English DRAMA In Transition

1880-1920

A collection of English drama of the period 1880–2000, including plays by Henry Arthur Jones, Arthur Wing Pinero, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, James M. Barrie, John Galsworthy, William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, and W. Somerset Maugham.

Henry F. Salerno

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Edited by

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To my Father and Mother

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Introduction

AFTER THE lively dramatic activity of the Restoration and eighteenth century, the English drama of the nineteenth century suffered a decline in the number and quality of new plays offered in the theatres, though the variety of theatrical entertainment increased. This decline continued until the last two decades of the century, when a transition to modern drama took place and there was a resurgence of serious drama. The new forms of popular theatre that developed during the century include the pantomime, vaudeville, extravaganzas, burletta and burlesque—the last two being mostly travesty or broad farce with music. Many theatrical stars and personalities emerged and gained popular approval, often on the basis of a very slight theatrical offering. The great stars—Edmund Kean (1787–1833), William C. Macready (1793–1873), and Charles Kemble (1775–1854)—made their reputations doing cut versions of Shakespeare and revivals of the work of other English dramatists. Texts were sacrificed to the demands of these stars, and new plays offered by these actors were fashioned to highlight their particular talents. Besides the introduction of the star system, a number of other factors contributed to the process of driving serious new plays and playwrights from the theatre and welcoming the work of hacks.

One of these factors was the patent system. Until 1843 when the patent law was repealed, only two theatres were licensed to do legitimate drama—Drury Lane and Covent Garden. All other theatres, called "minor" houses, were forbidden to do plays with

dialogue. That, of course, included practically all of English drama from the beginning up to the nineteenth century. However, these "minor" houses might ask for special license to do legitimate drama and a few were occasionally granted such license; or they might do a legitimate drama and risk paying a fine. But the common practice was to present plays without dialogue, such as the pantomime, which became famous, and plays with music, which were allowable. As a result, the burletta, usually a farce with music, came into great popularity; eventually the burletta came to mean any kind of drama with music—farce, melodrama, pantomime, or burlesque. The prevailing fashion was to present varied theatrical entertainment—a melodrama, pantomime, and animal acts on the same program. Thus theatre became a kind of variety show.

The larger and rowdier audiences of the nineteenth century not only demanded more and more of this variety, but the bulk of them came from the lower classes and thus were less literate than the audiences of the previous century. The power of this audience, especially those who frequented the gallery and the pit, was demonstrated by their ability to force down the price of admission during the famous "O.P." (Old Prices) riots and by their ability to make or kill a show, regardless of the reputation of a drama. For instance, *The Count of Monte Cristo,* a play that was done so successfully in America that Eugene O'Neill's father built a career playing it, was killed when it was acted by the much admired Charles Fechter (1824–1879) at the Adelphi. During a rather long scene in which the dying old prisoner tells the hero, Edmund Dantes, the secret hiding place of the gold, a man in the pit called out: "If you please, sir, shall you be much longer a-dying?" After that, the play was laughed off the stage. It was to this audience that the managers had to direct their theatrical entertainment, and it was this audience that determined the offerings of the theatres—the kind of entertainment Tennyson referred to in his sonnet to Macready:

> *. . . brainless pantomime*
> *And those gilt gauds men-children swarm to see.*

To maintain a steady stream of entertainment, the theatres hired hacks, called "stock authors." These writers often had to

produce a script within two or three days. To keep up the pace, they often resorted to adaptations of popular novels, stories, mythological material, and plays from the French. Dickens and Scott were among the most frequently plundered authors. The copyright laws were so lax at the time that most of these adaptations were open acts of piracy. One of the "stock authors," James Robinson Planche (1796–1880) who wrote burlesques, extravaganzas, and melodramas for the Adelphi, Lyceum, and The Olympic, was responsible for reform of the dramatic copyright as a result of litigation over the piracy of his own work. The Dramatic Copyright Act of 1833 protected dramatic works, and the Literary Copyright of 1842 consolidated the law but still left non-dramatic works open to piracy. In 1861 the law was extended to include non-dramatic works, but the author himself had to "adapt" the work before publication in order to protect it. However, the law was so ambiguous that the copyright performance came into being because the general assumption seemed to be that a play published before being performed was free of the copyright law. Thus the author hired actors to give a public reading or "performance" of the work in order to ensure its copyright. Even Shaw had to resort to copyright performances to protect his plays. Not until the Copyright Act of 1911 was full protection given an author's work. Meanwhile, novels, stories, and plays in other languages, particularly in French, were freely translated and adapted for the English stage.

Dickens' serialized novels were often pirated as they came off the press. Though his work made money for other writers and for the theatres, he himself never profited from the commercial success of these adaptations. Of the dozen novels of Dickens adapted successfully for the stage by various stock authors, the most memorable and popular were versions of *Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, A Tale of Two Cities,* and *Martin Chuzzlewit.* At many of the theatres, like the Strand, adaptations of Dickens were more popular than Shakespeare.

Although Dickens' novels made popular plays, he himself never made a career in the theatre. He in fact did write four plays for the stage, but after the last, *The Lamplighter,* was withdrawn after a first reading, he gave up the stage and devoted

himself to his more successful career as novelist. It seems strange that the man who could write such vivid and often very funny scenes in his novels could not make a career of the stage, whereas the hacks who adapted his novels for the stage invariably produced successful shows.

Those seasoned professionals who wrote for the theatres knew their business and their audience very well. They worked for all the emotional and sensational effects possible. In *London's Lost Theatres of the Nineteenth Century,* Erroll Sherson quotes John Hollingshead's description of the scene of Nancy's murder in a version of *Oliver Twist:*

> Nancy was always dragged round the stage by her hair, and after this effort, Sykes always looked up defiantly at the gallery, as he was doubtless told to do in the marked prompt-book. He was always answered by one loud and fearful curse, yelled by the whole mass like a Handel Festival Chorus. The curse was answered by Sykes dragging Nancy, twice round the stage, and then like Ajax, defying the lightning. The simultaneous yell then became louder and more blasphemous. Finally, when Sykes, working up to a well-rehearsed climax, smeared Nancy with red ochre, and taking her by the hair (a most powerful wig) seemed to dash her brains out on the stage, no explosion of dynamite invented by the modern anarchist, no language ever dreamed of in Bedlam, could equal the outburst.

All the emotional and visceral effects of the most popular theatre—the violence, the macabre, the absolute focusing of strong feeling on the monstrous villain, the complete involvement, the mixture of horror and theatrical thrill—are suggested by this performance and its response. It portrays the popular theatre and its audience, the taste of both performers and responders, and is a graphic illustration of what was commercial and thus successful during the nineteenth century.

Serious dramatists could not compete with this kind of theatrical spectacle. A Shakespeare could compete with the bear-baiting pits next door to the Globe or the slaughterhouse drama of his contemporaries, but not with an audience that could not stand to listen to long speeches or wanted a variety show of fast-moving entertainment that startled the eye and did not make great demands on the ear. Thus Shakespeare was revived by Kean

and Macready and Kemble, but with sensational effects and often with interpolated scenes of eye-filling spectacle, scenes mentioned but never written into the Shakespearean texts. Coleridge's remark on seeing Kean's performance suggests both the sensational effect and the ruthless cutting of the text; he said it was like "reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning."

The only serious literary men writing drama were the poets—Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and Browning. But they were not stage craftsmen, and the public theatre did not open its doors to their work; thus they could not develop any of the stage craftsmanship necessary to make them dramatists. They wrote verse drama which we now call closet drama because it is apparently meant to be read rather than staged. It is significant that a theatre hack could take Byron's poem *Mazeppa* and adapt it for the stage, using a real horse and a nearly naked man or woman and bring off a popular success—successful both for the theatre and the performer. One attractive woman, Ada Isaacs Menken, played the role in flesh tights and built a career on it. The theatre wanted Byron's adapted *Mazeppa* played by an attractive woman in flesh tights but not Byron's *Manfred.*

The craving for sensational variety was so great that even the patented theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, were compelled to offer not simply Shakespearean and other English revivals, but animal acts and tight-rope spectacles as well in an effort to draw crowds as large as those frequenting the other theatres.

To accommodate the growing audiences, the theatres were made larger, some seating as many as two or three thousand people. The stage itself shrank back behind the proscenium, and thus away from the audience. These developments and the fact of the larger and often lower-class audiences who filled the gallery and the pit made spectacle more commercial than literary drama and comedy with music more attractive than serious drama. The enlargement of the theatre, of course, created practical problems: it was more difficult for the actors to be heard; facial expression, subtle gesture, and the fine nuances of delivery were lost or missed by three-fourths of the audience; verbal rapport between actor and audience diminished and with that lost rap-

port, of course, went loss of interest in plays depending a great deal on language for their theatrical effect. Scenic interest and development, then, became more and more a matter of broad gesture, eye-catching stage action, and clever stage devices. Plays of broad comedy and the macabre were most sought after. At the popular Booth Theatres, for instance, which were set up during Bartholomew Fair, the typical offering was a Gothic melodrama, such as *Monk and Murderer: Or the Skeleton Spectre* and a pantomime, *Mirth and Magic: Or a Trip to Gibraltar,* with a Harlequin, Pantaloon, and Columbine. The melodrama had to have at least two appearances of a ghost; otherwise it was considered unsatisfactory.

What the drama required was a group of writers who could combine the seriousness of the verse dramatists with the theatrical craftsmanship of the popular dramatists. In the middle of the century, the actor-playwright Dion Boucicault (1822–1890), one of the most prolific writers and producers of the theatre, introduced some seriousness of theme in such plays as *The Octoroon* and *Colleen Bawn.* Boucicault was also responsible for introducing realistic touches in his action and decor, but these were used chiefly to heighten the effect of thrill and sensation. He depended more on stage tricks and spectacular action—cleverly staged fires, last-minute rescues in front of speeding trains, and so on—than upon dialogue and character, which were usually trivial and functional in the most mechanical sense. In a review of the revival of Boucicault's *Colleen Bawn* in 1896, Shaw comments that it was "far superior to the average modern melodrama." But Boucicault, despite some of his innovations, was for the most part typical of the theatre of sensation. He was simply more skillful at stage tricks than any of his contemporaries and gave his melodramas a veneer of seriousness.

Thomas W. Robertson (1829–1871) is one of the few serious dramatists whose work precedes the transition period. He wrote a more natural dialogue than his contemporaries, and he introduced some realistic scene and subject matter. His most impressive play, *Caste* (1867), is highly regarded by critics, including Shaw, who considered it an epoch-making play. One of Robert-