# Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

NCLC 151

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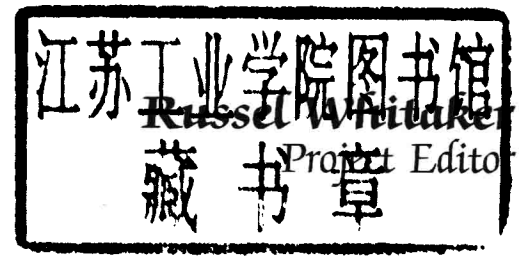
Volume 151

# Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

*Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other Creative Writers Who Died between 1800 and 1899, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations*

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# Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

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# Contents

# Joanna Baillie
## 1762-1851

Scottish poet, playwright, and essayist.

The following entry presents criticism of Baillie from 1947 through 2003. For additional information on Baillie's life and career, see *NCLC,* Volume 71.

## INTRODUCTION

Widely respected during her lifetime as a playwright, Baillie has only recently enjoyed a resurgence in readership after her poetry and dramas had been all but neglected for over a century. After moving to London from her native Scotland, Baillie became involved in the literary community that included some of the most important Romantic writers of the day, including Lord Byron and William Wordsworth. However, until the late twentieth century she was not considered part of the canon of British Romantic writers. Recent critics have sought to show how Baillie's works depict the standard subjects of Romantic literature, including tortured heroes, humble peasants, and the beauty of nature. Baillie's most ambitious and influential works are the three volumes titled *A Series of Plays: In Which it is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind* (1798-1812), each of which contains moral cautionary plays illustrating human passions and their consequences. Her "Introductory Discourse," a preface to the first volume of these *Series of Plays,* is a detailed aesthetic treatise that criticizes tragedy's claim to represent a universal human nature and is considered a revolutionary work of critical theory, particularly since it was composed by a woman writer. A revival of interest in Baillie's plays and poems and her introduction into the canon of British Romantic authors has reestablished Baillie's reputation as a poet and dramatist of note, and she is now regarded by many as the most important female playwright of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Baillie was born on September 11, 1762 in Bothwell in South Lanarkshire, Scotland. Her father, James, was a Presbyterian minister who claimed among his ancestors the nationalist Sir William Wallace, and her mother, Dorothea Hunter, was the sister of the poet Anne Hunter. Her maternal uncles were the noted surgeons William and John Hunter. As a young child, Baillie resisted learning to read, preferring to spend her time outdoors; she was known equally for her sense of humor and her sense of mischief. When she was six, her father moved to the town of Hamilton, and in 1772, when she was ten, Baillie was sent to boarding school in Glasgow, where she excelled in music, art, mathematics, and reading and where she took to entertaining friends by telling stories and organizing amateur theatrical shows. In 1776, Baillie's father was appointed Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow, but he died just two years later. Baillie, her mother, and her sister Agnes then moved to a small estate in Long Calderwood, Lanarkshire, where they remained for six years while Baillie's brother Matthew studied medicine in Oxford and London. During her years at Long Calderwood, Baillie pursued her own education, reading the major British poets and studying Shakespeare.

In 1784, Baillie moved with Agnes to London to live with Matthew, now a doctor. When Matthew married in

1791, the two sisters moved to Hampstead, on the outskirts of London, and lived off an inheritance from their uncle William Hunter. It was in London that Baillie began writing with the intent to publish. Her first works were published anonymously, and, while they were not popular, received a number of favorable reviews that encouraged her to continue writing. She began to see success in 1798 with the publication of her first plays in her *Series of Plays* about the passions. By the early 1800s, she had established herself as a respected poet and dramatist. Her plays were not often staged, but several of them had successful runs in Edinburgh and London, and Baillie always donated a large portion of the proceeds from her theatrical productions to charity. Baillie and her sister began to receive many visitors of distinction at their Hampstead house, which soon became the center of a literary circle that included Lady Annabella, Byron, Wordsworth, Maria Edgeworth, and Sir Walter Scott. Baillie enjoyed a close friendship and correspondence with Scott, visiting him in Scotland many times; several of her works were published under his patronage. Until her death in 1851 at the age of eighty-eight, Baillie continued writing and engaging in philanthropic pursuits: she sponsored new legislation on copyright laws, mentored young writers, fought for anti-slavery legislation, and supported the publication of England's first slave narrative.

## MAJOR WORKS

Baillie began writing poetry at an early age, and by 1790 her first collection of verse appeared in print. *Poems: Wherein It Is Attempted to Describe Certain Views of Nature and of Rustic Manners; And Also, To Point Out, In Some Instances, the Different Influence Which the Same Circumstances Produce on Different Characters,* published anonymously, contains poems about the Scottish peasantry and describes its subjects' rustic manners with a combination of aesthetic distance and sympathetic identification. Baillie's love of the outdoors and her native Scotland are obvious in these poems, the best-known of which include "A Winter Day," a portrayal of a family laboring on the land providing a picture of idealized bourgeois domesticity, and "Address to the Muses," a meditation on poetry and nature. The same year her *Poems* appeared, Baillie decided to take up playwriting. Her first effort was the now lost *Arnold,* which took Baillie three months to write. In 1798, Baillie anonymously published the first volume of *A Series of Plays.* Baillie's plan in writing these *Plays on the Passions* was to trace the structure of each human passion in one tragedy and one comedy. Each play attempted to illustrate how a hero's actions are symptoms caused by an excessive passion, or emotion, of the mind. The seventy-two-page "Introductory Discourse" to the first volume of plays, a treatise arguing for simplicity and the unhurried development of dramatic passions, was hailed as a brilliant, revolutionary piece of writing on aesthetics—and so was quickly assumed to have been written by a man. Besides the "Discourse," the volume contains three plays treating individual passions: *Basil,* a tragedy on love, *De Monfort,* a tragedy on hate, and *The Tryal,* a comedy on love. *De Monfort,* about the hatred De Monfort feels for his childhood friend Rezenvelt, remains Baillie's best-known play. The second volume in the series was published in 1802, and the third volume appeared in 1812. Baillie also published a number of plays individually and in a collection that appeared in 1804. In 1836, she published three more volumes of plays that also treated the passions. Of Baillie's twenty-seven plays, the most important are the three in her first volume of plays and *The Family Legend* (1810), a Scottish Highland drama for which Walter Scott wrote a prologue. Some of the characteristics of her dramatic work include the use of idiomatic language in portraying characters who belong to the lower classes, an interest in nature, and the representation of human psychology as it pertains to motives and desires that lead to tragedy.

In addition to her volumes of drama, Baillie published several collections of her poetry, edited a volume of verse by other writers, and wrote occasional essays. Her *Metrical Legends of Exalted Characters* (1821), a collection of verse that blends historical fact and poetic narrative, includes poems about Scottish folk heroes such as Lady Grisell Baillie and William Wallace. *A Collection of Poems, Chiefly Manuscript, and from Living Authors* (1823), edited by Baillie, was produced to raise money for several of her friends. Baillie's most important book of poetry, *Fugitive Verses,* appeared in 1840, when she was in her seventies. The volume includes her 1790 poems as well as poems exploring her complex feelings and attitudes toward her Protestant faith, particularly after the deaths of her loved ones. Also included are "Lines Written on the Death of Sir Walter Scott," which praises her friend's purity of language. Baillie continued writing poetry to the end of her life, and new poems were included in *The Dramatic and Poetical Works of Joanna Baillie* (1851), which was published several weeks before her death.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

When the first volume of the three volumes of *Series of Plays on the Passions* appeared anonymously in 1798, it created a stir in London's literary circles. When Baillie came forward as the author of the collection, another sensation ensued, as no one had even considered she could have been its author. Afterward, Baillie quickly established herself as a writer of distinction. Her plays became popular in print in Britain and even the United States during the nineteenth century, and several of them were produced in London, Liverpool,

Edinburgh, and Dublin. However, perhaps because of their psychological detail and lack of action, they were more often read than performed on stage. The most successful of her plays produced for stage was *The Family Legend,* which was received especially favorably in Edinburgh.

During her life, Baillie was highly respected as a poet and dramatist, counting Scott and Byron among her many admirers. Nevertheless, after her death Baillie's works fell into neglect, and by the early twentieth century she was all but unknown outside her native Scotland. It was not until the late twentieth century that critics began to look seriously again at her substantial body of writing. Many critics have conjectured that, had Baillie been a man, her works would have continued to be read and performed. Recent commentators have also found it remarkable that this unmarried, sheltered, daughter of a Presbyterian minister produced such a revolutionary theory of drama and portrayed dark, obsessive characters predating the appearance of the tortured Byronic hero. Critical commentary on Baillie has proliferated since the last decade of the twentieth century, and scholars have taken up a variety of issues in discussing her works, including her aesthetic theories; her use of Gothic conventions; her relationship with and attitude toward Byron; her views on gender, identity, and repression; her place in the tradition of private theatricals or "closet" dramas; her perspective on Scottish history; her use of *Sturm and Drang* techniques from German drama; her status as a Romantic writer; and her moral purpose in her plays, especially those depicting the passions. Her "Introductory Discourse" has been widely discussed and is seen as anticipating Wordsworth's landmark statement of Romantic theory in his 1800 preface to the *Lyrical Ballads.* Another important issue that critics have taken up is Baillie's status as a "closet playwright"—one who writes to be read rather than acted, since her letters reveal that she desired her plays to be performed on the stage. Critics generally agree that, despite the weaknesses in some of her plays, her writings show admirable powers of analysis and observation as well as a simple, energetic style. While some fault her attempt at depicting the individual passions in her plays as overly ambitious, she is admired for her bold vision and her attempt to handle works with a moral purpose using complex characterization and psychological insights.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Poems: Wherein It Is Attempted to Describe Certain Views of Nature and of Rustic Manners; And Also, To Point Out, In Some Instances, the Different Influence Which the Same Circumstances Produce on Different Characters* [anonymous] (poetry) 1790

**A Series of Plays: In Which it is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind—Each Passion Being the Subject of a Tragedy and a Comedy.* 3 vols. [anonymous] (plays) 1798-1812

"The Bonny Boat" (song) 1800

"Epilogue to the Theatrical Representation at Strawberry-Hill" (essay) 1800

†*Miscellaneous Plays* (plays) 1804

*The Family Legend: A Tragedy* (play) 1810

*Basil: A Tragedy* (play) 1811

*The Election: A Comedy in Five Acts* (play) 1811

*The Beacon: A Serious Musical Drama, in Two Acts* (play) 1812

*The Dream: A Tragedy in Prose, in Three Acts* (play) 1812

*Metrical Legends of Exalted Characters* (poetry) 1821

*A Collection of Poems, Chiefly Manuscript, and from Living Authors* [editor] (poetry) 1823

*The Martyr: A Drama, in Three Acts* (play) 1826

*The Bride: a Drama in Three Acts* (play) 1828

*A View of the General Tenour of the New Testament Regarding the Nature and Dignity of Jesus Christ: Including a Collection of the Various Passages in the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles which Relate to that Subject* (essay) 1831

*The Complete Poetical Works* (poetry) 1832

‡*Dramas.* 3 vols. (plays) 1836

*A View of the General Tenour of the New Testament Regarding the Nature and Dignity of Jesus Christ: Including a Collection of the Various Passages in the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles which Relate to that Subject. To Which Are Now Added a Correspondence with the Late Bishop of Salisbury, Together with Remarks on the Pre-Existence of Christ, and on Toleration and Fanaticism* (essay and letters) 1838

*Fugitive Verses* (poetry) 1840

*Ahalya Baee: A Poem* (poetry) 1849

*The Dramatic and Poetical Works of Joanna Baillie: Complete in One Volume* (poetry and plays) 1851

*Volume one contains the "Introductory Discourse" and the plays *Count Basil, The Tryal,* and *De Monfort.* Volume two contains the plays *The Election, Ethwald* (Parts One and Two), and *The Second Marriage.* Volume three contains the plays *Orra, The Dream, The Siege,* and *The Beacon.*

†This work contains the plays *Rayner, The Country Inn,* and *Constantine Paleologus, or The Last of the Caesars.*

‡This work contains the plays *Romiero, The Alienated Manor, Henriquez, The Martyr, The Separation, The Stripling, The Phantom, Enthusiasm, Witchcraft, The Homicide, The Bride,* and *The Match.*

## CRITICISM

### M. Norton (essay date April 1947)

SOURCE: Norton, M. "The Plays of Joanna Baillie." *Review of English Studies* 23, no. 90 (April 1947): 131-43.

[*In the following essay, Norton presents an overview of Baillie's dramatic works.*]

The dramatists of the early nineteenth century have been condemned for their slavish imitation of Elizabethan traditions on the grounds that 'every age, however fully it may be conscious of the beauties and virtues of the past, must work out its own methods, its own character and its own aims'.[1] This is but a more emphatic statement of the case hinted at by one of the Romantics himself when reviewing his contemporaries' efforts to lead a dramatic revival: 'I am convinced that the man who is to awaken the drama must be a bold trampling fellow—no reviver even, however good. Just now the drama is a haunted ruin'.[2]

That the plays written during the half century following the outbreak of the French Revolution are for the most part bloodless, unhuman things cannot be denied. Pale ghosts of the Elizabethans hover upon the stage, scarcely heard Shakespearean echoes reach the auditorium; but the Elizabethans have become attenuated during a visit to Germany, and the vastness of the Georgian theatres had turned inspired poetry into mere ranting. But while the Elizabethan tradition touches all the Romantic drama to a greater or less degree, to say that all the dramatists consciously sought to follow that tradition is scarcely true; certainly it is not true of Miss Joanna Baillie and Lord Byron. It is possible to find the Shakespearean influence at work in their dramas, but they were scarcely aware of the debt; for both had very decided views upon drama, wrong-headed perhaps, but at least original. Both recognized the short-comings of contemporary drama, no less than those of the theatre itself; and both sooner or later disclaimed any desire for stage success. Miss Baillie certainly wrote for many years in the hope of obtaining theatrical successes, and was indeed acclaimed by her contemporaries with as much fervour as if she had actually achieved them. Byron hailed her as 'our only dramatist since Otway';[3] while Scott championed her even more enthusiastically as 'the best dramatic writer since the days of Shakespeare and Massinger'.[4]

Her dramatic writings extend over nearly forty years, for the first volume of the ***Series of Plays in which it is attempted to delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind*** appeared in 1798, the year of the *Lyrical Ballads,* and was almost as revolutionary; and her last volume in 1836. Something of her reputation by that time may be gauged by the way *Fraser's Magazine* greeted its announcement:

> Had we heard that a MS. play of Shakespeare or an early but missing novel of Scott's had been discovered and was already in the press, the information could not have been more welcome.[5]

The second and third volumes of ***Plays on the Passions*** had appeared in 1802 and 1812 respectively; two other volumes of miscellaneous plays had been published in 1804 and 1810. In all she wrote some twenty-six plays of which no more than seven were actually performed. No one could have persevered more in the face of disappointments, and few have been more consistent in their views; for even when the plays she was writing were not nominally ***Plays on the Passions,*** she seldom strayed far from the road she had proposed to tread in the first volume of 1798.

All people, she maintains, spend much time in observing the dress and manners of their fellows: even more attention is paid to a fellow being 'placed in extraordinary situations of difficulty and distress'.[6] The public attendance at executions seems adequate proof of this; and she argues that the public would be even more fascinated if they could probe the workings of the criminal's mind in those last hours.

> To lift up the roof of his dungeon, like the *Diable boiteux,* and look upon the criminal the night before he suffers, in his still hours of privacy, when all that disguise is removed which is imposed by respect for the opinions of others, the strong motive by which even the lowest and wickedest of men still continue to be actuated, would present an object to the mind of every person . . . more powerfully attractive than almost any other.[7]

> But it is not in situations of difficulty and distress alone, that man becomes the object of this sympathetic curiosity: he is no less so when the evil he contends with arises in his own breast, and no outward circumstance connected with him either awakens our attention or our pity.[8]

The angry man attracts by his very display of anger the attention of those who are not the objects of its attack and even know nothing of its cause.

This psychological approach leads her to outline how far the study of human nature affects the poet, the novelist, the historian and the philosopher; and she concludes that where with them it is a powerful auxiliary, to the dramatic writer it is 'the centre and strength of the battle';[9] for

> 'the characters of the drama must speak directly for themselves. Under the influence of every passion, humour and impression; in the artificial veilings of hypocrisy and ceremony, in the openness of freedom and confidence, and in the lonely hour of meditation, they speak . . . We expect to find them creatures like ourselves; and if they are untrue to nature, we feel that we are imposed upon'.[10]

In the growth of drama it was inevitable that Tragedy should come first into prominence because struggles against odds of any kind were always calculated to attract public attention. According to Miss Baillie Tragedy has two purposes: to reveal the heroes of these struggles against odds, whom other art forms can display but at a distance, 'to our nearer regard, in all the

distinguishing varieties which nearer inspection discovers; with the passions, the humours, the weaknesses, the prejudices of men';[11] and 'to unveil to us the human mind under the domination of those strong and fixed passions, which, seemingly unprovoked by outward circumstances, will, from small beginnings, brood within the breast, till all the better dispositions, all the fair gifts of nature, are borne down before them'.[12]

If not strictly Aristotelian in word, Miss Baillie's theory of Tragedy differs little from that of Aristotle in deed; and there is nothing in her plays to suggest she would disagree with the definition of tragedy as

> a representation of the will of man in conflict with mysterious powers or natural forces which limit or belittle us; it is one of us thrown living upon the stage, there to struggle against fatality, against social law, against one of his fellow mortals, against himself if need be, against the ambitions, the interests, the prejudices, the folly, the malevolence of those who surround him.[13]

She merely concentrated upon 'the struggle against himself', a phase which dramatists of the past had neglected, however successfully they had portrayed the hero as a human being. For, in seeking to emulate the Masters, they had preferred 'the embellishments of poetry to faithfully delineated Nature'; and 'neglecting the boundless variety of nature, certain strong outlines of character, certain bold features of passion, certain grand vicissitudes and striking dramatic situations, have been repeated from one generation to another',[14] until the heroes have become such models of courage, virtue and magnanimity, so free from human weaknesses, that they are beyond poor human comprehension and provide us with no example; while the tyrants are too monstrous to serve as warnings to us.

To Joanna Baillie, indeed, the drama was essentially an inculcator of morality. 'The theatre is a school in which much good or evil may be learned', she writes, not entirely unconscious of the irony of the remark when applied to the contemporary theatre; and she continues: 'The author who aims in any degree to improve the mode of its instruction and point to more useful lessons than it is generally employed to dispense, is certainly praiseworthy'.[15]

She therefore proposed 'to write a series of tragedies, of simpler construction, less embellished with poetical decoration . . . in which the chief object should be to delineate the progress of the higher passions in the human breast, each play exhibiting a particular passion'.[16] She was convinced that plays written upon this plan were 'fitted to produce stronger moral effect than upon any other', provided that the several passions are depicted

> not only with their bold and prominent features, but also with those minute and delicate traits which distinguish them in an infant, growing, and repressed state. . . . The characters over whom they are made to usurp dominion must be powerful and interesting, exercising them with their full measure of opposition and struggle; for the chief antagonists they contend with must be the other passions and propensities of the heart, not outward circumstances and events. Though belonging to such characters, they must still be held to view in the most baleful and unseductive light; and those qualities in the impassioned, which are necessary to interest us in their fate, must not be allowed by any lustre borrowed from them, to diminish our abhorrence of guilt.[17]

With this moral end in view, therefore, Miss Baillie planned to write plays embodying the great passions, Love, Hatred, Ambition, Fear, Hope, Remorse, Jealousy, Pride, Envy, Revenge, Anger, Joy and Grief; but as the plan matured some of these were omitted—Anger, Joy and Grief as being too transient for long dramas; Pride as being too dull. Envy had been confined to comedy as it aroused least sympathy of all the passions; and Hope had been relegated to musical drama as otherwise unsuitable since 'when it acts permanently it loses the character of a passion, and when it lacks violence is too transient'.[18]

Although these prefatory remarks suggest that she had a complete scheme under perfect control, there are times when the passions seem to take command and dictate the development of the play, leading her to inconsistencies in the application of her theories. Thus she laments that she is obliged to give 'the rise and progress [of Hate] in retrospect, instead of representing it all along its actual operation. But hatred is a passion of slow growth. . . . I could not have introduced my chief characters upon the stage as boys and then as men.'[19] In discussing Ambition, however, the theme of **'Ethwald'** in the second volume, she writes:

> Those passions which are of a permanent nature are proper subjects of this work; such, I mean, as are capable of taking up their abode in the mind and of gaining a strong ascendancy over it during a term of some length. But compared with ambition, perhaps all other passions may be considered as of a transient nature. They are capable of being gratified; and when they are gratified, they become extinct. . . . Ambition alone acquires strength from gratification; and the dominion which it usurps over the mind is capable of enduring from youth to extreme age.[20]

And in this case she devotes two full length dramas to the development of her theme. Again, in the second play upon Fear, **'The Dream'**, she allows the duration of the passion to influence the length of the play, of which she writes:

> I have made it short because I was unwilling to mix any lighter matter with a subject so solemn; and in extending it to the usual length without doing so, it would have been in danger of becoming monotonous and harassing.[21]

This remark emphasises an earlier one upon the simplicity of plot in these plays. The focussing of attention upon one passion as revealed in a single character necessarily limits the plot to that which bears directly upon that character. This is true even of the comedies, where greater freedom might have been expected. One instance will suffice for the moment: the love of William Beaumont for Sophia Seabright is no more than hinted at lest it distract attention from Seabright's ambition, the theme of **'The Second Marriage'**.

But not only is the plot thus limited; so too is the characterization: even leading figures in the action are subordinated to the central figure. Again Miss Baillie appears to have been aware of the dangers incurred by this method:

> The second, and even the inferior persons of each play, as they must be kept perfectly distinct from the great impassioned one, should generally be represented in a calm, unagitated state, and therefore more pains are necessary than in other dramatic works to mark them by appropriate distinction of character, lest they should appear altogether insipid and insignificant.[22]

To know the dangers is not necessarily to avoid them: and it is seldom that any of her characters, apart from the central figures, is not 'altogether insipid and insignificant'. Jane de Monfort is an exception; though none but a blind votary would rank her with the great heroines of literature, or even of the stage.[23] In **'Orra'** the subordinate character of Rudigere looms larger than usual, partly, perhaps, because Miss Baillie has allowed her one-play-one-passion scheme to break down; for Rudigere is a sketch, however slight by comparison with Ethwald, of Ambition, while Orra herself illustrates Fear.

If characterization is thus to be limited to little more than the protagonist, what is the effect upon the plots of her plays? A few brief summaries will be enough to prove their simplicity. **'Basil'**, the first of the tragedies in order of publication, opens with the arrival of Count Basil, the victorious Imperial General, in Mantua, the Duke of which is secretly conspiring with France. To ensure that Basil shall postpone his departure to join the Emperor's forces, the Duke makes use of his unsuspecting daughter, Victoria, with whom the Count has fallen in love at first sight. Against the advice of his friend, Rosinberg, and despite the recognition of his duty to join the Imperial hosts without delay, Basil, infatuated, remains in the city while the battle of Pavia is fought. Feeling the disgrace of his absence, he commits suicide. No one would place **'Basil'**, for all its simplicity in the same category as *Antony and Cleopatra*; any more than he would suggest that **'Ethwald'**, retelling at great length and with certain modifications the Macbeth story, compares favourably with its Elizabethan prototype. **'Orra'**, too, owes something to Shakespeare, if only in the character of Glottenbal, the Cloten-like lover of its heroine, who is driven mad by the cunning playing upon her superstitions by the villain and by the unwitting employment of those superstitions in an attempt to rescue her.

**'De Monfort'**, which was the most successful upon the stage of all her writings, has few intricacies. The deep-rooted hatred of de Monfort for the Marquis Rezenvelt, dating from childhood, defies the efforts of friends and sister to eradicate it; and flames up to such a pitch when he suspects that his sister loves his enemy that he treacherously slays him. Then, imprisoned in a convent, he learns that his suspicions are quite unfounded, and dies before he can be handed over to the civil authorities for punishment. Finally there is **'The Dream'**, in which Count Osterloo, chosen by lot, from the forces passing the St. Maurice Monastery, to spend a night of penance there in order to avert a plague that threatens to overwhelm the district, is revealed as the murderer, years before, of the one-armed Montera, brother of the Prior, who, in revenge, condemns him to death by daybreak. The situation is complicated by an abortive attempt to rescue the Count by the Lady Leonora, a widow who had long loved him; but Osterloo, overwhelmed by fear of his sudden and ignominious end, dies of fright on the scaffold before a blow is struck.

Simple themes do not necessarily make for bad plays; indeed, the greatest Greek dramas are essentially simple in plot, and those of many of Ibsen's plays, *Ghosts* or *A Doll's House* for example, could be summarized in a few lines. But if the theme is simple, success depends upon treatment. Miss Baillie, shrewd as always where theatrical matters were concerned, was fully alive to the danger and had her answer ready:

> To make up for this simplicity of plot, the show and decorations of the theatre ought to be allowed to plays written upon this plan in their full extent. How fastidious soever some poets may be in regard to these matters, it is much better to relieve our tired attention with a battle, a banquet or a procession, than an accumulation of incidents. In the latter case the mind is harassed and confused with doubts, conjectures and disappointments which multiplied events occasion: but in the former it enjoys a rest, a pleasing pause in its more serious occupation.[24]

'Relieve our tired attention' is an unfortunate, not to say foreboding, phrase for her to have used; for no one can say to-day that the attention is entirely held by the reading of the plays, and the spectacular interpolations leave the reader cold. Production may bring the spectacle to life; but we have still to see if production could possibly enliven the play proper. How much spectacle there is in the plays is not apparent until they are analysed in some detail. **'Basil'** is a case in point; for it opens with the meeting in the crowded streets of Man-

tua of two processions, that of Basil and his officers and that of Victoria and her ladies. Subsequently there is a masked ball in the ducal grand apartments, and a further street scene where Basil quells his rebellious forces. What opportunities for Mr. Cecil de Mille's particular genius! Similar spectacles are provided in **'De Monfort'** by the party at Count Freberg's and the procession of nuns in the last act; in **'The Dream'** by the meeting of the Monks of St. Maurice with Osterloo's Imperial forces; and by the most elaborate battle scenes in **'Ethwald'**. There are, too, numerous scenes scattered throughout the plays of 'halls of state' where high nobility or clergy pass judgments. Such pageantry cannot make the play: if it did, Drury Lane melodrama of 'The Whip' type would be studied in preference to a play by Mr. Shaw.

It may be objected that spectacle is, after all, no more than a mere adjunct of a play. It is, however, impossible to ignore the evidence of contemporaries who suggest that at this period spectacle had become of first importance. Miss Baillie herself might deplore the invasion of the stage, consequent upon the enlarging of the theatres of Drury Lane and Covent Garden, by 'pieces whose chief object is to produce striking scenic effects',[25] and Genest become delightfully ironic upon the subject;[26] nevertheless the would-be dramatist who ignored what Professor Nicoll calls 'opportunities for exercise of the stage carpenter's craft'[27] did so at his or her peril. If Byron, who disclaimed repeatedly all desire to see his dramas produced on the English stage, could introduce so much of the pure spectacular into *Sardanapalus*; if Mrs. Siddons could instance the banquet scene as the high light of her new production of *Macbeth*;[28] how much more might Miss Baillie, who at the time at least aspired to stage success, be expected to call in spectacle to her aid.

As for the theory which inspired the plays, it was not in itself particularly novel; the theory of a dominant passion had been behind the comedies of Ben Jonson, and it had held the stage till Miss Baillie's own day, as the very *dramatis personae* of Sheridan's comedies bear witness. Where Miss Baillie differed from her predecessors was in the application of the theory; for where Jonson and his followers conceived the plot in the clash of the various 'humours', as he called them, she concerned herself with one passion only and had to fit her plot to reveal the passion. Not only does her protagonist embody a single passion, at least before the play is ended, but, as already observed, all other characters are deliberately subordinated lest they distract attention from the central figure. 'With her the passions are, like the French Republic, one and indivisible: they are not so in Nature, or in Shakespeare.'[29]

No one would maintain that there is as much humanity in Jonson as there is in Shakespeare; and this is partly due to the fact that the characters dominated by the humours do not ring true to Nature: at the best they are eccentrics, oddities. Yet the admixture and inter-action of the various types upon the stage give an air of reality to the piece as a whole; it may be an unfamiliar, even odd, world that is presented to our observation, but it is a possible one. In the plays of Joanna Baillie, on the other hand, the very isolation of the passion-dominated soul adds to the unreality. Even were it reasonable to suppose a person to be so swayed by a single passion—and the reasonableness of the supposition is certainly open to doubt—it is extremely unlikely that he would move in a world made up almost entirely of nonentities. Ultimately success or failure rests, therefore, upon a convincing delineation of the central figure.

Little true delineation of character is revealed when Miss Baillie's plays are examined. There is on the whole little character-revealing action in them; what hints are given of the character of the principal figure by the subordinate actors in the drama carry little weight because it is impossible to believe that these personages are sufficiently human to be capable of formulating a judgment upon anyone. Consequently the hero is driven to reveal his own character. He says much, but is frequently unconvincing, being unsupported by external evidence. Moreover, most of the self-revealing speeches are designed not so much to reveal the man in whose soul the passion works as the actual working of the passion itself. **'Ethwald'** is one of the few plays in which we watch the man's debasement as the passion works and expands within him.

As usual, Miss Baillie is ready with a defence for her method:

> Soliloquy, or those overflowings of the perturbed soul, in which it unburthens itself of those thoughts which it cannot communicate to others, and which in certain situations is the only mode that a Dramatist can employ to open to us the mind he would display, must be often and to a considerable length introduced. Here, indeed, as it naturally belongs to the passion, it will not be so offensive as it generally is in other plays, when a calm unagitated person tells over to himself all that has befallen him and all his future schemes of intrigue and advancement.[30]

Such a defence of the soliloquy is open to two objections: first, that however effective the monologue may have been upon the intimate stage of the Elizabethans, it had ceased to be so when fashion changed; and if it was unnatural upon even the smaller picture frame stage which Miss Baillie herself advocates,[31] it was ridiculous upon the gigantic stages of the 'legitimate' theatres; secondly, it had never been more than a convention, never in the strictest sense dramatic, a convention where the deplored 'embellishments of poetry' most abounded. In justice to Miss Baillie, however, we must add that no substitute for the soliloquy has yet been discovered, the nearest alternative being the dual personality of the hero in Eugene O'Neill's *Day Without End.*