstly, Astley's repertoire chiefly capitalised on equestrian military spectacles which, despite following a dramatic plotline, were largely characterised by combat scenes fought on horseback.<sup>31</sup> Capitalising on such spectacular entertainments, the classical burlesques staged at Astley's cannot be equated with the standard classical burlesques represented in London's theatres. In addition, it is arguable that Astley's repertoire did not regularly include classical burlesques. In her 'List of Burlesques', Davies acknowledges that only two epic burlesques were staged at Astley's Amphitheatre, namely the anonymous *The Siege of Troy; or, The Giant Horse of Sinon: A Grand Spectacle* (1833, re-staged in 1840) and Hugo Vamp's – pseudonym of John Robert O'Neill – *The Siege of Troy; or, The Miss-Judgment of Paris in Three Acts* (1854).<sup>32</sup> Moreover, reviewing a performance of *Jupiter's Decree*, another classical burlesque staged at Astley's in 1853, a journalist writing for *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper* observed that:

[w]e have nothing to say against the present burlesque [...] but we do hope that Astley's will return to the same style of drama for which it has so long been celebrated. At Astley's we only want Astley dramas, and we do not care about seeing Lyceum pieces produced

<sup>28</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 193.

<sup>29</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 178.

<sup>30</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 186.

<sup>31</sup> According to Assael, between 1820 and 1860, Astley's Amphitheatre chiefly capitalised on the staging of equestrian plays. See Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Davies, 'List of Epic Burlesques', in *Victorian Epic Burlesques*, pp. 270-271.

there, even though they be mounted on horseback. We wish every theatre would attend to the specialty of entertainment which it can execute the best, and which the class of people who visit it appreciate the most.<sup>33</sup>

Not only does the reviewer imply that classical burlesques were rarely staged at Astley's, but he also suggests that, when they were performed, classical burlesques were chiefly appreciated by the audiences on account of the equestrian spectacle embedded in performance. As such, Astley's repertoire can hardly be examined alongside that of burlesque theatres such as the Strand.

The cross-class appeal of Astley's Amphitheatre, as theorised by Bratton and Davies, is equally linked to the venue's unique status. Despite being located in Lambeth, the prices of tickets to attend Astley's Amphitheatre were relatively high if compared to those of other neighbourhood theatres. Whilst for the performance of *The Siege of Troy; or, The Giant Horse of Sinon* Astley's charged 4s for boxes, 2s for the pit, and 1s for the gallery, theatres like the Victoria and the Surrey charged respectively 2s, 1s, and 6d for boxes, pit, and gallery.<sup>34</sup> As Dickens illustrates in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Astley's may have been a venue for special occasions for those spectators with limited income.<sup>35</sup> Hence, although Astley's arguably attracted a socially mixed public, it can hardly be considered as representative of the typical stratification of burlesque audiences.

As far as theatrical burlesque audiences are concerned, Davies admittedly seeks to combine the approaches to audience research developed in the fields of classical reception and theatre history. For this reason, she questions Hall's simplistic assumptions about classical burlesque demotic vocation and recognises the value of Schoch's study of Shakespearian burlesques. Davies believes that Schoch crucially posits the necessity of audiences' 'knowingness': for burlesques to be successful, the audiences needed to have a knowledge of their original sources to gain a general understanding of the plays.<sup>36</sup> Yet, as Davies highlights, Schoch also states that burlesque multifaceted layers of meaning

<sup>33</sup> 'PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS', *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, 18 September 1853, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Both price ranges refer to the 1830s. See Davis and Emeljanow, p. 24 and Playbill, *The Siege of Troy or The Giant Horse of Sinon*, Astley's Amphitheatre, London, 29 April 1833 (Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum). Davis and Emeljanow also note that on the playbills which advertised Astley's performances Omnibuses and trains were often mentioned. This signals the venue's reliance on relatively affluent spectators living outside Lambeth. See Davis and Emeljanow, pp. 14-15.

<sup>35</sup> The servants Kit, Barbara, and Kit's little brother Jacob enjoy an extraordinary night of entertainment at Astley's accompanied by their mothers on a holiday. See Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Elizabeth M. Brennan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 304-306.

<sup>36</sup> Davies calls into question Schoch's approach to the competency of audiences in Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 208. Schoch illustrates this concept in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 12.



were ‘never fully intelligible’.<sup>37</sup> Hence, she argues that different social strata of society could have enjoyed classical burlesques in different ways, according to their specific areas of ‘knowingness’. For instance, some spectators might have been familiar with the classics but not with opera and vice versa. This allowed the socially diverse members of the public to laugh at different humorous references, whilst witnessing the same play.

As with equestrian burlesques, playbills, performance reviews, and theatrical burlesque scripts emphasised the different layers of interpretation available to spectators and the different areas of knowledge they reworked. For example, Davies shows how Brough’s *The Siege of Troy* not only humorously rewrites Homer’s *Iliad*, but also parodies Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. Similarly, Burnand’s *Dido* features The Talking Fish as a character. Burnand alluded to a specific show staged in London in 1859, where a trained seal named Jenny allegedly spoke a few words before its public.<sup>38</sup> By virtue of their multiple sources and topical references, Davies defines classical burlesques as collages, whose composite nature attracted diverse patrons.<sup>39</sup> Hence, although Davies attempts to question Hall’s thesis, she ends up developing a similar argument, as both scholars assert the socially mixed nature of classical burlesque public.

Despite her attempt to incorporate the observations of theatre historians into her discussion, I argue that Davies doubly misinterprets Schoch’s work. Firstly, she claims that Shakespearian and classical burlesques were different in nature: if the former had a single and distinct source – namely one of Shakespeare’s plays – the latter had a greater number of influences. Hence, in Davies’ view, classical burlesque, being more diverse in content, cannot be interpreted following Schoch’s guidelines.<sup>40</sup> However, Schoch highlights the variety of sources inspiring Shakespearian burlesques. For example, he notes that the ghost of Hamlet’s father is compared to Pepper’s ghost in the anonymous burlesque *A Thin Slice of Ham Let!*.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, in Halliday’s *Romeo and Juliet Travestie*, Romeo sings a parody of Ernesto’s serenade in Donizetti’s *Don Pasquale*.<sup>42</sup> These few examples already illustrate that Shakespearian burlesques seem to be more varied in content than Davies acknowledges. Consequently, as my analysis will further clarify, it

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<sup>37</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 208. Schoch treats such matter in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, pp. 236, 249-250.

<sup>39</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 224.

<sup>40</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 208.

<sup>41</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 34-36.

<sup>42</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 15.

seems hardly possible to consider Shakespearian and classical burlesque as separate subgenres.<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, Davies arguably misunderstands the notion of confusion which, according to Schoch, is entailed by the experience of witnessing a burlesque performance. In effect, when Schoch asserts that burlesques were ‘never completely intelligible’<sup>44</sup>, he specifies that this lack of understanding merely related to the quickfire usage of topical references, puns, and slang. He never asserts that Shakespearian burlesque spectators did not follow the plays’ plots and development. In fact, he believes that it was crucial, for burlesques to be successful, that spectators worked out at least the main humorous points made by the plays.

Not only does Davies refer to classical burlesque’s *actual* audience, but she also argues that classical burlesque’s *target* audience was socially mixed, by virtue of its multiple layers of interpretation.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, Schoch specifies that the target audience of Shakespearian burlesque was clearly identifiable with the mid-Victorian men about town, who could have understood all the multiple references embedded in burlesque performances.<sup>46</sup> In effect, mid-Victorian men about town were arguably familiar with most of the areas of knowledge encompassed by Shakespearian burlesques (e. g. Shakespeare’s plays, operas, and melodramas, but also music hall songs, Blackface Minstrelsy, as well as the socio-political developments and the ‘fast’ life of the age). Although inspired by Schoch, Davies ignores the existence of a similar class of intended spectators who may have possessed, if not all, a large part of the pre-requisite foreknowledge needed to interpret classical burlesques.

The work of all the classical scholars examined so far reinstates Hall’s initial thesis: with varying degrees of depth and analytical rigour, Macintosh, Fiske, Monrès-Gaspar, and Davies claim that classical burlesques appealed to different strata of Victorian society, also encompassing the working classes. Richardson is the only classical scholar who offers a rather different perspective. Focussing on the performance of Brough’s *Medea*, Richardson states that the majority of the Olympic audiences corresponded to

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<sup>43</sup> As the following section of this chapter will show, Joanne Cormac adopts a similarly limiting perspective, as she studies exclusively operatic burlesques. See Joanne Cormac, ‘From Satirical Piece to Commercial Product: The Mid-Victorian Opera Burlesque and its Bourgeois Audience’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 142 (2017), 69-108.

<sup>44</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 216.

<sup>46</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 37. It is also true, as Schoch makes clear, that the piling up of too many puns or topical references, sometimes poorly delivered by actors, may have resulted in the confusion of spectators. Yet, the target audience’s disorientation was only momentary and did not affect the overall understanding of burlesque humour.

Britain's elite. For this reason, he believes that what he sees as the politically radical undertones of Brough's burlesque were not readily understood. As noted in a previous section of this thesis, the privileged members of the public appreciated the performance of Robson, laughed at the burlesque, but did not conceive *Medea* as a piece of political theatre.<sup>47</sup> However, Richardson does not provide any empirical evidence to substantiate his claim about the Olympic Theatre audiences and argues for a component of political radicalism that my analysis of classical burlesques has already questioned.

This section has exposed the methodological shortcomings of classical scholars who approach the issue of classical burlesque audiences' composition and reception. It has shed light on the assumptions and misunderstandings that have permeated scholarship on classical burlesque since the turn of the twentieth century. Although not specifically engaging with classical burlesque audiences, theatre historians have developed an alternative historical narrative to describe the composition of the theatrical burlesque public, which the following section seeks to outline.

## 5.2 Victorian Burlesque Audiences: A Different Perspective

As Booth notes, Victorian burlesque as a theatrical genre was neither esteemed by contemporary critics nor extensively studied by modern historians before the 1980s. Being a light form of entertainment, burlesque was generally dismissed as meaningless and vulgar, or totally neglected. The lack of scholarly attention devoted to Victorian burlesque in the field of theatre history means that considerations on the composition of its audiences are inevitably sparse. Booth himself merely alludes to the fact that burlesques were 'almost entirely aimed at the relatively educated middle classes'<sup>48</sup>, without offering evidence to corroborate his argument. Yet, since the turn of the twenty-first century, some scholars have engaged in more in-depth investigations of the kind of public Victorian burlesques might have attracted.

Schoch is the first theatre historian to deal extensively with the issue of Victorian burlesque audiences. Crucially, Schoch distinguishes between competent and incompetent burlesque spectators:

[c]ompetent spectators possessed sufficient knowledge of the burlesque's 'sources', whether plays, novels, poems, operas, fables, history books, or contemporary events. Such knowledge enabled them to appreciate not just the manifest amusement of the burlesque's

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<sup>47</sup> Edmund Richardson, 'Political Writing and Class', in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, ed. by Norman Vance and Jennifer Wallace, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), iv: 1790-1880, pp. 103-129.

<sup>48</sup> Booth, *Prefaces*, p. 150.

catchy songs, dances, and ‘gags’ but also, and more importantly, the cut and thrust of its pointedly topical parody. By contrast, incompetent spectators – that is, those who lacked the requisite foreknowledge – would be unable to fully appreciate a burlesque *as* a burlesque.<sup>49</sup>

From Schoch’s perspective, the members of the public who had no knowledge of the sources of burlesques might have appreciated its humorous sketches, songs, and dances, without recognising the parodic nature of the performances. Yet, Schoch believes that burlesque would not have survived throughout the nineteenth century merely on account of its songs and dances. As previously noted, Schoch argues that there must have been a ‘critical mass of knowledgeable spectators’<sup>50</sup> who witnessed burlesque performances and decoded their parodic meaning, thus ensuring the long-lasting appreciation of the genre.

At the same time, Schoch acknowledges that, when burlesques were performed, ‘there was never any original moment of complete spectatorial mastery’.<sup>51</sup> Specific elements embedded in burlesque performances, such as puns and topical references, may sometimes have eluded the understanding of the public. Even the most competent of burlesque spectators might have been unable to follow the piling up of non-stop puns or references to Victorian daily life, which were crammed by burlesque authors into their plays. In addition, Schoch argues that burlesque actors were not always capable of delivering complex lines with clarity, contributing to the sense of momentary confusion experienced by the audiences.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, as previously observed, Schoch never questions the audiences’ broad familiarity with burlesque sources. In his opinion, although baffled by its puzzles and riddles, Victorian audiences were generally capable of detecting the general meaning of a burlesque and at least some of its parodic references.

After having established that competency distinguished the majority of burlesque spectators, Schoch attempts to identify the class of people who possessed the requisite foreknowledge to qualify as competent members of burlesque audiences. In accordance with Booth’s thesis, Schoch acknowledges that, in general, London’s educated middle

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<sup>49</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, p. xxix. The same distinction is made in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>50</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxx.

<sup>51</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxv. The same point is illustrated in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 37.

<sup>52</sup> Even though some performers might have been inexperienced, certain theatre companies specialised in burlesque acting and, specifically, in the delivery of puns. The Strand company, for instance, was regarded as ‘a sort of stage rifle corps for firing off puns; every verbal has not at all times its billet, but of the multitude of missiles hurled at the heads of people during a Byronic burlesque, many fall above below or beyond the immediate comprehension, and the victory of the evening is generally achieved by the comparative few that go straight to the mark’. See Henry B. Baker, *The London Stage: Its History and Traditions from 1576 to 1888*, 2 vols (London: W. H. Allen & Co, 1889), II, 135.

classes might have been familiar with the areas of knowledge parodied in Victorian burlesques. Yet, he also specifies that the middle classes were not a uniform social category. Therefore, they could not have received burlesque performances in a uniform and distinctive way.<sup>53</sup> Conversely, Schoch believes that the social category of ‘men about town’ was much more clearly identifiable as the target audience of Victorian theatrical burlesques. The men about town who populated London in the mid-Victorian age are defined by Schoch as young men who ‘had professional careers, disposable incomes, leisure time, and no domestic responsibility’.<sup>54</sup> According to the *Era*, such gentlemen ‘float(ed) about town after nine o’clock cogitating where they shall invest their odd shilling in exchange for a little fun’.<sup>55</sup> They attended public places of leisure, such as song-and-supper rooms, clubs, and, chiefly, the London theatres. On account of their ‘insatiable desire for pleasure’<sup>56</sup>, men about town are said to have embraced a ‘fast’ lifestyle. As previously noted, Schoch claims that Victorian theatrical burlesque appropriated the same ‘fastness’ displayed by the men about town of the age, insofar as characters identified themselves with ‘fast’ men or swells, who drank beer in taverns, engaged in boxing matches, and enjoyed smoking.<sup>57</sup>

As burlesque scripts and performances featured ‘fast’ characters, Schoch believes that the genre explicitly catered for the same social category as its intended patrons. Mid-Victorian swells and men about town would have certainly recognised the references to London’s ‘fast’ life and, given their social status, they were likely to have had access to education, which familiarised them with burlesque sources. In addition, Schoch draws on demographic data to corroborate his thesis: from the 1850s, middle-class families moved from the West End and City of London to the suburban areas of Islington, Highgate, Clapham, and Richmond. The relocation of families entailed that single young men moved to the central areas of London, within walking distance from the West End theatres. Schoch hypothesizes that these young men might have been the educated sons of the wealthy families who relocated to the suburbs.<sup>58</sup> Having neither domestic responsibilities nor the desire to entertain at home – as they generally lived in chambers

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<sup>53</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxi.

<sup>54</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 134.

<sup>55</sup> ‘THEATRES, &c.’, *Era*, 12 March 1854, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxii.

<sup>57</sup> Schoch illustrates the ‘fastness’ of Shakespearian burlesque characters in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 118-135. He applies the same thesis to describe the characters featuring in burlesques of melodramas in Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxii.

<sup>58</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxii. The same argument is developed in Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 134.

and lodgings – men about town may well have attended the theatres on the occasion of burlesque performances.

Despite showing how men about town may have patronised theatrical burlesques, Schoch is careful not to assume that they constituted the totality of burlesque spectators. He illustrates, for instance, that the slang terms included in burlesque scripts were undoubtedly understood not only by ‘fast’ men, but by a larger portion of people.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Schoch remarks that the burlesque depiction of boxing matches did not require first-hand experience of prize-fighting. The readers of *Bell’s Life in London*, for example, might have familiarised themselves with such a practice thanks to the descriptions included in the columns of the newspaper.<sup>60</sup> Although broadly acknowledging some variety in terms of audience composition, Schoch emphasises how burlesque scripts and performances deliberately wished to ground their spectators in the precise social actuality of London’s ‘fast’ life: Victorian theatrical burlesque appropriated the language and experiences of men about town, thus *constructing* its audience as a ‘collective of fast young men’.<sup>61</sup>

Being focussed on the description of burlesque’s *target* audience, Schoch arguably overlooks the possible variety of burlesque *actual* audiences both in terms of class and of gender. His passing references to the diversity of burlesque spectators seem not to be supported by substantial and accumulative evidence. Yet, as the following paragraphs will show, the evidence gathered for this research suggests the presence of some members of the lower classes and of women at burlesque performances. Firstly, Schoch’s adoption of the term ‘swell’ to indicate the core audience of burlesque is ambiguous in itself, as it delineates both the affluent young men devoted to a mildly dissipated lifestyle and the lower-class men who attempted to imitate the swell’s behaviour. Both the ‘real’ and the ‘fake swell’ might have witnessed burlesque performances. In addition, this research will take into account a series of factors which potentially demonstrate the presence of female spectators among the public for classical burlesque.

The partiality of Schoch’s work has been acknowledged by Joanne Cormac, who regards his description of burlesque audiences as too simplistic an interpretation of a more ‘complicated story’.<sup>62</sup> Cormac notes that Schoch does not account either for geographical or chronological variations in the target audiences for burlesque throughout the nineteenth

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<sup>59</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 131.

<sup>60</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>61</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 131.

<sup>62</sup> Cormac, p. 74.

century. Hence, she attempts to formulate a more organic description of burlesque intended spectators. Cormac chooses three operatic burlesques, performed at three different London theatres (namely the St James's, the Prince of Wales's, and the Gaiety) across the 1860s to illustrate how their musical scores signalled their distinctive appeal to the Victorian middle classes.

Firstly, according to Cormac, Buckingham's *Lucrezia Borgia*, staged at the St James's Theatre in 1860, manifested the middle-class appeal of operatic burlesque as it featured a fairly large portion of operatic numbers taken from the original source. Thus, Buckingham's burlesque presupposed the audience's familiarity with Italian opera.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, Cormac highlights how Byron's *Little Don Giovanni*, performed in 1865 at the Prince of Wales's, shows less reliance on the musical score of the original. The burlesque musical programme mixed operatic music with parlour songs, minstrel songs and music hall songs. As such, Cormac argues that the musical programme of *Little Don Giovanni* catered for 'a new heterogeneous, mass public that was nonetheless essentially middle class'.<sup>64</sup> In effect, from Cormac's perspective, Byron's burlesque heavily relies on parlour songs, which capitalised on the middle-class habit of domestic music-making. According to Cormac, the music in Byron's *Little Don Giovanni* 'drew on the expectation that its audiences would own a piano'.<sup>65</sup> In effect, domestic music-making was a pastime chiefly enjoyed by those who were affluent enough to afford a musical instrument and by those who had enough free time to be devoted to music. Finally, Gilbert's *Robert the Devil*, staged in 1868 at the Gaiety Theatre, is even less reliant on the original source than the two burlesques briefly examined above. Most of the music of *Robert the Devil* was taken from recently premiered French operettas, interspersed with operatic and folk songs. According to Cormac, the musical score of Gilbert's *Robert the Devil* distinctively wished to advertise the new French operettas staged at the Gaiety as 'fashionable products which the bourgeoisie might like to consume'.<sup>66</sup>

In order to demonstrate the middle-class appeal of operatic burlesque, Cormac almost exclusively relies on burlesque musical scores, except for passing references to the price of tickets, theatres locations, and sparse quotations from performance reviews. She arguably fails to substantiate her claims with more empirical evidence specifically related to each of the three venues she discusses, developing a narrative which seems largely

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<sup>63</sup> Cormac, pp. 87-94.

<sup>64</sup> Cormac, p. 98.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Cormac, p. 105.

speculative. In addition, her narrow focus on operatic burlesque presupposes a differentiation of this subgenre from other types of burlesques which is not always clearly observable. In fact, in his introduction to *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, Schoch treats burlesque as a single theatrical genre, regardless of its source of inspiration. Building on Schoch's approach, the following section of this chapter will be specifically devoted to highlighting the impossibility of classifying burlesques – and their audiences – on the basis of their sources of inspiration.

Despite these controversial points, Cormac's study is an invaluable addition to the field of research on theatrical burlesque audiences. Cormac identifies a middle-class-based target audience to whom burlesque directly spoke, highlighting the signals of *demarcation* (crucially, burlesque use of music) which differentiate burlesque performances from working-class forms of entertainment. Although rejecting any strictly class-based assumption, Schoch equally identifies a specific target audience for theatrical burlesques, namely the Victorian men about town, who belonged to the middle classes but were not particularly attached to the notion of respectability which normally characterised their social status. By focussing on the analysis of burlesque scripts and performative elements, both scholars highlight the middle-class appeal of burlesque while implicitly questioning the assumptions of those who described classical burlesques as intentionally speaking to a socially mixed or working-class public. This chapter will be informed by both Schoch's and Cormac's approaches to burlesque performances, in its search for elements which might illustrate classical burlesque willingness to target middle-class patrons, whilst attempting to formulate an empirically informed description of classical burlesque actual audiences.

### **5.3 Is There a Classical Burlesque Audience?**

As the previous sections of this chapter have shown, there is a tendency among scholars to categorise Victorian burlesques – and, accordingly, differentiate their audiences – on the basis of their sources. While scholars like Hall, Macintosh, Monròs-Gaspar, and Davies focus exclusively on classical burlesques and their socially mixed public, Cormac deals solely with operatic burlesques, which, from her perspective, had a distinctive middle-class appeal. However, the majority of the aforementioned scholars do not explicitly engage in discussions concerning the separate nature of burlesque subgenres and their audiences, building their studies on implicit and perhaps arbitrary distinctions. Davies offers instead a justification for her choice: from her point of view,



classical burlesques are substantially different from others, as they collapse the distinction between primary and secondary sources. She argues that, whilst being based on a Greek or Roman main source, classical burlesques incorporate parodies of additional sources, like Shakespearian tragedies and melodramas, which are as central to the development of the dramatic action of burlesques as the classical hypotexts. On the other hand, Davies argues that Shakespearian burlesques parodied a clearly identifiable source text, while embedding passing topical references within their performance.<sup>67</sup> Thus, in her opinion, the greater variety of classical burlesque's sources of inspiration signals the subgenre's willingness to attract a public which was more socially stratified than that for Shakespearian burlesque.

As previously noted, Schoch sheds a different light on Victorian burlesque and on the composition of its audiences. Although focussing on Shakespearian burlesques in *Not Shakespeare*, Schoch provides a general definition for the genre, regardless of its sources. Theatrical burlesques qualify as such because of a shared set of characteristics (namely the rhymed couplets parodying an original text; the humorous re-enactment of classic scenes; the transposition of characters from high to low; the puns; the topical references; and the inclusion of various kinds of music) which remained constant throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup> Schoch's willingness to treat burlesque as a unique theatrical genre is manifested in his introduction to the anthology *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, where five burlesques based on melodramas are presented as functioning like the Shakespearian ones. With their parodies, puns, topical references, and music, Victorian burlesques equally satirised the vogue for sensation melodramas as for Shakespeare's tragedies.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, according to Schoch, Victorian burlesque as a theatrical genre displayed an irreverent disregard for the middle-class value of respectability. As a result, they all catered for 'fast' young spectators, no matter what their subject was.

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<sup>67</sup> Davies claims that one crucial difference between Shakespearian and classical burlesques is that 'although both "contest an idea", whether of Shakespeare or the Classics, the former draw on original texts and performances of these as sources. The latter, in contrast, must exploit a more diffuse corpus. This comprised not only Homer's and Virgil's epics, whether in the original Greek and Latin or in translation, but also murkier mythological traditions epitomised by Classical Dictionaries such as Lemprière's and even a variety of contemporary performances (including of Shakespeare's plays)'. See Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 208.

<sup>68</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup> Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, pp. xv-xvi. In order to demonstrate Schoch's approach to Victorian burlesque as a single theatrical genre, it might be useful to note that the list of representative burlesques included in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques* encompasses classical, operatic, melodramatic and Shakespearian burlesques. See Schoch, 'Representative Victorian Burlesques', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, pp. 246-251.

There are several factors which arguably support the adoption of Schoch's holistic approach to the analysis of Victorian burlesque variants and their audiences. Firstly, all kinds of burlesque seem to cross-reference a range of source texts or performances. As Davies rightly notes, classical burlesques intermingle references to several serious sources in their scripts and performances. As previously noted, Brough's *Siege of Troy* generally parodied Homer's *Iliad*, but also humorously reworked Troilus and Cressida's love story as narrated by Shakespeare.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in Talfourd's *Atalanta*, the dialogue between Atalanta and Hippomenes taking place in Scene VI is humorously constructed as *Romeo and Juliet*'s balcony scene.<sup>71</sup>

However, classical burlesque is by no means the only sub-genre to exploit the humorous potential enabled by the parody of different sources. The variety of inspirations for melodramatic burlesques is exemplified, for instance, by Burnand's *Very Latest Edition of Black Eye'd Susan*, which premiered at the New Royalty Theatre on the 29 November 1866. Although mainly parodying Douglas Jerrold's nautical melodrama *Black Eye'd Susan* (1829), Burnand's burlesque features in its prologue mythological characters like sea nymphs and the god Neptune, who are anachronistically disturbed by the installation of the Atlantic cable.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, Neptune partially appropriates the words of the ghost of Old Hamlet when describing the hair of Wirena, the young woman loved by the character who personifies the Atlantic cable. According to Neptune, Wirena's hair is 'like quills upon th' *electric* porcupine'.<sup>73</sup> Shakespearian (mis-)quotations are also included in operatic burlesques. In Byron's *The Maid and The Magpie* (Strand, 1858), for example, Fernando mentions that he should have met his daughter Ninetta at 'the very witching time of night / when churchyards yawn'<sup>74</sup>, appropriating the words of Hamlet.

As previously noted, Shakespearian burlesques humorously referred to opera in their performances. For example, in *Perdita* (Lyceum, 1856), a burlesque written by William Brough satirising Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, the fate of the young Perdita is

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<sup>70</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, pp. 235-236.

<sup>71</sup> Talfourd, *Atalanta*, pp. 31-35.

<sup>72</sup> As Schoch explains, the prologue of Burnand's burlesque is set in the Atlantic Ocean and humorously alludes to 'the recent completion of the first transatlantic telegraph cable by the Anglo-American Telegraph Company'. See Francis Burnand, 'The Very Latest Edition of Black Eye'd Susan', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, pp. 95-149 (pp. 98, 102-105).

<sup>73</sup> See Burnand, 'The Very Latest Edition of Black Eye'd Susan', p. 103 and William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), I. 5. 19-20 ('And each particular hair to stand an end / Like quills upon a fretful porpentine').

<sup>74</sup> Henry J. Byron, *The Maid and the Magpie; or, The Fatal Spoon* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1858), p. 26.

paralleled to that of Arline, the protagonist of William Balfe's opera *The Bohemian Girl*.<sup>75</sup> Shakespearian burlesques also referred to contemporary forms of entertainment. For instance, the character of Prospero in the Broughs' *The Enchanted Isle* is presented as 'the wizard of the North'.<sup>76</sup> The description humorously hints at the conjuring shows performed by the renowned John Anderson.

One might argue that Shakespearian burlesques did not humorously reference other forms of entertainment as much as classical, melodramatic, and operatic burlesques referenced Shakespeare's works. Nevertheless, such a difference can hardly be considered substantial enough to justify the hypothesis that different burlesque types targeted different audiences: overall, as the previous examples have shown, no kind of burlesque relied on a single source of inspiration. In addition, the canonical status in Victorian culture of Shakespeare's plays – which were performed throughout the nineteenth century – was unique.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that burlesque authors crammed humorous (mis-)quotations from Shakespeare's plays into their classical, melodramatic, and operatic burlesques with the aim of exciting the audience's laughter, even if the main target of their parodies was not Shakespeare himself.

Apart from the formal characteristics of burlesque, other elements invite us to consider mid-Victorian burlesque as a multifaceted yet unique theatrical genre. Firstly, burlesque authors did not specialise in the composition of a single burlesque kind. The most renowned and prolific burlesque authors of the nineteenth century, such as Talfourd, Byron, Burnand, and the Brough brothers, experimented with all the burlesque variants considered so far. The career of Byron perfectly illustrates this point: Byron wrote a Shakespearian burlesque (*The Rival Othellos*, 1861); melodramatic burlesques (e. g. *The Lady of Lyons; or Two-Penny Pride and Pennyteuce*, 1858); operatic burlesques (e. g. *The Maid and the Magpie; or, the Fatal Spoon*, 1858); and classical burlesques (e. g. *Orpheus and Eurydice; or, The Young Gentleman who charmed the Rocks*, 1863). Similarly, Burnand wrote Shakespearian burlesques (e. g. *Antony and Cleopatra; or, His-story and Her-story in a modern Nilo-metre*, 1866); melodramatic burlesques (e. g. *The*

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<sup>75</sup> The character named Time sings 'When the fair land of Poland', a song taken from Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl*. He describes how, like Arline, Perdita was abandoned despite her noble origins. See William Brough, *Perdita; or, The Royal Milkmaid* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1878), p. 34.

<sup>76</sup> Robert and William Brough, *The Enchanted Isle; or, "Raising the Wind" on the Most Approved Principles* (London: National Acting Drama Office, [1848(?)]), p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> As Schoch notes, in the nineteenth century, 'nearly all the leading actor-managers in Great Britain – J. P. Kemble, W. C. Macready, Samuel Phelps, and Henry Irving – staged lavish revivals of Shakespeare', in order to play great roles which granted them respectability and to educate their audiences. In so doing, they fostered the development of Bardolatry, a form of worship and devotion to Shakespeare's iconicity which was promptly satirised by burlesque writers'. See Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 3-7.

*Very Latest Edition of Black Eye'd Susan*, 1866); operatic burlesques (e. g. *Acis and Galatea; or, the Nimble Nymph and the Terrible Troglodyte*, 1863); and classical burlesques (e. g. *Ixion; or, the Man at the Wheel*, 1863).

Secondly, neither individual performers nor theatre companies specialised in the acting or mounting of a single burlesque kind. As Schoch suggests, both female and male burlesque performers developed a set of histrionic skills which enabled them to sing, dance, and deliver complex lines with a convincing tone, in order to generate 'absurd effect[s]'.<sup>78</sup> However, such qualities were not related to the generic sources of burlesques. Wilton, for instance, who may be considered one of the most gifted burlesque actresses of her time, performed the role of Juliet in Halliday's Shakespearian burlesque *Romeo and Juliet Travestie; or, the Cup of Cold Poison*; the role of Pippo in Byron's operatic burlesque *The Maid and the Magpie*; the role of the groom Karl in Byron and Talfourd's melodramatic burlesque *The Miller and his Men*; and the role of Cupid in Talfourd's classical burlesque *Atalanta*. Equally praised by his contemporaries, Robson acted both the role of Shylock in Talfourd's Shakespearian burlesque *Shylock; or, the Merchant of Venice Preserved* and the role of Medea in Brough's classical burlesque *Medea; or, the Best of Mothers with a Brute of Husband*. A similar argument can be developed with respect to the theatres where burlesques were regularly performed. West End theatres like the Olympic and the Strand did not prioritise one kind of burlesque over another. The Strand, which may be considered the burlesque theatre *par excellence*, especially during the years of the Swanborough management, equally capitalised on Shakespearian, melodramatic, operatic, and classical burlesques.<sup>79</sup> At the Strand premiered, for example, Halliday's *Romeo and Juliet Travestie* (1859); Byron's *The Lady of Lyons* (1858); Buckingham's *William Tell; a Telling Version of an Old-Tell-Tale* (1857); and Burnand's *Patient Penelope* (1863).

Thirdly, no difference among burlesque types is acknowledged as being crucial by nineteenth-century dramatic critics, who tended to comment on burlesque as a unique theatrical genre in their works. In *Principles of Comedy*, for instance, Fitzgerald devotes a chapter to critiquing the genre of burlesque without dwelling at length on its sources.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Burnand, 'The Spirit of Burlesque', p. 177. Also quoted by Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxx.

<sup>79</sup> As Bratton notes, the Swanborough family managed the Strand from 1858 to 1885. Throughout the 1860s, burlesque constituted the 'heart of the Strand's offering'. See Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage*, pp. 150, 200-204.

<sup>80</sup> Fitzgerald argues that burlesques should parody 'something existing in the mind of the public, part of the common stock of popular knowledge', whether it be of Shakespearian, melodramatic, or classical inspiration. See Fitzgerald, *Principles of Comedy*, p. 160.

Specifically, he dismisses Victorian burlesque as ‘inconceivably poor and trivial’<sup>81</sup>: drawing on Brough’s *Joan of Arc* and Burnand’s *Ixion* and *Black Eye’d Susan* as examples, Fitzgerald argues that the use of puns, songs, dances, and cross-dressing transformed burlesque into ‘a mere diverting spectacle’<sup>82</sup>, no matter what its source of inspiration was.

Given that neither burlesque authors, nor theatres, nor critics distinguished between burlesque subgenres, it seems hardly possible to argue that different kinds of burlesque attracted different audiences. Hence, although being primarily concerned with classical burlesques, this chapter will consider as evidence melodramatic, operatic, and Shakespearian burlesque audiences’ descriptions, as well as reference studies of melodramatic, operatic, and Shakespearian burlesque spectators (namely Schoch’s and Cormac’s work). In so doing, this study aims to provide a broader base of application and to go beyond the descriptions of audiences for classical burlesques formulated in the scholarly field of classical reception: despite being multifaceted, burlesque will be treated as a single theatrical genre.

In fact, nineteenth-century theatrical audiences might have preferred to follow their favourite burlesque actors rather than a specific subgenre of burlesque. According to a journalist writing for *London Society*, there were days in the Victorian era ‘when playgoers talked of “going to see Wright”, or “to see Robson”’<sup>83</sup>, two of the most gifted low comedians of the time. The appeal of Robson as perceived by his contemporaries perfectly illustrates this tendency. In praising his histrionic skills in an article published in the *Train*, Sala argues that Robson was the only mid-Victorian actor who possessed such a strong individuality to render him the true ‘attraction of the Olympic Theatre’.<sup>84</sup> Sala recalls that ‘seeing Robson’ was recommended to foreign visitors by the *Times* and, perhaps hyperbolically, he describes the appeal that the low comedian had, commenting on his interpretation of Richcraft in Planché’s fairy extravaganza *The Discreet Princess*:

I verily believe that if the Olympic were a barn, and Wych Street a sewer (it is not much better); if the stage merely so many boards on tressels; if there were no better scenes than placards with “This is a chamber”, “This is a forest” inscribed on them; if the audience had to stand up during the performance, and there were no better orchestra than a blind fiddler, or a boy with the bones; if Mr Robson played *Richcraft* in the uniform of a captain in the guards – as Garrick played Macbeth – or in a waterproof siphonia, or in a sack, or (saving

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<sup>81</sup> Fitzgerald, p. 168.

<sup>82</sup> Fitzgerald, p. 165.

<sup>83</sup> ‘The Christmas Entertainments, *London Society*, February 1862, p. 91.

<sup>84</sup> George Augustus Sala, ‘Robson’, *Train*, 1856, 169-176 (p. 172).

your presence) in a full suit of buff, the people will still crowd to see him, would still, from the highest to the lowest, throw up their caps, and cry “Io Robson! Evoe Robson!”<sup>85</sup>

According to Sala, the appearance and comfort of the Olympic theatre, together with scenery and costumes, were mere accessories to the performances of Robson, who was responsible for the success of Planché’s extravaganza among the public. Likewise, Sala asserts that Robson’s appeal did not depend on the role he was called to act: the low comedian was ‘seen and admired [...] in almost every character he has attempted’<sup>86</sup>, from the role of Jem Baggs in Mayhew’s farce *The Wandering Mistrel*, to one of the protagonists in Tom Taylor’s farce *The Blighted Being* and including his performances in classical and operatic burlesques like *Medea* and *Masaniello*. Hence, in Sala’s opinion, Robson’s charm seems to have transcended not only different burlesque types, but also different dramatic genres, as the audiences were drawn to witness burlesques and farces alike by the skills of an extraordinarily gifted performer.

Sala worshipped Robson to the point of arguing that no other low comedian of his age had the power to entice the audiences as he did.<sup>87</sup> Yet, the evidence gathered for this research suggests that other comic actors and actresses had considerable appeal to the playgoing public. It is arguable, for instance, that some of those who attended the Adelphi Theatre were interested in seeing the performances of the leading low comedians Edward Wright and Paul Bedford. In a letter published in *Punch*, a correspondent remembers the times when ‘people went to see Wright and Bedford, and used to split their sides over a broad – a very broad farce in one Act and one Scene’.<sup>88</sup> According to Yates, Wright was ‘[t]he low comedian’<sup>89</sup> of the age, for his ability to combine his coarseness and ignorance with moments of high artistry. Burlesque scripts often capitalised on the popularity of such renowned actors. For example, Byron’s *The Babes in the Wood* (1859) and *The Ill-Treated Trovatore* (1859), both staged at the Adelphi Theatre and starring Bedford, featured the actor’s signature sentence ‘I believe you my boy!’.<sup>90</sup> The inclusion of this line clearly signalled the audiences’ familiarity with Bedford’s dramatic repertoire.

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<sup>85</sup> Sala, ‘Robson’, p. 172.

<sup>86</sup> Sala, ‘Robson’, p. 174.

<sup>87</sup> Rather than earnestly critiquing the value of other Victorian actors, Sala may have wished to distinguish Robson from his contemporaries. This might be connected to the fact that Sala was personally acquainted with Robert Brough, the author of the burlesques in which Robson starred. Both Sala and Brough cooperated with Yates on the magazine the *Train*.

<sup>88</sup> ‘Letters to Some People’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 29 March 1884, p. 148.

<sup>89</sup> Yates, I, 197.

<sup>90</sup> ‘I believe you my boy’ is a line taken from Buckstone’s drama *The Green Bushes*, in which Bedford successfully acted the role of Jack Gong in 1845. Yates considers the popularity of this sentence as signalling the professional accomplishments of Bedford. See Yates, I, 199.

As previously argued, before venturing into the management of the Prince of Wales's Theatre, Marie Wilton was another favourite of nineteenth-century burlesque spectators. In the autobiography written with her husband Squire Bancroft, Wilton recalls that after her performance as Cupid in Talfourd's *Atalanta*, she started receiving letters and flowers from anonymous admirers.<sup>91</sup> At the Strand, she made a name for herself acting cross-dressed roles in Byron's burlesques, such as that of Pippo in *The Maid and the Magpie*. Not only did Dickens memorably describe her performance, but Montagu Williams, a barrister, also acknowledged that he would 'travel any distance, or get up in the middle of the night, for the privilege of once more seeing [Wilton] in the "Maid and the Magpie"'.<sup>92</sup> The actress' appeal was considered equally exceptional by a journalist writing for the *Saturday Review*, who remarked that it was almost compulsory for the West End men about town of the mid-Victorian age to be able to 'pronounce a strong opinion on the merits of Miss Marie Wilton'<sup>93</sup> concerning her burlesque acting at the Strand. Williams followed Wilton from the Strand to the Prince of Wales's. In fact, he was enumerated among the theatre's regular 'first nighters'.<sup>94</sup> Davis and Emeljanow hypothesise that he was not the only professional who did so, as many other 'young Templars, [who] had previously flocked to the Strand to see Marie Wilton in burlesque' may have 'continued their support when she moved to Tottenham Street'.<sup>95</sup>

Hence, as this section has highlighted, it is hardly possible to assume the existence of a thoroughly distinct audience for classical burlesques. Firstly, classical burlesque may not have been perceived to be as different from other burlesque types as some modern scholars suggest. Secondly, nineteenth-century playgoers might have been more inclined to follow their favourite actors, regardless of the genre they were called to perform. Therefore, when addressing the issue of who attended classical burlesque performances relying on contemporary evidence, it is necessary to adopt a certain degree of flexibility and account for variables such as spectators' personal interests. Starting from this premise and seeking to resist the temptation of indulging in problematic generalisations, the following sections of this chapter will be devoted to evaluating whether there were any factors which may have distinguished classical burlesque audiences from those of other theatrical genres.

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<sup>91</sup> Specifically, Wilton recalls having attracted a 'mad admirer' who insistently sent her notes and flowers. See Marie and Squire Bancroft, *Mr and Mrs Bancroft On and Off the Stage*, I, 52-58.

<sup>92</sup> Montagu S. Williams, *Round London, Down East and Up West* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1893), p. 273.

<sup>93</sup> 'The Strand Burlesques', *Saturday Review*, June 1851, pp. 611-612.

<sup>94</sup> Marie and Squire Bancroft, *Mr and Mrs Bancroft On and Off the Stage*, II, 124-126.

<sup>95</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, p. 156.

#### 5.4 Knowledge and Class

Although the previous section of this chapter has acknowledged that burlesque audiences may have overlapped with those of other theatrical genres, it is arguable that, simultaneously, burlesque possessed specific characteristics which distinguished it – and perhaps its spectators – from other forms of entertainment. In fact, unlike any other theatrical genre of the age, Victorian burlesque demanded a substantial degree of prior knowledge from its public, insofar as the targets of burlesque parody and satire had to be recognised. Given that this thesis is primarily concerned with classical burlesque spectatorship, the areas of knowledge that its audiences were required to master may be listed as follows: firstly, competent classical burlesque spectators were likely to have known the classics (*literary knowledge*); secondly, they would have been acquainted with contemporary performances, including Shakespearian revivals, operas, and melodramas (*theatrical knowledge*); thirdly, they would have followed the socio-political events of the age, such as the passing of new laws or the spread of new fashions (*socio-political knowledge*). Burnand's classical burlesque *Paris; or, Vive Lemprière* (Strand, 1866) perfectly illustrates burlesque's reliance on such a wide range of knowledge: as discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis, Burnand's *Paris* principally reworks the episode of the judgement of Paris, Priam's son, who is called to choose the most beautiful among the goddesses; secondly, the burlesque satirises Dion Boucicault's melodrama *Rip Van Winkle* (Adelphi, 1865), as Paris and Oenone are respectively construed as Rip and his wife Gretchen; thirdly, it alludes to Victorian gender politics, as Oenone acts the role of the virtuous wife who is abandoned by her philandering husband. In addition, the character of Helen, Paris' lover, is referred to as 'La Belle Hélène [...] at the Adelphi'.<sup>96</sup> The comic reference to Offenbach's operetta presupposes the audiences' familiarity with the fact that *La Belle Hélène* premiered at the Adelphi Theatre in June 1866.

In addition, Burnand may have presupposed the audiences' familiarity with John Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, which is not only mentioned in the subtitle of the burlesque but also referenced throughout it. Most significantly, Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* is presented as enabling Paris to fill his gaps in classical knowledge. The swell Castor invites Paris to 'read Lemprière' in the exchange which follows:

PARIS: Her hair...  
 MINERVA: May be produced sir, artificially.  
 You've only got to dye it...

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<sup>96</sup> Burnand, *Paris*, p. 39.



[...]  
 PARIS: Why, you cannot mean that the Immortals dye!  
 JUNO: Of course they do. Where have you passed  
 Your days?  
*Di immortales* is a common phrase!  
 CASTOR: Read Lemprière, young man, 'twill make  
 Things plainer [...].<sup>97</sup>

The piling up of puns constructed on the verb dye emphasises the absurd information that Paris is supposed to find in Lemprière's dictionary.<sup>98</sup> In this exchange, Burnand seems to critique the swells' behaviour: being aware that knowledge of the classics functions as a status marker, the 'counterfeit' who had no training in Latin or Greek read popular publications in English to compensate. Yet, Burnand seems to humorously imply that the information included in such works is limited and fallacious. Burnand, who had benefited from an elite education, was a member of that closed circle of Etonians and Oxbridge gentlemen who, during the course of the nineteenth century, saw their mastery over the classics being usurped by a wider public.<sup>99</sup> From this perspective, he parodies the swells' aspirations to acquire a gentlemanly education, which dubiously authoritative sources inevitably fail to provide.

Davies argues that Burnand's references to Lemprière's dictionary signalled a 'more obvious dig at modern classicism'<sup>100</sup>, which possibly targeted a wider section of spectators who were not trained in Latin and Greek but read modern retellings of classical stories. In order to substantiate her claim, Davies interprets Oenone's final plea to the audience as a serious invitation to read Lemprière's version of the judgement of Paris.<sup>101</sup> However, the previous analysis illustrates that Burnand's burlesque might have actually targeted more educated patrons, who were able to identify and laugh at both the

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<sup>97</sup> Burnand, *Paris*, p. 33.

<sup>98</sup> Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (1788) was an engagingly written yet imprecise summa of classical knowledge condensed by an Oxford undergraduate. It went into several subsequent editions, which testify to the popularity of this product among the reading public. See Christopher Stray, 'Education and Reading', in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, IV, 79-102 (p. 86).

<sup>99</sup> During the early decades of the nineteenth century, classics were principally taught in public schools and in the two ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. According to Stray, these were places that encouraged social exclusion, since they contributed to the formation of a social and cultural elite of middle-class men who shared mastery over the classics. See Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, University and Society in England, 1830-1960* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 58. Nevertheless, '[t]he growth of a working-class public in the first half of the nineteenth century led to an expanding market for cheap self-tutors and translations'. From the 1820s onwards, interlinear translations, English textbooks and dictionaries increased the familiarity of the uneducated with the classical world. See Stray, *Classics Transformed*, p. 96 and Stray, 'Education and Reading', p. 84.

<sup>100</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 246.

<sup>101</sup> Davies, *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians*, p. 244.

inaccuracies contained in Lemprière's dictionary and at the affected display of gentlemanly education characterising the swell as 'counterfeit'.

Overall, it is fair to assume that only a relatively educated person, who read the classics or mythological dictionaries and earned enough to attend a range of theatrical performances, could have possessed the requisite literary, theatrical, and socio-political knowledge to understand the majority of the parodic references embedded in a classical burlesque like Burnand's *Paris*. Although claiming that 'we cannot expect any class-based reception of Victorian theatrical productions to have been either uniform or predictable'<sup>102</sup>, Schoch argues that the members of the middle classes were 'indeed likely to possess the knowledge needed to make them competent spectators', thus being identifiable with burlesque 'core audience'.<sup>103</sup> This section will investigate further the middle classes' possible familiarity with the areas of knowledge required to interpret classical burlesque performances and their potential acquaintance with such a form of entertainment.

The middle classes of Victorian Britain were undoubtedly stratified on both a professional and economic level. Hoppen argues the middle classes included everyone from 'the wealthiest financiers and industrialists down to modest shopkeepers whose incomes depended upon the erratic earnings of working people'.<sup>104</sup> More specifically, Hoppen broadly distinguishes between 'a more affluent half made up of higher professionals, employers, and managers, and a lesser one of lower professionals, foremen, and clerks'.<sup>105</sup> The white collar workers belonging to the lower-middle class earned little or no more than the most skilled artisans. Geoffrey Best indicates, for instance, that while a professional man or tradesman belonging to the upper-middle class earned on average £500 a year, a clerk generally earned £99 per year, and highly skilled labourers like jewellery makers or scale makers earned 35s per week (corresponding to £91 per year).<sup>106</sup> A clerk living on £99 per year could afford to live in London, without any resident servant, renting a room for £15 a year, which, according to Best, was scarcely a guarantee of middle-class respectability.<sup>107</sup> Not only do these data reveal that the difference in

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<sup>102</sup> Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxiii.

<sup>103</sup> Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxii.

<sup>104</sup> Hoppen, p. 32.

<sup>105</sup> Hoppen, p. 34.

<sup>106</sup> Best, pp. 90, 95. Best draws these data from the works of the Victorian statistician Robert D. Baxter. For differences in income among the middle classes see Robert D. Baxter, *The Taxation of the United Kingdom* (London: Macmillan, 1869), pp. 105-106. For the incomes of the working classes see Robert D. Baxter, *National Income: The United Kingdom* (London: Macmillan, 1868), pp. 88-93.

<sup>107</sup> Best, p. 90.

income between the upper-middle and lower-middle class was very marked, but they also illustrate the difficulty of setting precise class boundaries on mid-Victorian society. As this brief analysis has shown, historians like Hoppen and Best classified the middle classes with a certain degree of generalisation. Nevertheless, an analysis of the middle classes' approach to education, their level of income, and their attitude towards leisure still proves to be useful to evaluate their possible acquaintance with theatrical burlesques.

The young male members of the upper- and upper-middle classes were likely to have been educated at public schools. Best reveals that, from the 1840s onwards, interest in public school education increased because of three key factors: the implementation of the railways made it easier to send boys off to boarding schools; examinations to access money-making occupations and universities were becoming unavoidable; social and moral prestige was increasingly attached to public school education.<sup>108</sup> Public schools' classical curricula were indeed considered as forging their pupils' gentlemanly characters: public school boys' mastery over Greek and Latin was synonymous with their high social status.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, as Joseph Banks argues in *Prosperity and Parenthood*, a gentlemanly acquaintance with the classics was a necessary requirement to access certain professions, such as that of barrister: by 1839, the Inner Temple had established an examination which tested candidates' proficiency in Greek and Latin among other areas of education.<sup>110</sup>

Together with the youths belonging to the upper classes, some of the wealthiest members of the middle classes would also have benefited from university education, one notable example being William Gladstone. Gladstone attended Oxford University, despite being the son of a Liverpool merchant. In fact, according to Robert Anderson, the core section of Oxbridge graduates was represented by members of the professional classes, together with the sons of the landed aristocracy.<sup>111</sup> As the universities' curricula were largely classical, the young gentlemen who attended Oxford and Cambridge were undoubtedly familiar with ancient Greek and Roman mythology.<sup>112</sup> In addition, both universities had amateur dramatic societies, whose members wrote and staged burlesques. For example, Amanda Wrigley discusses the amateur performances of classical

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<sup>108</sup> Best, p. 164.

<sup>109</sup> Best, p. 165.

<sup>110</sup> Joseph A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood: A Study of Family Planning among the Victorian Middle Classes* (London: Routledge, 1954), p. 173.

<sup>111</sup> According to Anderson, Oxford and Cambridge prepared upper-middle-class men to fill the top level of British professions, as they accessed the competitive examinations for the most prestigious posts in the Civil Service. See Robert Anderson, 'LEARNING: Education, Class and Culture', in *The Victorian World*, ed. by Martin Hewitt, pp. 484-499 (pp. 487-488).

<sup>112</sup> The classics were perceived as having a central educational role, although mathematics was more important at Cambridge. See R. Anderson, 'LEARNING: Education, Class and Culture', pp. 485-486.

burlesques at the University of Oxford in the mid-Victorian period. She focuses on the 1847 performance of Talfourd's *Macbeth Travestie*, already discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. The play was staged at the Henley-on-Thames regatta and was reportedly so successful that the students involved in the production established themselves as the Oxford Dramatic Amateurs. Wrigley follows Alan Mackinnon in stating that the Oxford Amateurs' performances ceased in 1849.<sup>113</sup> However, from the late fifties onwards, other dramatic groups were founded. The classical burlesque author Robert Reece, for instance, participated in the private theatricals organised by the Balliol Amateurs. Yet, the most well-documented amateur theatrical activity in Oxford is that which took place in the late sixties, when the Shooting Stars and the St John's College Amateurs 'turned to Greek tragedy and mythology for the subject matters of many of their plays and burlesques'.<sup>114</sup> One of the most prominent members of the Shooting Stars was Vincent Amcotts who wrote classical burlesques such as *Fair Helen* (1866), an adaptation of Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène, Ariadne; or, The Bull! The Bully!! And The Bullion!!!* (1867), and *Pentheus* (1866), parodying Euripides' *Bacchae*.<sup>115</sup> Edward Nolan was one of the leading members of the St John's College Amateurs, for which he wrote at least two classical burlesques, namely *Iphigeneia; or, The Sail! The Seer! And the Sacrifice!!!* (1866) and *Agamemnon at Home; or The Latest Particulars of that Little Affair at Mycenae* (1867).<sup>116</sup>

The University of Cambridge had its own Amateur Dramatic Club, which was founded, as noted in Chapter 1, by Burnand in 1855. According to William Elliot, the Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Club's repertoire chiefly relied on burlesques and farces in the period from 1855 to 1866.<sup>117</sup> For example, burlesque versions of *Villikins and his Dina!*, *St George and the Dragon*, and *Norma* were staged in 1855 and 1856.<sup>118</sup> Not only did the Cambridge Amateurs mount and act in burlesques but, according to Burnand, they were also familiar with London's theatrical scene. In "*The A.D.C.*", he states that Robson's interpretations of Shylock and Medea informed the society's ideal of burlesque

<sup>113</sup> Wrigley, pp. 23-24. Alan Mackinnon, *The Oxford Amateurs* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1910), pp. 21-27.

<sup>114</sup> Wrigley, pp. 24-25.

<sup>115</sup> Wrigley, p. 25. Mackinnon, pp. 36-37.

<sup>116</sup> Wrigley, p. 26 and Mackinnon, p. 38. It is interesting to note that Wrigley argues that all theatrical activities by the Shooting Stars and the St John's Amateurs ceased in 1870, after the Boulton and Park case. Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park were arrested after attending a burlesque performance at the Strand Theatre dressed as women. Other men were implicated in the scandal. For instance, Martin Luther Cumming, 'the transvestite star of the Shooting Stars', faced charges in 1871 for dressing in drag off stage. For a more in-depth discussion of Boulton and Park's case as connected to Oxford amateur theatricals, see Wrigley, pp. 35-39. On the Boulton and Park's case see also Jim Davis, "Slap On! Slap Ever!": Victorian Pantomime, Gender Variance, and Cross-Dressing', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 30 (2014), 218-230.

<sup>117</sup> William G. Elliot, *Amateur Clubs and Actors* (London: E. Arnold, 1898), p. 69.

<sup>118</sup> Burnand, *The "A.D.C."*, pp. 61, 86, 115.

acting. From Burnand's perspective, he and his fellow members of the Amateur Dramatic Club were 'constantly seeing Robson in his best days at the Olympic', but also 'the Keeleys, the Wigans, Charles Mathews, the Frank Matthews, James Bland, Miss Horton, Harley, Madame Celeste, and Mrs. Mellon' acting in burlesques which 'occupied an important position in the evening's programme'.<sup>119</sup> The London stage was also a source of inspiration for amateur burlesque authors. For instance, Burnand recalls that when he wrote the burlesque of *St George and the Dragon*, which was performed in 1856, he was inspired by 'a picture in the *Illustrated News* of Paul Bedford, of the Adelphi, in the dress of a dragon'.<sup>120</sup> University men's acquaintance with theatrical burlesques staged in London, as suggested by Burnand, is confirmed by several performance reviews. According to a journalist writing for the *Daily News*, at the premiere of Burnand's *Dido*, the author's friends occupied the stalls, the private boxes, and the dress circle.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper* remarked that Talfourd's burlesque *Electra*, based on Sophocles' tragedy, entertained 'the brains that have ached at college'.<sup>122</sup>

However, the university-educated members of the upper and middle classes were not the only ones who may have possessed the literary knowledge required to understand burlesque parodies. Members of the lower-middle classes, who could not afford the expenses of public schools, often sent their sons to local private or grammar schools paying lower fees. In such establishments, the classics were taught alongside commercial subjects.<sup>123</sup> Then, without attending universities, lower-middle-class young men might have started their career as clerks, schoolteachers, or lower officials of the Civil Service.<sup>124</sup> Even some members of the working classes might have developed a taste for reading the classics. In *A People's History of Classics*, Hall and Stead gather evidence to demonstrate that some working-class men had both the level of literacy and the interest to read reference books such as Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*. They quote, for instance, the words of Tom Barclay, a yarn winder, who reportedly bought second-hand books to familiarise himself with classical mythology.<sup>125</sup> In addition, they argue that,

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<sup>119</sup> Burnand, *The "A.D.C."*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>120</sup> Burnand, *The "A.D.C."*, p. 84.

<sup>121</sup> 'DRAMA', *Daily News*, 13 February 1860, p. 2.

<sup>122</sup> 'PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS', *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, 1 May 1859, p. 7.

<sup>123</sup> According to Sanderson, from the last decades of the eighteenth century, grammar schools started to change their curricula and introduced commercial subjects. See Michael Sanderson, *Education, Economic Change, and Society in England, 1780-1870* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 34.

<sup>124</sup> Frank Musgrave, 'Middle-Class Education and Employment in the Nineteenth Century', *The Economic History Review*, 12 (1959), 99-111 (p. 1).

<sup>125</sup> Edith Hall and Henry Stead, *A People's History of Classics: Class and Greco-Roman Antiquity in Britain and Ireland 1689 to 1939* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 52-53.

from the 1840s onwards, cheap education periodicals like Charles Knight's *Penny Magazine*, *Penny Cyclopaedia* and *Shilling Volume*, and John Cassel's *Popular Educator* contributed to the spreading of classical knowledge among the lowest strata of society.<sup>126</sup>

Yet, as previously observed, a literary knowledge of classical mythology was not enough on its own to enable an understanding of theatrical burlesque complex humour. Classical burlesques also parodied Shakespeare's plays, operas, and melodramas. Hence, to qualify as competent, classical burlesque spectators needed to be familiar with a range of contemporary dramatic productions. Schoch hypothesises that mid-Victorian audiences gained the necessary theatrical knowledge to understand burlesque references by cultivating a taste for 'indiscriminate theatregoing'.<sup>127</sup> During a single holiday season, playgoers were given the chance to witness a range of different plays staged in different West End theatres. In order to support his thesis, Schoch quotes the words of Godfrey Turner, a journalist who habitually attended 'Drury Lane, the Haymarket, the Lyceum, the old Olympic, and the old Adelphi'<sup>128</sup> to see the melodramas, farces, comedies, and extravaganzas staged in the 1840s and 1850s. According to Schoch, Turner's indiscriminate approach to theatrical productions was all but unusual.<sup>129</sup> Williams describes a similar experience: in *Round London*, he remembers having attended the Adelphi, the Lyceum, the Strand, the Princess's (specially to see Shakespeare revivals as mounted by Kean), and the Haymarket, which he terms 'the home of comedy'.<sup>130</sup> Occasionally, Williams also witnessed operatic performances. Furthermore, as Davis and Emeljanow note, writers like Dickens and Collins, as well as journalists like Sala and Yates, habitually attended multiple West End theatres.<sup>131</sup>

Some of these professional men witnessed burlesque performances and became personally acquainted with burlesque authors. As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, Sala and Yates were directly involved in the Bohemian network of London journalists who gathered at the Savage Club with burlesque authors such as Talfourd, Brough, and Burnand. Dickens, who admired Wilton in Byron's burlesque *The Maid and the Magpie* and Robson in *Medea*, was the trustee of the fund instituted to help Robert Brough's widow after his death.<sup>132</sup> Dickens, together with the manager of the Olympic Theatre,

<sup>126</sup> Hall and Stead, *A People's History of Classics*, p. 53.

<sup>127</sup> Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxi.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. See also Godfrey Turner, 'First Nights of my Young Days', *Theatre*, September 1887, 115-126.

<sup>129</sup> Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxi.

<sup>130</sup> M. Williams, pp. 271-278.

<sup>131</sup> According to Davis and Emeljanow, George Eliot and Anthony Trollope also were West End regular theatregoers. See Davis and Emeljanow, pp. 188-189.

<sup>132</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, IX, 277-278.

contributed to the mounting of Collins' *The Lighthouse* (1857), which was followed by Robert Brough's burlesque *Masaniello*.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, Williams was intimately acquainted with Burnand, whose burlesque version of *Black Eye'd Susan* he especially enjoyed.<sup>134</sup>

Because of their constant attendance at West End venues and their consequent familiarity with the variety of London's dramatic entertainments, it is arguable that people like Williams, Dickens, Yates, and Sala gained the necessary theatrical knowledge to qualify as competent burlesque spectators. Several nineteenth-century sources record that professional men who earned their living through journalism and the law assiduously attended West End theatres, witnessing a wide range of forms of entertainment. However, as Davis and Emeljanow argue in their investigation of theatregoing patterns in the Victorian era, they possibly represented only a limited section of the typical playgoers of the age.<sup>135</sup>

The costs of attending theatres in the West End on a regular basis were indeed substantial. In *The History of the Prince of Wales's Theatre*, Richard Lorenzen quotes the words of a journalist writing for the *Illustrated London News*, who described the prices of admittance at the Prince of Wales's Theatre as 'aristocratic'. As Lorenzen observes, in April 1865, 'stalls were 6s, dress circle 3s, pit 1s 6d, amphitheatre stalls 1s 6d, boxes £2 2s, £1 11s, and £1 1s'.<sup>136</sup> The perception of such prices as 'aristocratic' is partially connected to the fact that, in the prior months, the Prince of Wales's had been refurbished, under the management of Marie Wilton, so as to attract a more fashionable audience.<sup>137</sup> However, in general, the prices of admittance to West End theatres may be regarded as comparable to those of the Prince of Wales's. For example, *The Brown Book to 1865*, a guide listing hotels, lodgings, and places of entertainments in London for the year 1865, reports that the Strand Theatre, especially renowned for staging burlesques, charged £1 1s, £1 11s, and £2 2s for private boxes, 5s for stalls, 3s for boxes, 1s 6d for the pit, and 6d for the gallery.<sup>138</sup> In a similar fashion, at the Haymarket, private boxes were £2 2s and

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<sup>133</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VIII, 394. According to Collins, Dickens, Thackeray, and Lemon witnessed the premiere of *The Lighthouse* at the Olympic from a private box. See *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, ed. by William Baker and William M. Clarke, 2 vols (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), I, 162.

<sup>134</sup> M. Williams, p. 274.

<sup>135</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, p. 190.

<sup>136</sup> See Richard L. Lorenzen, *The History of the Prince of Wales's Theatre* (London: University of Hertfordshire Press/Society for Theatre Research, 2014), p. 131.

<sup>137</sup> For a more-depth discussion of the Prince of Wales's refurbishment and subsequent transformation see Davis and Emeljanow, pp. 137-164.

<sup>138</sup> It is meaningful to note that, on the occasion of the performances of Burnand's classical burlesques *Patient Penelope* (1863) and *Paris; or, Vive Lemprière* (1866), the Strand charged the same prices as listed above. See Playbill, *Patient Penelope; or, The Return of Ulysses*, Strand Theatre, London, 25 November 1863 (Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum) and Playbill, *Paris; or, Vive*

£1 11s, stalls 7s, the dress circle was 5s, upper boxes 3s, pit and amphitheatre 2s, and gallery 1s. At the Olympic, stalls were 7s, upper box stalls 4s, pit 2s, and gallery 1s. Overall, these prices are considerably higher than those charged by East End theatres such as the Britannia, where stage boxes were 2s and stalls were 1s.<sup>139</sup>

According to George S. Leyard, a relatively wealthy member of the middle classes earning £700 a year, living in a house situated in Kensington Gardens with his wife and a child for a rent of £105, could devote £35 18s 2d to pleasures.<sup>140</sup> He might well have spent some of his budget on being entertained at the theatre. For less affluent members of the middle classes, however, securing a seat in a West End venue may have been financially challenging. Arthur Hayward estimates that, in the 1840s, a comparatively well-to-do clerk, working for a bank in London and earning £150 per year, could have devoted only £1 19s 4d to excursions and amusements.<sup>141</sup> As a result, he might have been a casual theatregoer, perhaps concentrating his visits during the holiday seasons. The budget set for a clerk's amusement might have been higher if he was not married. According to the *Economy for the Single and Married*, a bachelor earning £150 may have devoted £15 to suppers and excursions, while a single man living on £100 per year may have afforded £5 for suppers and *occasional* excursions.<sup>142</sup>

Whilst the figures discussed above are helpful in establishing the broad social categories who might have habitually attended West End theatrical venues, they are also rather simplistic. In fact, they do not account for several additional factors whose incidence is more difficult to estimate. For example, private incomes might have perhaps allowed a larger section of mid-Victorian men to attend West End theatres more regularly. In addition, the nineteenth-century sources interrogated here generically refer to the category of 'amusements', which likely included visits to the theatre, without specifying the cost of transportation to reach venues, if needed. Whilst, as Davis and Emeljanow argue, '[t]he Victorian habit of walking persisted throughout the nineteenth century, outliving the improvements of transport'<sup>143</sup>, suburban audiences might have required public transport to reach London's West End theatres. Davis and Emeljanow estimate

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*Lemprière*, Strand Theatre, London, 21 May 1866 (Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum).

<sup>139</sup> *The Brown Book for 1865* (London: Saunders, Otley and co., 1865), pp. 163-166.

<sup>140</sup> George S. Leyard, 'How to live on 700 a year', *Nineteenth Century*, 1888, 238-244.

<sup>141</sup> Arthur Hayward, *The Days of Dickens* (London: Routledge, 1926; repr. 1968), p. 73. Also quoted by Davis and Emeljanow, pp. 183, 268.

<sup>142</sup> *Economy for the Single and Married; or, The young Wife and Bachelor's Guide to Income and Expenditure* (London: Mitchell, 1845), pp. 23, 34.

<sup>143</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, p. 180.



that, in the 1840s and 1850s, prices of hackney cabs to Drury Lane oscillated between 2s and 1s, whilst an omnibus fare corresponded to 6d. On the basis of such data, they hypothesise that a lower-middle class man, earning 35s per week (corresponding to £91 per year), and renting a room in south London at 7s per week, would have been able to visit the theatre with his wife once a fortnight, possibly privileging neighbourhood theatres like the Surrey and the Victoria, instead of travelling to the West End.<sup>144</sup> Additional costs were entailed if theatregoers chose to dine out after witnessing a theatrical performance in the West End. As Brenda Assael notes, theatres and restaurants started developing a ‘symbiotic relationship’ after the 1880s, when ‘theatre programmes recommended restaurants in their vicinities’ and ‘some theatres, like the Savoy, had restaurants attached to them’.<sup>145</sup> However, she notes that, in the 1850s and 1860s, it was customary for taverns and oyster shops in the West End to serve dinner until late at night, after the end of theatrical performances. Sala, for instance, recalls eating some oysters bought from a stall in the Haymarket after midnight, before attending Evans’s supper room in the Strand.<sup>146</sup>

Overall, evidence seems to suggest that the wealthier members of the middle classes may have earned enough to attend West End theatres on a regular basis. However, according to Schoch, indiscriminate theatregoing was not the only way in which spectators might have gained the necessary theatrical knowledge to understand burlesque parodies. Schoch argues that the columns of Victorian newspapers and periodicals, where performance reviews were regularly published, contributed to familiarising a wider public with London’s theatrical scene.<sup>147</sup> Katherine Newey develops a similar argument, when stating that nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals contributed to the shaping of audiences’ expectations before witnessing a dramatic performance.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, mid-Victorian publications commented on the most pressing socio-political issues of the time, equipping their readers with the necessary knowledge to understand burlesque topical references.

As both Schoch and Newey suggest, newspapers and periodicals may have spread both theatrical and socio-political knowledge among their reading public. Embarking on the

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<sup>144</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, p. 268.

<sup>145</sup> Brenda Assael, *The London Restaurant, 1840-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 37.

<sup>146</sup> Mentioned by Assael, *The London Restaurant*, p. 45 and George A. Sala, *Twice Around the Clock; or, The Hours of the Day and Night in London* (London: Richard Marsh, 1862), p. 326.

<sup>147</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxii.

<sup>148</sup> Katherine Newey, ‘Theatre and the Periodical Press’, in *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, ed. by Andrew King, Alexis Easley, and John Morton (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 365-376 (p. 366).

task of determining who the readers of mid-Victorian journals and newspapers were entails embracing a certain degree of generalisation. As Jonathan Rose highlights, it is almost impossible to label a publication as distinctively upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, or working class.<sup>149</sup> However, a number of modern studies offer invaluable insights into the possible readership of newspapers and periodicals and constitute a point of reference for this study. First of all, Newey notes that performance reviews were included in a wide range of publications, including ‘edgy and iconoclastic journals’<sup>150</sup> like *Bell’s Life in London* and *John Bull*, and ‘established belles lettres journals’<sup>151</sup> like the *Examiner* and the *New Monthly Magazine*, which possibly appealed to different types of readers. For example, according to a survey reported in *The English Common Reader*, *Bell’s Life in London* was read among domestic servants and labourers.<sup>152</sup> Conversely, the *New Monthly Magazine*, which was relatively expensive, was possibly directed to a wealthier and more cultivated readership.<sup>153</sup> In addition, London’s dramatic productions were also covered by publications explicitly targeted at female readers like the *Ladies’ Cabinet of Fashion, Music and Romance*. Finally, performance reviews also appeared in satirical magazines like *Punch*, *Fun*, and *Judy*. According to David Kunzle, *Punch* appealed to an upper-middle-class readership, while *Fun* and *Judy* entertained the lower-middle classes.<sup>154</sup>

Consequently, as rather briefly and perhaps rather generically outlined above, newspapers and journals might have reached sections of Victorian society that go beyond the group of upper-middle-class professionals and intellectuals who habitually attended the theatres in the West End. The readers of the daily and periodical press may have gained the necessary theatrical and socio-political foreknowledge to understand burlesque performances. Nevertheless, while the evidence gathered so far seems to confirm the upper and middle classes’ familiarity with burlesque performances – either via university

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<sup>149</sup> Jonathan Rose especially deals with working-class readers. He believes that it is ‘often risky to assume that what we call “working class” journals really had an exclusively working-class readership’. For example, Rose argues that there is evidence to demonstrate that cheap papers like *Bell’s Life in London* circulated not only among the working classes but also reached the middle and upper classes. See Jonathan Rose, ‘Workers’ Journals’, in *Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society*, ed. by J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 302-303.

<sup>150</sup> Newey, ‘Theatre and the Periodical Press’, p. 369.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 342.

<sup>153</sup> Altick, p. 319.

<sup>154</sup> David Kunzle, ‘Busch Abroad: How a German Caricaturist Willy Nilly Helped Launch the New Cheap Comic Magazines in Britain and the United States’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 25 (1992), 99-108 (p. 99). Altick also believes that *Punch* addresses an upper- and middle-class readership. See Altick, p. 358.

education or regular attendance at the theatre –, the presence of the lower orders of nineteenth-century society among classical burlesque public remains largely speculative.

### 5.5 Respectability *versus* ‘Fastness’: The Man About Town as the Stereotypical Classical Burlesque Spectator

As illustrated in the previous section of this chapter, the upper and middle classes’ education and income may have facilitated their acquaintance with classical burlesque sources. Specifically, upper- and middle-class spectators may have recognised burlesque parodic allusions to Greek and Roman myths, as they constituted the core curricula of public schools. Those who attended the universities of Oxford and Cambridge may also have participated in – or witnessed – amateur burlesque performances. In addition, upper- and middle-class audiences may have been affluent enough to enjoy the practice of habitual theatregoing in the West End. Thus, they would have been familiar with the range of serious productions that burlesques satirised. Yet, although possibly possessing the requisite foreknowledge to understand burlesque performances, the educated upper and middle classes were associated with *moral values* which were incongruous with the cult of ‘fastness’ embraced by burlesque. Specifically, according to Schoch, burlesques derided respectability, as they staged characters cultivating mildly immoral habits.<sup>155</sup> This section seeks to explore further the dichotomy created between respectable audiences and the ‘fastness’ of burlesques as detected by Schoch, devoting specific attention to classical burlesque scripts and performances. Then, drawing on a range of speculative and more empirical evidence, it discusses the possible reasons why the wealthy and educated members of the upper and middle classes may have been inclined to become theatrical burlesque spectators, despite the genre’s satirical approach to respectability.

According to Schoch, theatrical burlesques manifested their ‘fastness’ by staging characters with a vibrant and dissipated lifestyle.<sup>156</sup> In *Not Shakespeare*, Schoch notes that, in Halliday’s *Romeo and Juliet Travestie*, the traditional swordfight between Tybalt and Romeo is transformed into a boxing match narrated by the Nurse, who adopts the tone associated with contemporary descriptions of sporting events, as published in journals like *Bell’s Life in London*. Similarly, in Blanchard’s *Merchant of Venice*, the characters of Antonio, Salarino, and Salanio are staged as walking home from the Cider Cellars, a renowned drinking establishment in the West End, notably patronised by

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<sup>155</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

<sup>156</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 117.

Victorian ‘fast’ men.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, Schoch detects the presence of ‘fast’ characters in operatic and melodramatic burlesques. For instance, the male protagonist of Byron’s *The Very Latest Edition of the Lady of Lyons*, is described as assuming ‘the modern fast-man’s manners’.<sup>158</sup> Likewise, in John Halfourd’s *Faust and Marguerite*, the characters of Faust and Mephistopheles enter on stage accompanied by the song ‘I love to be a swell’.<sup>159</sup>

Neither Schoch nor classical scholars have engaged in an in-depth investigation of classical burlesque ‘fastness’. Nevertheless, the fourth chapter of this thesis has shown that classical burlesque characters display a similar attitude towards sports, drinking, and slang to that of the ‘fast’ protagonists of Shakespearian, melodramatic, and operatic burlesques. Lemon’s reinterpretation of *Medea*, for example, frames Jason as engaging in boxing matches and enjoying the company of his male friends. In addition, classical burlesques alluded to popular drinking establishments and places of entertainment. For instance, in Burnand’s *Cupid and Psyche*, the character of the god Saturn caricatures Paddy Green, the owner of Evans’s, which was, as noted in Chapter 1, a tavern where mid-Victorian ‘fast’ men reportedly spent their late nights.<sup>160</sup> Similarly, in Burnand’s *Paris*, the gods and goddesses gather in Cupid’s Tea Rose Gardens, a parodic reinterpretation of Cremorne pleasure gardens, where the characters of Castor and Pollux describe their ‘fast’ passions: while Castor enjoys races – specifically *Don-Castor* races –, Pollux is fond of pugilism.<sup>161</sup>

Although ‘fast’ characters rejected respectability, they did not speak from a working-class perspective. In fact, Schoch notes that Shakespearian burlesques were rarely represented in working-class theatres and that working-class burlesque characters seldom benefited from upward social mobility.<sup>162</sup> Classical burlesques can be read with similar provisions. The lists of classical burlesques compiled by Monrès-Gaspar and Davies show that only two of them were performed in East End Theatres in the 1850s and 60s, while three classical burlesques were staged in the South of London.<sup>163</sup> The vast majority

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<sup>157</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 125-128.

<sup>158</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxiv.

<sup>159</sup> Schoch, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxxiii.

<sup>160</sup> Francis Burnand, *Cupid and Psyche; or, Beautiful as a Butterfly* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1864). The reference to Paddy Green is explained by a reviewer writing for the *Sunday Times*, who recognised the ‘well-known host of the Cave of Harmony, better known as Evans’s’ behind the character of the god Saturn. See ‘Her Majesty’s Theatre’, *Sunday Times*, 1 January 1865, p. 7. According to Sala, Evans’s was the place to go if you wanted to see the men about town of the day. See Sala, *Twice Around the Clock*, p. 344.

<sup>161</sup> Burnand, *Paris*, p. 12.

<sup>162</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>163</sup> According to Monrès-Gaspar and Davies, in the 1850s and 1860s, three classical burlesques were staged in South London, at Astley’s Amphitheatre (W. E. Suter’s *Jupiter’s Decree and the Fall of Phaeton or the*

of classical burlesques, written by well-known dramatists like Byron, Talfourd, and Burnand, were staged in the West End, where an extensive presence of working-class patrons in theatrical venues is much less clearly discernible. Moreover, classical burlesque working-class characters are often represented as stock comic types, which arguably spoke to a middle-class audience. For example, Phoedra, the maidservant featuring in Talfourd's *Alcestis*, is stereotypically portrayed as flirtatious and unreliable. She entertains a secret romance with a policeman, Polax, who repeatedly visits her at work. When she is discovered talking to him by Alcestis, Phoedra lies, saying that Polax is her cousin.<sup>164</sup> By staging Phoedra's flirtatiousness and Alcestis' valid concerns over her inappropriate behaviour, Talfourd seems to humorously send up the issue of the trustworthiness and morality of servants from a distinctively middle-class perspective.

Judging from the examples given above, and as argued in the fourth chapter of this thesis, even though classical burlesques rejected respectability, they did not seriously give voice to working-class concerns or class-based antagonism. In fact, Schoch believes that burlesques intended to attract the 'fast' young members of the upper and middle classes, whose restlessness prompted them to deny the moral values embraced by older generations. As indicated above, Schoch hypothesises that they might have been the sons who stayed behind as wealthy families relocated in the suburban areas of Islington, Highgate, Clapham, and Richmond at mid-century.<sup>165</sup> The demographic research undertaken by Davis and Emeljanow reports that a considerable number of unmarried lodgers lived in the area of St Giles, within walking distance of the West End theatres renowned for staging spectacular burlesques.<sup>166</sup>

Schoch believes that men about town spent their free time in the pursuit of leisure in public places like theatres, song-and-supper rooms, pleasure gardens, and clubs. A fictional – and maybe romanticised – description of the men about town's lifestyle is given by Sala in *Twice Around the Clock*, where 'fast' young men are portrayed as enjoying London as a twenty-four-hour place of entertainment. According to Sala, the

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*Fiery Courses of the Sun* in 1853, J. R. O'Neil's *The Siege of Troy; or, The Miss-Judgement of Paris* in 1854, and the anonymous *Apollo and the Flying Pegasus; or, The Defeat of the Amazons* in 1858) and two in East End venues (G. H. George's *King Jupiter; or, The Freaks of the Graces* at the Effingham Salon in 1856 and J. Wooler's *Jason and Medea: A Comic, Heoric, Tragic, Operatic Burlesque-Spectacular Extravaganza* at the Grecian Salon in 1851). All the other burlesque performances are concentrated in the West End of London. See Monrès-Gaspar, 'List', pp. 46-48 and Davies, 'List', pp. 270-271.

<sup>164</sup> Talfourd, 'Alcestis', I. 1. 343. In order to convey her flirtatious nature to the policeman, Phoedra sings 'I'm a flirt'. The servant describes herself as enjoying men's company despite being unmarried. See Talfourd, 'Alcestis', I. 1. 271-282.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, p. 179.

theatre marks the beginning of London's nightlife. He sketches the portrait of an audience leaving the Haymarket Theatre at midnight. Together with dramatic critics and old playgoers, '[c]rowds of jovial young clerks and spruce law students cluster beneath the portico' after having witnessed 'Mr Talfourd's last sparkling burlesque'.<sup>167</sup> After the performance, the young men about town would have eaten a few oysters and walked towards Evans's in the Strand. A similar account is offered by William Day, who describes 'the era of fast living' as characterised by attendance at theatres and taverns like Evans's, the Cider Cellars, and the Coal Hole.<sup>168</sup>

Hence, not only did men about town live near to West End theatres and possess sufficient income to attend such venues, but they were also acquainted with the 'fast' lifestyle being parodied on the burlesque stage. As the previous examples make clear, for instance, London 'fast' men would have possibly patronised the drinking establishments mentioned in burlesques. As Sala's sketch exemplifies, going to the theatre to see a burlesque performance was an essential component in the London swells' nightly pursuit of entertainment. Other mid-Victorian accounts contribute to cementing the association between burlesque, as a theatrical genre, and the social category of men about town as its patrons. Plentiful are the journal articles which framed theatrical burlesques as a 'fast' form of entertainment devised for the enjoyment of swells. For example, the *Theatrical Journal* described burlesque as an 'intellectual diversion provided for the "swells" [...] of the period', while the *Musical World* remarked that burlesque was an 'article [...] manufactured for the consumption of men, and specifically for that class of men who are called "swells"'.<sup>169</sup> Similarly, in a rather generalised comment on the nature of the burlesques produced at the Strand in the 1850s, a journalist writing for the *Saturday Review* observed that:

[t]he West-End man about town does not think his experience in actual life complete till he has seen the last new burlesque at the Strand, and can pronounce a strong opinion on the merits of Miss Marie Wilton. We have no predilection for slang, but if we said that the Strand was the "swell" theatre of the day, we should accurately define the position it at present holds.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Sala, *Twice Around the Clock*, p. 320.

<sup>168</sup> William Day, *Reminiscences of the Turf, with Anecdotes and Recollections of Its Principal Celebrities* (London: R. Bentley, 1891), p. 139.

<sup>169</sup> 'MODERN BURLESQUE AND ITS PROTOTYPE', *Theatrical Journal*, February 1870, p. 60 and 'BURLESQUE', *Musical World*, September 1869, p. 667.

<sup>170</sup> 'THE STRAND BURLESQUES', *Saturday Review*, 15 June 1861, p. 612.

‘Fast’ men’s fascination with burlesque actresses like Marie Wilton was also emphasised by an article published in *Tinsley’s Magazine*:

[...] the private boxes, looking like gilded doves, are bright with youth and fashion [...]. Here are damaged characters and motheaten reputations in plenty: patched-up roués, spendthrift striplings just escaped from leading-strings, titled poverty, erring beauty, and bald-headed curiosity are all met to gratify a morbid taste, and find pleasure in watching a questionable play. [...] The stalls are of course filled with a more mixed class. Here you will find the garrulous nuisance fresh from his club, the Junior something or other; he always has a friend with him [...]. Close beside the general nuisance sits the military beau, who has eyes and ears for nothing but the actresses [...]. How manly he appears when compared with the civilian dandy, who sits as close as possible to the stage [...]. What an interesting batch of patrons the third row contains! They are the aristocratic fledglings of the stalls. They are waiting for the new burlesque, and yawn and grimace over the first piece as if it were a sort of premature nightmare to them [...]. When the burlesque begins, and a special favoured one appears, her admirer will shake off his languor; then concentrating all the power of sight under his command into his eyeglass, he will watch the object in question in quite a flutter of excitement, rustling his programme, or patting his gloved hands in marked approval of everything she does.<sup>171</sup>

Whether aristocrats or bourgeois, sitting in private boxes or in the stalls, burlesque spectators are generally described as young. Specifically, the journalist frames them as the ‘striplings’, ‘juniors’, and ‘fledglings’ of an older generations of playgoers. Despite their belonging to different social categories (e. g. titled gentlemen, military men, dandies), such spectators’ attitude towards the burlesque performance may be uniformly described as ‘fast’, since all members of the public seem to concentrate on the performance of burlesque actresses.

In *All the Year Round*, a journalist impressionistically describes burlesque audiences capturing a similar social composition to that sketched by *Tinsley’s Magazine*:

[it] cares but little for comedy-dramas, and is insatiable of extravaganzas and burlesque. As a concession to public usage, the burlesque of the evening is generally preceded by something in the form of a play – comic, farcical, melodramatic, or tragic. But it is not till nine or ten that the patrons, for whom the management chiefly caters, appear upon the spot. Whether they occupy private boxes or stalls, they are readily distinguishable. The amplitude of shirt-front and wristband, the strident tones, the echoing laugh, proclaim at once the tooth-pick critic. Some of these gentlemen are up from Aldershot bent on a metropolitan holiday; others are scions of, or it may be are, themselves, hereditary legislators; others again are baronets, guardsmen, and their hangers-on; others – and these perhaps constitute the majority – are gentlemen whose days are given to commercial pursuits in the city, and whose evenings are devoted to enjoyment at the West-end. [...] They are demonstrative, and even turbulent. Their critical comments in the stalls, which are mostly of a strikingly personal nature, are made in a tone so loud that the actors and actresses can overhear.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>171</sup> ‘AUDIENCES AT THE PLAY’, *Tinsley’s Magazine*, January 1880, pp. 51-59.

<sup>172</sup> ‘SOME THEATRICAL AUDIENCES’, *All the Year Round*, 19 May 1877, pp. 273-278.

The journalist notes the presence of baronets, critics, military men on leave from Aldershott, and politicians with their offspring among the burlesque public. Although members of the middle classes employed in a variety of commercial pursuits possibly represented the majority of burlesque spectators, the journalist also accounts for a considerable presence of noblemen and politicians. According to the journalist, all the social categories mentioned above fall into the category of ‘fast fashionable audiences’<sup>173</sup> by virtue of their manifest enjoyment of extravaganzas and burlesques.

Although ideologically biased, Victorian intellectuals also described burlesques as generally patronised by men about town. For example, Morley believes that the ‘fast blockheads’<sup>174</sup> of his age were responsible for the decadence of Victorian drama. Their taste conditioned the choice of theatrical productions which were reduced to adaptations from the French and burlesques, whose ‘vacuity of thought’<sup>175</sup> Morley condemns. Similarly, in *Principles of Comedy*, Fitzgerald defines burlesque as a ‘mixture of low dresses, comic songs, and break downs’ favoured by the ‘swell of our day’.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, burlesque authors themselves were possibly conscious of the target audience they were addressing in their plays. In ‘The Spirit of Burlesque’, Burnand states that ‘Talfourd [...] wrote for undergraduates, while Albert Smith and the Broughs [...] composed such burlesque pieces as the men about town of that period would enjoy’.<sup>177</sup> In effect, in Burnand’s opinions, such authors crammed their burlesques with references to contemporary social life and political developments for the enjoyment of the swells of the day.

Men about town’s fascination with theatrical burlesques was also derided by contemporary satirical journals like *Punch* and *Judy*. For example, in 1866, *Punch* imagined a ‘young man wishing to be considered about town’<sup>178</sup> among the audience witnessing Burnand’s burlesque *Helen*. *Punch* specifically caricatured the man about town’s anxiety to be recognised by the rest of the spectators, as he was ‘glad to nod and be nodded to as often as possible’.<sup>179</sup> Moreover, in a caricature published in 1869, *Judy* foregrounds the swell as the stereotypical burlesque patron (Figure 18).

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Morley, p. 7.

<sup>175</sup> Morley, p. 25.

<sup>176</sup> Fitzgerald, *Principles of Comedy*, p. 150.

<sup>177</sup> Burnand, ‘The Spirit of Burlesque’, p. 166.

<sup>178</sup> ‘EVENINGS FROM HOME’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 21 July 1866, p. 26.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.





**IN THE STALLS.**

Can't say for certain whether or not it's as good as the other ones he has seen. Upon reflection, doesn't think it is, unless, indeed, he is getting rather tired of that sort of thing; and Judy thinks that perhaps some other people may be growing a little tired also.

Figure 18. 'THE LAST NEW BURLESQUE', *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*, 22 December 1869, p. 80

A smartly dressed gentleman is said to be 'rather tired'<sup>180</sup> of repeatedly witnessing burlesque performances night after night. Yet, in 1870, *Judy* humorously portrayed again two 'languid swells'<sup>181</sup> sitting in a box to see a burlesque (Figure 19).

<sup>180</sup> 'THE LAST NEW BURLESQUE', *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*, 22 December 1869, p. 80. Figure 17 corresponds to a portion of a larger caricature which will be analysed later in this chapter.

<sup>181</sup> 'AT A BURLESQUE', *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*, 13 April 1870, p. 242.

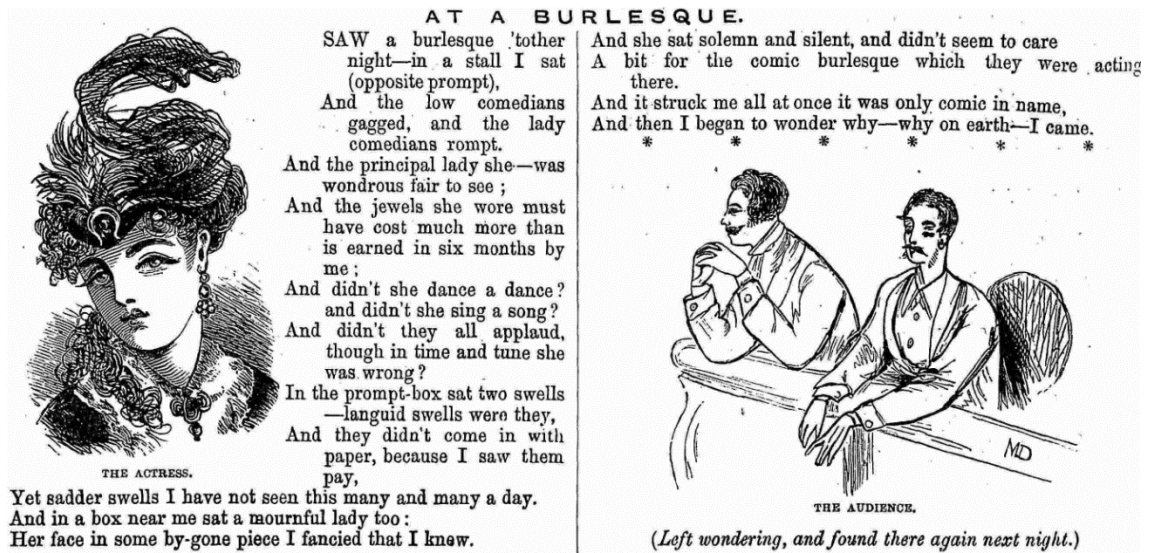


Figure 19. 'AT A BURLESQUE', *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*, 13 April 1870, p. 242

In order to make fun of their theatrical habits, the caption says that the gentlemen were 'left wondering, and found there again next night'.<sup>182</sup>

Although highly stereotypical and in some instances ideologically driven, it is arguable that the articles, caricatures, and intellectual opinions discussed here picked upon a real playgoing tendency. In fact, some performance reviews mention the actual presence of young swells and men about town among burlesque audiences. For example, a reviewer writing for the *Times* noted that Burnand's classical burlesque *Paris*, staged at the Strand in April 1866, chiefly attracted 'the youthful swell, who has fresh upon him all the bloom of the public school'.<sup>183</sup> Similarly, a review of Lemon's *Medea* remarked that the play was sympathetically received by the 'wretches of men of the present day who like their club and will smoke their nasty tobacco'.<sup>184</sup> In addition, the private reminiscences of Victorian professional gentlemen framed burlesques as a typically youthful pastime. The barrister Montagu Williams, for instance, recalls having witnessed numerous burlesques written by the Broughs, Smith, Talfourd, Byron, and Burnand in his youth.<sup>185</sup> Other members of the upper classes recall having witnessed burlesques only on isolated occasions. Henry Greville, son of the second cousin of the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Warwick, reportedly saw Ristori performing *Medea* in Legouv e's tragedy. He notes that the actress later enjoyed Robson's comic performance in the same role.<sup>186</sup> Similarly, the barrister, man of

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> 'Strand Theatre', *Times*, 7 April 1866, p. 5.

<sup>184</sup> 'PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS', *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, 20 July 1856, p. 12.

<sup>185</sup> M. Williams, pp. 272-273.

<sup>186</sup> Henry William Greville, *Leaves from the Diary of Henry Greville: 1852-1856* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1884), pp. 371-372.

letters, and inveterate theatregoer Henry Crabb Robinson admitted enjoying Robson's interpretation of *Medea* in Brough's burlesque.<sup>187</sup> Finally, some members of the upper classes seem not to have appreciated burlesque at all. For instance, Sir William Hardman recalls having left the Olympic Theatre before Burnand's extravaganza *Robin Hood* (1862) was even finished. He was admittedly 'disgusted' by and 'despaired' of the excessive use of music hall songs and break-down dances.<sup>188</sup>

Nevertheless, on the basis of the quantity and variety of documents discussed here, it seems possible to hypothesise that young men about town belonging to the upper echelons of Victorian society constituted a portion of burlesque audiences.<sup>189</sup> As Schoch suggests, they had the economic means, time, educational background, and 'fast' life experience necessary to understand and enjoy the humorous references in burlesque. In addition, as this section has initially highlighted, classical burlesque scripts may have directly addressed men about town as their intended spectators: by displaying a dissipated lifestyle while maintaining typically bourgeois attitudes, classical burlesques might have appealed to the social category of 'fast' young men, who refused to embrace respectability in order to enjoy the pleasures offered by the city of London. Nevertheless, such a conclusion opens an issue which Schoch arguably sidesteps. Although Schoch recognises the impossibility of labelling a theatrical audience as entirely composed of mid-Victorian swells, he fails to investigate further the wider appeal that burlesque might have had. Specifically, Schoch does not discuss the complex issue of swells' social affiliation: whilst acknowledging that the 'fast' men might have belonged to the upper and middle classes, Schoch does not consider the potential adoption of 'fast' attitudes among other social categories. The following sections of this chapter seek to tackle this issue, as they will evaluate the possible presence of lower social orders among burlesque audiences, together with the possible presence of women.

### **5.6 Beyond the Stereotype: Lower Classes and Classical Burlesque**

The evidence gathered so far has contributed to the sketching of a fairly exclusive portrait of the composition of the audience for classical burlesque. The core public for

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<sup>187</sup> It is interesting to note that Robinson was eighty-one when he saw Robson's performance of *Medea*. See Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1872), II, 359.

<sup>188</sup> Sir William Hardman, *A Mid-Victorian Pepys*, ed. by S. M. Ellis (London: Cecil Palmer, 1923), pp. 254-255.

<sup>189</sup> I do not refer here to classical burlesque specifically as no document differentiates among burlesque types. However, when possible (as in the case of specific performance reviews), I include evidence dealing with classical burlesques, as they are the main concern of this thesis.

classical burlesque was arguably made up of gentlemen belonging to the middle and upper strata of mid-Victorian society, who were affluent enough to afford the comparatively expensive price of admittance into a West End theatre and educated enough to understand the humorous references in burlesque. In addition, the absence of a significant corpus of classical burlesques performed in East End and South London theatres may signal the lack of appeal that this form of entertainment had for the lower strata of Victorian society. According to Schoch, staging a classical burlesque in East End theatres could prove to be unsuccessful, as many of the audiences attending such venues would have been insufficiently educated. For example, Burnand's *Sappho; or Look Before you Leap!*, performed at the Standard Theatre in 1861, reportedly 'fell flat' as it required 'more erudite' spectators, like those who crowded theatres to the 'West of Temple Bar', in order to be fully understood.<sup>190</sup> In a similar fashion, Wooler's *Jason and Medea*, staged at the Grecian Theatre in 1851, seems to have been appreciated chiefly because of the dance numbers interspersed in the performance, which were loudly encored by the audience.<sup>191</sup> Both reviewers arguably imply that the less educated spectators, belonging to the lower strata of society and habitually attending East End venues, did not appreciate classical burlesques as much as the educated members of West End theatre audiences did. Although perpetrating a rather simplistic class division between East and West End spectators, the performance reviews quoted here testify to the lack of popularity that burlesques had among East End audiences. Burlesques staged in South London theatres were received with a similar scepticism. As an anonymous journalist noted with a patronising tone, '[b]urlesques and extravaganzas have never been extremely popular on the south side of the river and the manager who would venture to place either of those innovations before a transpontine audience on Boxing Night would assuredly meet with the treatment that so daring an iconoclast would deserve'.<sup>192</sup>

The substantial lack of burlesque performances in East End theatrical venues does not exclude the presence of members of the lower social classes in West End theatres on the occasion of burlesque performances. Although reaching the West End might have been financially prohibitive, members of the lower social classes living in suburban areas might still have chosen to visit the theatres which staged burlesques on isolated occasions. Moreover, as previously noted, in spite of their lack of formal education, individuals

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<sup>190</sup> Anonymous newspaper clipping quoted in Schoch, 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, p. xxviii.

<sup>191</sup> 'THEATRICALS, ETC.', *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, 31 August 1851, p. 10.

<sup>192</sup> Anonymous newspaper clipping quoted in Schoch 'Introduction', in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

belonging to the lower-middle and working classes might have developed a second-hand knowledge of the classics and of serious theatrical productions, thus being capable of understanding burlesque humour. There are several factors which support the hypothetical presence of some members of the lower classes among burlesque public.

Firstly, as noted in the first chapter of this thesis, the term swell was often used to designate that section of young lower-class men who mimicked the dress code and behaviour of upper-class gentlemen.<sup>193</sup> Focussing on their fashion and appearance, Ellen Moers observes that the ‘young men at the bottom of the respectable class, the scrubby clerks, apprentices and medical students who scraped along the backwaters of London on less than £50 a year’ relied on cheap ready-to-wear clothes, which were sold in London shops since the early years of the Victorian era, in order to imitate the style of fashionable swells.<sup>194</sup> For example, Moers observes that a ‘thousand London shopkeepers’ attending ‘theatres and eating houses’<sup>195</sup> all looked like Dickens, who dressed in accordance with the style of the swell. Indeed, he wore extravagant accessories, like heavy gold chains and colourful boutonnières, while combing his hair to emphasise his brilliantined earlocks.

The presence of the ‘swell as counterfeit’<sup>196</sup> was acknowledged by the commentators who sketched the portraits of Victorian burlesque audiences. For example, a journalist writing for *Tinsley’s Magazine* invited his readers to ‘take a peep at [the] young fellows in the corner of the pit, leaning over the wooden barrier as if they wished to make believe they are occupants of the stalls. Poor fellows! How they strive to ape the lackadaisical manners of fast young swelldom!’<sup>197</sup> The anonymous commentator registers the presence of young male burlesque spectators who imitated the careless attitude of the ‘fast’ swells. Not affluent enough to purchase a ticket for the stalls, the ‘fake swells’ described in *Tinsley’s Magazine* sit in the pit of the theatre while symbolically leaning forward. Such a gesture perfectly encapsulates their desire to climb up the social ladder.

In the light of Bailey’s and Moer’s description of the swell as ‘counterfeit’, it is arguable that the young men mentioned by *Tinsley’s Magazine* belonged to the lower-middle classes, working as junior clerks or shopkeepers in the city. They might have purchased a half-price ticket for the pit, either because they wanted to save money or because they worked until late in the evenings. In effect, mid-Victorian theatres offered the possibility to buy a cheaper ticket after the first piece of the night, which ended at

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<sup>193</sup> See Bailey, p. 109 and Chapter 1.

<sup>194</sup> Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960), p. 215.

<sup>195</sup> Moers, pp. 226-227.

<sup>196</sup> Bailey, p. 109.

<sup>197</sup> ‘Audiences at the Play’, *Tinsley’s Magazine*, January 1880, pp. 56-57.

about nine o'clock. According to Yates, the practice of half prices allowed the men who would have been bored spending an entire evening at the theatre to witness only the performances they were interested in (usually burlesques and farces).<sup>198</sup> However, half price also facilitated the lower classes' attendance at theatrical venues: London clerks and shopkeepers, for instance, would have managed to sit in the pit at a reduced price, thus being able to witness their favourite burlesques like the true swells did.<sup>199</sup>

Given the lack of first-hand testimonies, it is hardly possible to substantiate the arguments developed so far with more tangible evidence. However, the remarks of nineteenth-century commentators like Sala contribute to cementing the association between theatrical burlesques and the category of aspiring swells. In *Twice Around the Clock*, Sala describes the Green Room of a theatre on the occasion of a burlesque performance at mid-nineteenth century, for the benefit of the 'jaunty young clerks' and 'incipient men about town' among his readers.<sup>200</sup> The journalist opens the doors to a forbidden region, where actors gather with the dancers of the *corps de ballet*. Swells are seen wandering in and out of the Green Room, talking to the most attractive female performers of the night. It is arguable that Sala's account offered a vicarious experience to those young clerks among his readers who dreamt about 'spangles, muslin, skirts, and pink tights'<sup>201</sup>, possibly nurturing their desire to emulate the lifestyle of the lucky 'genus swell[s]'<sup>202</sup> who found admittance behind the theatres' stage doors.

The second factor which arguably suggests the presence of the lower classes among burlesque audiences is the occasional description of gallery spectators in contemporary accounts. For example, a journalist writing for *Tinsley's Magazine* describes the occupants of the galleries as such:

[c]uriously enough, the gods who attend the theatres more especially devoted to burlesque cannot understand a pun – many of them do not even know what a pun means. But if wanting in this respect they do not lack knowledge of, or taste for, the other ingredients that go to make up the burlesque of the period. They have a keen appreciation of leg and bust, and the costume that allows the stage Prince Prettyman to show the largest proportion thereof. They are delighted by gorgeous scenery, and tickled by rough-and-tumble buffoonery, and they are sworn admirers of music-hall songs and break-down dancing. In the latter art, indeed, many of them are amateurs, and they are technically critical upon the part of the performance. They are believers in, and propagators of, theatrical scandal, too. They will tell you that this or that actress is kept by this or that nobleman; will tell it unhesitatingly, and as a fact with their own knowledge, though generally speaking the thing

<sup>198</sup> Yates, *Recollections*, I, 200.

<sup>199</sup> While clerks finished working at around 6 p.m., shops closed at 9 p.m. Therefore, shopkeepers and their associates would have been able to attend the theatres only at half-price. See Davis and Emeljanow, p. 182.

<sup>200</sup> Sala, *Twice Around the Clock*, p. 236.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> Sala, *Twice Around the Clock*, p. 247.

is utterly untrue. But true or false, the idea that a young actress is “under protection” seems, in their opinion, to enhance her claim to consideration and applause in her professional capacity. These are, however, but hybrid and half-hearted gods – beings whose inclinations lay music-hallwards, who only attend the theatres because they cannot afford to go to halls which, through their accessories, are expensive places of amusement.<sup>203</sup>

According to the journalist writing for *Tinsley's Magazine*, the spectators who sat in the galleries did not possess the requisite foreknowledge necessary to understand burlesque parodic meaning. They merely appreciated burlesque as a titillating show, enriched by spectacular scenic effects, ridiculous songs and break down dances. The burlesque spectators who occupied the galleries probably belonged to the lower social classes, who were supposedly less educated than other audience members. As the reviewer suggests, they might have chosen to witness burlesque performances because they could not afford to attend London's music halls, where food and drinks had to be purchased. A journalist writing for the *Times* adopts a similar tone when describing the gallery audiences of the Strand Theatre, who are defined as an ‘assembly that seems to have no notion of serious interest, but to regard laughter as the sole end of its being’.<sup>204</sup> The spectators sitting in the galleries of the Strand are condescendingly framed as unable to appreciate the qualities of serious drama. Overall, even though they imply gallery audiences’ lack of understanding with a patronising tone, the nineteenth-century accounts quoted here crucially register the presence of some members of the lower social orders among burlesque public. As such, they offer a less exclusive portrait of the composition of burlesque audiences.

Although acknowledging the presence of some relatively poor and uneducated spectators, the testimonies analysed in this section do not foreground burlesque as a demotic form of entertainment. Despite this, some journalists and commentators seem to emphasise the appeal that burlesque had on a generically lower section of Victorian society, which included the lowest level of the middle classes and possibly accommodated some members of the working classes. As a reviewer writing for the *Musical World* notes, burlesques were written and performed ‘as if audiences were composed merely of “gents”, shopmen, prize fighters, and the denizens of ale-houses and billiard rooms’.<sup>205</sup> Whilst certain commentators directly address the presence of young clerks in their accounts, explicit descriptions of working-class patrons are rare. In *Some*

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<sup>203</sup> ‘Gods and Galleries’, *Tinsley's Magazine*, June 1872, pp. 7-8.

<sup>204</sup> ‘Strand Theatre’, *Times*, 1 September 1869, p. 10.

<sup>205</sup> ‘Burlesques’, *Musical World*, 16 May 1868, p. 332.

*Habits and Customs of the Working Classes*, Thomas Wright, a Journeyman Engineer, does refer more explicitly to the theatrical habits of the working classes. As a working man himself, Wright witnessed several theatrical performances sitting in the galleries, as he could not afford to sit in any more expensive parts of a theatre. He notes that the genre of burlesque was particularly appreciated by those among the gallery audiences who did not like farces. Such spectators would have not understood burlesque puns, they would have noisily commented on the performance and, according to Wright, they would have also thrown orange peels, nutshells, and peas to the audience members sitting in the lower parts of the theatre. Yet, as Wright ironically remarks, the gallery audiences of a burlesque would also have contributed to the maintenance of order: they would have silenced the ‘half-drunken swells’, who habitually talked and laughed too loudly, uttering their ‘well-known war-cry “turn them out”’.<sup>206</sup>

The account of the Journeyman Engineer admittedly emphasises the liveliness of gallery audiences. He argues that the ‘the witticism and eccentricities of those in the galleries are sometimes quite as entertaining as any part of the legitimate performance’.<sup>207</sup> Accordingly, his description may be read as rather formulaic in tone: like some of his contemporaries, Wright frames working-class burlesque audiences as stereotypically uneducated and boisterous, since their manifestations of disapproval are presented as innocuous signs of vitality. Nevertheless, the Journeyman Engineer’s account, together with the description of gallery audiences published by the nineteenth-century press, acknowledge the presence of more socially mixed audiences in the theatres staging burlesques. Given that *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes* is one of the few publications testifying to the presence of working-class spectators at burlesques, it hardly provides sufficient evidence to frame burlesque as a demotic genre as classical scholars have suggested. Yet, as this section has shown, nineteenth-century descriptions of burlesque audiences signal that theatrical burlesques might have also attracted spectators such as lower-middle-class clerks desirous of emulating the swell’s lifestyle despite their difference in income and, perhaps occasionally, working-class men in search of enjoyment at the theatre.

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<sup>206</sup> Thomas Wright, *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes. By a Journeyman Engineer* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1867), pp. 161-162.

<sup>207</sup> Wright, p. 162.



### 5.7 Beyond the Stereotype: Women and Classical Burlesque

Whilst acknowledging a certain diversity in terms of class, this chapter has not yet dealt with the issue of gender in its investigation of the composition of classical burlesque audiences. Neither classical scholars, nor theatre historians have thoroughly investigated the possible presence of women among burlesque public. Hall merely observes that ‘[a]lthough women certainly attended classical burlesques, as well as acting in them, unfortunately no source of which I know records a woman’s responses to this type of theatre in any detail’.<sup>208</sup> The lack of evidence – and, hence, of scholarly attention – accounting for the presence of female burlesque spectators in Victorian theatres may be due to the very nature of burlesque as a theatrical genre. Being a form of entertainment that capitalised on the display of actresses’ bodies, burlesque was arguably devised for the enjoyment of men. As repeatedly emphasised throughout this thesis, female burlesque performers’ movements and scanty costumes arguably contributed to their sexualisation. Female-to-male cross-dressing was chiefly regarded as enticing the male members of the public, as actresses appeared on stage wearing male clothes which revealed their bodies (crucially, their legs), whilst knowingly flaunting their feminine sensuality. As a journalist writing for the *Musical World* observed:

[...] it would be ridiculous to suppose that women in general really care about seeing other women made more attractive in the eyes of men [...]. We should think that a burlesque must be as amusing to a party of ladies as the half-hour in a ballroom during which the gentlemen are taking supper below stairs. [...] But, whatever women in general are pleased or not with burlesques, it is undeniable that burlesque is not intended to please women. This article is manufactured for the consumption of men, and specifically for that class of men who are called “swells”.<sup>209</sup>

Some reviewers regarded burlesque as not only unappealing, but also as potentially corrupting the morals of young ladies. For example, a journalist writing for the *Era* remarked that:

[...] though we appreciate classic beauty in all its details, we strongly condemn the indelicate – nay, why mince the word – the positive indecency, in which many classical characters are dressed for the stage. However such semi-nude exhibitions of young ladies may please the morbid taste of the sensualist, no father or husband would take either daughter or wife to witness the performance of a half-dressed woman.<sup>210</sup>

<sup>208</sup> E. Hall, ‘Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre’, p. 352.

<sup>209</sup> ‘Burlesque’, *Musical World*, September 1869, p. 667.

<sup>210</sup> ‘THEATRICALS IN THE CHRISTMAS WEEK’, *Era*, 30 December 1860, p. 11.

For such a reason, in 1869, the Lord Chamberlain issued a circular in which he condemned the impropriety of the costumes worn by dancers and actresses performing in pantomimes and burlesques, as they were ‘displaying too much of their charms to appreciative audiences’.<sup>211</sup> Lord Sydney, the Lord Chamberlain at the time, invited theatre managers to lengthen the skirts worn by female performers, as he believed that ‘a man should think twice about taking the ladies of his family to see’ such allegedly indecent shows.<sup>212</sup> Although many nineteenth-century commentators denied the moral offence caused by burlesque performances, the debate around the indecency of costumes contributed to framing the genre as exclusively entertaining male audiences.

In spite of the development of such a narrative, there is some evidence which suggests the presence of women among burlesque audiences. Firstly, burlesques were reviewed in newspapers and periodicals explicitly addressed to women. The *Lady’s Newspaper and Pictorial Times* reviewed theatrical performances including burlesques. This newspaper occasionally reproduced the performance reviews published by the *Morning Post*. For instance, both newspapers featured the same article reviewing Brough’s *Medea* in July 1856.<sup>213</sup> The *Ladies’ Cabinet of Fashion, Music and Romance*, a monthly magazine targeting upper-middle-class women, regularly reviewed burlesque performances in the column ‘Amusements of the Month’. Some of the articles published in this magazine arguably betray the readers’ acquaintance with burlesque theatre. For example, when advertising the *Forty Thieves*, a burlesque written by some members of the Savage Club for the benefit of the families of two deceased dramatic authors, a journalist writing for the *Ladies’ Cabinet* observed that some of the actors who starred in the performance, such as Robert and William Brough, Sala, and John Hollingshead, would have been ‘familiar as “household words” in the homes of [...] readers’.<sup>214</sup> Other magazines published burlesque performance reviews with less regularity. For instance, the *Ladies’ Treasury: An Illustrated Magazine of Entertaining Literature* occasionally advertised burlesques

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<sup>211</sup> Before articulating his response, the journalist writing for *All the Year Round* summarises the charges that the Lord Chamberlain made to the genre of burlesque. See ‘TO THE LORD CHAMBERLAIN’, *All the Year Round*, 6 March 1869, p. 325.

<sup>212</sup> ‘TO THE LORD CHAMBERLAIN’, *All the Year Round*, 20 March 1869, p. 375.

<sup>213</sup> See, for example, ‘Olympic Theatre’, *Morning Post*, 15 July 1856, p. 5 and ‘Amusements & c.’, *Lady’s Newspaper and Pictorial Times*, 19 July 1856, p. 37.

<sup>214</sup> ‘AMUSEMENTS OF THE MONTH’, *The Ladies’ Cabinet of Fashion, Music and Romance*, [n.d.], p. 164. According to Auerbach, the magazine catered for ‘a well-educated audience, probably to the upper-middle classes’. See Jeffrey A. Auerbach, ‘What They Read: Mid-Nineteenth Century English Women’s Magazines and the Emergence of a Consumer Culture’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 30 (Summer 1997), 121-140 (p. 123).

performed in London theatres.<sup>215</sup> Likewise, the *Englishwoman's Review* commented on burlesque performances in the years 1858 and 1859. The journalist who reviewed burlesques for this publication seems to have had a predilection for Talfourd's plays, whose witticism is repeatedly praised.<sup>216</sup>

The presence of burlesque performance reviews in women's magazines suggest a possible overlap between their readership and theatrical audiences. In addition, thanks to the genre's press coverage, it is possible to identify a few women journalists who were familiar with burlesque. In 1866, Samuel Orchart Beeton, renowned as the publisher of the *Boy's Own Paper*, the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, and a series of self-help books with the assistance of his wife, edited *Beeton's Book of Acting Charades*. Conceived as a collection of home entertainments, *Beeton's Book of Acting Charades* included two children's plays and a classical burlesque, entitled *Proserpine; or, Striking a Match*. The burlesque is advertised as being written by 'a favourite writer in our "Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine", who signs herself St Swithin'.<sup>217</sup> St Swithin was the pseudonym adopted by Eliza Gutch, an intellectual remembered nowadays for the contributions she made to the fields of dialect and folklore studies at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>218</sup> It is possible that Gutch used the same pseudonym in the 1860s to write for the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and compose a classical burlesque for Beeton's collection.<sup>219</sup>

St Swithin's *Proserpine* is a burlesque on love and marriage: after having been abandoned by Jupiter, Ceres forbids her daughter to marry. Attempting to minimise the chances of her meeting a suitor, Ceres keeps Proserpine locked inside her house. Yet, with the help of Venus, the young lady manages to go out for a walk, when she is kidnapped by Pluto, the god of Hades who had fallen in love with her. Despite her initial

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<sup>215</sup> The *Ladies' Treasury* reviewed, for instance, the performance of Talfourd's *Atalanta* at the Haymarket. See 'Music and the Drama', *The Ladies' Treasury: An Illustrated Magazine of Entertaining Literature*, 1 April 1857, p. 63.

<sup>216</sup> I am referring here to the *Englishwoman's Review and Drawing Room Journal* edited by Eleanor Duckworth. Although the magazine is explicitly devoted to cover the issue of female occupations, it is not to be confused with the *Englishwoman's Review* edited by Jessie Boucherett from 1866. See 'The Englishwoman's Review', *The Englishwoman's Review*, 21 March 1857, p. 1. For the reviewer's predilection for Talfourd see, for example, 'STRAND THEATRE', *Englishwoman's Review*, 31 December 1859, pp. 330-331.

<sup>217</sup> Samuel Orchart Beeton, 'Preface', in *Beeton's Book of Acting Charades*, ed. by Samuel O. Beeton (London: S. O. Beeton, 1866), pp. v-vi (p. vi).

<sup>218</sup> 'Gutch, Eliza', *A Dictionary of English Folklore* <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198607663.001.0001/acref-9780198607663-e-447>> [accessed 21 April 2021].

<sup>219</sup> Indeed, some of the articles published in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* under the pseudonym of St Swithin have a folkloristic interest. See, for instance, 'NOTES OF THE MONTH', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 1 July 1861, pp. 160-163.

reluctance, Proserpine gets to like her husband and ultimately wishes to spend six months a year with her beloved. The burlesque ends with a moral: the young ladies in the audience are invited not to emulate Proserpine, as she disobeyed her mother, but they are also encouraged to search for true love.<sup>220</sup> As the plot sketched here reveals, St Swithin's burlesque seems to have been expunged of the details that may have made the play unsuitable for young ladies. For instance, Proserpine is not depicted as flirtatious according to the conventions of theatrical burlesques; she is instead framed as desirous of marriage. In addition, the characters of Minerva and Diana, respectively portrayed as a 'bluestocking' and a 'fast young lady', are not portrayed as tempting Proserpine with their claims over female literacy and celibacy.<sup>221</sup> The young protagonist of the play is completely absorbed by her search for love. Consequently, the burlesque is foregrounded as neither titillating nor threatening the gender conventions observed by mid-Victorian respectable society.

As the risk of corrupting young ladies' morals was eliminated, St Swithin's burlesque might have appealed to those upper- and middle-class families who enjoyed staging private theatricals.<sup>222</sup> The burlesque reliance on numerous puns in English, French, and occasionally, Latin, may also be considered as targeting a relatively educated – and therefore upper-class – readership. However, as the author specifies in the argument preceding the script, the knowledge of mythology was not an essential pre-requisite for enjoying *Proserpine*. St Swithin states that 'classical readers will see at a glance what liberties we have taken with the Immortals; other classes of readers may either remain in ignorance of our offences, or may find us out by seeking our characters in the livre noir of some Detective Lemprière'.<sup>223</sup> The upper-class young ladies who did not receive a classical education, but were familiar with French and possibly read Lemprière's dictionary, might still have understood the burlesque humour and taken part in its domestic performance.

St Swithin was not the only female journalist and intellectual to be acquainted with the genre of burlesque. Marie Duval, actress and cartoonist for the magazine *Judy*, realised more than one caricature satirising theatrical burlesques and their 'fast' audiences. As

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<sup>220</sup> St Swithin, 'Proserpine; or, Striking a Match', in *Beeton's Book of Acting Charades*, pp. 121-149.

<sup>221</sup> For the labels attached to the characters see St Swithin, p. 122. For Proserpine's refusal to follow the examples set by Diana and Minerva see St Swithin, pp. 130-134.

<sup>222</sup> According to Steinbach, '[t]hroughout the Victorian period, middle-class and upper-class families were fond of private theatricals, including charades and tableaux vivants, in which families and friends would stage scenes at home for one another's entertainment'. See Steinbach, pp. 180-181.

<sup>223</sup> St Swithin, p. 121.

Julian Waite argues, Duval portrayed for *Judy* the audiences in front of whom she used to play. For example, in 1869, she realised a caricature entitled ‘The Last New Burlesque’ after having performed in Burnand’s *The Beast and the Beauty* at the Royalty Theatre (Figure 20).<sup>224</sup>

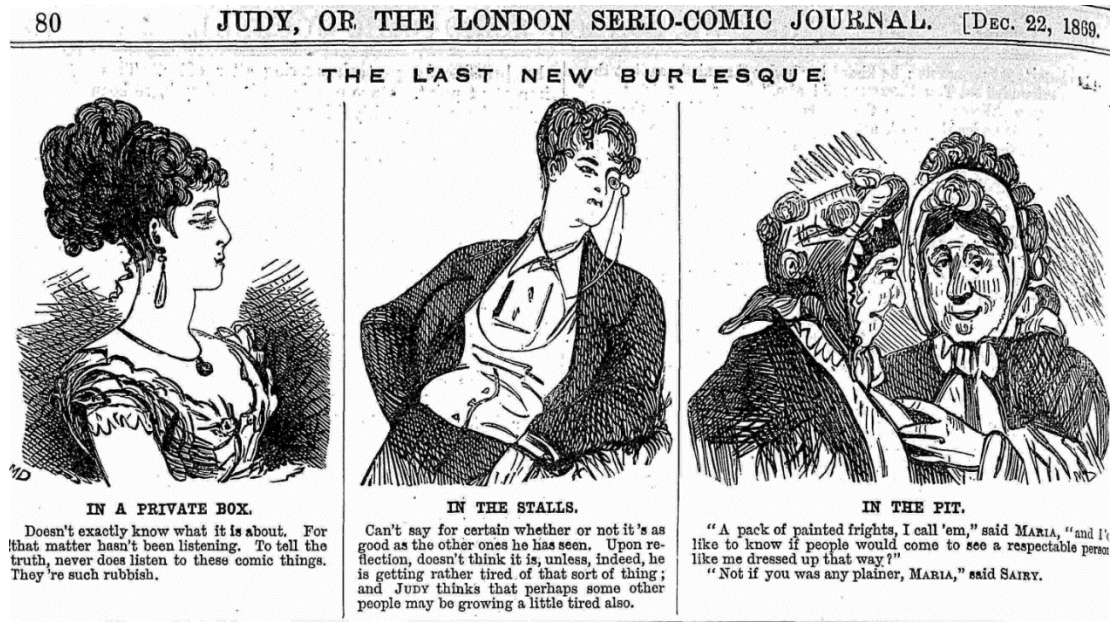


Figure 20. 'THE LAST NEW BURLESQUE', *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*, 22 December 1869, p. 80

As observed previously in this chapter, this caricature foregrounds the swell as the stereotypical burlesque patron: in the stalls, there is an elegant swell, a theatrical *habitué* accustomed to witnessing of burlesque performances. However, the burlesque audience depicted by Duval also includes women: in a private box, an upper-class woman pretends to watch the burlesque despite her general dislike for genre; in the pit, two old lower-class women comment on the extravagance of the actor's costumes.<sup>225</sup> Although highly conventional in its division, Duval's caricature testifies to the composite nature of burlesque audiences both in terms of class and gender.

The lack of empirical evidence substantiating such a claim compels this research to remain – up to a certain extent – speculative. Some degree of speculation is involved, for example, in the analysis of the testimony written by Amelia Roper, the wife of a butcher living in a residential area on the outskirts of London. In one of her letters, Roper narrated

<sup>224</sup> Simon Grennan, Roger Sabin, and Julian Waite, *Marie Duval: Maverick Victorian Cartoonist* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 77.

<sup>225</sup> 'THE LAST NEW BURLESQUE', *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*, 22 December 1869, p. 80.

that she went to the Olympic Theatre on the ‘last Monday fortnight’<sup>226</sup> before the 19 July 1857, in company of a friend and her husband. On that date, the Olympic was staging a comedy, *All In The Wrong* and Brough’s burlesque *Masaniello*.<sup>227</sup> As Roper does not specify which of the aforementioned plays she witnessed, it is not possible to establish with certainty if she saw only the comedy or spent the entire evening at the theatre to enjoy the burlesque. Roper merely describes her experience as so ‘affecting in some of the parts’ that she ‘couldn’t keep from saying oh my!’.<sup>228</sup> In addition, Roper reports having felt like a ‘screamer’<sup>229</sup> while at the Olympic. According to Nead, the word ‘screamer’ hints at the social category of swells, who were stereotypically perceived as being the target audience of burlesque.<sup>230</sup> Hence, Amelia Roper’s account might have framed theatregoing – perhaps on the occasion of a burlesque performance – as a ‘fast’ experience.

Overall, the evidence gathered and discussed in this section signals that burlesque possibly attracted female spectators. Some women arguably familiarised with theatrical burlesques via the press and books for home entertainments; others might also have attended West End theatres when burlesques were being staged, thus being able, perhaps, to get a glimpse of the ‘fast’ lifestyle of the age.

### Conclusion

This chapter has proposed a new approach to the investigation of classical burlesque audiences. Firstly, it has highlighted the impossibility of neatly separating the various types of burlesque into sub-genres and then categorising their audiences accordingly. The classification of theatrical burlesques into classical, Shakespearian, operatic and melodramatic has emerged as a construct adopted by modern historians in their analyses of the genre. By contrast, there seems to be no evidence suggesting a distinct perception of different kinds of burlesque in the mid-Victorian period: no theatre company, performer, or commentator specialised in the mounting, acting, or reviewing of a single burlesque type. As a consequence, it is arguable that burlesque audiences cannot be categorised according to the subject being parodied. Although mainly concerned with classical burlesques, this thesis has discussed burlesque audiences in more general terms,

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<sup>226</sup> The unpublished letters of Amelia Roper are quoted in Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 78.

<sup>227</sup> ‘Multiple Arts and Popular Culture Items’, *Morning Post*, 6 July 1857, p. 4.

<sup>228</sup> Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 78.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

gathering evidence which broadly described burlesque spectators as well as selecting specific examples related to classical burlesque performances when relevant.

Secondly, this chapter has proposed a thorough investigation of the target audience for classical burlesque, building upon Schoch's definition of the 'fast' burlesque spectator articulated in *Not Shakespeare* and in *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques*. Classical burlesques actualised ancient gods and heroes into mid-Victorian swells and men about town, who used slang and enjoyed drinking in taverns, gambling, and fighting. Drawing on a range of empirical and more speculative evidence, this chapter has highlighted how mid-Victorian men about town may well have formed a consistent portion of the actual audiences for burlesque. The level of education, income, and the 'fast' lifestyle adopted by the men about town and swells living during the mid-nineteenth century allowed them to access and understand burlesque performances, thus securing the genre's long-lasting success. In addition, many journalists and commentators framed burlesque as a 'fast' theatrical genre mainly enjoyed by these men about town.

Whilst acknowledging the plethora of testimonies depicting burlesque as patronised by swells and men about town, this chapter has not treated this social category as constituting the totality of burlesque spectators. The accounts of the journalists and commentators who emphasised the 'fastness' of burlesque and its consequent appeal to the swells and men about town of the age cannot be considered as giving an exhaustive and inherently truthful description of burlesque audiences. In fact, as Davis and Emeljanow argue, the 'eyewitness reports by sympathetic or discriminating social observers' responded to specific agendas and often followed 'descriptive patterns and rhetorical formulas that erode the boundaries between fact and fiction'.<sup>231</sup> In the case of descriptions of burlesque audiences, it is noticeable how some critics arguably capitalised on the 'fastness' of burlesque to foster the appeal that this form of entertainment had. Other intellectuals wished instead to discredit theatrical burlesques by describing them as 'fast', thus alluding to their frivolity and licentiousness. This chapter has emphasised how such recurrent descriptions might have truthfully captured the presence of relatively affluent and educated men about town among burlesque public, whilst following some formulaic patterns of description.

This chapter has also considered evidence which demonstrates the presence of lower-class and female spectators among burlesque public. Although possibly sparse, these categories' attendance at theatres which staged burlesques proves to be significant when

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<sup>231</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, p. 99.

attempting to formulate a comprehensive and evidence-based description of burlesque audiences. In addition, the issue of spectators' personal interest in burlesque performers has been tackled. Many mid-Victorian reminiscences and accounts testify to the popularity of the burlesque stars of the day, like Wilton and Robson. Individuals might have wished to see these renowned performers regardless of the play they acted in. Hence, burlesque audiences might have included spectators who did not develop a particular taste for such a genre but were merely intrigued by the performance of their favourite actor. The migration of spectators from theatre to theatre, in order to follow the stars of the age, signals the possible overlap of burlesque audiences with those of other theatrical genres, such as comedy and farce.

Overall, this chapter is inspired by the work of theatre historians like Schoch: Schoch's claim according to which 'fast' men were both the target audience and perhaps a large section of the actual audiences for burlesque has been supported with additional evidence. Nevertheless, this chapter has also investigated the inherent variety of actual burlesque audiences, both in terms of class and of gender, moving beyond Schoch's generic discussion of the diversity of nineteenth-century theatregoers.<sup>232</sup> Moreover, this chapter has disputed the thesis of classical scholars concerning the working-class appeal of classical burlesque performances, on the grounds of limited evidence. Ultimately, together with the identification of possible theatregoing patterns, this chapter has foregrounded the impossibility of adopting broad generalisations to describe burlesque audiences, interiorising the principle proposed by Davis and Emeljanow according to which 'there [is] no such thing as a Victorian audience, but rather a variety of audiences, embodying a wide range of perspectives'.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 131.

<sup>233</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, p. 229.



## AFTERWORD

This thesis has questioned the ‘master narrative’ developed by scholars in the field of classics, who describe classical burlesques as a demotic theatrical genre which encapsulates politically radical messages pertaining to the area of mid-Victorian gender politics. In the first section, it has challenged classical scholars’ assumptions concerning the politically radical beliefs of classical burlesque authors. Although developing a Bohemian lifestyle, most classical burlesque authors did not espouse openly progressive positions in their memoirs, nor encode politically radical messages in their novels, comedies, and farces. In addition, this section has analysed the satirical portraits of independent women in journals such as *Punch* and *Fun*, to which classical burlesque authors often contributed. Strong-minded and ‘fast’ women were either masculinised or hyper-feminised, so as to humorously convey their lack of adherence to the stereotypical portrait of mid-Victorian respectable femininity.

The second section of this thesis has called into question classical scholars’ reading of classical burlesques as politically aligned in terms of gender politics. Although topically referring to the debates surrounding legislation on divorce, classical burlesques portrayed strong-minded and ‘fast’ women in a parodic way, recalling once again the caricatures published in *Punch* and *Fun*. Such a similarity is retrievable once the *performative* dimension of burlesque is considered. Whilst classical scholars have only focussed on written scripts, my investigation has crucially shifted the focus onto acting styles, the use of cross-dressing and linguistic conventions, all of which had a distinctively comic impact on classical burlesque performances. Consequently, the staging of gendered social types, including strong-minded and ‘fast’ women, has emerged as distinctively *caricatural*. In addition, this section has complemented the work of classical scholars by focussing on the performance of male social types. Specifically, it has shown how classical burlesques feminised the martial masculinity stereotype, associated with the doctrine of Muscular Christianity, and that of the mid-Victorian swell, foregrounding his marked interest in fashion and leisure.

The third section of this thesis has challenged classical scholars’ assumptions concerning the composition of classical burlesque audiences which, from their perspective, predominantly included the lower-middle and working classes. Specifically, it has questioned classical scholars’ claims on the diffusion of classical burlesques in the East End theatres of London and on their distinctive appeal to the lower strata of society

on account of their politically progressive contents and broad humour, insofar as both arguments are hardly sustained by available evidence. In contrast, this section has argued that, although heterogeneous, classical burlesque audiences may have been best characterised through the presence of young gentlemen belonging to the upper and middle classes who had the means to attend relatively expensive West End theatres, where burlesques were predominantly performed, and the necessary education to understand burlesque parodies.

Although resisting the tendency to trace a unified narrative, this thesis suggests that classical burlesques were less politically engaged than indicated by classical scholars. Classical burlesque performances arguably exploited the humorous potential enabled by the subversion of gender norms and by references to mid-Victorian gender politics and ideology, without aiming at indoctrinating their audiences. Echoing Schoch's investigation of Shakespearian burlesques, this thesis suggests that classical burlesques were 'hostile to the ascription of unitary meaning'<sup>1</sup>, as they continuously subverted all kinds of expectations around gender roles. Caricaturing dissipated 'fast' men and flirtatious 'fast' women, weak heroes and viragoes, abandoned wives and philandering husbands, classical burlesques staged fictitious social systems and created humorously incoherent social conventions, which were engineered to satirise mid-Victorian beliefs and therefore excite the laughter of the audiences. Classical burlesque's incessant parodies did not propose a viable alternative to the mid-Victorian status quo. Instead, they possibly entertained the younger members of the upper and middle classes who laughed at the humorous subversion of the values cherished by their own social class, without witnessing the serious erosion of their privileges.

As argued above, this study illustrates that classical burlesque performances were not likely to encode politically radical messages, but rather topically referred to issues such as divorce legislation in a way which sustained, amongst other dramatic conventions, the staging of parodic portraits of gendered social types. Such a reading is in accordance with the wider tendencies registered in mid-Victorian theatre: as Yeandle, Newey, and Richards argue, 'one of the continuous appeals of popular theatre [...] was topical referencing [...]. But the producers and writers of stage had to be careful not to invite interference from the censors'.<sup>2</sup> This resulted in a lack of explicit political engagement

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<sup>1</sup> Schoch, *Not Shakespeare*, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Yeandle, Newey and Richards comment on the consequences of censorship and on the consequent lack of political activism of Victorian theatre in the short introduction to the second section of their collection of essays. See Peter Yeandle, Katherine Newey, and Jeffrey Richards, 'Politics in Performance', in *Politics, Performance and Popular Culture: Theatre and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Peter

across a variety of theatrical genres including pantomime and melodrama, as well as burlesque.

Historiographically, this thesis simultaneously reinstates the centrality of evidence, which mostly relies on the written word, whilst attempting to reconstruct the immaterial – and therefore irremediably lost – conditions of performance which characterize and make patent the comicality of burlesque. As previously stated in the Introduction, this thesis balances the rigour of an evidence-based historical analysis with the creativity of informed speculation. It is precisely by means of this approach that the genre of mid-Victorian burlesque is revitalised, being granted a new and perhaps less dissonant position in the history of British theatre than previously acknowledged. The utmost importance of evidence in theatre history has been recently proposed by the previously referenced collection of essays edited by Cochrane and Robinson. Some of the contributors to the volume revisit master narratives through the discovery of new pieces of evidence and the reinterpretation of existing ones, under the ethical obligation imposed by approaching the narration of historical truth(s). Heike Roms, for instance, warns against the supposedly unmediated use of archival evidence as intrinsically justifying truth claims. From her perspective, the research and evaluation processes adopted by the historian should be made transparent, as they are crucially sustained by the researcher's creativity. The historian indeed presents evidence engaging in a performative act that is, for example, writing.<sup>3</sup> In a similar sense, this thesis has made transparent the limitations and biases arising from the collection of archival evidence, whilst hinting at the limitations and biases inevitably shaping my own interpretations.

In Cochrane and Robinson's collection, Newey's essay meditates on the struggles of a feminist theatre historian whose values clash with the ones embraced by the conservative women living in the past and who constitute the object of her study. Newey calls for an 'ethics of care'<sup>4</sup>, which is a careful approach to the histories of women, crucially emphasising how their selves were shaped by the social structures in which they lived. After having revitalised the comicality of burlesque, and therefore highlighted its limited engagement in matters of gender politics, my research has faced a similar struggle: how does one reconcile the political standpoint of a twenty-first century female historian

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Yeandle, Katherine Newey, and Jeffrey Richards (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 129-130 (p. 129).

<sup>3</sup> Heike Roms, 'Mind the Gaps: Evidencing Performance and Performing, Evidence in Performance Art History', in *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*, pp. 163-181.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Newey, 'Feminist Historiography and Ethics: A Case Study from Victorian Britain', in *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence and Truth*, pp. 85-102 (p. 90).

with a nineteenth-century theatrical genre which arguably proposes a conservative view of women? This thesis attempts to offer a careful evaluation of the constraints operating in the mid-Victorian era, analysing how nineteenth-century subjectivities – both male and female – moved within them. As such, this thesis has emphasised the mildly conservative stance of classical burlesque authors, as well as that displayed by classical burlesque performances, as dictated and forged by the forces which shaped individuals, societies, and the theatrical industry in the middle of the nineteenth century. Even if the mild conservatism embraced by burlesque contrasts with my own personal beliefs, it is crucial to appreciate the comicality of the genre as its primary characteristic.

Although questioning the involvement of classical burlesque performances in the early battles for the recognition of women's rights, this thesis does not adopt an anti-feminist perspective. Indeed, this thesis has proposed a limited investigation of women's active engagement with mid-Victorian burlesques as actresses, authors, and audience members, following the feminist approaches of theatre historians such as Bratton and Davis. Having only passingly acknowledged women's active participation in the processes of creation, staging, and fruition of classical burlesques, this thesis may actually pave the way for new and 'careful' investigations centred on women's degree of involvement with mid-Victorian forms of entertainment, following in the footsteps, for instance, of Grennan, Sabin and Waite's recent work on Marie Duval.<sup>5</sup> Additional scholarship focussing on female burlesque performers, authors, and spectators may shed new light on the more subtle challenges that the theatrical entertainment industry might have posed to the gender norms observed in the mid-Victorian age.

Hence, in conclusion, this thesis primarily hopes to interrogate the accuracy of classical scholars' claims about classical burlesque's political alignment through the revitalisation and discovery of evidence. More specifically, this thesis challenges an accepted narrative whilst resisting the formulation of a definitive account as an alternative. As such, this work follows Cochrane and Robinson's definition of historical truth, which is conceived as inevitably plural and dialogic.<sup>6</sup> Instead of thinking in mutually exclusive terms, this thesis dialogues with classical scholars' old truths to propose new processes of historical investigation around classical burlesque. In making patent such processes, this thesis opens itself to the scrutiny of future scholars, who might

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<sup>5</sup> I am here referring to the previously quoted book written by Simon Grennan, Roger Sabin, and Julian Waite entitled *Marie Duval: Maverick Victorian Cartoonist*, published in 2020, which 'investigate Duval's work', both as an actress and a cartoonist on *Judy*, and 'put her life in contest in so far as the limited historical records of her remarkable career allow'. See Grennan, Sabin, and Waite, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Cochrane and Robinson, 'Introduction', pp. 4-14.

in turn engage in other dialogues which result in the revitalisation of a long-forgotten genre in the history of British theatre, and in the formulation of composite narrations approximating historical truth(s).

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*All the Year Round*

*Belfast News-Letter*

*Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*

*Daily News*

*Englishwoman's Review and Drawing Room Journal*

*Era*

*Examiner*

*Fun*

*Girl of the Period Miscellany*

*Illustrated London News*

*Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*

*Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion, Music and Romance*

*Ladies' Treasury: An Illustrated Magazine of Entertaining Literature*

*Literary Gazette: A Weekly Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*

*Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*

*London and Provincial Entr'acte*

*London Society*

*Morning Chronicle*

*Morning Post*

*Musical World*

*Nineteenth Century*

*Punch, or the London Charivari*

*Reynold's Newspaper*

*Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*

*Sporting Gazette*

*Standard*

*Sunday Times*

*Theatrical Journal*

*Theatrical Times*

*The Times*

*Tinsley's Magazine*

*Tomahawk: A Saturday Journal of Satire*

*Train*

*Universal Review*

### **Online resources**

*Adelphi Theatre Calendar:*

<<https://www.umass.edu/AdelphiTheatreCalendar/msti.htm>>

A *Dictionary of English Folklore:* <<https://0-www-oxfordreference-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198607663.001.0001/acref-9780198607663>>

Nead, Lynda. *Fashion and Visual Culture in the 19th Century: The Girl of the Period.*

Online video recording: <<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/fashion-and-visual-culture-in-the-19th-century-the-girl-of-the-period>>

— *Fashion and Visual Culture in the 19th Century: Le Habit Noir: Men in Black.*

Online video recording: <<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/le-habit-noir-men-in-black>>

*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography:* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/>>

*Oxford English Dictionary:* <<https://www.oed.com/>>

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