

The Magical Body on the Stage:

Henry Irving Reconsidered

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Michael Punter, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is clearly stated.

Michael Punter

1st March 2014

Abstract

This thesis proposes that Henry Irving, the Victorian actor and manager, has been undervalued as a performer, and that his position in the history of nineteenth century theatre is in need of revision. The argument is developed by a re-appraisal of two contesting narratives that have, in their different ways, both obscured the nature of Irving's work. Irving deployed a diverse range of techniques to present the Victorian body under stress from powerful and unseen forces. His work, although not obviously contributing to theatrical modernism, was both original and innovative in a number of important ways.

Modernism's rejection of Victorian melodrama located Irving firmly at the centre of George Bernard Shaw's eviscerating criticism. This critical narrative was quickly countered with a number of pro-Irving biographies, mostly written after the actor's death by colleagues and members of his family. Yet these have worked effectively to reinforce another narrative of Victorian theatre; the move to respectability and the gentrification of the actor/manager, of whom Irving is the exemplar. Both narratives ignore important aspects of Irving's professional development and aesthetic approach, but the latter, identified here as the 'Irving Narrative', overwrites the actor's biography and reshapes it to fit the well-worn trope of 'rags to riches'.

The thesis begins by defining the nature of the Irving Narrative and identifying the key texts that constitute it, then moves on to position Irving within the body of English

nineteenth century actors, considering those who influenced his development via anecdote or personal observation. Irving's early career is then charted, focusing on three key incidents that the writers of the Irving Narrative have either simplified or chosen to ignore.

Irving's encounter with the work of the spiritualist performers the Davenport brothers is of particular importance. This meeting exercised a profound influence on his subsequent approach to both performance and production. The techniques of occult performance continued to be employed by Irving throughout his career, beginning with his performance of Mathias in *The Bells* in 1871. Occult performance emphasised the power and importance of the transformative body, making it appear magical.

The thesis continues by examining Irving as a performer of the body in crisis. It argues that the actor's selection of conflicted characters allowed him to demonstrate the effects of psychological extremity upon the body, resulting in a spectacular performance of male suffering and, eventually, hysteria. Irving applied this approach to Shakespeare, winning new audiences to his production of *Hamlet* by decoupling the play from certain well-established traditions. Finally, I consider the decline of Irving's use of the magical body, and his increasing dependence on the creation of an overwhelming spectacle in plays such as *Faust* and *King Arthur*. The final reflections consider the indirect influence of Irving upon contemporary theatre.

Introduction

Henry Irving's Reputation

1 Outline

This thesis is about the career of the Victorian actor Henry Irving and his representation in the theatre history of the late-nineteenth century. Irving was the most successful British actor of the age, performing in some of the most commercially and artistically successful productions of the period. Yet he divided audiences and critics. Many believed that Irving's productions were the highest example of theatrical art they had seen. Others, on the other hand, took a diametrically-opposed view. To this latter group, Irving was artificial, unconvincing and old-fashioned. After Irving's death in 1905, a glut of biographies lionised the actor, and yet the position of the anti-Irving group has generally held sway. This is largely due to the prominence of George Bernard Shaw amongst Irving's critics and the influence of realistic forms of drama during the twentieth century. Henry Irving was associated with a reactionary and anti-progressive movement, and presented by Shaw as a relic of the previous century. In this thesis, I consider how Irving's history has been over-written by contending narratives. These narratives have ignored important aspects of the actor's work and over-simplified his career.

Henry Irving was a complex and nuanced figure. He represents a considerable challenge to the modern theatre historian. Irving's success was centred upon an extraordinary level of stage presence achieved via the 'spectacular body', a mode of

physical presentation associated with certain aspects of melodramatic performance. Yet Irving developed this into something unique; a way of representing the male figure in states of psychological extremity and even hysteria. This approach frequently created a profound emotional response in audiences. The focus upon the body and the assertion of subjective conditions over an agreed stage 'reality' is the principal reason Irving ought to be connected more deeply to the performance traditions of the twentieth century, and perhaps beyond.

Irving has not entirely vanished from the memory of current theatre practitioners. In Stephen Mallatratt's stage adaptation of Susan Hill's novel *The Woman in Black*, written in 1987 and first performed at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough, an Edwardian actor attempts to encourage an elderly lawyer to recreate a ghostly experience that has troubled the lawyer for many years. By way of encouragement, the actor tells his hesitant charge that he intends 'to make an Irving of him'.¹ The dashing, progressive actor in the play, who has arranged a number of props, costumes and special effects to support the rehearsal, including recorded sound, offers Irving as a model for the aspiring performer. But this is one of the few references to Irving in modern popular culture. Henry Irving is not well-remembered. Despite the fact that he was the first actor to be knighted, with a statue positioned opposite the Garrick Theatre in London, Irving is a largely obscure figure. And yet his great rival, George Bernard Shaw, whose criticism of Irving in the *Saturday Review* veered between bitter

¹ Stephen Mallatratt, *The Woman in Black*, adapted from the novel by Susan Hill (London: Samuel French, 1989). p. 3.

invective and outrageous mockery, is still celebrated and written about, the subject of theses, theatre festivals and regular reappraisal by theatre and literary historians.

There are reasons for this, some obvious and some less so. Shaw was a social progressive, a left-wing playwright and critic who, along with a small group of intellectuals, acknowledged the importance of the work of Henrik Ibsen when very few in British theatrical and critical circles would. In a letter written in August 1896², Shaw informed Ellen Terry of his attempts to negotiate the sale of his play about Napoleon, *The Man of Destiny*, to the Lyceum. Irving had been knighted in the previous year, a point Shaw mentions sarcastically. He belittles his rival's intelligence, a tactic regularly employed in his criticism of Irving:

The negotiations concerning *The Man of Destiny* did not get very far. I proposed conditions to Sir H.I. Sir H.I. declined the mental effort of bothering about my conditions, and proposed exactly what I barred, namely, to treat me handsomely by making me a present of a £50 note every Christmas on condition that nobody else got the play, with an understanding that it should be produced at some date unspecified, when the tyrannical public would graciously permit the poor manager to indulge in it. To this I replied by proposing three alternatives. 1. My original conditions (virtually). 2. That you should have the play to amuse yourself with until you were tired of it without any conditions at all. 3. That *he* should have a present of it on condition of his

² The exact date is not certain. The letter was written at some time between 20th and 26th August, 1896.

instantly producing works by Ibsen. The effect of this on his mind was such that I have not heard from him since.³

This exchange ended negotiations, and the brief possibility of some kind of rapprochement between actor and playwright.

It is remarkable that the possibility of collaboration still existed, given Shaw's previous, acidic critical response to Irving's work. Bram Stoker describes a more straightforward purchase of a play in his *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*. This was Arthur Conan Doyle's play *A Story of Waterloo*.⁴ In this account, both Irving and Stoker, the Lyceum's manager, see immediately the opportunity for popular success with a play that celebrates the memory of one of the nation's greatest heroes, the Duke of Wellington. It was a play that would encourage in audiences a kind of collective, sentimental and celebratory mourning for the departed hero. As W.D. King describes in *Henry Irving's Waterloo*, Stoker's account of the realisation of the play's viability as a project for the Lyceum '...is a blend of miracle and machine, conjuration and high-efficiency engineering'.⁵ The play itself was full of jingoistic sentiment, and Shaw's inevitable and terrible assault upon it, the critical notice *Mr Irving Takes Purgatory*, published in the *Saturday Review* on 11th May 1895, is perhaps Shaw's most brilliant and virtuoso assault on his old enemy.⁶ Shaw succeeded in ensuring that this is

³ George Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters 1874-1897*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: Max Reinhardt, 1965). p. 641.

⁴ Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906). p. 248

⁵ W.D. King, *Henry Irving's Waterloo, Theatrical Engagements With Arthur Conan Doyle, George Bernard Shaw, Ellen Terry, Edward Gordon Craig, Late-Victorian Culture, Assorted Ghosts, Old Men, War and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). p. 2

⁶ The review is reprinted in King, Appendix B. pp. 260-263.

the view that has generally lived on in theatre history. Here, Irving is the nostalgic reactionary, a pillar of the Victorian establishment eager to bask in the late-light of imperial glory. Shaw's version of Irving was, quite simply, a hindrance to accelerating modernity.

Haldane MacFall was one of a number of journalists to celebrate Irving's work in the period immediately after his death in 1905. In his biography of 1906 he wrote:

When death silences the player's tongue, his art is gone as though it had never been. His greatness becomes but a tradition; and no man's skill shall restore to us even the ghost of that which he wrought – his art lies buried with him – the story of his manhood and his triumphs alone remains. How Burbage spoke, or Betterton, or Garrick? Who shall tell? How shall we pit them against Irving's magnificence?⁷

MacFall's biography was one of a number of texts that sought to assert the genius of Henry Irving. The matter of Irving's reputation and subsequent influence is very much like his acting itself, in that it divided and polarised critical opinion. It is possible to read two accounts of the same performance by Irving and to encounter a range of responses, from adoration to outright scorn. He could either captivate his audience or alienate them entirely. Likewise, Shaw and Stoker's views of Irving offer us radically different visions of the same man, one a stubborn, ageing reactionary, the other a passionately involved artist, as enthusiastic about a piece at the Royal Lyceum, London as he had been about working at the Royal Lyceum, Sunderland in his first paid job as a

⁷ Haldane MacFall, *Sir Henry Irving* (Edinburgh: J. N. Foulis, 1906), p. 4.

young actor in September, 1856. After his funeral, the debates about the nature of his performance continued for several decades into the twentieth century. Despite recent challenges, it is Shaw's view of Henry Irving that has generally prevailed, even over the mercurial picture of Irving offered by Ellen Terry's son, Edward Gordon Craig.

In the following chapters, I intend to demonstrate that the work of Henry Irving has been misunderstood and misclassified. Irving's work drew upon a complex and diverse range of historical and contemporary performance forms, a fact that has been largely unexplored. Far from being a reactionary force, I argue that Irving's work at the Lyceum actually shared common ground with progressive elements in the theatre. Irving's negative response to Shaw's idea of realism was specific and local, and should not be interpreted as a reaction against modernity itself. Rather, Irving was asserting a certain kind of approach to theatrical performance that located the drama in and upon the actions of the body.

2 Methodology

My approach has been to consider the first wave of Irving biographies, emerging from the 1890s and growing rapidly after the actor's death in 1905. These were written by close associates and journalists who supported Irving's work at the Lyceum. A second wave of biographies appeared in the mid-twentieth century. Some of these were also written by family members, but also by admirers who had seen Irving in their youth and wished to sustain his memory. By closely studying these works, I trace the growing imposition of storytelling tropes, and the simplification of Irving's creative journey. Working broadly through the theoretical approaches of cultural materialism, I

have sought to challenge these tropes, and to counter them by considering British and Irish national and regional newspaper accounts of Irving's performances from 1860 onwards, with a focus upon neglected and overlooked moments from Irving's career that fall outside the existing narrative strands. Throughout my study of accounts of Irving, I have been careful to heed the advice of Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, given in their work on theatre making during the nineteenth century. Discussing the relationship between myth and history, they write of the need for scholarly caution: 'Yet, in questioning the orthodox narrative of the theatre's social and literary reclamation during the nineteenth century, we argue that Victorian narratives of theatre history should be treated with caution'.⁸ Descriptions of a movement towards a predetermined destination, a particular characteristic of Irving biography both directly after the actor's death and subsequently, must be resisted. Victorian cultural history often appears to contain a series of received 'truths' emanating from apparently discriminating eye-witness sources. As Davis and Emeljanow write:

Yet the closer we get to the evidence, the more we are aware that the theatre in the nineteenth century was itself subject to myth-making and the invention of traditions, to paraphrase Eric Hobsbawm, propagated by those same detached and discriminating observers on whose evidence we have come to rely.⁹

⁸ Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow. *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2008), p. 98.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 99.

Thomas Postlewait warns how the cumulative retellings of historical instances acquire weight and the assumption of truthfulness over time, to the exclusion of other, contending or more complex narratives. Again, this is highly relevant to much writing about Irving. Postlewait refers to the over-promotion of George Bernard Shaw's views on the significance of the work of Henrik Ibsen in the early 1890s as a particular example of this phenomenon in action. He writes:

Most theatre scholars who write about the Ibsen campaign in London grant Shaw a central place in the fight for Ibsen in 1889, although in fact he was a rather obscure music and art critic in 1891. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* had a small print run and few readers. Yet because it was republished in new editions in the coming years, paralleling the growing name of Shaw, the book provides us with a handy summary of the production of *Ghosts* and the Ibsen movement.¹⁰

The writings of these theatre historians offer valuable warnings to those investigating both artists and their audiences in the late-nineteenth century. In order to unpick the contending narratives of artistic careers, certain tropes have been identified and interrogated in order to expose the assumptions that have gained weight by repetition. The conventional view of Henry Irving depends upon a number of events and encounters, some of which do not stand up to detailed investigation. These events and encounters have come to comprise a supposed 'factual' sequence that has overwritten the more complex detail of the actor's career.

¹⁰ Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 252-3.

The thesis also discusses the critical and largely negative responses to Irving's work by William Archer and George Bernard Shaw. I have attempted to contextualize their responses, particularly regarding Irving's relationship to the works of Ibsen. The argument for Irving's originality derives largely from eye-witness accounts given in newspapers of the time, and these constitute a significant part of this study. I have placed a particular value upon accounts of Irving's appearances in the USA from the mid-1880s, especially those of William Winter. In general, American critics tended to view the actor without the prejudice that had accrued in England during his management of the Lyceum. Additionally, American audiences first saw Irving's work in a rather unique way, with different roles juxtaposed during the touring schedule. This meant that audiences viewing Irving on tour often saw his characters in a different light from their Lyceum-attending counterparts, and were more aware of variation in Irving's characterisation.

In addition to conventional sources for theatre history of this period, I have sought to make connections between Irving's work and traditions of occult performance that were active in England from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. From his time in Manchester in the 1860s, and quite possibly earlier, Irving displayed a fascination with the techniques and processes of occult performance that only diminished when he sought to style himself as the leader of the acting profession in the 1880s. I have therefore undertaken a survey of occult performers and performances, including the Davenport brothers, whom Irving directly encountered in 1865. This approach has allowed me to make connections between Irving and

performance traditions that operated outside the mainstream. With the exception of Edward Gordon Craig, Irving's biographers have undervalued Irving's relationship to occult performance and its influence upon his approach to both performance and production. An awareness of the importance of these influences heightens appreciation of Irving as a performer of the body and its hidden, transformative power.

3 Early Biographies of Irving and the Irving Narrative

Charles Hiatt's work of 1899, *Henry Irving: A Record and Review* was published during the actor's lifetime. Hiatt established a narrative that was to be elaborated and embroidered by subsequent biographers, focusing upon Irving's journey from poverty in the rural south-west of England to success in London. As the Irving story was repeated, this familiar narrative trope, called 'rags to riches', began to dominate. The main group of pro-Irving biography was produced after Irving's death in 1905. These biographies sought to celebrate the actor, and to identify the characteristics that made him unique. The journalist Austin Brereton, writing in *Henry Irving* (1905) suggested Irving's will power as his most distinctive trait. His account of the young Irving contains the following passage:

There are not many boys of thirteen who earn their own living and out of the few pence allotted for their daily nourishment save something to buy books; who rise at four in the morning, and walk from the city to bathe in the river; who consider tea and bread and butter an excellent meal [...] It was a severe

training, but it created that fund of indomitable energy which contributed so much to the success of later years.¹¹

In his biography, Brereton builds upon a version of Irving first described by Hiatt six years earlier. Hiatt wrote of Irving's sense of purpose and faith in his own capacity to make important decisions swiftly, such as when he decided to become an actor, apparently at the age of fourteen: 'Once he made up his mind, he never hesitated nor looked back, but strove with unconquerable constancy and inflexible will to achieve his heart's desire'.¹² The story describes the relentless momentum of self-improvement: the story of a boy from Cornwall who became a humble London clerk and then, by the astonishing application of a distinctly Victorian work ethic, achieved his ambition to become the greatest actor of his time. As I have stated, the period after Irving's death saw a large number of memoirs by those who claimed to know him well, including Haldane MacFall (1906) and Walter Herries Pollock (1908). These biographies are sometimes couched in a semi-religious language. As MacFall wrote:

He had a fierce struggle to raise himself from obscurity to fame, and he had bitter detractors who knew him not, except for the self-imposed task of being a hindrance to him – men who, seeing spots upon the sun, deny the sun its whole effulgence'.¹³

This narrative, which I term the Irving Narrative, takes shape in these early biographies. It frequently repeats anecdotal evidence and adds to it, offering the

¹¹ Austin Brereton, *Henry Irving* (London: Anthony Traherne and Co., 1905), p. 4.

¹² Charles Hiatt, *Henry Irving: A Record and Review* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1899), p. 18.

¹³ Haldane MacFall, *op. cit.*, p.3.

image of an actor who seemingly knew his destiny from childhood, and who worked ceaselessly to create a morally upright and respectable theatre. This narrative has never been subjected to thorough analysis. Davis and Emeljanow demonstrate the need for awareness of such tropes: 'As the evidence becomes more questionable we begin to notice recurring descriptive patterns and rhetorical formulas that erode the boundaries between fact and fiction'.¹⁴

Brereton's account, published just after Irving's death in 1905, alongside MacFall's and Pollock's, sought to commemorate and memorialise him as an eminent Victorian. Moreover, it saw Irving as a contributor to a supposed process of reclamation that sought to make the theatre more respectable and acceptable to the social elites of the period.

Bram Stoker's *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* was published in two volumes in 1906. Stoker had first seen Henry Irving in Dublin, playing Digby Grant in James Alberry's play *Two Roses* in 1870. The young George Bernard Shaw apparently saw the touring version of the same production. Grant is a bourgeois rogue, whose incorrect assumption of a sizeable fortune imperils his daughters' opportunities for happiness and security. Irving had researched the character meticulously, and based it on an officer of the French royal court he had met at a dinner party, the Chevalier Wykoff. The impersonation became so celebrated that even Wykoff took to claiming it was based upon him. Such had been the effect of Irving's performance that Stoker apparently dedicated himself to theatre journalism from that point on. But an even

¹⁴ Davis and Emeljanow, op. cit., p.99.

more profound conversion was to follow. In 1876, after a performance of Irving's *Hamlet* in Dublin, Stoker and some journalist colleagues attended a private performance in the theatre of Thomas Hood's poem *The Dream of Eugene Aram*. Stoker's awe-struck description gives a powerful sense of what it was like to regard Irving in his pomp, at the peak of his powers, and also suggests the kind of hold he had over certain types of audience member:

The whole thing was new, recreated by a force of passion which was like a new power. Across the footlights amid picturesque scenery and suitable dress, with one's fellows beside and all around one, though the effect of passion can convince and sway it cannot move one personally beyond a certain point. But here was incarnate power, incarnate passion, so close to one that one could not meet it eye to eye, within one touch of one's outstretched hand.¹⁵

Stoker's description was written thirty years after the encounter. It may be informed by grief and the need to protect and defend the reputation of his friend. Stoker goes on to recall: 'I can only say that after a few seconds of stony silence following his collapse I burst out into something like a violent fit of hysterics'.¹⁶ Stoker thus describes Irving as an actor of mesmeric power. His recollection of Irving's reading of the play *Dante* in 1892 describes a virtuoso display, in which the great actor 'adumbrated every character'.¹⁷ Stoker's account records a demonstration of force that was inherently mysterious, an extraordinary but natural phenomenon emanating

¹⁵ Bram Stoker, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 273.

from deep inside the imagination of the actor. It was designed, in part, to preserve Irving's memory in the face of the hostility of Shaw's criticism. This factor undoubtedly informed the creation of the Irving Narrative. But an awareness of the process of construction should not detract from Irving's extraordinary success, particularly in the role of Mathias in *The Bells*, and his capacity to enthral and grip theatre audiences.

4 Negative Responses to Irving's Acting

In stark contrast to this image, Irving's detractors located the actor in a landscape of clear category, where the dramatist Shaw and the critic Archer advocated the future, and the reactionary actor Irving railed against it. Against a background of vast social and technological change, Irving appears, at least in this landscape, as a desperate anachronism. Irving's championing of the plays of the past, such as Colman's *The Iron Chest* or Reade's *The Lyons Mail*, appears to be utter folly, a nostalgic desire for the perpetuation of melodrama: a comforting presentation of 'moral manicheanism' as Peter Brooks has described the genre, a world of clear moral choice that was passing rapidly out of existence.¹⁸ To these critics, Irving was not only anachronistic, but bizarre. In 1877, William Archer observed that Irving 'walks like an automaton whose wheels need oiling'.¹⁹ His much-vaunted ability to shift rapidly between emotional states resulted in his 'alternating between basso profundo and falsetto, like a ventriloquist imitating a conversation between the giant cormorant and

¹⁸ Peter Brooks *The Melodramatic Imagination Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, And The Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p.15.

¹⁹ William Archer and Robert Lowe, *The Fashionable Tragedian* (Edinburgh and Glasgow: Thomas Gray and Co.,1877), p.4.

Jack the Giant-Killer'.²⁰ This is a stunning contradiction of Stoker's vision of the genius. In Archer's case, the actor's power reduces the theatre critic to a very different bout of hysterics. Such images helped in time to enshrine the image of Irving the obstructive and reactionary manager, representing and promoting an image of British cultural superiority predicated on imperial success abroad and the preservation of oppressive class structures at home.

5 Later Biographies and the Further Development of the Irving Narrative

Stoker was not the only person who considered Irving to be in the vanguard of theatrical developments. In Edward Gordon Craig's *Henry Irving*, first published in 1930, Craig gives voice to the (by now deceased) actor for his own purposes. Craig used the idea of Irving to offer a rival dramatic approach to that offered by Shaw and the realists. This approach asserted the importance of spectacle, not simply for its own sake, but as a way of recapturing the transformative aspects the theatre was in danger of shedding if it continued to represent 'real life' upon the stage. In 1939, H.E. Saintsbury and C. Palmer collected a volume of Irving appreciation and titled it *We Saw Him Act! A Symposium on the Art of Sir Henry Irving*. As a document of first-hand experience of Irving's work, it is most useful, particularly since it includes responses to some of Irving's lesser-known roles. However, those contributing were drawing on their memories of events witnessed three decades previous (or beyond), and the growing influence of the Irving Narrative is in evidence in much of the writing.

²⁰ Ibid., p 7.

Irving's grandson Laurence Irving wrote *Henry Irving: The Actor and his World*, which was published in 1951. It is the longest and most detailed Irving biography. Laurence Irving supported the conventional view of Irving to a large degree, describing the actor as a generally progressive theatre maker who became somewhat reactionary in later life.²¹ This biography endorses the story of relentless self-improvement by an actor who was only hesitantly accepted as a lead by critics in the 1860s; they were determined to cast him as a light-comedian for the first half of his career. Henry Irving emerges as a tireless student and emissary for his craft, with an awareness of his own destiny conceived seemingly in youth or even infancy. In the book's early chapters, Laurence Irving lovingly describes his grandfather's relationships with a series of encouraging schoolmasters and employers, each detecting in young John Henry Brodbribb, Irving's birth name, a spark of genius that might be nurtured into a flame if only the young man could survive the privations and temptations of the acting profession. His friendships with his peers, including the Victorian scholar Henry Palmer, are described by Laurence Irving in a narrative that somewhat recalls Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and the friendship of Pip Pirrip and Herbert Pocket. Laurence Irving's work is a narrative of risk taking, chance encounters and holding one's nerve in the face of peer and parental disapproval. It is in this work that we see the further imposition of the tropes of a 'rags to riches' narrative upon the story of Henry Irving. In Madeleine Bingham's *Henry Irving and the Victorian Theatre* (1978), many of these aspects are amplified and exaggerated, with little reference to sources. In this work, anecdote supplants scholarship almost entirely, and the story is often told as though it

²¹ Laurence Irving, *Henry Irving: The Actor and his World* (London: Faber, 1951), p.18.

were a work of fiction. By repetition, aspects of Irving's work attain weight, whilst others are ignored or dismissed in favour of a simplified picture of inevitable success. The tropes of 'rags to riches' are strongly present in Bingham's work.

6 Recent Irving Scholarship

Recent Irving scholarship tentatively supports the need for a revision of nineteenth century theatre history regarding the actor's position. Jim Davis accepts there is a case for viewing Irving as belonging exclusively to the traditions of the nineteenth century, but he urges open-mindedness in this: 'there is also a case for linking Irving's name with those of Saxe-Meiningen, Antoine and Stanislavski when we consider new developments in staging'.²² In his study of British actors published in 2000, Peter Thomson devotes a chapter to Irving entitled *Henry Irving: the Volcano and the Cathedral*.²³ His assessment of Irving does not offer a revisionist view, and makes far too little of *The Bells* and the extraordinary audience response to it, but the author perceptively views Irving's reinvention as complex and agonised, reflecting the feelings and aspirations of his conflicted late-Victorian audience. This explains, in part, their fascination with him. Most interestingly, Thomson considers the idea of Irving as a performer from a perspective of gender. He was repeatedly criticised, in many of his most significant roles, for being effeminate and lacking manly virtues. Archer regularly described Irving as lacking emotional control and falling into hysteria. His assumption of leading roles was, in its own way, quietly progressive, and his critics generally failed

²² Jim Davis, 'He Danced, He Did Not Merely Walk – He Sang, He By No Means Merely Spoke: Irving, Theatricality and the Modernist Theatre' in *Henry Irving: A Re-Evaluation of the Pre-eminent Victorian Actor-Manager*, ed. R. Foulkes (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008) p. 191.

²³ Peter Thomson, *On Actors And Acting* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000). pp. 148-163.

to appreciate the nature of this change. This is a fascinating point, since it reveals Irving's supposedly socially progressive critics as being leaden-footed and ossified in their conception of casting.

Thomson's writing is useful, since it shifts the emphasis away from the selection of texts, the usual battleground chosen for those opposed to Irving, and moves it to the actual business of performance and the expressive nature of the body. Thomson sides with the argument that Irving was a conservative and romantic actor, but changes the nature of Irving studies sufficiently to show there is a case to be made for Irving as a contributor to modern movements. Certainly, Irving's dramatisation of the body transformed by psychological pressure was unique, and far more important than his championing of literary 'authenticity' in the presentation of Shakespeare. This, I argue, was part of a defensive strategy Irving deployed to protect himself against university-educated critics, such as William Archer.

Jeffrey Richards discusses the complexity of the actor's choices in his reinvention from John Henry Brodribb, Irving's birth name, into Henry Irving, and amply demonstrates the richness of source material that Irving deployed to remake himself. At the conclusion of his exhaustive study, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and his World*, published in 2005, Richards gives an impression of the scale of Irving's achievement in terms of those he brought into the theatre, and reveals a rather modern sensibility in the actor's selection of plays: 'He made no distinction between high and low brow, alternating happily between Shakespeare and popular melodrama,

showing all of them equal respect'.²⁴ This approach led to the creation of a larger theatre audience: 'not only did he perform habitually to a mixed audience at his West End base...but he toured Britain regularly and extensively'.²⁵ For Richards, Irving was instrumental in widening the appeal of the theatre nationally. In an age when transporting sets, flats and costumes around the country was expensive and time-consuming, Irving's achievement should not be underestimated. In Richards's study, Irving is revealed as being both romantic and technophile, an artist who used modern resources to create, publicise and tour extraordinary and spectacular works around the country and across the Atlantic. This supports the earlier view of George Rowell, who considered Irving's work, especially *The Bells*, as being singularly innovative: 'Where it excels is in its use of sensation to illustrate the working of Mathias's (Irving's character) mind and not purely as shock tactics'.²⁶ For Rowell, Irving's uniqueness was his ability to present psychological extremity and 'to explore the technical resources of the theatre with discretion and real force'.²⁷ The creation of wonder in Irving's work, and the way in which it was received and valued by his audience in London, regionally and overseas, should not be underestimated.

W.D. King's *Henry Irving's Waterloo*, published in 1995, is a complex study of the actor and his subsequent reputation that does much to reposition Irving. In King's chapter entitled *Irving's Ghost*, he connects Irving to the aesthetics of idealism. By this, he means that Irving was attempting to create a kind of theatre that was a

²⁴ Jeffrey Richards, *Sir Henry Irving A Victorian Actor And His World*, (London: Hambledon, 2005), p. 443.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre 1792-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p.99.

²⁷ Ibid. p .98.

transcendent and arresting experience for the audience member. This suggestion places Irving close to the artistic philosophies of Schopenhauer and Wagner, a position that was romantic in many respects, but that also influenced the development of the arts into the twentieth century.²⁸ Michael R. Booth has made the point that ‘the more educated critics cited Wagner as eminent precedent for advocating the legitimacy of a union on the English stage of pictorial spectacle and the art of acting’.²⁹ If Irving were classified in this way, then that would explain his desire to fashion a secular theatre that aspired to the conditions of a quasi-religious experience which made mystery and awe central to the audience response. Given Irving’s difficult relationship with his Methodist faith, this is certainly an intriguing hypothesis.

For those inspired by Irving, such as Edward Gordon Craig, his championing of spectacle, poetic language and stylised movement offered a powerful alternative to Shavian realism. For Craig, Irving asserted the creative rights of the performer over those of the dramatist, and proposed the actor as the theatre’s principal artist, with the body as the main conduit for the expression of theatrical ideas. This assessment of Irving’s contribution to the development of the theatre has been largely unacknowledged, a fact that can be partly attributed to the actor’s conspicuous attempts to connect himself to the processes of Shakespearean literary ‘reclamation’. Craig’s idea of Irving places the actor in a distinctly more progressive and original light than Shaw’s criticism, or the Irving Narrative, have allowed. Henry Irving must be

²⁸ There are several interesting connections between Irving and Wagner’s selection of material to dramatize. Both, for example, were fascinated by the myth of *The Flying Dutchman* and by Cornish folk tales and mythology.

²⁹ Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, p. 91.

reconsidered as an actor of subjectivity, the drama of the body, and as a creator of astonishing spectacle. His total aesthetic approach to theatre, his binding of the physically transformative with the poetic, remains both relevant and valuable today. This thesis proposes that we have not yet fully understood the nature of his acting, its scope or influence, and encourages further scholarly and imaginative engagement with Henry Irving's work.

7 Irving, Shaw and Modernity

In this thesis I seek to challenge both the Irving Narrative and Shaw's interpretation of Henry Irving. I intend, finally, to present a new assessment of Irving that reveals him to be a complex and contradictory figure with connections to a variety of performance traditions. We remember George Bernard Shaw because his work has been deemed to be socially progressive. But more significantly, we remember Shaw because he left behind something that was not quite so important to Irving: texts. Shaw's battle with Irving centred upon the idea of new writing, and what it was supposed to do. Irving's defence was that he regularly commissioned new works, albeit from a somewhat limited pool of rather conservative writers, central to these being the playwright and painter W.G. Wills. These plays were usually based upon historical themes, selected for their potential to create the pictorial spectacle that was the specialism of Irving's principal designer at the Lyceum, Hawes Craven. What Shaw wanted was an acceptance of new dramas on contemporary themes that showed life in realistic terms and raised issues of social concern. It is important to remember that, earlier in his career, Irving had been appreciated critically for presenting characters in a

realistic way, without heavy-handedness or resorting to a declamatory style. Irving mistrusted Shaw's conception of the realist text for two reasons: it was not poetic or imaginative enough, and it promoted the text of the play above the expressive, physical activities of the performer. Indeed, Shaw's texts frequently described how the actor should act the role, limiting and restricting the performer's creative input absolutely. Shaw viewed the playwright as the theatre's primary artist, with the text, obviously, as the principal conduit for expression. Irving's view of theatre placed the performer at the centre of the theatrical event, with the most profound meaning conveyed via the actor's body.

Henry Irving rejected a theatre conceived upon a Shavian model. But that did not mean that Irving necessarily disapproved of theatre that engaged with contemporary ideas and anxieties. As Thomas Postlewait has demonstrated, Irving's relationship with the work of Henrik Ibsen is complex, and obscured by Irving's connections to those involved in staging the first London productions of the Norwegian playwright's work.³⁰ This relationship will be examined in more detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

Although an astonishing and undeniably melodramatic spectacle, Irving's theatre was not necessarily an escapist one. Rather, it was a theatre that sought to engage continually with the idea of conscience. Irving dramatised psychological crisis via the physical body, rather than by presenting plays in which characters spoke of it. Irving's production of a play was always unique to him. He had no interest in the creation of an objectively-realised representation of life, which his realist detractors claimed as more

³⁰ Postlewait, *op. cit.*, p.134.

artistically valid. In an address to Harvard University, in 1885, Irving stated: 'To act on the stage as one really would in a room, would be ineffective and colourless'.³¹ Irving's performance was artificial, and quite deliberately so. But it does not follow that the performance was not emotionally credible.

Henry Irving rejected Shaw's vision of the drama as fundamentally untheatrical. Irving was generally gracious in his response to Shaw's baiting, and the playwright continued to pour scorn upon Irving's productions until the actor's death in 1905, even when Archer was, partially at least, reconciled. Shaw's obituary of Irving, published in an Austrian newspaper the *Neue Freie Presse* in October 1905, one week after Irving's death, continued the assault. The works of Stoker and Brereton can be seen, in some ways, as responses to Shaw's insensitive display, the first exchanges in the battle for Irving's reputation, joined even before his funeral. Shaw's negative view of Irving, its subsequent repetition and connection to discussions about the validity of the work of Ibsen, has become a dominant narrative. But it must be understood that Irving's rejection of Shaw was not a rejection of innovation itself, or modernity. Jim Davis has termed Irving 'a transitional artist': a figure whose legacy is rich and complex, and involves a number of performance forms. Such a figure's work cannot be condemned to easy categorisation.³² His selection of plays may place him firmly in the nineteenth century theatre, but his aesthetic choices, especially his focus upon the expressive and transformative power of the body, suggest that he remains a constant, if unacknowledged, presence in our theatre practice.

³¹ Henry Irving, 'The Art of Acting' in *Sir Henry Irving: Theatre Culture and Society Essays Lectures and Addresses*, ed. Jeffrey Richards (Keele: Ryburn Publishing, 1994), pp. 41-43.

³² Jim Davis in ed. Foulkes, op. cit., p. 189.

Irving's legacy was ephemeral because he left little by way of personal record.³³

Laurence Irving refers to the cylinder recordings of the opening of *Richard III* and Shylock's speech from the trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, made in 1903. These seem to lack the strange traits of speech for which the actor was derided by William Archer. As Laurence Irving somewhat mournfully records:

For the rest, the brittle cuttings from old newspapers, a hundred or so faded photographs, a gallery of drawings and cartoons of unequal merit, a thousand letters written or received and the little red account books [...] must suffice as the raw material of his biography.³⁴

However, this insubstantial legacy should not detract from the power of Irving's work. Indeed, what frequently emerges from eye-witness accounts of Irving's acting, particularly from the 1870s, is the sense of absolute audience involvement. Irving's choice of plays may have been derided as nostalgic by certain critics, but they were undeniably effective. As Joseph R. Roach has written:

When an actor takes his place upon a stage, even in the most trivial vehicle, and his audience begins to respond to his performance, together they concentrate the complex values of a culture with an intensity that less immediate transactions cannot rival. They embody its shared language of spoken words and expressive gestures, its social expectations and psychological commonplaces, its conventions of truth and beauty, its nuances of prejudice

³³ As I have stated, Irving's addresses were often the work of Austin or Stoker.

³⁴ Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 15.

and fear, its erotic fascinations, and frequently its sense of humour. Wherever this isn't so, the actor will fail. The theater exists at the center of civilized life, not at its peripheries.³⁵

Roach, exploring the influence of Diderot's theories, shows an acute awareness of the actor's body as a conduit for power. A form of symbiosis is suggested in the above description. In Irving's case, this grew via the development of a relentless stage tension. He appreciated the audience was a form of organism that was susceptible to stress and release. Through precise choreography, and applying diverse techniques, Irving created intense moments for his audience. In his performances, particularly as Mathias and Hamlet, he understood how careful use of his body could accentuate and deepen the audience's commitment to the drama. This awareness of power, generated by one body and requiring a response in another, must be taken into account in any study of Irving's work. This process was far from trivial. Irving's presentation of the male body in crisis was particularly engaging and troubling to those watching because his characters often showed the unbearable burden of societal expectation.

8 An Overview of the Thesis

³⁵ Joseph R. Roach *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1993).

This introductory chapter has described the biographers whose work constitutes the Irving Narrative and also outlined the dominant, Shavian counter-argument. In terms of the overall span of the thesis, Chapter One places Irving in context as a performer via a study of those who are known to have influenced him directly, or via anecdotal information obtained from older actors. I also decouple Irving from the idea of a 'succession' of tragedians at this point. Chapter Two is a study of Irving's early career, focusing on three specific moments that the Irving Narrative has largely overlooked or rewritten: Irving's first meeting with Samuel Phelps in 1856, his departure from Augustus Glossop Harris's company in 1860 and his encounter with the spiritualist performers the Davenport brothers in 1865.

In Chapter Three, I consider the play that made Irving a hugely popular actor in Britain, *The Bells*. Here, Irving was able to use his skills as both actor and stage-manager, creating a drama of the body that would become his most successful method of presentation. I accompany this work with an analysis of Irving's changes to the play, considering the original French play, Leopold Lewis's version and Irving's own amended text. Irving's contribution to the physical realisation of the text, I argue, demands a credit as co-author of the piece. Chapter Four considers Irving's interpretations of the role of Hamlet from 1864-1874, culminating in his celebrated run at the Lyceum. This performance marked an extraordinary journey in terms of casting, from light comedian to tragedian, via a complex series of highly creative choices. Irving's performance as Hamlet is contextualized here in order to show its originality and progressive nature, building on the work of Charles Fechter and Tom

Taylor. Chapter Five argues that Irving's production of *Hamlet* in 1878 represented a landmark in the history of the play's production, combining a range of techniques to present a hysterical male body upon the stage. In Chapter Six, I consider the decline of the use of the magical body, and Irving's failure to develop the drama of psychological crisis inscribed upon the body. This, I argue, was in part due to Irving's courting of social elites, his assumed leadership of the profession, and a general decline in the acceptability of occult spectacle. I conclude by considering Edward Gordon Craig and Edith Craig's relationships to Irving, suggesting that, had either of them gained control of a theatre and its artistic output, we would have a clearer sense of Irving's performance legacy and progressive contribution to theatre in the twentieth century. Finally, I consider the nature of Irving's influence, both direct and indirect, upon the modern stage.

Chapter One

Henry Irving and the Great Tragedians

1:1 Introduction

The career of Henry Irving has been over-written by an imposed sequence of events that I have termed the Irving Narrative. This had its origin in his lifetime, with sympathetic biographers such as Charles Hiatt, and was augmented by a glut of literature that was published after Irving's death in 1905. Subsequent biographies have added to the narrative and largely developed the tropes of 'rags to riches', focusing on Irving's apparently predetermined path to success. These biographies agree upon a certain number of key encounters and events in Henry Irving's story. However, as Thomas Postlewait has written:

Once a specific event attains historical significance, through documentation and commentary, subsequent historians are drawn to it. New studies may reinterpret the event, but even revisionist histories rarely question its status as an important occurrence. This chain of commentary is not surprising, of course, because historians read other historians, and thus regularly write about the same events that their predecessors described and analyzed.¹

The Irving Narrative is composed of events that have attained significance via this process. Many of the events have been reshaped or even distorted, and others have

¹ Thomas Postlewait, *op. cit.*, p.250.

been overlooked or undervalued. Several of these events can even be disproved revealing a more complex and nuanced view of the actor and the methods he utilised in order to transform his casting from light comedian to tragedian. As I will demonstrate, this transformation, from the viewpoint of the early 1860s, seemed most unlikely.

The Irving Narrative suggests that Henry Irving, from his arrival in London with his parents in 1848, knew that he would become a great tragic actor, following in a supposed tradition going back to David Garrick. Over successive biographies, the story of Irving has become a rags to riches-style journey of hard work, self-belief, self-improvement, despair and salvation, a story filled with high stakes and, ultimately, a happy ending. It is populated by a variety of stock characters, such as the kindly mentor and the villain; props such as the letter that redeems the lead character's hopes and reputation; and the financial windfall that makes the impossible suddenly possible. It is, in many ways, as melodramatic as the plays he preferred, and, in that respect, Henry Irving has become the leading character in the drama of his own life, with each encounter made relevant, dramatised and heightened by a group of biographers who were, for the most part, family or very close associates. In order to re-evaluate Irving, it is first necessary to contextualize him as a nineteenth-century actor.

1:2 Irving's Self-Fashioning

The documentation of Henry Irving's career is a complex matter. He left no autobiography or set of diaries detailing his working methods. Instead, we have

fragments: some letters and a number of texts of lectures and addresses. These addresses date from the period when Irving was established at the Lyceum in the 1880s, and are somewhat problematic. Their authorship is questionable. Despite the fact that Irving delivered them as though they were his own personal views, they were, in fact, largely the works of L. F. Austin, Irving's press secretary, or Bram Stoker, the manager of the theatre. Ellen Terry asserted that they always represented Irving's views, but the knowledge that these addresses were essentially scripted performances adds yet another interpretative layer for the Irving scholar to negotiate.² Henry Irving was acutely aware of how he was perceived by others. As Jeffrey Richards has written: 'Irving was very conscious of his place in an apostolic succession of great English actors. He had a large collection of books, playbills and memorials of his distinguished predecessors'.³ This collection was later augmented by Irving's friends, including Robert Browning, who gave Irving the silk purse of Edmund Kean, which he had acquired after that actor's death. Irving's attempts to fashion himself as the successor to a perceived tradition of English actors were carefully judged and weighted. However, these connections were made with hindsight. Irving's journey to the position of tragedian was far from straightforward.

In the early phase of his acting career, Irving's physical awkwardness and vocal limitations meant that he was unlikely to succeed as a tragedian. Henry Irving, in 1856 at the age of eighteen, was simply a young, aspiring actor, whose physiognomy was particularly suited to comedy. When he addressed Oxford University on the subject of

² Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life*, (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1908) p. 191.

³ Jeffrey Richards (ed.), *Sir Henry Irving Theatre, Culture and Society Essays, Addresses and Lectures*, p. 51.

Four Great Actors on 26th June, 1886, he was secure in his reputation as the most successful actor and manager in Britain. In the previous year, he had first appeared as Mephistopheles in a new version of Goethe's *Faust* by W.G. Wills. It was the theatre's 'greatest hit', and was performed 187 times in its first season.⁴ But Irving's journey to that success included encounters with a large number of performers, and varied types of performance, some of which could not hope to achieve such prestige, or even legitimacy. Irving's possessed the ability to incorporate such diverse influences within a legitimate performance framework, and to transform a body that was better suited to comedy into a conduit for powerful melodramatic and, eventually, tragic performance.

1:3 Irving's Early Work

Irving's early career saw him participate largely in comedic roles and public readings. The sparse correspondence available during Irving's early career includes exchanges of letters with Charles Ford, a clerk and colleague at Thacker and Co., the London shipping merchants who employed Irving as a clerk until his departure for the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Sunderland in September, 1856. His letters to Ford from Sunderland and Edinburgh show him enjoying the gruelling schedule of the young actor, and the sense of freedom it allowed compared to his time in the office. Irving wrote, with youthful idealism, on 24th November 1856:

There is no restraint on a laugh or a joke, no governor to stop your mouth, no petty subjection to one another, because they are equal – they work for a prize free for all. Macready, Phelps, Kean, were novices once and gained their

⁴ Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, p.123.

position by degrees, however aided by genius or talent. A young aspirant, therefore, has, or ought to have, a special independence of feeling for no-one knows what he may become.⁵

It is clear that Henry Irving was an ambitious and somewhat idealistic young man, but the possibility of his joining a perceived 'succession' of tragedians was remote. It came about via a complex series of encounters and decisions that led, over time, to the reconfiguring of the actor's casting in the mid-1860s. His capacity to use his unique physiognomy to his advantage was highly significant, too. This was learned over time, and did not come easily to him.

1:4 Irving and J. L. Toole

Having begun his career at the Royal Lyceum in Sunderland in 1856, Irving proceeded to work in Glasgow and Edinburgh. At some point in the late 1850s, Irving began to develop a number of public readings of plays and poems. In this, he was encouraged by J. L. Toole, the most successful comic actor of the period, who encountered Irving in Edinburgh and appeared with him in an operatic burlesque in 1857, as recorded by the *Caledonian Mercury* on 12th September of that year.⁶ Toole encouraged Irving to develop his talent for such readings after seeing him perform a version of Bulwer Lytton's play *The Lady of Lyons* at Crosby Hall, Bishopsgate in 1859. This performance marked a serious development in the perception of Irving's abilities. As the *Era* reported on 25th December, Irving showed 'good taste and earnestness' in

⁵ Laurence Irving, *op.cit.*, pp. 74-5.

⁶ Michael Read, 'The Chief and his Champion: Irving and J.L.Toole', in ed. Foulkes, *op. cit.* p. 11.

his performance. The report further stated that ‘it was in the more poetical and sentimental scenes that he displayed the most marked ability’.⁷ The final effects of this reading were powerful, as documented in the *Standard* on the 21st December: ‘the audience became deeply affected and from some points of the hall sobs were distinctly audible’.⁸ As Michael Read has written: ‘Britain’s supreme low comedian suddenly saw the true potential of his gangling young friend for the kind of sustained tragic acting that he had been given no opportunity to attempt in Edinburgh’.⁹ Read, a scholar of Toole’s career, suggests that, at this point Toole actively involved himself in the process of promoting Henry Irving as something more than a comedian. His description of this scene displays aspects of rags to riches: revelation and astonishment, and it is important to be wary of such elements, given the pervasive nature of the Irving Narrative. However, it does appear that Toole encouraged Irving to develop these readings during the periods they worked together in the 1860s. This helped Irving to eventually attain regular parts in melodramas that were closer in some respects to tragic roles.¹⁰ The process of mentoring included advice and the making of professional introductions within the business that gave Irving access to those who had performed with tragedians of the previous generations. It was another public reading, this time of Thomas Hood’s macabre poem *Eugene Aram* at the Vaudeville in 1871 as part of Irving’s benefit, that encouraged Hezekiah Bateman to recruit him to the company of the Lyceum, London. As Michael Read writes: ‘Toole encouraged Irving to try the poem out between the usual farces while they were touring in the summer of

⁷ Unsigned Review. *Era*, 25th December, 1859.

⁸ Unsigned Review. *Standard*, 21st December, 1859.

⁹ Read, op. cit., p. 14.

¹⁰ I will discuss melodrama and Irving’s relationship to the genre in more detail in Chapter Two.

1869'.¹¹ Up to that point, Irving's most notable success had been as Digby Grant in *Two Roses*. But Grant was another comic role and, in spite of some villainous parts in plays by Boucicault, Irving seemed most likely to progress as a comedian. It was Irving's performance as Mathias in *The Bells* that changed the situation, and repositioned Irving as a potential tragedian of some stature. That success was followed, in 1874, by Irving's performance as the lead in the Lyceum's production of *Hamlet*. From this point on, Irving self-consciously tested himself against the most notable and critically regarded performances of the nineteenth century, including Kemble's *Coriolanus*, Kean's *Shylock* and Macready's *Macbeth*. In *Four Great Actors*, Irving spoke of Richard Burbage, Thomas Betterton, David Garrick and Edmund Kean, placing himself, by inference alone, as the inheritor of what Richards has described as an 'apostolic succession'. But Irving's path to power and position was far from simple or direct, and involved some highly unorthodox creative decisions.

1:5 Influences on Irving's Acting Style

Before going on to consider those elements and their origins in more detail, it is first necessary to contextualize Irving in terms of acting styles. In the correspondence with Ford of 1856, he refers to Macready, Phelps and Kean as actors who had 'gained their position by degrees'. Of those actors, he had only seen Phelps perform. Of the four actors he selected in his address of 1886, none were alive during his lifetime. But Edmund Kean's performances still featured strongly in the memory of critics and audiences, and G.H. Lewes, who did not see Kean at his supposed peak, described him

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.14

in the 1890s as ‘undeniably the greatest actor I have seen’.¹² In the addresses, Irving quotes Macready and goes on to praise Edmund Kean highly. He also defends John Phillip Kemble against the accusation that Kean’s work swept Kemble into irrelevancy. Once Irving gained control of the creative output of the Lyceum in 1878, he selected roles that Kean had excelled in, including Sir Giles Overreach in Massinger’s *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* and Sir Edmund Mortimer in Coleman’s *The Iron Chest*. In notes written by Henry Irving that Laurence Irving claimed to have seen, he consciously sought to surpass ‘the piping, asthmatical John [Kemble]’ as Coriolanus, a view of Kemble somewhat at odds with the respectful tone of the 1886 Oxford speech.¹³

Once established as leading man at the Lyceum in 1874, Irving actively sought to connect himself to elderly actors associated with John Phillip Kemble, Edmund Kean and William Charles Macready. Several of these actors, including Henry Howe and W. H. Chippendale, were subsequently recruited into the Lyceum company during Irving’s sole management from 1878 onwards. To discover what Henry Irving was seeking by such associations, it is first necessary to consider how the prominent tragedians of the nineteenth century presented themselves, and what inspiration the young Henry Irving took from his growing, and almost-exclusively anecdotal, knowledge of them. This study will also help to locate Irving within discussions of ‘naturalness’ and ‘artificiality’ which are important in the understanding of his subsequent career at the Lyceum from *The Bells* onwards.

¹² G. H. Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting*. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1875), p. 31.

¹³ Laurence Irving, *op. cit.*, p. 575. I can find no other source for the notes described. Such anecdotal material should be treated with a degree of caution.

Edmund Kean died five years before Henry Irving's birth, but Irving's attraction to melodrama, and his growing interest in the role of Hamlet, which he first performed at the Theatre Royal, Manchester in 1864, led him to seek out performers who had worked with Kean. But Irving was also aware of the performances of John Phillip Kemble. Kemble's physicality had some similarities to Irving's, as is demonstrated by the fact that, in Manchester in the same year, Irving posed as Kemble in a portrait to celebrate three hundred years since Shakespeare's birth.¹⁴ I will therefore begin with a description of Kemble and his approach, before continuing to a consideration of Edmund Kean, and then on to William Charles Macready, an actor quoted by Irving in the Oxford address. His style drew from both his predecessors and contributed to the development of 'naturalness' in performance, an important concept that informed Irving's approach to acting, and was greatly debated. From Macready, I will move to discuss Samuel Phelps, an actor Irving met and subsequently worked with. According to the Irving Narrative, Phelps was the first professional actor Irving saw on a stage.

1:5:1 John Phillip Kemble

John Phillip Kemble was the most celebrated actor in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In his work *On Actors and Acting*, William Hazlitt described him in the following terms: 'we see him in a stately hieroglyphic of humanity; a living monument of departed greatness, a sombre comment on the rise and fall of kings'.¹⁵ Kemble's physique and his ability to appear noble and heroic were particularly impressive. Leigh Hunt referred to him as 'manly and dignified...his features are

¹⁴ Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 113.

¹⁵ G. Rowell (ed.) *Victorian Theatre Criticism* (London: Methuen and Co., 1971). p. 5.

strongly marked with what is called the Roman character'.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, Kemble enjoyed great success in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Kemble was particularly aware of his own appearance, and how he was regarded upon the stage. As Hazlitt wrote:

If Mr Kemble were to remain in the same posture for half an hour, his figure would only excite admiration: If Mr Kean were to stand still for only a moment, the contrary effect would be apparent.¹⁷

This awareness of self-representation extended to an interest in the appearance of the stage picture itself, and productions in which Kemble appeared were often visually rich. Recalling Kemble's *Coriolanus*, the critic John Forster stated: 'The pictures which Kemble gave when he revived the play might be splendid, but they were utterly unreal'.¹⁸ The heroic Kemble, in his toga, required an overwhelmingly classical backdrop that disregarded 'the proprieties of space and time'.¹⁹

In addition to his bearing, Kemble was also praised for his power and 'severity of expression' which he preferred, according to Leigh Hunt, 'over tenderness or lightness'. Kemble was a deeply serious actor and triumphed in 'characters that are occupied with themselves and with their own importance'.²⁰ He demonstrated emotional mastery and self-control, and his performances showed a steady progression to their key dramatic moment: 'He never rises and sinks as in the enthusiasm of the moment; his ascension though grand is careful, and when he sinks it

¹⁶ Rowell, op. cit., p. 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 16

¹⁸ John Forster, *Examiner*, 18th March 1838.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Rowell, op. cit., p. 9.

is with preparation and dignity'.²¹ Hazlitt, writing on Kemble's retirement from the stage in June, 1817, identified his best trait as being his ability to represent 'the habitual workings of a predominant feeling'.²² 'Exclusive passion', or singular emotion, was what Kemble did best. In his best-regarded roles he was stately and delivered his lines at a specific and constant tempo.

Kemble's weakness appears to have been a lack of variation in his playing. He was a classical tragedian, and could not deviate from the intense and growing realisation of a single, dominant feeling. For Hazlitt, Kemble's Hamlet failed because of 'a want of flexibility, of that quick sensibility that yields to every motive, and is borne away with every breath of fancy which is distracted in the multiplicity of its reflections, and lost in the uncertainty of its resolutions'.²³ Most tellingly 'there was neither variableness nor shadow of turning'.²⁴ As Brutus, a role in which, at least superficially, Kemble ought to have impressed, he failed because he could not demonstrate 'a secret struggle of mind'.²⁵ For Leigh Hunt, Kemble's voice was particularly problematic. It was monotonous in tone and not sufficiently melodious. In his vocal style, he apparently introduced innovation for its own sake. Hunt's conclusion is damning: 'nobody will adopt Mr Kemble's pronunciation; and if he were to carry his dialect into private life, he would be either pitied or laughed at'.²⁶ In 1879, in response to a rumour that Irving was about to revive *Coriolanus* at the Lyceum, Arthur Hallam wrote in the *Theatre* of

²¹ Ibid., p. 13

²² Ibid., p. 14

²³ Ibid., p.17

²⁴ Ibid., p.16

²⁵ Ibid., p. 17

²⁶ Ibid., p. 12

Kemble's failure to convince in the part: 'There was too much of the polished patrician about him'.²⁷

1:5:2 Edmund Kean

Edmund Kean's acting offered a stark contrast in approach to the stateliness of Kemble's classically-informed tragedian. Where Kemble offered a constant tempo and clearly developed line of action, Edmund Kean offered the capacity to change, and to change rapidly, from one emotional state to another.

Hazlitt's account of Kean's performance as Shylock, published in the *Morning Chronicle's* edition of 27th January, 1814, gives some sense of the actor's groundbreaking approach. Kean defied the traditional interpretation of the role, which Hazlitt defined as: 'morose, sullen, inward, inveterate'.²⁸ Kean's playing daringly countered this. The actor instead displayed: 'a lightness and vigour in his tread, a buoyancy and elasticity of spirit, a fire and animation which would accord better with almost any other character'.²⁹ In place of a stable demonstration of portraiture, Kean offered 'a succession of striking pictures' and 'perpetually fresh shocks of delight and surprise'.³⁰ In a second notice of 2nd February, 1814, Hazlitt singled out a new quality to be praised: 'The character never stands still'.³¹ Kean's energetic performances clearly took their toll on his health, and the interest of the press in the matter showed that details of Kean's personal life fascinated the reading public. As a *Morning Post* journalist

²⁷ Arthur Hallam, *The Theatre*, 1st August, 1879.

²⁸ Rowell, op. cit., p. 50.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 51.

wrote in an article of 18th February, after seeing Kean as Richard III: ‘The great exertions requisite to sustain the part of Richard so much increased his disorder as to produce an expectoration of blood’.³² In place of Kemble’s classically well-proportioned and stately physique, audiences observed the mobile, but fragile, body of Kean.

Kean mixed his Shakespearean repertoire with tragic-comic or melodramatic roles, most successfully as Sir Giles Overreach in Massinger’s *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* and as Sir Edward Mortimer in Coleman’s *The Iron Chest*. Kemble had first appeared in the former, and his revival of the play, in direct competition with Kean, served merely to emphasise the strengths of his rival, who was approaching the peak of his acting power. Kean, as G. H. Lewes wrote, was capable of ‘mingling strong lights and shadows with Caravaggio force of unreality’.³³

After appearing as Richard III, Kean portrayed the character of Luke in *Riches*, derived from *City Madam* by Massinger. The role was a villain, and such parts clearly played to the actor’s strengths. Kean’s 1816 portrayal of Sir Giles Overreach in *A New Way To Pay Old Debts* was influential upon Henry Irving, who revived it at the Lyceum when he became sole manager. Hazlitt described the conclusion of Kean’s performance as ‘quite overwhelming’.³⁴ Indeed, force exercised over an audience was a key element of Kean’s success. Most impressive of all was the actor’s ability to realise

³² Quoted in *Kean*, G. Playfair (London Reinhardt and Evans, 1950), p. 104.

³³ Lewes, op. cit., p. 37.

³⁴ William Hazlitt, *Examiner*, 12th January 1816.

physical suffering in horrific detail. Reviewing *Othello* in *The Times* of 27th October, 1817, Hazlitt wrote of:

The convulsed motion of the hands, and the involuntary swellings of the veins of the forehead in some of the most painful situations should not only suggest topics of critical panegyric, but might furnish studies to the painter or anatomist.³⁵

Kean drew the audience's focus to physical details, to the effect of emotion upon the body. This would also become a key aspect of Irving's performances, with the presentation of suffering and death becoming significant in his Lyceum repertoire from the 1871 production of *The Bells* onwards. Indeed, one of Irving's innovations was, in his principal roles, to shift the dramatic focus to the process of bodily crisis, collapse and eventual death. Kean and Irving shared strong melodramatic inclinations: to create sensation, to compel their audience to sit forward, enthralled by a spectacle that combined awe and terror in equal measure. Irving took this aspect from anecdotal accounts of Kean, making his own body the centre of the drama, eventually developing it as a point of absolute focus for audience attention.

If Kemble had offered a stately and statuesque model of a heroic ideal, then Kean offered an unstable, constantly moving, series of studies of bodily trauma and distress. His performances required his audience to watch carefully, and to pay close attention to details. Even Leigh Hunt, who was not always well-disposed to Kean, was impressed. As he wrote of Kean's performance in *Othello* in the *Examiner* of 4th

³⁵ Rowell, op. cit., p. 54.

October, 1818: 'We never witnessed a performance that struck us so forcibly'.³⁶ The actor's physicality was again the main focus, and Kean's 'visage quivered' in the emotional passages of the play. The actor was incarnating raw emotion and a loss of psychological control, something that Irving would also later demonstrate, to the point of being accused of hysteria by William Archer.

Kean had a great capacity to move his audience and to convey emotion that was not simply admired, but deeply felt: 'It was impossible to watch Kean as Othello, Shylock, Richard or Sir Giles Overreach without being strangely shaken by the terror, and the pathos, and the passion of a stormy spirit utterly itself in tones of irresistible power'.³⁷ Although physically slight, G.H. Lewes commented upon Kean's astonishing quality to make himself bigger before the eyes of the audience. Playing alongside Macready in *Othello* in the 1820s, Kean seemed to tower over his rival. Lewes was critical of Kean's love of dramatic change, his ability to transform from one emotional state to another, but praised his portrayal of 'waves' of emotion.³⁸ This kinetic approach is important, since it shows Kean's awareness of the needs of his audience and their desire to feel something, and to go on feeling. For Edmund Kean, the climax was less of a steady progression, and more a series of intense, emotional reactions to events within the drama. It occurred in spasms rather than crescendos. In the words of Lewes: 'he could not be calmly dignified; nor could he represent the intellectual side of heroism'. Although Lewes acknowledged Kean as an 'innovator', he was able to dispassionately describe his flaws: 'he could not laugh; he had no playfulness that was

³⁶ Rowell, op. cit., p. 55.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 4

³⁸ Ibid., p. 8

not as the playfulness of a panther showing her claws every moment'.³⁹ It is quite possible that Irving made use of Lewes's descriptions of Kean in shaping his own performances of physical change. He was certainly aware of Kean's extraordinary reputation, and his own transitions from one mood to another are frequently described in similar terms to Kean's.

Irving's acquisition of objects associated with Kean suggests a significant interest in his career and achievements. Irving's desire to employ actors who had worked with him, such as Howe and Chipperfield, also serves to demonstrate this point. But it must be remembered that, from the period of his sole management of the Lyceum in 1878, Irving was self-consciously myth-making and forging connections to the past that became interpreted as inevitabilities by the authors of the Irving Narrative. From a practical viewpoint, Irving was undoubtedly fascinated by Kean's techniques, and the overwhelming effects he produced in audiences.

The qualities of Kean that were most admired by critics, and by the actors that followed him, were his emotional force and, more importantly, his ability to share this force with his audience. Kean's audience didn't simply admire Kean, they *felt* along with his characters, and he took them on a journey that was visceral and compelling. In a review of *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, published in the *Athenaeum* on 3rd October, 1828, a correspondent wrote of Kean: 'This is an actor of so singular and unbending a mannerism that many who have been delighted with his personifications of one

³⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

character have been equally disgusted with his representation of another'.⁴⁰ Kean clearly relished playing extremes in his characters. In both his public and private life, Kean's body, bodily appetites and bodily frailty, were the focus of audience attention. By contrast, Henry Irving protected his public persona, crafting it carefully to reflect notions of seriousness and sobriety. Extremes were for the stage, and only for the stage. In his performance of dignity and constant respectability in public life he was close in some respects to the noble and distinctly patrician stage presentations of Kemble. The ongoing maintenance of his conservative public persona would lead to the actor being awarded a knighthood in 1895. Unlike Kean, Irving installed clear lines of demarcation between stage and real life. He would refer to this in his *Addresses* as the 'double-consciousness', and then as the 'executive self': the psychological process by which he supposedly protected both himself and his audience from any potentially traumatic exposure to emotional extremity.⁴¹ Such caveats, made retrospectively, allowed the actor to justify taking his audience on thrilling and visceral journeys, and protected both sides from potential accusations of hysteria.⁴²

1:5:3 William Charles Macready

William Charles Macready worked with both Edmund Kean and Samuel Phelps. For William Archer who published a biography of Macready in 1890, the actor 'tried to combine the dignity of Kemble with the vivacity of Kean', a project that might also be

⁴⁰ Unsigned Review. *Athenaeum*. 3rd October, 1828.

⁴¹ This complex relationship between actor and audience is considered by W.D. King, op. cit., pp. 186-194.

⁴² This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

attributed to Irving.⁴³ Macready was a Victorian actor, retiring in 1851, and thus performing for fourteen years while Victoria was sovereign. It is unclear whether Henry Irving ever saw Macready act. Irving arrived in London with his parents in 1848, with the family moving to an address at 68 Old Broad Street. According to Laurence Irving, John Henry Brodribb (Irving's birth name) first went to see Samuel Phelps play Hamlet at Sadler's Wells 'shortly before Johnnie's 12th birthday'.⁴⁴ Although undated, this would suggest Irving first saw Phelps at some point in the winter season of 1849-50, close to Macready's retirement.

It is important to be wary of accounts of supposed 'succession', and the narratives that incorporate them, but Irving does appear to have measured himself against both Macready and Phelps in his subsequent work. Several of Macready's parts were included during Irving's management of the Lyceum, including the part of Richelieu, from Bulwer-Lytton's play of the same name, which Irving had encountered during his time at the Royal Lyceum, Sunderland in 1856 and again at the Theatre Royal, Manchester in the mid-1860s. Laurence Irving wrote that, although Irving did not have access to Macready's diaries, he was fascinated by how he had played the part.⁴⁵ Macready's undoubted influence upon the work of Samuel Phelps means that his approach as both an actor and as a stage-manager ought to be carefully considered here.

⁴³ William Archer, *William Charles Macready* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1890), p.194.

⁴⁴ Laurence Irving, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37

Macready made his London debut at Covent Garden in *The Distressed Mother*, a version of Racine's *Andromaque* by Ambrose Philips. He played the part of Orestes. In the *Examiner* of 22nd September, 1815, Hazlitt recorded that, in spite of the work being 'a bad play for the display of his powers...he succeeded in making a decidedly favourable impression upon the audience'.⁴⁶ Having fully expressed his dislike for the text, Hazlitt gave the promising actor some advice:

An actor is like a man who throws himself from the top of a steeple by a rope. He should chuse the highest steeple he can find, that if he does not succeed in coming safe to the ground, he may break his neck at once, and so put himself and the spectators out of farther pain'.⁴⁷

Macready chose a series of high steeples, committing himself to Shakespearean roles, with an approach that boldly challenged the interpretations of the actors who had gone before him. In 1819, also at Covent Garden, he performed as Richard III. The critic of the *Morning Chronicle*, James Haines, described Macready's success in the following terms: 'there was no apparent struggle after originality, no laborious effort to mark a difference in passages of small importance'.⁴⁸ For Hazlitt, Macready 'is the most romantic of actors' with 'fanciful sorrow a speciality'.⁴⁹ Archer's biography attempts to sum up Macready's power, and the author quotes Lady Pollock's observation of the actor's great strength: 'his singular power of looking at nothing'. This was most noticeable when Macready performed as Macbeth: 'When he spoke into the air, we

⁴⁶ Rowell, op. cit., p. 62.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 63

⁴⁸ Archer, op. cit., p. 194.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 202.

could almost see the hags pass away, as though in a wreath of vapour'.⁵⁰ Macready's work made audiences active and imaginative; they entered into the experience of the character alongside him. The critic Westland Marston, in his *On Recent Actors*, commented upon Macready's ability to create an extraordinary atmosphere in his performances:

the air of brooding reverie in the soliloquy, with a strange sense conveyed in the fixed and fateful force of impending evil, the insidious encroachment of evil...and afterwards the overdone warmth with which he excuses his abstraction to Rosse and Angus with consummate skill and effect.⁵¹

His portrayal of Hamlet displayed a capacity to enact change effectively. When Hamlet encounters the ghost 'he broke from the most intense and passionate indignation...to the lost and baffled air, and with a voice of unearthly horror...tremblingly addressed the spirit'.⁵² In 1838, the critic John Forster wrote the following about Macready's King Lear: 'The finest passage of Mr Macready's scenes upon the heath is his remembrance of the 'poor, naked wretches', wherein a new world seems indeed to have broken upon his mind'. Vocal power, and the ability to carefully modulate the voice to make audiences hang upon his word, were very much Macready traits. Archer suggests that his voice 'was very fine and rich' with great musicality. Although Macready was prone to wild vocal variations, and could produce a 'pumping roar', he showed sensitivity to

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Westland Marston, *On Recent Actors: Being recollections critical, and, in many cases, personal of late distinguished performers of both sexes with some incidental notes of living actors* (London: Sampson Law, Marston, Searle and Rivington Ltd. 1888), Volume One, p.75.

⁵² Unsigned Review, *New Monthly*, 1st July, 1821.

poetry, and used it to develop the mood of a piece.⁵³ This control, along with his tendency to pause to give further meaning to a line, or to get the audience to dwell upon its meaning, contributed to a powerful auditory aspect to Macready's work.

The ability to demonstrate well-honed craft and technique in his acting were key strengths of Macready. In his *Macbeth*, Marston especially admired the 'transitions from amazement and awe to returning reason'.⁵⁴ In this, Macready contrasted with Kean, whose *Macbeth* had, apparently, not shown clearly enough the seduction of the man by the powers of evil. Macready's interpretation of *Macbeth* dramatised an ongoing struggle of conscience within the man. This condition also fascinated Irving, and the playing of such warring extremes became a key aspect of several of his roles. However, some critics saw Macready as being too intellectual and considered in his performance. His aforementioned transitions, for Marston, had been 'too obviously reasoned out'.⁵⁵ Although he could not match Kean for force, his intelligence and sensitivity to a text meant 'that his entire performance (as *Macbeth*) was probably finer and more suggestive than that of Kean'. In his portrayal of Cardinal Richelieu in Bulwer-Lytton's *Richelieu*, critics observed qualities in Macready that were not particularly apparent in either John Phillip Kemble or Edmund Kean. The first was Macready's ability to add extraordinary amounts of detail to his performance, what Marston called his 'familiar touches'. These undoubtedly made historical and high-status characters seem closer to the audience, and gave a sense of their domesticity and humanity. They were not classical models of perfection, or characters embodying

⁵³ Archer, op. cit., p. 195.

⁵⁴ Marston, op. cit., p. 76.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 76

extraordinary forces, but people existing within a detailed and credible world. The second quality was humour: Macready could be funny in his performances. Marston commented that he found 'a terrible humour' in the part of Richelieu.⁵⁶ Macready used humour to give his characters depth and greater complexity: 'When Marion de L'Orme entered with news of the conspiracy headed by Orleans, every trace of caustic mirth or easy, exulting contempt at once disappeared'.⁵⁷ Irving similarly discovered such qualities in his performance of Richelieu. Dutton Cook referred to him as 'alternately a grim jester and an enthusiast of most exalted aims'.⁵⁸

Macready generally avoided roles that were too closely associated with Kean, most notably Sir Giles Overreach in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* and Edward Mortimer in *The Iron Chest* – the latter appealing to Henry Irving as a drama of conscience - and set about creating a series of new parts, many of which remained in the repertoire for some time. As Archer concludes, Macready's strength was as 'an originator of characters'.⁵⁹ Most notably, he created the role of Virginius in James Sheridan Knowles's play of the same name, a play Henry Irving introduced into his repertoire of readings as a young actor in 1858. William Archer, an advocate of textual respect and the importance of the playwright, made his approval of Macready quite clear in his biography of the actor.

Macready moved between productions of the works of Shakespeare and new plays with historical settings, an approach that also appealed to Henry Irving. In an

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 41

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 45

⁵⁸ Dutton Cook, *Nights at the Play* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883) p. 210. Cook found the combination of such qualities made the part practically unrealisable.

⁵⁹ William Archer, op. cit., p. 200.

accusation that adumbrates criticism of Irving, Macready was described on occasion as a 'melodramatic actor'. He was defended by G. H. Lewes, who, although placing Macready second to Kean, vigorously asserted the positive attributes of Macready. In *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, Lewes states that Macready was, 'by his intelligence [...]fitted to conceive[...]and express characters'.⁶⁰ Lewes then makes a differentiation between melodramatic acting and the more respectable kind necessary for Shakespearean performance. The melodramatic actor is limited to 'situations', by which Lewes appears to mean that the actor's character responds to plot, and is driven by actions upon the stage which frequently require rapid and contrived transitions from one state to another. The tragedian shows mastery and development of a line of action. Irving's approach was like Macready's in this respect, offering a conflicted character who demonstrated a credible emotional process. Irving created lead roles that showed clear lines of development and, especially in *The Bells*, a form of dramatic action that delivered a conclusion with the emotional impact of a tragedy. Indeed, it was the success of Irving's performance of Mathias that convinced Hezekiah Bateman to risk Irving's production of *Hamlet* at the Lyceum in 1874.

Macready had already attempted the part of Coriolanus, a role very much associated with John Phillip Kemble, when he decided to present the play in 1838. Macready involved himself in every aspect of the play's presentation. He had taken over management of Covent Garden in July, 1837, recruiting Samuel Phelps into his company. The company itself was a strong one, with significant acting and musical talent, as well as painters, carpenters and stage-management. He brought all these

⁶⁰ Lewes, op. cit., p. 50.

abilities to bear on the production, which appeared to set a new standard in stage spectacle. For John Forster, writing in the *Examiner* on the 18th March 1838:

The presentation of this play at Covent Garden Theatre on Monday night last may be esteemed the worthiest tribute to the genius and fame of Shakespeare that has been yet attempted on the English stage. We have nothing to compare with it, even in Mr Macready's management. Magnificent as the revivals of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear* and *Macbeth* have been, this of *Coriolanus* surpasses them all'.⁶¹

Forster hugely admired Macready's deployment of the mob, and the sense of scale that Macready had realised. But perhaps the most arresting aspect of the notice is the sense of a complete picture, a Rome that was credible and well-proportioned, in stark contrast to Kemble's:

It is an exquisite arrangement of art that, throughout the play, and in the rudest streets of the city, the Capitol is kept in view, and still presents, under varying aspects, the never-changed Roman form...of the three temples to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. As a chord in music pervading the entire composition, this awakens and sustains in the spectator's mind grand associations of the later with those of the earlier Rome.⁶²

In every aspect of production, Macready was scrupulously careful, with a clear aesthetic vision. Despite considering *Coriolanus* for production on several occasions,

⁶¹ Rowell, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

⁶² Ibid.

Irving did not put the play on the stage until 1901, suffering one of his few box office failures. It's possible that even Irving hesitated to take on a production that would have needed to match accounts, published and anecdotal, of Macready's extraordinary presentation of Rome and its populace. Macready's approach to aspects of production was ground-breaking, and this spirit of innovation continued as he attained more influence. His sense of spectacle and idea of a cohesive stage vision were influential upon the work of Samuel Phelps. According to several of Irving's biographers, he was the first actor Irving saw upon his arrival in London.

1:5:4 Samuel Phelps

Phelps made his London debut as Shylock in 1837. In 1844, he entered into partnership to take over the lease of Sadler's Wells. His acting style was considered to be more 'natural' than his predecessors, a common assertion and one of which we should be wary.⁶³ To some degree Phelps's 'natural' and more intimate style was created by the smaller houses of Sadler's Wells. He certainly viewed the company as important, and understood his role as something that must be properly integrated into a believable and effective whole. His ability to speak Shakespeare's poetry won him particular praise, and this was in evidence during his performances as Hamlet. Just as Macready appeared less forceful than Edmund Kean, so Phelps seemed less forceful than Macready. But he compensated for this with a striking vocal clarity and sensitivity to the rhythms and cadences of verse. Henry Morley remarked that, although Phelps's

⁶³ For a detailed discussion of this term see Lynn M. Voskuill, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

performance as Lear lacked awe, the actor compensated with feeling and pathos after the storm scene. It was 'exquisitely done'.⁶⁴

Morley wrote in *The Journal of a London Playgoer* of Phelps's sensitivity towards Shakespeare's work:

Shakespeare's plays are always poems, as performed at Sadler's Wells. The scenery is always beautiful, but it is not allowed to draw attention from the poet, with whose whole conception it is made to blend in the most perfect harmony. The actors are content also to be subordinated to the play, learn doubtless at rehearsals how to subdue excesses of expression that by giving undue force to one part would destroy the balance of the whole'.⁶⁵

Phelps achieved an aesthetic balance between detailed stage representation and an emphasis on clearly spoken text. Of Phelps's performance in his 1856 production of *Timon of Athens*, Morley wrote: 'he never by his acting drags out of its place in the drama. He takes heed that every part, even the meanest, shall have in the acting as much prominence as Shakespeare gave it in his plan'.⁶⁶ Referring to Phelps's treatment of the smaller roles in *Timon of Athens*, Morley wrote that the actors: 'manifestly say what Shakespeare has assigned to them to say with as much care, and as much certainty that it will be listened to with due respect, as if they were themselves Timons, Hamlets or Macbeths.'⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Morley, op. cit., p. 227.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 56

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 131

⁶⁷ Ibid.

It is perhaps Samuel Phelps's treatment of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that reveals the most about the actor's approach. His performance as Bottom was innovative in that he appeared to play the part in a style that we might term 'straight', avoiding exaggeration or buffoonery. In *Our Recent Actors*, Westland Marston wrote:

His absolute insensibility to the ridiculous was more mirth-moving than the most grotesque means by which inferior actors would have italicized the absurd conceit of the character. His quiet, matter-of-course belief that the parts of Thisbe and the Lion are equally within his grasp, and that, as to the latter, he could roar, with equal success, either 'terribly' or 'as gently as any sucking dove', was more telling than would have been a violent and highly-coloured expression of his self-complacency'.⁶⁸

Phelps's playing succeeded because it allowed the character to perform within the extraordinary situation of the play: 'In all this, the sense of acquiescence in the absurd was far more ludicrous than extreme wonder or excitement would have been'.⁶⁹ Phelps's approach to the portrayal of a fantastic world was to make the responses of those observing it credibly human and explicable.

Phelps did not stint in the realisation of Shakespeare's Athenian wood. For Henry Morley, Phelps engaged with the very heart of the play:

⁶⁸ Marston, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 29.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

Mr Phelps has never for a minute lost sight of the main idea which governs the whole play, and this is the great secret of his success in the presentation of it. He knew that he was to present merely shadows; that spectators, as Puck reminds them in the epilogue, are to think they have slumbered on their seats, and that what appeared to them have been visions.⁷⁰

The sense that all were watching a dream was effectively realised by Phelps's innovative approach to staging:

There is no ordinary scene-shifting; but, as in dreams, one scene is made to glide insensibly into another...And not only do the scenes melt dream-like into one another, but over all the fairy portion of the play there is a haze thrown by a curtain of green gauze placed between the actors and the audience, and maintained there during the whole of the second, third and fourth acts.⁷¹

This effective use of a gauze 'subdues the flesh and blood of the actors into something nearly resembling dream-figures, and incorporates more completely the actors with the scenes'.⁷² The success of the spectacle was evident from the audience's hushed and attentive response. When an audience member in the gallery responded to Bottom's intention to roar: 'the unexpected sally was not well received by the house'.⁷³ Phelps's production, with its creation of a credible dream-state, established a compelling way of realising the supernatural upon the stage that required the audience to sit in rapt attention. His realisation of a detailed stage world and emphasis

⁷⁰ Morley, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

on poetry were influential upon Henry Irving, who appears to have followed Phelps' work from the time of his own arrival in London. Both Phelps and Irving shared a capacity to defy the boundaries of casting and move between tragic and comic roles, too. The principal difference between Phelps and Irving is that Phelps did not choose to produce melodramas during his management of Sadler's Wells. Irving's management of the Lyceum placed melodrama, and its spectacular realisation, at the heart of the theatre's programme.

According to the central texts of the Irving Narrative - those of Hiatt, Brereton, MacFall and Laurence Irving - Henry Irving was first introduced to Phelps in 1856 by the actor William Hoskins. Irving, according to these sources, was offered a job by Phelps, but turned down the offer. Here is Charles Hiatt's account of the meeting between Irving and Phelps, published during Irving's lifetime in 1899:

The manager of Sadler's Wells, like Mrs Siddons, Macready, and Fanny Kemble, had a poor opinion of the profession of which he was an ornament. He, however, received Irving graciously enough, and went so far as to offer him an engagement; but he accompanied the proposal with the discouraging words: "Young man, have nothing to do with the Stage; it is a bad profession."⁷⁴

In Laurence Irving's account, published in 1951, the story has been shaped into a more complex narrative. Phelps's reply is similarly gloomy and brief, but the effects upon the young actor are imagined and extended:

⁷⁴ Hiatt, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

‘Sir, do not go on the stage; it is an ill-requited profession.’ Something in the boy’s bearing, or perhaps an interceding word from Hoskins, led Phelps to reconsider his discouraging admonition. He repeated what he had said, and again the boy made it clear that his advice had fallen upon deaf ears. ‘In that case, Sir,’ said Samuel Phelps, ‘you’d better come here and I’ll give you two pounds a week to begin with.’⁷⁵

According to Laurence Irving, Henry Irving rejected the offer: ‘Brodrigg had his plan, and knew that the time was not advantageous. He refused Phelps’ generous offer’.⁷⁶

In Madeleine Bingham’s account, published in 1978, the story is further embellished, with additional dialogue and imagined motivations. Here, young Irving finds the voice to appeal directly to his hero:

He (Phelps) then gave his advice: ‘Have nothing to do with the theatre.’ The young Roscius looked at his idol: ‘Well, sir, it seems strange that such advice should come from you, seeing that you enjoy so great a reputation as an actor.’ He paused, ‘I think I shall take my chance and go upon the stage.’ Now the old actor looked again at the hopeful face: ‘In that case, sir, you may come next season to Sadler’s Wells, and I’ll give you two pounds a week to begin with’.⁷⁷

Here we can see the development in the representation of an encounter, an encounter that has now become a historical event. From Hiatt’s account of Phelps taking pity on a

⁷⁵ Laurence Irving, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58

⁷⁷ Madeleine Bingham *Henry Irving and the Victorian Stage* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978). p. 29.

young actor, who, perhaps, simply wasn't very good, to Laurence Irving's suggestion of his grandfather's long-term plan and certainty of his own genius and destiny, to the plucky teenager of Bingham, who finds the courage to respond to Phelps, creating kinship with an actor who had already taken his place in a supposed succession of great tragedians.

The story of this encounter seems barely credible, given the esteem in which Irving held Phelps, and the opportunities that would have ensued from working with such an influential actor and manager at Sadler's Wells. The Irving Narrative insists that, rather than join one of London's most successful companies, Irving chose instead to join the company of the Royal Lyceum in Sunderland. However, Chance Newton's *Cues and Curtain Calls*, a memoir published in 1927, gives a rather different version of the meeting with Phelps. Newton was a journalist, and his account is a gossipy story of his favourite performances and encounters with famous actors of the period. Two chapters of *Cues and Curtain Calls* concern Irving. Since Newton does not attempt to tell the Irving story, but focuses on a series of encounters with the actor during the period of his greatest fame, the text largely falls outside of the Irving Narrative and the trajectory of rags to riches. The text should be treated with a degree of caution however, since Newton tends to over-emphasise his own importance, and to foreground himself within theatrical anecdotes. It is worth noting that he is not referred to in Laurence Irving's otherwise detailed biography of 1951. Newton's narrative is full of intriguing detail, and at one point, the critic has Irving recall his first meeting with Phelps: 'Phelps gave me my 'notice' the first week I was with him (added

Irving) but nevertheless he was the greatest actor I ever saw – or ever shall see'.⁷⁸ If there is any truth in this account, then it challenges a key moment of the Irving Narrative: that Irving voluntarily turned away from his hero to follow his own path. That story of self-imposed exile, selected in order to build character and enhance learning, is a key trope of the narrative. It draws on ideas of self-help and self-improvement, as Hiatt wrote:

To Henry Irving a visit to the theatre was not a relaxation, but an object lesson, and, in order to gain the utmost possible advantages from the performances which he saw, he carefully studied the plays beforehand, and acted the various characters in his imagination.⁷⁹

Newton's rival narrative, neglected by Irving's biographers, suggests that the young Henry Irving was not considered good enough by his hero. This assertion would disrupt rags to riches, replacing Irving's self-belief, his faith in his own inevitable destiny, with the cold fact of rejection by a man who knew the theatre business very well, and played a wide range of roles within it. The idea that Irving was accepted by Phelps, but turned away to endure years of poorly-paid hard work in the provinces, certainly rings less true than Newton's remembrance that Phelps dismissed Irving after a week. Irving's career was by no means a steady ascent on a predetermined path from rural poverty to join a supposed apostolic succession of tragedians. It was a complex journey that involved a number of encounters with different strands of performance. Whereas the Irving Narrative has placed Irving within narrow confines, it is the sheer diversity of

⁷⁸ Henry Chance Newton, *Cues and Curtain Calls* (London: W. Henry, 1927). p. 9.

⁷⁹ Hiatt, op. cit., p. 19.

influences and methods – particularly those originating in occult performance - that made Irving's work unique.⁸⁰

1:6 Conclusion

In conclusion, I have described the acting styles of the actors that preceded Henry Irving in the nineteenth century in order to contextualize his work. In the case of Macready and Phelps, I have also described their approaches to theatrical production and management. During his management of the Lyceum, Irving actively recruited actors who were connected to previous, celebrated actors. In his recruitment of Howe and Chippendale to the Lyceum, and his support for the actor William Belford, Irving sought to demonstrate his awareness of the power of tradition, and to connect himself to the actors of the past via recruitment and charitable acts.⁸¹ This was part of a process of deliberate self-fashioning on Irving's part. Irving particularly sought out those connected to Edmund Kean. Kean's emphasis on changing emotional states and the presentation of physical suffering, credibly realised, appear to have heavily influenced him. Macready and Phelps were influences as performers and managers. Both saw the need to create a harmonious and credible stage-world, which required them to assume full control of the acting ensemble, its rehearsal and preparation, and the aesthetic presentation of the play via lighting, sound and staging effects. Phelps's creation of a supernatural or dream world in his production of *A Midsummer Night's*

⁸⁰ Occult performance will be discussed at length in Chapter Two.

⁸¹ William Belford was a member of Phelps's company at Sadler's Wells. In December, 1880, Irving appears to have discovered Belford was living in poverty. Irving, with Toole and Squire Bancroft, organized a benefit for the actor at the Lyceum on 10th December, 1880. The event is described in the *Era*, 13th December, 1880.

Dream appears to have been particularly influential upon Irving's approach to staging the vision scene and the supernatural court in *The Bells* in 1871.

Henry Irving was very much aware of the importance of the actors of the past, as his early letters reveal. However, it is important to emphasise that Irving's initial casting was comic, reflecting his physiognomy and vocal qualities. Irving's placing as the latest in a supposed apostolic tradition of tragic actors was a product of the actor's self-fashioning from 1878 onwards, and the Irving Narrative. That is not to say, of course, that actors did not contend with and challenge the interpretations of the immediate past and their own peer group, but the idea that Irving was somehow predestined to become a tragedian - an idea undoubtedly nurtured and even exaggerated by the actor himself and his biographers - clouds the more complex itinerary of his actual development. In the next chapter, I will describe the performance strands that inspired the actor, and led to an approach to acting that was far from conventional or orthodox.

Chapter Two

Henry Irving's Early Career: 1856-69

2:1 Introduction

Having contextualized Henry Irving as a performer and considered the actors who influenced him, directly or indirectly, I will now go on to consider specific moments in his early career, up to his recruitment by Hezekiah Bateman to become leading actor at the Lyceum in 1871. These examples will demonstrate the complex nature of Irving's casting, and how it was limited initially by his unusual physiognomy. I will trace his career through comedy to melodrama, via his development of public readings, and also consider his encounters with forms of what is termed 'occult' performance. By this I mean the work of magicians and illusionists, and also the séances and public demonstrations conducted by those, such as spiritualists, who were laying claim to supernatural gifts. Throughout the period of Irving's professional development, such displays were extremely popular, and constituted a significant percentage of performance during the mid to late-Victorian period. As in the previous chapter, I will focus on areas in which the Irving Narrative has reshaped or distorted certain encounters in Henry Irving's career, to the detriment of the actor's long-term reputation.

2:2 Irving's Initial Casting

A study of Irving's early roles shows that he was often cast in comic parts. From the Royal Lyceum in Sunderland, where he began his professional career in 1856, Irving moved on to the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh, where he first met J. L. Toole. The two worked together, at one point performing *Auld Lang Syne* in a burlesque of an operatic duet. As Michael Read has written:

To see them on the stage together made everyone smile. These improbable stars of Italian opera were physical opposites – one of them particularly short, the other so tall and bony – and their postures and facial contortions delighted the crowd. Any antics that Toole's eyebrows could perform, Irving's were sure to match.¹

The performance was part of Toole's benefit, and Irving cannot have been unmoved by the audience's response to the comedian's last bow in Edinburgh, as recorded by a *Mercury* reporter: 'At its conclusion, Mr Toole, in respect to the thundering call made for his appearance before the curtain, came forward and, in a few off-hand observations, thanked the audience for their unprecedented and unexpected mark of favour'.² Toole clearly saw the comic potential of the two men playing as a 'tall and short' double act, and perhaps this was the reason for his attachment to the nineteen year old actor. What is obvious here is that Irving, in 1857, was most likely to be cast in comic roles that made use of his unusual height and thinness. For him to become an

¹ Michael Read, op. cit., p. 11.

² Unsigned review, *Caledonian Mercury*, 12th September 1857.

effective tragedian would require an extraordinary level of mastery and control over his body. For Irving in September, 1857, the audience's ecstatic response to Toole must have demonstrated or reinforced the immense rewards of successful comic performance. It is possible that Henry Irving's youthful ambition was to play tragic roles, but it is also clear, from the friendship he actively cultivated with Toole over some years, that he was aware of the benefits of a successful comic double-act. Irving's early career path, extending from the late-1850s into the mid-1860s, was far from straightforward.

Irving arrived in London in the autumn of 1859 to join Augustus Glossop Harris's company at the Princess's Theatre.³ Harris planned a production of *Hamlet*, and cast George Melville in the lead, with Irving as Osric. The production was not well-received and Henry Irving, according to his grandson, decided to 'cut his losses', requesting that his contract be annulled.⁴ Like the account of Irving's encounter with Samuel Phelps, this is a story that does not entirely make sense. Despite the supposed failures of his management, Glossop Harris was still a noted actor and impresario who had invested heavily in the restoration of the theatre. After Irving's departure, he engaged Charles Fechter to play the lead in Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas*, a shrewd decision that, in Laurence Irving's words, 'retrieved his fortune'.⁵ Glossop Harris clearly had important connections in an industry in which Irving hoped to progress. His father Joseph Glossop had managed the Cobourg, and Glossop Harris had been a successful comic actor

³ It is important to differentiate between Augustus Glossop Harris (1825-1873) and his son Augustus Harris (1852-1896). Both were successful managers during the Victorian period.

⁴ Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 96.

⁵ Ibid., p.97

before moving into management. So it seems unlikely that the twenty one year-old Irving, with no experience of working in the capital, and no profile outside of Sunderland and Edinburgh, should reject consistent, paid employment of the kind offered by an ambitious manager like Harris. Hiatt's account of 1899 demonstrates aspects of the Irving Narrative:

After strongly advising him to remain, Mr. Augustus Harris yielded to his wish, and he determined that he would only return to London, when he might reasonably hope to take a place, honourable if not distinguished, on the metropolitan stage. Accordingly, he turned his face towards Scotland once more.⁶

Hiatt withholds the fact that Irving played Osric in *Hamlet* for Harris during the season, a piece of casting that would have allowed Irving to expand his practical knowledge of the play he had first seen Samuel Phelps perform. Brereton speeds over the incident, describing Irving's casting as unsatisfactory 'for an ambitious actor with the applause of Edinburgh ringing in his ears'.⁷ Laurence Irving attributes the decision to Irving's 'pride and tactical sense'.⁸ However, Irving cannot seriously have believed a major role awaited him in London in 1859, when his experience amounted to little more than small to medium-sized parts in provincial productions of comedies and melodramas. He had signed a three-year contract with Harris, which must have offered considerable security. Even if his casting was initially not to his favour, in other employments

⁶ Hiatt, op. cit., p. 43.

⁷ Brereton, op. cit., p. 8. The author suggests that Irving sought to further improve himself in the provinces, again emphasising the theme of self-improvement in the 'rags to riches' narrative.

⁸ Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 96.

outside the capital he had been prepared to wait his turn and build his profile with the audience. From Irving's position in the autumn of 1859, Augustus Glossop Harris must have represented a formidable figure, with the experience and connections to make or break the career of a young actor. It is, of course, quite possible that the young Henry Irving possessed such extraordinary levels of self-belief that he turned his back on regular work and a regular income in London, or that he was extraordinarily naive. However, I suggest it is far more likely that Irving did not impress Harris – perhaps his physical characteristics did not fit the manager's intended programme for the theatre – or Irving received word of other, more suitable employment that did not come off. As with the Phelps story, the actor's decision simply does not make sense, especially given the appalling consequences of unemployment – especially in the winter months – in London during the period. The encounter with Augustus Glossop Harris has probably been simplified or distorted to reinforce the dynamic of rags to riches, as offered in the texts of the Irving Narrative.

After a brief return to Edinburgh for a week in November 1859, Irving turned his attention to dramatic readings, hiring Crosby Hall in Bishopsgate for his project. Although he does not appear to have worked with Toole during 1859, the comedian secured an audience for his former colleague – a remarkable act, given their respective positions in the industry. As I have suggested, it is likely that Toole saw in Irving a potential long-term collaborator, given their statures, and the fact that they had combined well in Edinburgh; or that he saw, as Irving's biographers are quick to assert, the beginnings of a serious actor. I would suggest that the former is more likely, and

that Toole may have conceived of future vehicles involving their double act. Certainly, the majority of Irving's roles had been comic, and continued to be until the mid-1860s. Toole's nurturing and support of Henry Irving was, in all probability, conducted out of kindness, and to secure the services of a potential collaborator. Irving's stature, his height and the length of his legs, was remarkable. Alan Hughes quotes a tailor's bill from 1898 with the following dimensions: 'Chest 40, waist 37, sleeve 33, height over six feet'.⁹ This fact makes his transition into a tragedian in the mid-1870s all the more extraordinary, and is testament to the specific set of qualities, acquired in the mid-1860s, that he cultivated and developed. I will now go on to describe those qualities and their origins in more depth.

2:3 Irving's Public Readings

The success of the Crosby Hall reading, which occurred on 19th December 1859, possibly surprised even Toole. Irving chose for his text Bulwer Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons*, interpreting all of the characters himself. The *Standard* remarked upon the nature of the audience Irving had managed to secure, describing it as 'numerous and intelligent'.¹⁰ His characterisation of each role was described as 'admirably graphic' and met with 'repeated rounds of applause'.¹¹ The actor was described as showing 'a gentlemanly ease and grace in his manner'.¹² The *Era* was similarly supportive, and drew attention to the actor's ability to represent depth of feeling: 'it was [...] in the more poetical and sentimental scenes that he displayed the most marked ability'. His

⁹ Alan Hughes, *Henry Irving: Shakespearean* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), p. 11.

¹⁰ Unsigned review, *Standard*, 21st December 1859.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

capacity to change rapidly from one character to another was also praised: ‘the several parts brought out with a breadth and vigour that reflects credit on his penetration’.¹³

What seems clear from the descriptions of the Crosby Hall reading is that Irving had the ability to hold an audience, and to keep them engaged throughout the duration of a lengthy reading. This was a quality he had observed in the work of J. L. Toole during their time in Edinburgh. Toole’s performances were frequently gruelling, and required variation in the types of role and interpretation to sustain an evening. This quality was extraordinarily well-developed in the comedian, and he would have observed something similar in his former colleague. But it is possible that the depth of feeling realised by Irving in the reading of *The Lady of Lyons* revealed new and as-yet unseen aspects of Henry Irving’s talent.

Following the success of *The Lady of Lyons*, Irving undertook a reading of Sheridan Knowles’s *Virginus* at the same venue on February 8th 1860. As I described in the previous chapter, this was a play first produced by Macready in 1820. It was one of a number of original parts created by the actor. Macready was also the first to play Claude Melnotte in *The Lady of Lyons*. The selection of this text shows Irving, perhaps for the first time, attempting to test himself in a series of popular melodramatic roles made famous by well-regarded actors of the past. However, it is important to look beyond the dominant view of Irving’s biographers: the idea that Irving knew from an early age that his destiny was within a perceived succession of tragic actors. These plays were well-known and were therefore reasonably likely to win a respectably-sized house for the young actor. They also allowed a range of roles for him to display his

¹³ Unsigned review, *Era*, 25th December 1859.

talents to any potential employers in attendance. There is no doubt that Irving was seeking to develop his abilities in these roles, but what was most important for him as a young actor who had just left a three-year contract at a well-regarded theatre was to secure some much-needed income. In that respect, the selection of two well-known popular melodramas by Bulwer-Lytton and Knowles – enhanced and made more acceptable by their connection to Macready - was a shrewd one. Given the earlier events of 1859, it is quite reasonable to interpret the Crosby Hall readings as a kind of retrieval project, both financially and in terms of the young actor's reputation within the business. They should not be interpreted as an inevitable step towards the attainment of a pre-conceived goal.

2:4 Irving in Dublin

After a brief return to Scotland, Irving was recruited to play at the Queen's Theatre, Dublin, under the management of Henry Webb. Arriving on 5th March, Irving took to the stage playing Cassio to the Othello of T. C. King. Apparently unknown to Irving, Webb had recently dismissed an audience favourite called George Vincent, the theatre's juvenile lead. Irving, seen as Vincent's replacement, was apparently met with boos and catcalls from the house. On 8th March 1860, he wrote to Toole, expressing regret that he had not heard from him from a while. In the letter, Irving refers to an incident at the theatre that required direct intervention by the actor:

The house was crowded and I struck while the iron was hot as follows:

“Gentlemen, I should be very glad if you would tell me the reason of this disapprobation (Great applause mingled w. a few hisses) I have frequently

appeared in England and Scotland and London and Edin. W. applause but among a certain few of the audience here I have been denied the same...I have endeavoured to please you and really have been treated by some with anything but courtesy." Tremendous applause from all parts of the house – the tables entirely turned on the few roughs – part went splendidly and called at the end.¹⁴

Thus Irving described his own dramatic intervention in a letter to his former colleague and friend. However, a search of the Irish newspaper archives reveals no mention whatsoever of this event, which is described by Irving and subsequent biographers as a remarkable altercation, with an astonishingly bold intervention by an actor who was only twenty two years of age. Events at the Queens were regularly reported by the Dublin *Freeman's Journal*, who mentioned Irving's arrival and playing of Cassio.¹⁵ There is no reference to a disturbance at the theatre during the period of Irving's engagement. Subsequent to *Othello*, he performed as Percy in *The Castle Spectre* and Florizel in *The Winter's Tale*. Both are referred to by the journal. The *Era* refers to Irving playing Laertes to T. C. King's Hamlet. King's performance was 'marked with a carefulness and depth of study that renders every point most effective'.¹⁶

Irving's account of his taming of a hostile house undoubtedly has something of Dickens's version of Samuel Phelps's 'cleansing' of Sadler's Wells about it. Writing in

¹⁴ The letter is printed in Irving, L. pp. 100-101.

¹⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 5th March 1860.

¹⁶ *Era*, 18th March 1860.

The Story of My Life, published in 1908, Ellen Terry, who did not work with Irving until 1867, repeats the anecdote:

The bitterness of the Dublin episode was never quite forgotten. It coloured Henry Irving's attitude towards the public. When he made his humble little speeches of thanks before the curtain, there was always a touch of pride in the humility. Perhaps he would not have received adulation in quite the same dignified way if he had never known what it was to wear "the martyr's shirt of flame".¹⁷

Again, this recollection must be contextualised: it was published two years after Irving's death, alongside a body of work that paid tribute to him and attempted to explain the extraordinary effect that he had had on contemporary audiences. Ellen Terry was attempting, like the actor's biographers, to supplement cherished public memories. Terry's Irving, like Hiatt's, Laurence Irving's and Bingham's, was a construct serving a purpose for the authors and their audience, both consciously and unconsciously. Ellen Terry's son, Edward Gordon Craig, writing of Irving in 1930, recalls hearing of the Dublin incident of 1860. He recalls Irving's response to adversity in the following terms:

There was I (he writes) standing aghast, ignorant of having given any cause of offence, and in front of me a raging Irish audience, shouting gesticulating, swearing volubly, and in various forms indicating their disapproval of my appearance. Night after night, I had to fight through my part in the teeth of a

¹⁷ Terry, op. cit., p. 167.

house whose entire energies seemed to be concentrated in a personal antipathy to myself.¹⁸

Craig not only constructs an Irving for his own narrative, but also engages in remarkable dialogues with his 'ghost'. In this respect, Craig's memoir is the most engaging of all Irving biographies, but it is unreliable as a historical record of the actor because it continually seeks to imagine Irving in different scenarios, and even to project him into the author's own aesthetic struggles. Craig offered his memory of Irving as a model for his own ideal actor:

So then, while he was making his mask in Sunderland, Edinburgh, and Dublin, he was at the same time measuring himself for a suit of mail which, when it should be ready, would cover him from head to foot: for, indeed, Irving was the nearest thing ever known to what I have called the 'Ubermarionette'.¹⁹

Craig's evaluation of Irving as a performer who transcended the barbs of George Bernard Shaw and offered a model of performance based on absolute physical focus and control is a valuable one, since it suggests a diverse range of influences upon the actor's development. Most significantly, Craig's account values the influence of occult performance both on the actor's performance and on his approach to production. Craig's description of Irving therefore stands apart from the Irving Narrative in a number of interesting ways. I will shortly elaborate upon these further.

¹⁸ Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32

After his appearances at the Queen's in Dublin, Irving returned to Scotland before moving on to the Theatre Royal, Manchester in the autumn of 1860. The theatre was under the management of Charles Calvert, who had undertaken a considerable amount of restoration and improvement of the venue. In the opinion of the *Manchester Times* of 7th September, 1861, it possessed 'a brilliant appearance...only the two (London) patents can rival it'.²⁰ Irving's roles in the Manchester company continued to be predominantly comic. He was praised for his part in John Brougham's comedy *Playing With Fire*: 'a difficult part [...] he enacts with great feeling'.²¹ Further comic roles followed in *A Signal Engagement* by Albany Fonblanque and another Brougham comedy called *Flies in the Web*. In 1863 he appeared in C. S. Cheltenham's farce *Slowtop's Engagements*, and then in the supporting piece, *My Aunt's Advice*, to a production of *Our American Cousins*.²²

Charles Calvert's management was shrewd, mixing melodrama with comedy and Shakespeare. When he left the Theatre Royal to take over the lease of the newly-completed Prince's Theatre in autumn 1864, Irving's choice of roles appears to have become less diverse. At the Prince's, Calvert included more Shakespeare in the repertoire, and it is unclear to Irving's biographers why he did not take the young actor with him. Four months before Calvert's departure, Irving was permitted to play Hamlet for his benefit. Calvert played the ghost. Irving's choice was a risky one. There was no reason for a Theatre Royal playgoer in 1864 to think of Irving as anything but a

²⁰ Unsigned article, *Manchester Times*, 7th September 1861

²¹ Unsigned review, *Era*, 6th June 1861.

²² Laurence Irving, Appendix B, op. cit., p. 703.

comedian.²³ J. L. Toole had been quick to identify his casting during their time together in Edinburgh. The part of Hardress Cregan in Boucicault's melodrama *The Colleen Bawn* was the only significant role outside comedy that might be described as a lead. Cregan, in some respects, adumbrated some of Irving's Lyceum roles, in that he was a character who was psychologically divided between desire and duty.

Shortly after this performance, in February 1865, Irving attended a performance in Manchester by the occult performers the Davenport brothers. Their act comprised of an address concerning the nature of spiritualist phenomenon, followed by a demonstration of supposed supernatural phenomena. Irving, accompanied by two colleagues, recreated the Davenports' act in total. Their performance, described as a 'burlesque' by the Manchester press, gained a significant amount of interest. This encounter has been undervalued by Irving's biographers, with the exception of Edward Gordon Craig. I will now go on to describe and contextualize the Davenports' work in order to show the significance of it to Irving. His subsequent use of occult techniques in his principal Lyceum roles was unique, and enabled him to foreground the body as a source of hidden power.

2:5 The Davenport brothers and Occult Performance

William and Ira Davenport were from Buffalo, New York. During their cabinet séance act, they demonstrated supposedly supernatural phenomena. The brothers were one of a group of practitioners connected to the spiritualist movement in America and Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. They were influenced by the

²³ I will address Irving's approach to this performance of *Hamlet* in more detail in Chapter Four.

success of an earlier family group, the Fox sisters. In 1848, Kate and Maggie Fox, claimed to have experienced supernatural phenomena in their home in Wayne County, Arcadia, New York. The phenomena might now be termed poltergeist activity, and comprised of objects moving around the room, sometimes with some violence, and a variety of sonic phenomena, including, most notably, loud rappings upon the surfaces of furniture, and the walls of the household. They were later joined by their older sister, Leah Fox-Fish, who acted as their impresario, arranging tours and demonstrations of the girls' supposed powers. Kate Fox, the youngest of the sisters, went on to perform stage séances for various notable Americans, including the industrialist Charles Livermore. Kate Fox effectively transformed the nature of mediumship from an auditory experience – the hearing of knocks and voices – to a visual one when she claimed to have succeeded in materialising Livermore's late wife during a séance in 1861. Detailed accounts of their activities are given in Molly McGarry's 2008 work *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth Century America* and in Barbara Weisberg's *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism*, published in 2004. In the years following the Fox's performances, a number of people in American and Britain claimed the ability to talk with spirits and the spiritualist movement developed on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1852, the American medium Mrs Hayden arrived in Britain and gave a series of demonstrations of spiritualist phenomena. Her claims of contact with the dead were investigated by G. H. Lewes, who attended a séance determined to debunk spiritualism, and published an article in the *Leader* in January 1852. Lewes recorded a series of bizarre questions he put to the spirits, including asking them if the Ghost of

Hamlet's father had seven noses, to which they replied that he had. Lewes completed the exposure by asking the spirits if Mrs Hayden was a fraud, to which they also responded in the affirmative.²⁴ Daniel Dunglas-Home, a spiritualist who sometimes gave séances in full light, was rather more successful, gathering an illustrious and well-known clientele for his private séances that included Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, and, briefly, Bulwer-Lytton.

Scholarly accounts of the significance of spiritualist practice in Britain during the period are given in Janet Oppenheim's 1985 volume *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* and Alex Owen's 1989 work *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late-Victorian England*. It is a complex area of enquiry that covers a number of fields. To some, spiritualism prefigured the rise of a socialist utopia, and spiritualist communities were established in the United States during the period. To others, it was a development of faith, evidence of the impending return of Christ. Spiritualist practice, especially in its early form as a mostly-auditory phenomenon, attracted the interest of scientists such as William Crookes, the discoverer of the element thallium and a Fellow of the Royal Society. Crookes, who submitted the medium Daniel Dunglas Home to laboratory testing in 1871, became convinced of the existence of a kind of telekinetic power that he termed 'psychic force'. This force was only existent in some individuals, and permitted them, in certain circumstances, to exert pressure upon objects from a distance. The connection between 'occult' forces and 'legitimate' scientific ones was blurred, and those involved in the investigation of mediums included such prominent scientific minds as Crookes,

²⁴ G H Lewes, *Leader*, 12th January 1852.

Henry and Eleanor Sidgwick, and Robert Chambers. Chambers attended a séance given by the Davenport brothers at Dion Boucicault's house on Regent Street, London in 1864. As Richard Noakes has written, the dialogue between spiritualists, spiritualist performers and scientists was a complex one:

What was at stake were rival notions of the scientific, the natural and the lawful, with participants agreeing implicitly that spirits were natural and lawful, and that their own approaches were the most scientific, but fiercely disagreeing over what exactly counted as natural and lawful, and who counted as scientific.²⁵

Anxieties about mesmerism and control of audiences were evident in intellectual circles during the period. The London Dialectical Society's investigation of supernatural phenomena, beginning in 1869 and culminating in the *Report On Spiritualism*, published in 1873, displayed a number of anxieties regarding occult performance. In one instance, a man claiming to have witnessed spirits in a séance is accused of being the victim of mesmerism, an accusation he vigorously refuted.²⁶ Indeed, performers themselves were viewed as exercising an extraordinary level of power over their audiences. As W. D. King has written in *Henry Irving's Waterloo*:

²⁵ Richard Noakes, 'Spiritualism, science and the supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain', in Bown, N., Burdett, C. and Thurschwell, P. (eds) *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).

²⁶ *Report On Spiritualism of The Committee Of The London Dialectical Society Together With The Evidence Oral and Written And A Selection From The Correspondence* (London: J. Burns. 1873). p. 183.

By the middle of the century, the whole image cluster associated with such invisible powers came to be applied to descriptions of acting – “mesmerizing”, “hypnotic”, “electrifying”, “magnetizing”, “galvanizing”.²⁷

Irving, from his performance in *The Bells* onwards, was strongly associated with the presentation of such powers. His character in that play, the apparently respectable Mathias, was a criminal who confessed after being mesmerized, and part of the sensational success of the play must surely be attributed to public anxieties over the loss of control of mind or body, and the idea of an additional or hidden self. I will address these ideas shortly.

The Davenport brothers kept silent about the exact nature of their act, allowing their colleague, J B Ferguson, to establish an interpretative framework for the deeds the audience were about to witness, and to give credibility and significance to the events. The very name of the act was, in all probability, selected to summon comparison with the Fox sisters, who were internationally renowned by the mid-1860s. By the time the Davenports arrived in Manchester, they had already performed for Boucicault in London, and become the clients of a manager by the name of Palmer, who had previously represented the magician John Henry Anderson. They had given both private séances, such as that conducted for Boucicault, and public ones that were distinctly rowdy affairs, on account of the spirits interaction with the audience in the second half of the performance. This involved physical interaction with the audience

²⁷ King, op. cit., p. 194.

and the apparent unaided movement of props, including musical instruments and furniture.

The known facts about the Davenports and their origins come from an 1865 book by Thomas Low Nichols entitled *A Biography of the Brothers Davenport with Some Account of the Physical and Psychical Phenomena Which Have Occurred in Their Presence in America and Europe*, and from Emma Hardinge Britten's 1870 work *Modern American Spiritualism*. Their father was a policeman in their home town of Buffalo, New York, but this did not prevent the teenage Ira and William Davenport being jailed in 1855 for holding a public exhibition without a licence. The brothers often worked with their friend William Fay, who assisted them until the early 1860s. The trio were joined by the Reverend J. B. Ferguson, who claimed to be a minister from Nashville, Tennessee. Although the Davenports appear not to have overtly claimed the power to contact the dead, their routine was prefaced by Ferguson's address on the significance and meaning of spiritualism, which apparently suggested such powers existed.

Emma Hardinge Britten, a leading and respected spiritualist of the 1860s in Britain and America, believed in the genuineness of the brothers. But Britten's description reveals an aspect that sounds very much like a magic trick: 'Another striking phenomenon of the young Davenports' mediumship was the firing of pistols, rifles etc in the dark against a mark, which, however minute, was always hit with

miraculous precision'.²⁸ Unlike Britten, who only claimed basic living expenses for her feats of mediumship, the brothers immediately sought to offer their feats for public entertainment and profit. The *Report on Spiritualism* refers to a Mr Jones paying five guineas for a private sitting with them.²⁹ As he reported:

I thought they (the Davenports) were impostors, and I did my best to discover the trick. We had a dark sitting. The oil flared and the instruments flew up and round the room; the light from the oil was sufficient for us to see all persons present. I did not discover any imposture.³⁰

The Davenports were careful to ensure their demonstration remained a paying, and presumably profitable, concern. The Reverend Ferguson's role seems especially complex, since he was considered by many to be devout and committed to the spiritualist aspects of the Davenport's work. It remains unclear whether Ferguson was the Davenports' stooge or a knowing part of the act, although the latter seems more likely. The brothers' performance centred upon the use of a spirit cabinet. They were bound up and tied to chairs within it, with a selection of musical instruments placed beside them. The lights would be extinguished, and the instruments would be seen flying through the air, as Jones described. Spirit hands were also sometimes seen. As the lights came up, the cabinet was opened and the brothers were revealed still bound

²⁸ Emma Hardinge-Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism* (New York: Emma Hardinge Britten, 1870). p. 155.

²⁹ *Report on Spiritualism*, op. cit., p. 213.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

up and in a trance-like state. A detailed reconstruction of the complete act is given in Jim Steinmeyer's history of modern magic, *Hiding the Elephant*.³¹

2:6 Irving's Spiritualist Burlesque

The Davenports brought their cabinet act to Manchester in January 1865. It was offered as a public séance, and caused a similar sensation to the ones staged in London. Irving, along with two fellow actors, Phillip Day and Frederick Maccabe, attended the séance, and decided to create a burlesque of the events they had witnessed. They hired the Library Hall of the Athenaeum and staged their own version of the cabinet act for the first time on 5th February, with Day and Maccabe playing the role of the brothers, and Irving taking the role of the Reverend Ferguson. The trio replicated the Davenports' act entirely, with Irving delivering a satire of Ferguson's sincere address on spiritualism. Irving's introduction to the act has been preserved by Laurence Irving. It apparently began with a debunking introduction: 'Here are effects apparently marvellous; there is no effect without a cause; these things are done somehow. If they are done by a supernatural power, we cannot accomplish the same; but if by a natural power, why, then we can also – if we discover the somehow'.³² The *Manchester Times* reported a second presentation of the act, presumably due to its popularity, describing the actors as being 'perfectly successful in all the tricks, and the burlesque lecture by Mr Irving caused loud laughter and applause'.³³ This performance

³¹ Jim Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented The Impossible* (London: William Heinemann. 2004). pp. 57-65. Steinmeyer gives a detailed account of the cabinet act, but wrongly credits Irving, Maccabe and Edward Sothern with the Manchester burlesque. Although Sothern had appeared in Manchester, I can find no corroborative evidence for his presence during the performance.

³² Laurence Irving, p. 120. I can find no first-hand source for this.

³³ Unsigned article, *Manchester Times*, 3rd March 1865.

was given in the assembly rooms of the Free Trade Hall. Public demand appears to have led to further performances, with the *Manchester Times* further reporting that the ‘peculiar manifestations’ were to be given for the last time three days later ‘at the Public Halls, Rusholme’.³⁴

Irving’s early biographers generally view the Davenport séance as a rather high-minded piece of debunking or even cleansing: the exposure of some fraudulent spiritualists by three worthy young actors. Charles Hiatt, writing within Irving’s lifetime in 1899, has the actor state the following in his address to the audience at the Free Trade Hall: ‘So, if we can proceed in destroying the blasphemous pretensions of the unlicensed spirit-dealers, our object will be attained, and this meeting will not have been held in vain’.³⁵ I can find no record of a published source for Hiatt’s text, but it is repeated in various forms by subsequent biographers of the Irving Narrative. However, it is the events that followed the Davenports burlesque that are the most significant for those seeking to understand Irving’s motivation and ambitions at this stage of his career. According to Brereton: ‘the venture attracted so much attention that the manager of the theatre where Irving was engaged pressured him to repeat the performance on the stage, but he resolutely declined to make capital out of the affair at the expense of his art’.³⁶ According to Brereton, Henry Irving’s contract was then terminated. Laurence Irving, writing over forty years later, offered further details. He named the manager as John Knowles, who had taken over the Theatre Royal’s lease from Calvert. According to Laurence Irving, Knowles:

³⁴ Unsigned article, *Manchester Times*, 2nd April 1865.

³⁵ Hiatt, op. cit., p. 55.

³⁶ Brereton, op. cit., p. 10

told Irving to repeat the performance on the stage of the Theatre Royal. This was a totally unexpected development and involved a matter of principle on which, to the surprise of the manager, the young actor was unshakeable. To Irving, in spite of all the inferior plays which had been put on that stage and in which he had, perforce, to play, that or any theatre was to him a temple, and the idea of repeating what had been a capital though not wholly frivolous lark on the boards of a playhouse was as unthinkable to him as singing a comic song in a Methodist chapel.³⁷

Bingham, writing over twenty five years after Laurence Irving, continued to develop the picture of Henry Irving as defender of legitimate drama against inappropriate entertainments:

Already he (Irving) was conscious of the necessity of upholding the dignity of a theatre. It was not a place for comical representations or ephemeral skits. He cherished the thought of his beautiful art, as he called it.³⁸

However, in Charles Hiatt's biography of 1899, written in Irving's lifetime, the account of the affair is presented rather differently. In this account, Irving was asked by the manager to restage the sketch at the theatre. He refused, but in less strident terms than are subsequently suggested by later biographers:

While he (Irving) was always ready for a joke in the proper place, he felt that he could not accede to this request without disrespect to the art which he

³⁷ Laurence Irving, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

³⁸ Bingham, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

loved so well. His refusal was misunderstood, and was partly the cause of the somewhat abrupt conclusion of his long Manchester engagement.³⁹

The Irving Narrative is in operation here, taking the bare details of the 1899 account and embroidering them into a history of purging and reclamation, culminating in Bingham's florid account of the 1970s. The most significant problem with the accounts of Irving and the Davenports' séance is that the authors all ignore an important piece of information: Irving, Day and Maccabe presented the Davenport sketch on the stage of the Prince's Theatre in Manchester under Calvert's management later in 1865. As I have shown, Calvert was a highly capable manager, who created an engaging repertoire including performances of Shakespeare. In May 1865, the *Provincial Theatricals* section of the *Era* reported: 'A week of truly legitimate drama has proved how liberally the management can cater for its supporters'.⁴⁰ The report describes how *The Merchant of Venice* was played in the season, with Calvert as Shylock. It then goes on to describe a benefit for Phillip Day, during which the actor played Cassio in *Othello*, and then performed 'in the Davenport burlesque'.⁴¹ Here, then, is clear evidence that the act was played upon a 'legitimate' stage and amongst 'legitimate' dramas by Irving, Day and Maccabe, and that the trio had no objections to giving such a performance in such a location. This information also calls into question the reason given for Irving's departure from the Theatre Royal, which Hiatt suggests was a complex affair. It strongly suggests that Irving, who had been at the theatre for five years, was simply seeking to move on, and that he liked the look of Calvert's

³⁹ Hiatt, op. cit., p. 56.

⁴⁰ Unsigned article, *Era*, 28th May 1865.

⁴¹ Ibid.

repertoire more than that of Knowles. Irving, after a brief engagement at the Prince's, moved from Manchester to Edinburgh, with Laurence Irving giving the following justification for this decision: 'In view of his difference with Knowles, Irving had no wish to embarrass Calvert with his presence longer than was absolutely necessary. He accepted the first offer of an engagement which came his way'.⁴² Again, this account does not seem credible. When Irving took his benefit at the Free Trade Hall, an event that once again included the Davenport burlesque, the *Manchester Times* reported on 13th April that: 'The reception accorded to Mr Henry Irving last night was the best proof that could be afforded of the appreciation and esteem in which this young actor is held...he was received with vehement and prolonged cheering'. This account indicates the high regard in which Henry Irving was held by the Manchester theatre-going public.

Why, then, was he forced to leave the city, as Laurence Irving suggests? As with earlier career decisions in the Irving Narrative, this one does not make a great deal of sense when carefully scrutinised. Why would Irving acting for Calvert at The Prince's have brought shame on the manager? Irving had done no wrong, and was highly valued as a comic actor in the city. It is perhaps more significant to ask why Calvert, a manager Irving clearly admired, did not take him on for a full season. Was it that he simply could not find a place for Irving in his company, given his physicality and comic reputation, or guarantee him regular work? As with many apparent reversals described in the biographies of Henry Irving, the event has been transformed into a matter of moral choice for the actor, a test he must pass by standing firm. It stands as another

⁴² Laurence Irving, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

difficult event in his supposed, preordained quest to reform the theatre, and to establish it as a temple of high art. In this narrative, the chivalrous actor refuses, as a matter of principle, to compromise with ruthless managements or disagreeable audiences, and boldly asserts the truth of his own vision, bravely enduring exile and a time in the wilderness as a consequence. In this respect, it stands alongside other narratives of reclamation that have been successfully challenged. Irving performed in the Davenport burlesque on a legitimate stage, and learned much from the techniques the brothers deployed.

On May 30th, 1865, Irving rejoined Calvert at the Prince's Theatre, playing four roles, including Edmund in *King Lear*. This would not have occurred if Irving's actions had been in any way scandalous. Indeed, in 1866, he was taken on by Calvert for a full season, which suggests his previous departure was due, not to shame brought on by an argument with Knowles, but a lack of suitable opportunities for him at the time.

In Laurence Irving's narrative, Henry Irving, at the age of twenty seven, had already conceived of himself as a theatrical reformer. His biography heaps misfortunes on to his heroic and saintly grandfather, making his rise and eventual triumph all the more extraordinary. Henry Irving's rise was extraordinary. It was extraordinary because an actor with the physiognomy of a comedian, who first enjoyed success performing alongside the short comedian J. L. Toole, was able to transform himself from light comedian to tragedian, via melodramatic performance, in an extraordinary process of self-fashioning. With this in mind, a more credible version of the Davenport burlesque presents itself: three young actors, perhaps frustrated by their limited

opportunities, undertook a creative and imaginative spoof to draw attention to their talents and to indulge a shared interest in magic and illusion. Michael Read suggests that Irving was inspired by 'an Adelphi farce that had focused on the same subject', a play that would undoubtedly have involved Toole.⁴³ So the motivation of the sketch was to present something amusing and diverting for Manchester audiences, building on Irving's obvious success as a light comedian in a number of shows in the previous four years. The burlesque was performed at a number of venues in and around Manchester, before being played upon a legitimate stage: the Prince's, under the management of a highly-respected actor and manager, Calvert. Hiatt's 1899 text has Henry Irving announce an intention to destroy 'blasphemous pretensions'.⁴⁴ However, this probably simply reflected anger at the Davenports' use of Ferguson as a legitimate minister of the church, and the actors' subsequent desire to separate themselves from being connected to spiritualism. The suggestion that the debunking was some form of cleansing act, and that Irving had already conceived of the idea of the theatre as 'a temple' is part of the Irving Narrative. But the Davenport séance was hugely important in Irving's development, not as the latest masterstroke of a young genius, but for the storytelling skills it showed Irving nurturing and developing, skills that had first been displayed in the readings that Toole had supported at Crosby Hall, Bishopsgate, six years previously. Even more significantly, it also reflected Irving's interest in the properties and possibilities of the body during occult performance. This fascinated the

⁴³ Read in ed. Foulkes, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ Hiatt, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

actor, and influenced his presentation of *The Bells* at the Lyceum in 1871, becoming the focus for his most interesting work.

Edward Gordon Craig is the only biographer to give the Davenport burlesque the emphasis it deserves. As I have already stated, Craig's imaginative use of Irving as a mentor and supporter makes him, in some ways, an unreliable chronicler of the actor's career. But his account of this event is insightful since it considers Irving's use of technical performance skills. Craig also gives a persuasive reason for the change in Irving's casting that followed his time in Manchester. He suggests that the Davenport séance appealed deeply to Irving's desire to control the audience. In his work with J. L. Toole in Edinburgh, he had seen an actor who could make himself the centre of an audience's attention. In Irving's reading of *The Lady of Lyons* in 1859, he too had begun to demonstrate such a capability. Craig imagines the actor, in 1865, coming to an important decision after seeing the Davenports' routine:

Having shown how the Davenports did their little trick, he went home to his lodgings, and slowly there dawned an expression on his face...a very strange expression. This expression dawned slowly, as he recalled the gaping faces of the sturdy spectators he had that day seen watching him unveil a mystery'.⁴⁵

Craig places this moment before a recollection of Irving's experience in Dublin in 1860, facing a supposedly volatile and mob-like crowd. This leads to a crucial moment of reflection, a point of crisis, as the struggling actor attempts to work out which model

⁴⁵ Craig, op. cit., p. 109.

of previous performance to follow. After dismissing the Irish tragedian Barry Sullivan as a model, Craig's version of Irving contemplates the following:

“But I cannot barn-storm,” said Henry Irving to himself. “Besides, I will not. Suppose...suppose I mesmerise ‘em. That’s an idea. Kemble?... Kemble was too noble with ‘em. Edmund Kean?...a ruthless assault! I am not Kean – more like Kemble, perhaps, but er-r- , Kemble – too noble – too noble. Garrick? Too long ago – silks and satins – and a damned small city – coffee houses – powder and patches – another age. But Mesmer...Mesmer never went upon the stage...

Craig supports the Irving Narrative to a certain degree. He asserts that the actor was a genius who already knew, in his mid-twenties, of his place in a supposed apostolic succession of great actors from Garrick to Kean and beyond. But Craig sits outside the Irving Narrative because of his interest in the actor's diverse and distinctly unorthodox techniques. His identification of Mesmer demonstrates Irving's originality and powerful need to deeply involve his audience in the theatrical experience. Craig may not be a credible biographer, but he is the most insightful of the second wave of writers on Irving because he was interested in performance on a theoretical level. Craig's views were written in a speculative spirit, but his experience of working with Irving over time, and in a number of different capacities, gives them some weight.

At the beginning of his book *Henry Irving*, published in 1930, Craig describes his first encounter with Irving as a performer. He was eight years old, and had been taken backstage by his mother, Ellen Terry: ‘I was walking along in the dark, holding on to the hand of my guide, my mother, who was thrilled to feel that I was again behind the

scenes of our home – the theatre’.⁴⁶ The tour continued, with the enraptured child immersing himself deeper and deeper in the world of illusion: ‘the giddy heights, the mysterious glamour, the strange darkened realms of the place’. Finally, mother and child encounter a terrible vision:

There was hardly a sound to be heard, only some quavering music: and there I saw a ghastly figure of a man with a red wound showing up on the left side of his chest, and this figure was rising up from the stage floor, and gliding its way across the stage as it came up: and there too I saw H.I., with his back to it and to us, seated, and scribbling at a table. This was the end of the first act of *The Corsican Brothers*.⁴⁷

This account, which describes the arrival of a ghost via a piece of stage machinery called the Corsican Trap, transformed the young Craig’s idea of what the theatre might be: ‘Till that point I had always looked on the stage as a blithe sort of place...But that was all over now – and so was the brief, terrifying glimpse I had of the darkened stage, the travelling ghost, and Irving’.⁴⁸ His next memory is of the audience response to Irving: ‘the sound of thousands of people clapping their hands – there H. I. stood, between the front curtain and the glowing footlights, taking his call’.⁴⁹ Craig’s account is fanciful and imaginative, and Irving, throughout Craig’s work, serves as a defence against the realistic theatre of George Bernard Shaw. As W. D. King has written of Craig: ‘his writings on Irving tend to construct his memory as a prophetic embodiment

⁴⁶ Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

of Craig's own theories'.⁵⁰ But it must be remembered that Craig had a unique relationship with Irving, having acted with him from the age of eighteen. He had seen Irving from the audience, but also worked closely with him on the stage. Along with Ellen Terry's writings, and those of John Martin-Harvey, Craig's writings have a kind of double significance, an awareness of the effect of what was created, and the techniques that led to that final effect.

What Craig is describing in the Davenport encounter is an interest in the mysterious and the sinister that had not previously shown itself in Irving's repertoire. From this point on, he seemed to deliberately seek out, when he could, characters who held a secret, often a criminal secret. This drew him even closer to the genre he undoubtedly preferred: melodrama. Additionally, Craig indicates a growing desire to make the audience subject to the actions upon the stage. The Davenports are dismissed as frauds in the Irving Narrative, easily vanquished by three enterprising and righteous young actors, led by a man with a mission to cleanse the stage of such duplicitous nonsense. And yet the Davenports never actually advertised themselves as spiritualists at all. They claimed to be demonstrating mysterious powers only. It was Ferguson whose lecture contextualised them as such. What must be noted is that the Davenports were highly-skilled performers in their own right, whose act had brought them international fame and celebrity. Irving, Day and Maccabe were clearly attracted imaginatively to their performance, and sufficiently engaged by their work to attempt to replicate it in perfect detail. The dominant Irving Narrative has, with hindsight, turned this into a high-minded act of debunking and cleansing. And yet, rather than

⁵⁰ King, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

dismissing the Davenports, or protesting about them, or simply ignoring them, he and his friends set out to recreate their act perfectly. In doing so, they very likely realised the skill, craft and careful pacing that went into it. Their trick was also replicated some months later by the illusionist J. M. Maskelyne, who would later collaborate with Irving on his production of W. G. Wills' version of *Faust* at the Lyceum in December, 1885.

From his encounter with the Davenports, Henry Irving gained an appreciation for the dramatic possibilities of the magical or spectacular body. After nine years of playing mostly comic characters, it is quite possible that Irving, perhaps subconsciously, realised the significance of endowing the performance space, and the performer, with the quality of a mysterious, or even supernatural, power. Irving's dramatic transformations from one state to another: waking to mesmerized; innocent to guilty; living to dying, were particularly memorable to audiences at the Lyceum. It is highly likely that Irving's awareness of the effectiveness of such transformations was deepened by his experience of reconstructing the Davenports' séance with Day and Maccabe in February, 1865.

2:7 Changes to Irving's Casting after 1865

After Irving's departure from Manchester he undertook further tours and regional work. This period is described by his biographers as though it were a period of exile. In truth, Irving's privations were probably no worse than any other actor seeking employment between seasons. Several of his biographers refer to the extraordinary number of parts he played: 671 in total, but such a gruelling workload was expected of the nineteenth-century actor. That said, Irving was undoubtedly a tenacious and

ambitious actor who was aware of his limitations and took action to adapt his style carefully to each project.

The season of 1866 included a production of *Hamlet*, with Irving, interestingly, taking the role of the Ghost.⁵¹ It also included a new production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, with Irving as Claudio, and, most significantly, *The Two Lives of Mary Leigh*, a new play by Dion Boucicault. Irving was engaged to play the villain of the piece, Rawdon Scudamore, opposite the suffering Mary Leigh, played by Ellen Terry's sister, Kate. Scudamore was Mary's villainous first husband, believed to have died, only to return to jeopardize her new life. Scudamore was not a ghost, but he had returned from an assumed death, with a shocking, almost spectral, first appearance to the terrified Mary. This performance marked a trend that been developing since the Davenport séance, with Irving playing characters who incarnated villainy. They included Arthur Merrivale in *The Silver Lining* at the Prince of Wales in Liverpool, the lead role in *Robert Macaire* at Oxford's Theatre Royal and Blake in *The Fairy Circle*. Bingham, frustratingly vague in her use of sources, and embroidering the Irving Narrative, refers to a description of Irving by an un-named critic that is, at least, picturesque:

Another critic described his (Irving's) make-up as being like Mephistopheles in reduced circumstances, with a cross of German philosopher and a dash of Wilkie Collins's Count Fosco. This description gives a vivid picture of that quality

⁵¹ It is possible that this casting was designed to capitalise on Irving's appearance in the Davenport séance.

of strangeness in Irving, which had been his greatest disability and was to prove his most shining asset'.⁵²

Strangeness was certainly a quality that Irving presented and even nurtured, but it was not fully in evidence in 1867. In September of that year, the *Liverpool Courier* still asserted that 'he has fully proved his right to be placed in the first position on the stage as a light character eccentric comedian'.⁵³

Although Boucicault's *Two Lives of Mary Leigh* received a mixed reception critically, it was accepted for production at the St James's theatre in London, under the management of Louisa Herbert. Retitled *Hunted Down*, the production was delayed in the schedule and replaced by a performance of *The Belle's Stratagem* by Mrs Hannah Cowley. Irving was cast as Doricourt, a part in which, the *Morning Post* reported: 'he struggled to match the courtly air and the dash of polished gallantry which Charles Kemble is said to have imparted to the character'.⁵⁴ However, in the scene where his character has to convincingly perform insanity 'he was especially successful, and almost tempted the audience into the genuine lunacy of encoring his freak of mock madness'.⁵⁵ The *Examiner*, in a notice of 10th November, also praised the 'feigned madness' presented in the play's third act.⁵⁶ When *Hunted Down* was finally presented in London, the *Morning Post* responded negatively, but reserved praise for Irving: 'Henry Irving, as the villain, looks the part every inch, and plays it remarkably well'.⁵⁷

⁵² Bingham, op. cit., p. 58.

⁵³ Unsigned review, *Liverpool Courier*, 20th September 1867.

⁵⁴ Unsigned review, *Morning Post*, 8th October 1866.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Unsigned review, *Examiner*, 10th November 1866.

⁵⁷ Unsigned review, *Morning Post*, 6th November 1866.

Both roles show Irving expanding his range. On one hand, there is the presentation of sinister and villainous characters, or characters with a hidden past such as Scudamore, and on the other there is the physical embodiment of madness itself, something the actor clearly excelled at, characterised by Irving's performance as Doricourt. Louisa Herbert clearly understood the actor's transformation, casting Irving as *Robert Macaire*, and then as Count Falcon in *Idalia* in April 1867. The latter, a villainous and eventually murderous spy, struck the critic of the *Era* forcibly: 'His performance is consistent, eminently picturesque, and highly finished, as might be expected from so genuine an artist'.⁵⁸ Irving fused apparent villainy with the processes of collapse, eventually producing a unique kind of sympathy for criminal characters such as Mathias and Eugene Aram. This developing and psychologically sophisticated approach would become the key to Irving's success for almost three decades at the Lyceum.

The duplicitous or sinister villain became, increasingly, Irving's casting in the years leading up to *The Bells* in 1871. This was in stark contrast to the light comedian he had played in Scotland and the English provinces. Irving could now be hired as 'the heavy man', and Toole acquired him for the Queens Theatre in Long Acre, London in the winter of 1867 for precisely that purpose:

Irving and Toole rapidly made up for their decade apart. Irving, attracted by Toole's fondness for practical joking, enjoyed colluding with him in some elaborate, but harmless, deceptions. Encouraged by their easygoing companionship and the older man's love of the ludicrous, Irving was more at

⁵⁸ Unsigned review, *Era*, 28th April 1867.

ease with Toole than with anyone else, and found that, perhaps for the first time since boyhood, an impish sense of humour was being tapped and released.⁵⁹

This statement is problematic in that it contributes to the dominant concept of a perpetually statuesque and grave Irving whose playfulness could only be released by the company of certain individuals. And yet the Davenport sketch was given under the apparent direction of Irving himself, with its prefatory speech and ongoing commentary upon Day and Maccabe's actions apparently written by him. There is no doubting the depth of friendship that grew between Irving and Toole, nor its longevity and significance to both parties over the period of their respective careers and ventures into management. But, as I have demonstrated, it is very likely that Toole responded initially to Irving's blandishments because of their physical contrast, which was marked and potentially very funny on the stage. Toole maximised the contrast at the Queens, whilst also giving Irving the opportunity to develop his own portfolio of readings, which were often on supernatural themes. In 1868, the pair performed in a variety of roles, including Joseph and Charles Surface in *The School for Scandal*, and the Artful Dodger and Bill Sykes in John Oxenford's version of *Oliver Twist*. The latter part was designed to capitalise on Irving's ability to incarnate villainy, even when it had no gentlemanly component. Their relationship is described by Read in the following way:

⁵⁹ Read, in ed. Foulkes, op. cit., p. 15.

'Toole as the commanding star and Irving as the comic foil or villainous counterweight'.⁶⁰

2:8 The Dream of Eugene Aram

Having supported Irving's talent for public readings at Crosby Hall ten years earlier, Toole decided to include some of them on the bill, including a version of the poem *The Dream of Eugene Aram* by Thomas Hood. It was a performance of this piece at the Vaudeville theatre in spring of 1871 that apparently caused the manager of the Lyceum, Hezekiah Bateman, to engage Henry Irving as his leading man. Five years later, with Irving taking control of the theatre's aesthetic direction after Bateman's death, it was a private performance of the poem that would convince Bram Stoker of the actor's genius. It is worth re-visiting Stoker's description of his encounter with Irving again:

Outwardly I was as of stone; nought quick in me but receptivity and imagination. That I knew the story and was even familiar with its unalterable words was nothing. The whole thing was new, recreated by a force of passion which was like a new power.⁶¹

The actor's skill is clearly highlighted:

How a change of tone or time denoted the "Blood avenging Sprite" – and how the nervous, eloquent hands slowly moving, outspread fanlike, round the fixed

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 15

⁶¹ Stoker, op. cit., p. 37

face – set as doom, with eyes as inflexible as Fate – emphasised it till one instinctively quivered with pity.⁶²

This description is of Henry Irving performing the reading in 1876, seven years after it was put on the bill by J. L. Toole. Presumably, it grew in power as Irving continued to perform it. What is clear in Stoker's account is the actor's absolute control of his audience through sincerity, sensitive pacing of the narrative and a persuasive, almost mesmerizing, use of his body, or at least his face and hands, to convey the processes of conscience and collapse. From his experiences with occult performance, Irving came to understand the possibilities of presenting the body as a conduit for powerful, concealed or unknown forces.

2:9 Conclusion

The success of the Davenport burlesque appears to have caused Irving to develop certain new qualities in his performances. The impersonation of the ambivalent and probably duplicitous Reverend Ferguson led to Irving expanding his range to include villainous characters and those harbouring secrets. From a light comedian, he moved to playing successfully in melodramas such as Boucicault's *Hunted Down*. Even more significantly, Irving used elements of occult performance to develop an approach to acting based upon the possibilities and potential of the body, adapting his extraordinary physicality until it became the focus of the drama. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how Irving applied the techniques of such performance to *The Bells*, produced at the Lyceum in 1871.

⁶² Ibid. p. 38

Chapter Three

The Bells: The Spectacular Body and the Magical Body

3:1 Introduction

After his experience with the Davenport seance, Irving's casting changed from that of a light comedian to that of a melodramatic villain. This change was made possible by the power Irving was able to develop in readings of poems and plays, and also by an awareness of the techniques of occult performance, as displayed by the Davenport brothers in Manchester in 1865. Most significantly the change was made possible by Irving's increasing awareness of the opportunities presented by his unusual physicality and his body's capacity for dramatic transformation.

3:2 The Melodramatic Body

The representation of the body in late-Victorian performance requires some contextualising, since it involves aspects of 'legitimate' theatrical performance, 'occult' performance, and medical presentation. In *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910*, Michael R. Booth describes the shift of the emphasis of the theatre audience's sensory appreciation, from the ear to the eye. He quotes Percy Fitzgerald's description of the entertainments available in the mid-nineteenth century: 'It is like a gigantic peep-show, and we pay the showman and put our eye to the glass and stare'.¹ The taste for

¹ Michael Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, p. 4. Percy Fitzgerald's description of the visual impact of the Lyceum during Irving's time as manager is particularly striking and can be found in *The World behind the Scenes* (London: 1881), p. 42.

the visually extraordinary and spectacular grew as the century went on, and audiences from all backgrounds expected to see more sophisticated representations of situations and places. This is evidenced in my earlier description of Macready's *Coriolanus* and its detailed and expansive realisation of Rome. The representation, and audience expectations, of the human body in performance also changed during this period. In melodrama, the emphasis had always been physical since it originated, at least in England, in the dumb-show. As Booth has written: 'the presence of mime and wordless physical combat, and the heavy reliance on emotional semiology to carry content and moral point of view meant that from the beginning melodrama was strongly and stereotypically visual'.² Melodrama, therefore, often made the operations of the body central to the drama. Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack, in their analysis of melodrama, quote Eugenio Barba: 'the acrobats, the dancers, show us 'another body' a body which uses techniques very different from daily ones, so different in fact as to lose all contact with them'.³ Shepherd and Womack describe the career of Andrew Ducrow, an acrobat who became the proprietor of Astley's Amphitheatre. He rode a horse at high-speed whilst performing tableaux derived from images of classical gods and heroes. He also posed on a pedestal, changing from one pose to another: 'The pleasure produced depends on the smoothness of the changes, the gradation, in conjunction with the appearance of fixedness when he stops, at once – paradoxically – flowing and marble'.⁴ Ducrow's heroic bearing recalls the earlier description of John Phillip Kemble: 'a stately hieroglyph of humanity'; but his performance also

² Ibid., p. 60

³ Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack, *English Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 197.

⁴ Ibid., p. 197.

demonstrated rapid and expressive change. Ducrow, after his career as an acrobat ended, became an actor, portraying, in 1837, the role of Tom in Barnabas Rayner's *The Dumb Man of Manchester*. Ducrow's character, who can only communicate through sign-language, is wrongly accused of a crime committed by his brother-in-law. The audience share deeply in sensation: the frustration of the protagonist. When the actual murderer appears, Tom can only issue 'a convulsive noise'. Shepherd and Womack explain the moment:

Tom's noise works as an emotional climax because, following a series of scenes in which the truth is not expressed, is not understood, is always tantalisingly withheld, it now bursts forth unbidden with the force of convulsion.⁵

In this instance, it is physicalised expression that conveys the truth of a situation, beyond the communication of language. The body, in the performance of melodrama, was vitally important in the expression of meaning.⁶

3:2:1 The Magical Body

It is not a coincidence that occult performance, including mediumship, grew and developed alongside melodramatic performance during the Victorian mid-century. The success of the Davenports' cabinet act, which was seen and then burlesqued by Henry Irving and his colleagues in Manchester, demonstrates the widespread appeal of such

⁵ Ibid., p. 196.

⁶ For a detailed study of Ducrow's performance see also Joanna Townsend, *Speaking the Body, Representing the Self: Hysterical Rhetoric upon the Stage*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Warwick, 1999, pp. 80-84.

events. They ranged from private séances such as that attended by G. H. Lewes with the American Mrs Hayden in 1852 and Boucicault's private séance with the Davenports in 1864, to large-scale public displays such as those witnessed by Irving, and also given by touring mediums such as the spiritualist Emma Hardinge Britten. Occult performance, which often displayed the physical body transformed, possessed, levitating or elongated, was a not-insignificant aspect of Fitzgerald's 'peep show'. In general terms, the movement of mediumship was from an auditory activity, focused on the production of voices, to the materialisations and physical manifestations of Kate Fox, as described in the previous chapter. Although predominantly a role performed by women, mediums such as William and Ira Davenport and the Scottish-American Daniel Dunglas-Home also conducted occult performance activity during the mid-century. This interest in 'the magical body' was reaching its peak at the time Henry Irving appeared in *The Bells* at the Lyceum in 1871.

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Davenports were exploiting an established interest in the supernatural, hence their reception by Dion Boucicault, a dramatist with a tremendous appetite for striking visual images upon the stage, including ghostly appearances. Increasingly, those attending occult performance were expecting to see the body transformed in new and exciting ways. This desire to see the extraordinary or the unexplained was encouraged by a number of contemporary stories reported in the press. In 1868, at Ashley House in London, Dunglas-Home was said to have successfully levitated before respectable and high-profile witnesses, including the aristocrats Viscount Adair and Lord Lindsay. Home's widely-reported

activities were finally put to the test by the scientist William Crookes in 1870. Crookes, a fellow of the Royal Society, tested Home under laboratory conditions, and found a number of the medium's enacted phenomena to be inexplicable except by a new term, 'psychic force'.⁷ Home's activities, unlike those of the Davenports, were often conducted in full light. Accounts of his activities, along with those of the Davenports', were documented in the *Report on Spiritualism*. Eye-witness accounts reveal a mixture of awe, bafflement and frustration. Discussion of these matters involved significant figures in science, such as Crookes, but also in philosophy. The philosopher Henry Sidgwick and his wife, the mathematician Eleanor Sidgwick, both involved themselves in investigations of so-called materialisation mediums, and their interest ultimately led to the establishing of the Society for Psychical Research in Cambridge in 1882. After Home retired in 1870, attention shifted to Florence Cook, a materialisation medium from Hackney, who, once entranced, could supposedly manifest the spirit of a pirate's daughter called Katie King. Katie King was unique in that she was a spirit who could be touched, and even walked arm-in-arm with the sitters. From the late 1860s onwards, the phenomena of occult performance became increasingly bold and theatrical. Such risk-taking regularly resulted in exposure, an outcome often reported in the press.

I mention these cases to demonstrate that, from Irving's first encounter with occult performance in 1865, to the staging of *The Bells* in 1871, public fascination with mediums continued to grow, and increasingly focused on visual, rather than auditory, phenomena. In the case of Home, magical performance involved not only levitation

⁷ For a detailed description of the term and William Crooke's relationship to occult phenomena, see Oppenheim, 1985, pp. 344-354.

and bodily elongation, but the projection of fire from his head and the production of spirit hands that could seize the hands of sitters in a séance. Florence Cook initially produced a variety of spirit faces from her chamber, before graduating to the production of figures, culminating in the manifestation of the ghostly figure called Katie King. Cook was also subjected to testing by Crookes, with less success than Home.⁸ In many respects, the journey of occult performance is a small-scale version of the English theatre's own trajectory: an initial focus upon the word, and the ear, supplanted by a demand to see the spectacular, and scenes to delight and baffle the eye. Katie King was undoubtedly a spectacular sight for audiences, and her magical manifestations, out of the body of an entranced teenager, became a considerable talking point in the early years of the 1870s. Given Henry Irving's knowledge of the Davenport brothers, he was surely aware of the sophisticated nature of occult performance and the potential, transformative power of the magical body of the medium. As with the Davenport sketch, Irving sought to use the techniques and devices of occult performance for theatrical effect, whilst carefully removing any suggestion of blasphemous intent. The magical body became increasingly important to Irving, and is at the centre of many of his most successful performances. It is, of course, connected to presentations of the hysterical body, but care must be shown in any connection between *The Bells* and hysterical performance.

Jean-Martin Charcot's investigations, and most importantly for this purpose, his public demonstrations, did not begin until he became professor of anatomical

⁸ For an account of this, see Trevor H. Hall *The Medium and the Scientist: The Story of Florence Cook and William Crookes* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984).

pathology at the Paris Faculty of Medicine in 1872. Sarah Bernhardt, before performing the role of Marguerite Gautier in *La Dame aux Camélias* by Dumas, may have viewed hysterical demonstration at Charcot's clinic at Salpêtrière, as Elaine Aston suggests.⁹ But this was several years later, in 1881. The subject of hysteria was interesting to Irving, and his version of *The Bells* contains references to it, but I argue that it is his version of *Hamlet* in 1878 that demonstrated features of the performing hysteric. For that reason, a fuller discussion of hysteria will be undertaken in my chapter on the 1878 version of *Hamlet*. Irving's audience would undoubtedly have some idea of what mesmerism was, and it is deployed sensationally in *The Bells* to obtain confession. As Joanna Townsend has written of *The Bells*: 'a theatrical staging of mesmerism enables the truth of that play's murder to be 'played out' before its thrilled audience'.¹⁰ In this chapter, my focus must remain on the magical body, and the effects of occult performance. Discussion of hysteria must be limited. Mesmerism, generally associated with occult performance during the period, will be considered as I examine Act Three and the drama of bodily collapse. Before that, *The Bells* must be placed in context as a performance text, and one that Irving developed to suit his theatrical purposes.

3:3 Background to *The Bells*

On Saturday, 25th November 1871, Henry Irving first appeared as Mathias in Leopold Lewis's play *The Bells*. It was a defining moment in the actor's career. He was thirty-three years old, and had been working in the theatre since his professional

⁹ Elaine Aston, 'Studies in hysteria: actress and courtesan, Sarah Bernhardt and Mrs Patrick Campbell' in eds. Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes, *The Cambridge Companion To The Actress*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 253-271.

¹⁰ Townsend, op. cit., p. 61.

debut in Sunderland in 1856. *The Bells* transformed Irving's career. It was performed for 151 consecutive performances in its first run, drastically improving the fortunes of the Lyceum theatre and the management of Hezekiah and Sidney Bateman. The play was subsequently performed throughout Britain, and on eight tours of North America. In total, Irving performed the role of Mathias over eight hundred times. The last occasion was two nights before his death on 13th October 1905, in Bradford. Even on that night, he had been due to play the role, but his doctor suggested he change the performance to that of Beckett in Tennyson's play. It was considered far less gruelling for an actor who was frail and exhausted from constant touring.¹¹

3:3:1 Texts of *The Bells*

There are three known English texts of *The Bells*. They are: Leopold Lewis's hand-written version, a modified edition published by Samuel French in 1872, and Irving's personal script, which was passed to the actor's son, Harry Brodribb Irving, upon Henry Irving's death in 1905. Lewis's hand-written version had been available to managers for some time. It is impossible to know at what point Irving became interested in the project, and what his input was to any early draft. It is easy to see why Lewis's adaptation appealed to him. *The Bells*, as adapted by Lewis, contained supernatural scenes of a vision and a courthouse that would allow the actor to apply techniques he had learned from devising and performing in the Davenport sketch in February 1865 and via the development of his public readings since 1859. As I

¹¹ Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 667.

described in the previous chapter, these readings were of an extraordinary intensity, and audiences frequently found them to be overwhelming.

3:3:2 Origins

The production of *The Bells* in 1871 was a gamble on the part of the Lyceum's manager, Hezekiah Bateman, and his wife Sidney. Hezekiah Bateman had seen Irving perform his reading of Thomas Hood's poem *The Dream of Eugene Aram* in the previous year, following a number of written invitations from the actor. He had recruited Irving to his theatre as a leading man, hoping that he would play opposite his actress daughter, Isabel Bateman. Their first project had been a production of a play called *La Petite Fanchette*, adapted by Sidney Bateman. Irving had been cast as Landry Barbeau, a comic role that played to Irving's widely-perceived strengths as a comic performer. As I have demonstrated, in early 1871 Irving was seen primarily as a light comedian with, in Peter Thomson's words, 'a recognized gift for the sinister'.¹² The production was not a great commercial success, and Henry Irving took the opportunity to put forward *The Bells*, translated and adapted from a French original by Leopold Lewis. According to Irving's grandson Laurence Irving, Lewis had already offered the play to Bateman, and to several other London managements, and had not been able to place it. Finally, he had sent it to Henry Irving, who saw the possibilities that the role of the criminal burgomaster, Mathias, might offer.¹³

¹² Peter Thomson, op. cit., p. 148.

¹³ Laurence Irving, op. cit., pp. 188-191. It is unclear at what point Irving became involved in the process of translation and adaptation.

The Bells, then, was a translation and adaptation of a French play in three acts called *Le Juif Polonais* by two writers from Alsace, Emile Erckmann and Pierre Alexandre Chatrian. The play had been produced at the Théâtre Cluny in Paris in 1869, with the actor Talien in the lead role of Mathias. The original was successful, and even after Irving's performance redefined the play, the original role would be taken by several leading French actors, including Coquelin and Got. Coquelin's performance would provoke a debate about acting with Irving that forced the English actor to reveal his own working methods in some detail.¹⁴ The play was considered to be a melodrama, and presents what David Mayer has called the 'propelling force' of that genre: villainy.¹⁵ This aspect, and melodrama more generally, require some further contextualising.

3:4 Melodrama

Melodrama was located within traditions of performance emerging from the dumb show with musical accompaniment at the end of the eighteenth century. Here, I will briefly attempt to explain it further, in order to locate the *The Bells* as a superior form of psychological melodrama or 'late-melodrama'. It is, of course, impossible to cover every aspect of such a wide-ranging and influential genre, so I shall limit this study to the elements that most influenced Henry Irving, and supported his presentation of the body as a conduit for powerful forces.

¹⁴ The debate between Irving and Coquelin is described by Jeffrey Richards in *Sir Henry Irving: Theatre, Culture and Society*, pp. 69-74.

¹⁵ David Mayer, 'Encountering Melodrama' in ed. Powell, op. cit., p. 148.

Although melodrama has generally been associated with the production of spectacle and sensation, it should be remembered that it is a complex genre with a number of sub-genres. Michael R. Booth's *English Melodrama* gives a strong sense of the diverse strands that comprise it. Melodrama encountered and embodied many anxieties over time, and permitted debate about issues of class, gender and national identity. As David Mayer has written:

Because much criticism of "Victorian Melodrama" tends to take the entire nineteenth and early twentieth century as a single entity – a huge confused clot of time in which political, social, cultural, and theatrical events are inextricably fused – I argue that melodrama is subtle and has often been responsive to immediate social circumstances and concerns.¹⁶

Mayer disagrees with the well-known assertion of Booth, that melodrama 'is a dream world inhabited by dream people and dream justice' and instead argues that melodrama could 'clarify and critique contemporary issues'.¹⁷

Peter Brooks, in his work *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and The Mode of Excess*, favours a study of French melodrama over the British variety, arguing that 'in England, melodrama seems quickly to have become exclusively entertainment for the lower orders'.¹⁸ It is true that French melodrama was taken more seriously by a broader public into the mid-century, but British melodrama's evolutionary dynamic should not be underestimated. Shepherd and

¹⁶ Mayer, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 155

¹⁸ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and The Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. xvi.

Womack, whose emphasis upon the action of the body in English melodrama is very persuasive, add that the genre offered a means of involving audiences deeply within the momentum of the narrative itself, indeed 'it is more important than their involvement with the situation of any one character'.¹⁹

The principle that seems to underpin all melodramatic performance, from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, is the idea of a moral order. Brooks concludes *The Melodramatic Imagination* with a final paragraph that includes the following statement:

Melodrama substitutes for the rite of sacrifice an urging toward combat in life, an active, lucid confrontation of evil. It works to steel man for resistance, it keeps him going in the face of threat. Even if we cannot believe in the easier forms of reward that melodrama traditionally offers, there is virtue in clarity of recognition of what is being fought for and against.²⁰

Melodrama, in an increasingly secular landscape, asserted the importance of virtue, and the need to confront villainy. As David Mayer has written of early melodrama:

Melodrama depicts such a world – Manichean is the philosophic term frequently present in discussion of melodrama – where forces of wickedness and goodness are in constant contention and where there is no place for characters who are tainted, but not wholly good or altogether bad.²¹

¹⁹ Shepherd and Womack, op. cit., p. 199.

²⁰ Brooks, op. cit., p. 206.

²¹ Mayer, op. cit., p. 148.

Irving's casting moved decisively towards villainy in 1871. But it was a complex form of villainy. In the months before *The Bells*, he was still best known as a light comedian. Certainly, the role of Landry Barbeau was comic, and it seems the initial instinct of managements engaging Irving was to make use of his comic ability, honed in a decade-long relationship with the British theatre's best-known comic, J. L. Toole. However, in the roles of Rawdon Scudamore and Bill Sykes he had shown his versatility and ability to develop the villainous aspects which he had displayed in occasional performances from the mid-1860s. The enactment of villainy was certainly central to melodramatic performance, as Elaine Hadley has observed:

Perhaps more crucial to the melodrama than even its heroes and heroines, these villains embody all the ills of modernizing Victorian capitalism. By the conclusion of a melodrama, the heroes and heroines of stage melodrama almost always defeat the self-interested plots of these dastardly figures, frequently disinherit them but not "disowning" them. Eschewing any proprietary interest in people or places, melodrama's heroes and heroines strive for the spectacular familial tableau that ends the play²²

Villainy, and the anxieties produced by its successful performance, were increasingly considered to be in Irving's range. However, *The Bells* is perhaps best interpreted as a different kind of melodrama. We might even call it a 'late-melodrama', in that it offers a more complex view of villainy than the merely manichean. David

²² Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace 1800-1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1995) p. 225.

Mayer identifies changes in the supposedly fixed characters of melodrama in the mid-century. He describes a new kind of character, the 'conflicted protagonist':

This role might be called the "divided hero-villain". The protagonist's chief struggle is within his divided or double-self to master his evil nature and to recover in himself some evidence of decency and good, a role reprising the earlier temperance melodrama, but now the stakes are higher because there is more at risk than domestic stability and health. Moreover, these plays are fuelled by a growing scientific and lay interest in human psychology and awareness that there are deep fissures between outward behaviour and inner lives.²³

The dramatisation of this kind of inner conflict, and its effect on the body, interested Henry Irving deeply. *The Bells* undoubtedly contained both spectacular and sensational elements, and villainy was vital to its operation. But the revelation, or in Hadley's terms the 'disinheriting' of the kind of villainy shown in *The Bells* could lead only to domestic destruction, and not to a 'spectacular familial tableau'. As I will demonstrate, *The Bells*, in Irving's version of Lewis's text, offered a radical view of unbearable societal pressure and the division and eventual collapse of the patriarch. Irving made a melodrama genuinely tragic in its cathartic pay-off, and by doing so, made himself acceptable as a tragedian of power and originality.

²³ Mayer, op. cit., p. 159.

3:5 Le Juif Polonais

Le Juif Polonais is set in a tavern in Alsace in 1833, during an exceptionally harsh winter. Mathis, called 'Mathias' in Lewis' translation, is the burgomaster of a village and its most respected citizen. He arrives home from a visit to a fair where he has seen a mesmerist at work. His description of this person baffles his wife and the regulars of the tavern, who do not understand what mesmerism entails. Soon, talk in the tavern returns to the matter of an unsolved crime fifteen years previously, when a visiting merchant, a Polish Jew, went missing. His sledge, complete with sleigh-bells, was found intact, with no sign of the merchant himself. It was concluded by the village's gendarmerie that the merchant had been murdered, but his body was never discovered. We soon understand that this night is also the eve of the wedding of the burgomaster's daughter to an ambitious local gendarme called Christian. At the end of the first act of the French version, a merchant matching the description of the missing Polish Jew arrives at the tavern and announces himself. Mathis collapses in shock, believing the man to be the murdered merchant, returned from the grave. In the play's second act, Mathis is treated by a doctor, and his physical frailties are explained away as being due to his hard work and the upcoming wedding celebrations. Christian, his daughter Annette's fiancé, visits the tavern for the signing of the marriage contract. He outlines his theory of the murder: the killer disposed of the merchant in a lime kiln. With great use of dramatic irony, Christian describes how clever the criminal must have been. At the end of act two, with preparations for the wedding complete, the family and their guests take part in a dance. In the play's final act, which represents an

extraordinary challenge for the actor playing Mathis, the burgomaster goes to his bedroom and prepares for bed only to be confronted by the vision of a courtroom. Here, he is accused of the murder of the merchant. When he refuses to confess, a mesmerist is brought forward. Mathis violently resists, but is put into a trance state. In this state, he physically re-enacts the crime, disposing of the body in the manner described by Christian in act two. Mathis is sentenced to hang, waking from the dream and screaming, feeling for an imaginary rope around his neck. He dies in the arms of his wife on the morning of his daughter's wedding.

3:5:1 Becoming *The Bells*.

Hezekiah Bateman does not appear to have held back in his support for Irving once *The Bells* was announced as part of the Lyceum's winter schedule. He visited Paris to engage the composer of the original score, Etienne Singla, and secured additional funding for the production from James McHenry, an American friend of the family who had made a considerable amount of money from the building of the Lake Erie to New York railway. Lewis's play had already been partially adapted from the French original, and this process of adaptation was continued by Irving as rehearsals continued in autumn, 1871. With Bateman engaged in recruitment and finance for the production, aesthetic control of the performance fell to Irving, who went about the task with an extraordinary attention to detail. His use of the correct type of sleigh-bells, and their deployment, gives a good sense of the actor's commitment and perfectionism during the play's rehearsal period: 'Having chosen the bells, he insisted that the crescendo of their approach should be achieved realistically by the ringer starting from the back of

the stage and continuing to jangle them until he reached the prompt corner'.²⁴ As I have described, the final act of the play places a huge responsibility upon the shoulders of the actor playing Mathias, who must drive the entire courtroom sequence, finishing with his death. Irving's preparation was meticulous in terms of his rehearsal of the Lyceum company and his use of the technical resources available in the theatre. This approach would define his work at the Lyceum under the remaining term of the Batemans' management, and his own productions when managing the theatre into the 1890s.

With *The Bells* scheduled to open the winter season at the end of November 1871, the producer's confidence in the production was presumably shaken by the failure of another adaptation of the play in London. This was titled *Paul Zegers; or, The Dream of Retribution* and it played at the Royal Alfred Theatre in Marylebone, with the actor F. C. Burnand in the lead role. Clement Scott, the critic of the *Observer* was very specific about the reasons for the failure of this version of *Le Juif Polonais*: 'Mr Burnand departed widely from the authors' intention, and by adding a prologue and toning down many of the terrible details, gave us more of a stage play, and less of a psychological study'.²⁵ Burnand's version transformed the play's ending into a happy one, with an emphasis upon the family itself and the redemption of the principal character. It closed only a few days after its opening on 13th November.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 191.

²⁵ David Mayer (ed.), *Henry Irving And The Bells* (Manchester: Manchester University Press. 1980), p.100. Scott's review is reprinted in full here.

3:6 Critical Reception of *The Bells*

The first performance of *The Bells* took place at the Lyceum on the 25th November, 1871. The house was far from full, according to the playwright George R. Sims, who wrote an account of the actions of Leopold Lewis at the first night of the play. This account is recalled by David Mayer in his annotated edition of Irving's performance text. Sims had met Lewis in a public house, and decided to accompany him to the Lyceum. He wrote: 'The first part of *The Bells* was not very enthusiastically received, but the audience was undoubtedly held by the big scene. In the stalls there was a general agreement that Henry Irving had fulfilled the promise of dramatic intensity which he had shown in his recitation of *The Dream of Eugene Aram*'.²⁶ Laurence Irving, writing almost eighty years after the event, vividly augmented accounts of that first night:

For several moments the audience sat in shocked silence, which was broken by the whispering flurry of attendants as they removed a lady who had fainted in the stalls...Suddenly, the tension was relieved. The mesmerist had broken his spell. A tumult of cheers and round upon round of applause brought up the curtain once more. There was Irving, bowing in modest acceptance of their acclaim...At length the applause died away. The excited chatter which had drowned the orchestra during the interval subsided as the curtain rose on *Pickwick*.²⁷

²⁶ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 6.

²⁷ Laurence Irving, op. cit., pp 198-9.

It is important to be very wary of the Irving Narrative's moments of theatrical epiphany and victories snatched from the jaws of defeat. Laurence Irving was, of course, not present at the event, and at the time of writing he was attempting to memorialise his grandfather when those who had actually witnessed his work were dwindling in number. But contemporary critics lauded Irving's portrayal of Mathias. Clement Scott, who had swiftly identified the supposed flaws in *Paul Zegers*, wrote in the *Observer* five days after seeing *The Bells*: 'There are possibly very few who were aware that this actor possessed so much undeveloped power, and would be capable in such a character of succeeding so well'.²⁸ Scott also drew attention to an aspect that would become a staple of Irving's performances in tragedy and melodrama: his ability to die well: 'the almost hideously painful representation of death at the end of the play...the very ugly picture of a dead man's face, convulsed after a dream, in which he thought he was hanged'.²⁹

John Oxenford, writing in *The Times* on 28th November 1871, referred to Irving's performance as 'a debut' for the actor 'in serious drama'.³⁰ Again, Oxenford focused upon the idea of mental or hidden power in his notice - 'Mr Henry Irving has thrown the whole force of his mind into the character' - and drew the attention of his readers to the actor's ability to change effectively: 'frequent transitions from a display of the domestic affections to the fearful work of self-communion'.³¹ Oxenford also develops the theme of power to suggest a genuine control over the audience, or the

²⁸ Rowell, op. cit., p. 112.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 113

³⁰ Mayer, *Henry Irving and The Bells*, p. 103.

³¹ Ibid., p. 105

stimulation of some quality within them: 'On Saturday it was not till the curtain fell, and they summoned the actor before it with a storm of acclamation, that they seemed to recover their self-possession'.³² The critic of the *Morning Post* also focused on Irving's strange power. His acting 'is such as lends fullest effect to whatever is most weird and terrible in the story, and the effect produced upon the audience was most powerful'.³³ The *Examiner's* critic warned that the effect might overcome some audiences: 'we think the agonies of the trial scene are unduly protracted, and caused a somewhat painful feeling to the audience, owing to the great power with which Mr Henry Irving related them'.³⁴ The notice was followed by a further article on Irving's performance entitled '*Henry Irving in The Bells*'.³⁵ The article praised an improvement in the standard of acting, a 'marked and sudden improvement in the matter of delivery and finish'. Most interestingly, the article drew attention to a specific detail of Irving's performance: 'we have to read his conscience, to follow his every step and look, to watch his going out and coming in, to trace and mark like detectives every change and play upon his features. There is no rest for Mathias on the stage for the audience follows him everywhere'. Both the notices of the *Morning Post* and the *Examiner* drew attention to the power Irving required to perform the final act of the play, during which Mathias is never off stage.

Power, imposed upon the audience or summoned from within it, would be a recurring theme in criticism of Irving for the next three decades. For the critic of the

³² Ibid.

³³ Unsigned review, *Morning Post*, 27th November 1871.

³⁴ Unsigned review, *Examiner*, 3rd December 1871.

³⁵ 'Henry Irving in The Bells' in *Examiner*, 28th January 1872.

Pall Mall Gazette, Dutton Cook, it was Irving's self-control that was most remarkable: 'the actor is thoroughly possessed by his part and depicts its agonising fear and pessimistic despair with real artistic force'.³⁶ Cook also drew attention to the uniqueness of Irving. 'Acting at once so intelligent and so intense has not been seen on the London stage for many years'.³⁷ A journalist from the *Birmingham Daily Post* wrote that it was 'painfully incongruous in seeing the same actor a few minutes afterwards rattling through the part of Jingle'.³⁸ The performance of Mathias in *The Bells* allowed Irving to show his qualities as a melodramatic actor of great ability, and also to make himself, for the first time, the centre of the stage presentation. However, the matter of Irving's most effective casting was still a matter of debate. It was his ability to enact transformation, an ability he cultivated perhaps with anecdotal reference to the work of Edmund Kean, that audiences appeared to find particularly enthralling. At the end of 1871, Henry Irving was viewed as an actor of originality and versatility. He was marshalling a number of techniques that he had acquired from a diverse range of sources. I will now go on to describe the changes Henry Irving made to *The Bells* in order to demonstrate that the actor effectively redesigned the play in order to create a spectacle that placed its focus upon the body as the central text of the drama. In doing so, he created a production that was close to David Mayer's definition of late-melodrama.

³⁶ Dutton Cook, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2nd December 1871.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Unsigned review, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 26th December 1871.

3:7 Changes to *The Bells*

As I have already discussed, the text of the English version of *The Bells* exists in three distinct forms. The first was a longhand edition that was sent to the Lord Chamberlain's Inspector of Plays in November 1871 and was subsequently granted a licence. In the opinion of the actor Eric Jones-Evans, who had appeared with Irving's son Henry Brodribb Irving in his revival of the play in 1917, the play had already been submitted to the managements of the 'Adelphi, Surrey and Britannia, and to Bateman at the Lyceum'.³⁹ Laurence Irving claims that Henry Irving purchased the rights to the play soon after reading it. Mayer believes that Irving persuaded Bateman to obtain a lease on the rights, rather than an outright purchase 'and that Irving and Lewis collaborated to produce the version of the text used in November'.⁴⁰ The main change that occurred to this text was the removal of Mathias's wife, Catherine, from what is known as 'the Vision scene' at the end of Act One. It is also probable, according to David Mayer, that the opening of Act Three was also amended at this time. The second version of *The Bells* is the text that is most frequently published. It was produced by Samuel French in the spring of 1872, as the stage play approached the end of its first run. In Mayer's words, 'the history of the published version is, to say the least, clouded and vexed by discrepant accounts'.⁴¹ The Samuel French first edition states that on 29th June, 1877 the rights of *The Bells* reverted back to its author. Mayer concludes that the rights became Lewis's again, and that he resold them to French's. The rights were then apparently repurchased by Irving. The third version of *The Bells* is Henry Irving's

³⁹ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

personal script of the play, which passed to his son H. B. Irving upon the actor's death in 1905. This edition is the version played by Henry Irving and developed during touring, with 'pencilled addenda and emendations'.⁴² This text has complex and precise stage directions and some alterations in dialogue, some of which are very revealing about Irving's method of working, as I will shortly go on to demonstrate. This text was published in a scholarly edition in 1980, with detailed notes about the production and interviews with those who had seen Henry Irving in *The Bells* at various points in the production's history.

For the purposes of this study, I will also include the text of the French original, *Le Juif Polonais* by Erckmann-Chatrian. This original version of the story was produced at the Théâtre Cluny in Paris in 1869, with the actor Tallien in the role of 'Mathis', given by Lewis as 'Mathias'. The authors specialised in representing characters and locations of Alsace, and *Le Juif Polonais* contains many specific details about the representation of the tavern, its proprietor, his family and their customers. Lewis's translation is generally faithful to the French original, but he made a major change at the end of Act One, Scene Thirteen, adding what has since become known as the 'Vision' scene, a dramatic moment that was further altered by Irving in rehearsals at the Lyceum in autumn, 1871.⁴³ This deserves some consideration, since it transforms the nature of the drama.

⁴² Ibid., p. 11.

⁴³ It is possible that Irving had already influenced Lewis's handwritten draft. We do not know when the actor first encountered the work.

3:7:1 Lewis's Modifications

Lewis made some changes in his translation of *Le Juif Polonais*, including changing a character's name from Heinrich to Hans, and reduced the two maids to one renaming her 'Sozel'. The French 'Songeur', was translated as the 'Mesmerist', possibly to capitalise on English interest in, and anxiety about, the nature of such displays. The principal dramatic difference is in Act One of the play. Mathis has successfully put to one side talk of the murder of the merchant, which occurred exactly fifteen years before. He settles, safe in the knowledge that his daughter will soon be married to a successful local gendarme. The French text contains the following directions:⁴⁴

Il boit. En ce moment, le tintement d'une sonnette se fait entendre dans la rue, puis le rot d'un cheval s'arrête devant l'auberge. Tout le monde se retourne. La porte du fond s'ouvre, un juif polonaise paraît sur le seuil. Il est vêtu d'un manteau vert bordé de fourrure et coiffé d'un bonnet de peau de martre. De grosses bottes fourrees lui montent jusqu'aux genoux. Il regarde dans la salle d'un oeil sombre. Profond silence.⁴⁵

(He drinks. At that moment, the ringing of bells can be heard in the street, then the snorting of a horse as it stops before the inn. Everyone turns. The rear door opens, a Polish Jew appears upon the threshold. He is dressed in a green coat edged with fur and covering his head is a hat of marten skin. On his feet, he

⁴⁴ The translations into English are my own.

⁴⁵ Erckmann et Chatrian, *Le Juif Polonais*, (Boston: D C Heath. 1903). p. 26.

wears large, knee-length fur boots. He gazes gloomily about the room. Intense silence.)

This dramatic tableau is held into the beginning of the next scene of the play, Act One, Scene Fourteen. The play continues with the following dialogue:

LE POLONAIS, entrant. Que la paix soit avec vous!

(THE POLE, entering. Peace be with you!)

CATHERINE, se levant. Qu'y a-t'il pour votre service, Monsieur?

(CATHERINE, rising. What may I do for you, Sir?)

LE POLONAIS. La neige est profonde...le chemin difficile...Qu'un mette mon cheval à l'écurie...Je repartirai dans une heure. ⁴⁶

(THE POLE. The snow is thick...the road difficult...Can I stable my horse...I shall set off again in an hour.)

The consequences for Mathis of the Polish Jew's arrival are profound: 'le Polonais le regarde, il (Mathis) chancelle, étend les bras et tombe'.⁴⁷ (the Pole looks at him, he staggers, reaches out his arms and falls'.) This is the key dramatic change in Lewis's adaptation. Lewis creates a solitary moment for Mathias at the end of Act One. He hears the sleigh bells at the same point as in Erckmann and Chatrian, but the difference is that nobody else hears them. He has Catherine and Annette, the burgomaster's wife and daughter, respectively, exit in order to 'warm some wine by

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 26

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 26

the kitchen fire' to revive Mathias, whom they assume is feeling the effects of the winter cold. Two of the tavern's customers, Walter and Hans, hastily agree to leave to 'see after the horse'. This creates a moment of 'business' for Mathias who, in his solitude: 'runs up to the window, tears curtain open and looks out and closes them again'.⁴⁸ Mathias then reflects upon the crime, clearly indicating his own guilt, something which is not apparent at this point in the original version. As he dismisses his troubled state with the words: 'It is nothing, the wind and the cold have overcome me' a vision appears of the murdered Polish Jew. The audience sees this before Mathias does, thus creating sensation and spectacle in a single moment. Within the Vision, a younger version of Mathias, hooded, enters and commits the crime as his present self, turning, looks on. The guilt of the burgomaster is therefore definitively established at the end of Lewis's first act. In the handwritten version, Catherine returns to see Mathias's tormented response, but this had been changed as David Mayer has specified. This change was very likely made to support Irving's performance.

Irving's Mathias had to be alone for the revelation to have its full dramatic impact. It also changes the nature of the play, suggesting that Mathias is being haunted by the ghost of the merchant. It seems very likely that Irving already had a powerful conception of how the play would be produced, and the nature of the performance that he wished to give. He wanted the text to maximize the possibilities of occult performance. The magical body, and its transformations, would be enabled by the establishing of a subjective viewpoint at the end of Act One, and the possibility

⁴⁸ George Rowell (ed.) *Nineteenth Century Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1972) p. 481.

of the supernatural. This would allow a subsequent focus upon the body and the effects of unknown forces upon it in the play's final act.

3:7:2 From Mathis to Mathias

French performances of 'Mathis' contrasted strongly with Irving's interpretation of Mathias. At the heart of this difference was an argument about acting that revealed much about Irving's methods of physically realising a character, and his treatment and effective overwriting of a dramatic text. Before turning to these points, it is first necessary to consider the differences between the 1872 published edition of *The Bells* and Henry Irving's personal script of the play, which passed to H.B. Irving in 1905. The second text is also extremely difficult to date, since Irving continued to make changes to the role as he worked. Yet there are differences, often very subtle ones, that show the working of Irving's mind over time as he remodelled the play to make it a study not simply of guilt and its exposure, but a drama of conscience, subjectivity, and extreme psychological stress inscribed upon the body.

The removal of Catherine from the 'vision' scene was a key creative decision. This made the end of Act One effectively a solo, a performance of anxiety by Irving that allowed him to enact the physical build-up of stress, and allowed the audience to enter a state of tension. This also adumbrated the subjectivity and crisis displayed in Act Three, in which Mathias undergoes the trial, with all focus on him as he is put to sleep by the Mesmerist. It is clear from the critical response to the first night of *The Bells* that this, alongside the death of Mathias, was the moment that made the most impact upon the audience. The other reason for changing to a vision, a supernatural or

subjective production of the Polish Jew, was the opportunity for a potentially stunning visual coup, with the snowy exterior erupting into the cosy interior of the Alsatian tavern. In this moment, Henry Irving brought together two aspects of production that would serve his aesthetic approach for the rest of his time at the Lyceum: the portrayal of the body in crisis under the stress of societal expectation, and the realisation of spectacle.

Irving worked to alter the essential character of Mathias. Coquelin reportedly said of Irving's performance as Mathias 'it is a great assumption, but it is not a bit like the real thing'.⁴⁹ This requires some clarification. In *Le Juif Polonais*, Mathis does not seem likely to repent. Indeed, he is bullish about the success of his crime, but fears the physical business of exposure. But Irving, through subtle alterations, offered the Lyceum audience a Mathias who regretted his past actions and worried about the damage he had done. In the words of the critic John Oxenford, his version was 'A man not of a naturally malign disposition but impelled by poverty (to murder)'.⁵⁰ Irving's version of Lewis's adaptation of the French original reveals an attempt to make Mathias more likeable and loving. In the words of Alan Hughes, Irving's Mathias 'was an exceptional person who happened to be a burgomaster'.⁵¹

The changes to Lewis's text cannot be effectively dated, but it's clear that Irving had very clear reasons for making them. They were carefully calculated to appeal to the concerns and anxieties of the audience, and they demonstrate an awareness and

⁴⁹ Newton, op. cit., p. 43.

⁵⁰ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 103.

⁵¹ Hughes, op. cit., p. 10.

sensitivity that contradicts the later Shavian assertion that Irving's selection of plays had little connection to contemporary concerns. *The Bells* played for one hundred and fifty one consecutive performances, gripping Lyceum audiences and becoming a subject of discussion for theatre-goers in London, across Britain, and eventually North America. In Edward Gordon Craig's defence of his own aesthetic approach, he wrote: 'We are concerned with the other thing – the sun rising, the curtain rising, the excitement which lies in the words: "I am going to see Irving in *The Bells*"'.⁵² For Craig, Irving remembered, or summoned in his biography *Henry Irving* as a kind of ghostly mentor, stood not for the past, but for a timeless, symbolic version of the performer, the storyteller who held his audience in a kind of awe-struck thrall through an astonishing level of vocal and physical control.

Irving's Mathias was kinder than the text of *Le Juif Polonais* would allow. The Mathis of that version is bad-tempered, robust and direct. He is a ruthless peasant who has made money quickly. He is, in his outward appearance, 'self-made'. He is affectionate to his family, but he is mostly concerned with his own status within the community, which he dominates. However, Irving's portrayal is a complete revision of the leading character. As the *Morning Post* article suggests 'the interest centring in the principal character to such an extent that the other personages of the play seem little more than shadows'.⁵³ This 'centring' of the lead character was to become, to Irving's detractors, an act of centring upon the figure of the actor himself. However, Irving's remodelling in *The Bells* was sensitively done, a careful repositioning of a character

⁵² Craig, op. cit., p. 2

⁵³ Unsigned review, *Morning Post*, 27th November 1871.

over time to suit his physical requirements, or limitations. Once Irving's Mathias had entered, and the first fifteen minutes of the play are designed to prepare an audience specifically for that entrance, as Edward Gordon Craig observed, the community's response is that of a loving family to a devoted patriarch. When the burgomaster sees Annette, Irving adds the line: 'Ah, my darling' at line seven.⁵⁴ When she attempts to help Mathias remove his boot, the caring father stops her with the line: 'Don't touch that, dear, it's nasty and wet'.⁵⁵ This serves a dual purpose, to show the caring nature of the man, and to create a solitary moment of performance for the actor. For Edward Gordon-Craig, Irving's removal of his boots in the scene was a masterpiece of actorly craft that seemed to slow time. Mathias reveals he has seen a mesmerist, a piece of information we learn in an exchange of banter in Lewis's version. But Irving's Mathias slows this moment down and displays a gentlemanly aspect. When Catherine insists the mesmerist must have given people a drug of some kind, Mathias asserts: 'No, he didn't do that, he simply looked at them, -and-made-made-some signs'.⁵⁶ This shows us the gentleman, the patient and troubled individual faced with something inherently mysterious that he cannot explain but suspects has value. Mathias's chivalry extends to the maid Sozel. In *Le Juif Polonais*, those below Mathis in social rank receive short shrift, but Irving's Mathias is scrupulously courteous to all. When Mathias sees Sozel, he enquires: 'How are you?' The Mathis of the original work hardly acknowledges his pair of servants, barking peremptory orders at the staff. But Irving's Mathias is the performance of a gentleman. Indeed, Mathias only loses his manners when he deals

⁵⁴ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

with Doctor Zimmer at the beginning of Act Two, calling him a 'fool' and the President of the spectral court in Act Three. These characters ought to be addressed as equals, or superiors, but Mathias defies social convention to demonstrate that he does not defer to people purely on the basis of social caste.

In all versions of the opening scene in Act One, talk keeps returning to the night fifteen years previous when the Polish Jew vanished, leaving only his sleigh. In Erckmann and Chatrian's version, and Lewis's, the burgomaster dismisses the account as 'an old woman's story'. But Irving's Mathias again makes the moment strangely tender by referring to it as being like 'a grandmother's story'.⁵⁷ Irving's changes summon domestic images and create a sense of comfort even amongst suspicion. By doing this, Irving's text raises the stakes for what is to come: the Vision at the end of Act One which literally erupts into the home and hearth of the burgomaster's family. Throughout the first two acts of the play, despite the growing stress and tension impacting upon him, Irving's portrayal of Mathias is gentlemanly and patrician, acting always to slow down the busy nature of a scene. Irving interpolates the words 'child' or 'my child' on a number of occasions to demonstrate the tenderness between Mathias and his daughter, Annette. Above everything, Irving's Mathias is a good father, beyond reproach; the kindly and effective leader of a family unit and its extension: the village community. For Irving's audience, the revelation of the character's previous life would have been utterly shocking. In his version of *The Bells*, the idea of a father's duty to provide for his family becomes twisted into a brutal act that both he, and the audience, must sensationally relive during the process of the play. This point alone

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 47

suggests that *The Bells* has been seriously undervalued as a dramatic text, and that Irving's awareness of his audience's needs has also been underestimated. Irving's creation of the conflicted protagonist was careful and detailed, and far from the villain of early melodramatic tradition.

With the establishing of a tight community group, and with a loving patriarch placed at its centre, Irving was able to work upon an idea central to his performance: the effects of psychological forces upon the body. In Act Three of the play, where Mathias counts out his daughter's dowry in advance of the wedding contract, there is a marked difference from the original in terms of action. The French Mathis, and Lewis's Mathias, both revel in their ownership of gold: 'It is pleasant to hear the sound of gold'.⁵⁸ But Irving's interpretation of Mathias focuses on the gold as a means to an end: it will secure the future life, comfort and respectability of his daughter, Annette. By joining the family contractually, Christian will become provider. This again suggests the relentless expectation and pressure of nineteenth century patriarchy. It has exhausted Irving's Mathias, and he wishes to shed the burden. The gleeful enjoyment of the hoarder is replaced by a piece of stage business, the counting of the gold, which ends twice on the number thirteen, causing the burgomaster to cry out. Tension, physical sensation in the audience, is expertly grown through the use of repetition, and an act of telling is replaced with a physical enacting. It is richly theatrical, and demonstrates the effects of guilt upon the body: compulsive repetition. The business is precisely recorded in Irving's personal copy of the play, with an exact description of when the coins go into Mathias's hand and when they go into the bag. Presumably, the

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 57.

chinking of the money together provided a strange kind of musical accompaniment to this moment. Mathis, and Lewis's Mathias, is a kind of pantaloon, savouring every moment of physical comfort and excess. But Irving's Mathias is seemingly ashamed of the money. The groundwork for the enacting of conscience has already been done by the character Hans (Heinrich in *Le Juif Polonais*) in Act One. When Mathias refers to seeing the Mesmerist at Ribeauville, Hans corroborates the burgomaster's account of how the act worked. Lewis's version contains the line: 'The Parisian sends people to sleep and when they are asleep he makes them tell everything that weighs upon their consciences'.⁵⁹ But Irving made a very specific change to this line. He changed 'consciences' to 'conscience'. According to Edward Jones-Evans's recollections, which are contained in the notes to Irving's personal script: 'In response to Hans's recollection of a mesmerist...Irving listens intently, then holds a long (10-12 second) pause before responding in a low voice, 'Exactly'.⁶⁰

By making this textual change, and isolating a moment dramatically once again, Irving promoted conscience as an idea, and made it, rather than villainy, into the effective engine of all that followed. Irving's *The Bells* is a play about singular conscience. It ceases to be merely an exciting melodrama about the possible guilt of a successful man, and instead becomes a kind of harrowing, as the guilty man (the audience know so at the end of Act One, the Vision Scene) moves towards a confrontation with the horrific consequences of his deed.

⁵⁹ Lewis, op. cit., p. 479.

⁶⁰ Mayer, op. cit., p. 82.

Irving's version of the play is not about crime and villainy, but punishment, and the effects of mental processes upon the physicality of the sufferer. The working out of the processes of conscience requires solitude, which Irving created for Mathias with the exclusion of Catherine from the vision scene in Lewis's version. This solitude is developed in the money-counting scene, and becomes most significant in Act Three, when Mathias is left alone to prepare for bed. Just before Mathias retires, and begins the journey to the spectral court that will find him guilty, he makes a statement that seems grimly ironic: 'The most important acts in life should always take place in the presence of all'.⁶¹ But Irving altered the line again to read: 'The most important acts in life should always take place in the presence of others'.⁶² This skilfully expresses the solitude of Mathias in his suffering, and the difference between those intimates gathered at his hearth. The line becomes less ironic, and more melancholy and philosophical. Irving's Mathias is indeed about to meet others: phantoms who will create in him intense psychological and physical suffering. Irving's final display of this was a virtuoso piece of acting that was quite unlike anything his audience had seen before. To quote John Oxenford's review of the first night of *The Bells* in the *Times*: '(Mathias) is at once in two worlds – an outer world that is ever-smiling and an inner world which is a purgatory'.⁶³

Before going on to examine Irving's performance in Act Three of the play in detail, it is worth considering further Irving's motivation in realising solitary moments at the end of Act One of *The Bells*, and in Act Three, just before Mathias's encounter

⁶¹ Lewis, op. cit., p. 489.

⁶² Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 59.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 105

with the supernatural court. As I have shown, these moments allowed for the development of specific sections of stage business that showed the gathering effects of conscience upon the body. Mathis in *Le Juif Polonais* is gregarious and rarely alone, but Mathias finds himself in solitude on a number of occasions. Irving's choices focused the audience upon Mathias's conflicted persona, but also prepared them for the harrowing that constitutes the conclusion to Act Three. It is a kind of preparation for what will happen to the body once it passes beyond the constraints of objective domesticity, and passes into a world that is wholly subjective, psychological or magical. Again, in the original French version, this subjective element is withheld, but in the Lewis-Irving version the subjective nightmare, the Vision Scene, has already erupted into the objective/realistic one. In the original, the audience response is based upon a melodramatic kind of sensation, a tension concerning the discovery of the criminal. But Irving, via such moments, prepared his audience for something more spectacular and harrowing: the journey of the kindly patriarch into a ghostly nightmare in which he will fall victim to newly-revealed and powerful forces.

3:8 Irving's Use of the Magical Body

I will now focus upon the final act of *The Bells*. Irving had to enact what I have described as a harrowing, a physical testing that concluded with, in the words of Laurence Irving 'the violent egress of a soul from a body'.⁶⁴ The Mesmerist's control of Mathias, I argue, is an extraordinary piece of theatre that has been overlooked or misunderstood because of the misclassification of Irving merely as a romantic,

⁶⁴ Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 198.

reactionary figure. The principal objective of this project is to challenge that misclassification, and some of the clearest evidence resides in the performance of Mathias and the representation of his physical and psychological collapse. The presentation of Act Three of *The Bells* challenged its audiences and engaged with them on a number of levels. It presented the transformation of the spectacular body of the melodrama into something psychologically complex and compelling. Irving dramatised the effects of extreme mental states upon the body in a drama of collapse and eventual breakdown.

The final act of *The Bells* in performance was remarkable because it combined elements and techniques of occult performance with a series of arresting pictorial effects. At the end of Act Two of the play, Mathias joins in the dance that celebrates the successful signing of the marriage contract. Irving's amendments to the scene make it wilder, showing Mathias losing psychological control as he 'waltzes madly'.⁶⁵ The contrast between slow, purposeful action and a violent change of performance tempo is marked in this scene. The overall effect is carefully calibrated to involve the audience in the growing tension of the drama. Mathias hears the bells, introduced by the line 'Ring on! Ring on!'⁶⁶ According to Eric Jones-Evans, Irving added 'To Hell!'⁶⁷ The audience is left with a scene of wild disorder, and a final line that was placed to inform them that the final stage of the burgomaster's journey might be a metaphysical one played out before their eyes: a harrowing.⁶⁸ After the curtain came down on Act

⁶⁵ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 61.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 90.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 90

Two, there was a 'wait' of six minutes as Act Three was prepared. This time must have constituted a period of growing anticipation for the audience. Irving's presentation of act III was the final phase of the harrowing.

The lights come up on another domestic scene: a bedroom in the inn. The masterly representation of the Vision scene at the end of Act One had already demonstrated to the audience that home and hearth were far from sacrosanct in this play. The supernatural – and the subjective - had invaded once, and could do so again at any point. The first action of the act brings Sozel, and then Mathias, Catherine, Father Walter and Hans to the brink of the door. They are 'a little intoxicated', but no more. Mathias has relocated to a 'cooler' room, following the doctor's advice in Act Two.⁶⁹ The gathering of the group to say their farewells is dramatically highly effective, showing Mathias's concern for others and good standing. When Walter wishes 'calm repose – and no bad dreams!' Mathias replies 'fiercely'. However, in his notes of the performance, Eric Jones-Evans states that Irving did not deliver the line in this way: 'it was said with weary emphasis and a far-away look in his eye'.⁷⁰ The long round of goodbyes demonstrates the significance of Mathias's journey to come, and raises the emotional stakes for the audience. Changes in lighting illustrated the removal of Mathias to a dream-state, a subjective experience that placed him at the centre of the drama.

As I have explained previously, the magical body was a part of the 'peep show' of mid-nineteenth century entertainment, a development of the focus upon the body

⁶⁹ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 63.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91

viewed in early melodrama. It had been present since the early 1850s, with the appearance in London of American mediums such as Mrs Hayden and Daniel Dunglas Home. Mediumship was well-known as a private and public entertainment and, as Michael Read suggests, Irving's burlesque of the Davenports' cabinet act was probably inspired by an Adelphi farce involving Irving's comic collaborator, J. L. Toole. In the 1860s, mediumship was being widely investigated, and even practised, by a number of people within the social elites of the period. Occult performance followed the general trend of theatrical performance itself, becoming increasingly about visual spectacle. As I have already described, the American medium Kate Fox produced a physical materialisation of a body during a séance with the American industrialist Charles Livermore in 1861, and from that point on, the ability to produce the body of a spirit became increasingly commonplace in séances. In the work of the Davenport brothers, the body was concealed, restrained and entranced in order to permit the realisation of spirit limbs and other varied phenomena. It is interesting to note throughout *The Bells* that, in Lewis and Irving's version, auditory phenomena – the titular bells – are supplanted by a fully-formed, spectral materialisation. This reflects the growing dominance of the eye as the primary sense for theatrical appreciation.

3:8:1 Enacting the Magical Body

There is a degree of speculation in any attempt to show the influence of occult performance upon Irving's staging of Act Three of *The Bells*. However, a number of elements were asserted in the presentation of the play's final section. Irving's burlesque sketch, based upon the work of the Davenports, supplied him with an

awareness of how certain occult devices could powerfully affect an audience. Gordon Craig described the encounter as decisive in the development of Irving's approach. This was speculative, but Craig's description of *The Bells* gives a strong sense of the intense and almost mesmeric way the play worked upon spectators so that: 'time seemed out of joint'.⁷¹ His well-known commentary on Irving's Act One entrance is particularly relevant here. Mathias, in from the snow, has exchanged his boots for shoes:

...buckling his second shoe, seated and leaning over it with his two long hands stretched down over the buckles, we suddenly saw these fingers stop their work...and then, at the pace of the slowest and most terrified snail, the two hands, still motionless and dead, were seen to be coming up the side of the leg.⁷²

Before the Vision has even been seen, Irving had succeeded in making the doing up of his shoe a uniquely strange event. Craig suggests that the hands seemed disembodied, and to be working independently of their owner. Irving was creating an atmosphere of strangeness and mystery, and he continued using occult performance techniques throughout the act. This was a departure from the character's actions in *Le Juif Polonais*, and a development of Lewis's version of Mathias, too. It indicated that Irving was prepared to import a variety of different techniques in order to ensure a focus upon the body of the protagonist.

⁷¹ Craig, op. cit., p. 59

⁷² Ibid.

Once the well-wishers have left Mathias at the end of Act Two, he closes the door of the bedroom. In the recollections of Eric Jones-Evans, this was accompanied by ‘an audible click as he turns the key in the lock’.⁷³ The audience was being informed that there was no way out for Mathias, and that he was effectively sealed in the room. In Manchester in 1865, at the Davenports’ public séance, the brothers were similarly sealed into a spirit cabinet by their colleague, William Fay. This action followed the sincere talk on the truth of Spiritualism by the Reverend Ferguson. After the introduction of the Davenports, who hardly spoke throughout, they stepped inside the cabinet. Once they were in place, the side doors of the cabinet were locked by Fay. The similarities between Irving and the magical burlesque he staged are striking here, and they continued. After winding his watch, Mathias ‘casually removes his coat and waistcoat’. Once in the cabinet, the Davenport brothers ‘stripped off their frock coats, and their remaining garments were searched for devices’.⁷⁴ In the text of *The Bells* ‘Mathias having divested himself of his coat and vest, goes into the alcove R. Closing the curtains...After a pause, Mathias’s arm is seen to extend out from the curtains and puts the extinguisher on the candle’.⁷⁵ Again, the audience were confronted by a strange and disembodied limb. This was not Henry Irving’s arm. It was the arm of a double, an actor called J. H. Barnes, who also played the younger Mathias in the Vision scene. The audience in Manchester six years previously were similarly unsettled by a limb emerging strangely from a concealed space. Once the main door of the Davenports’ cabinet was closed, with the mediums restrained within: ‘an arm, bared to

⁷³ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 91.

⁷⁴ Steinmeyer, op. cit., p. 50.

⁷⁵ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 67.

the shoulder, emerged from the window'.⁷⁶ Indeed, throughout the Davenports' cabinet act, disembodied limbs presented themselves to the shock of the audience. In the second half of their act, where the brothers undertook a more conventional séance, spirit hands played musical instruments and even struck the sitters. If we consider the end of Act Two of *The Bells* as the prelude to this extraordinary sequence, we can see the outline of another trait of occult performance: 'the juxtaposition of violent activity and the Davenports' calm unruffled demeanour seemed superhuman. It definitely suggested another presence, a personality or a force which was sharing the wooden box with the young men'.⁷⁷

The Davenports' act was, as Irving, Maccabe and Day had demonstrated, a piece of stage magic, an escapology act that required any escape from the supernatural forces at work to be seemingly impossible. For Irving's Mathias also, there could be no possibility of escape from what was to come, and the forces about to be unleashed. The establishing techniques of the occult performer were worked into the text of *The Bells* by Irving to signal that the magical and transformative were about to take place. The audience were encouraged to pay close attention to the body of the protagonist, and the powerful forces that would be unleashed. What made Act Three of the play groundbreaking was this intense focus upon the physicality of a single individual under extraordinary influence. If the audience's concentration was broken during this sequence, then the play could not deliver its climactic moment effectively. Here, Irving presented the body as a centre of unknown energies that will

⁷⁶ Steinmeyer, op. cit., p. 50.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

shortly be made physically manifest. However, these energies were not supernatural. They were psychological.

From this point on, Irving used lighting to indicate that Mathias was passing out of secular time and into another sort of time, perhaps a kind of dream-time. His playing of each section of business, which had a markedly slower tempo than Coquelin's, had already created the sensation of disjointed time. This was allied to the sudden transforming of a conventional space, the inn, by the eruption of the subjective Vision at the end of Act One. For Irving's audience, most things were now possible, and Mathias's journey through the alcove may have had a profound effect upon his audience in terms of the build up of tension and sensational involvement. In Irving's personal script of the play, there is the following direction upon the appearance of the Court Vision: 'Perfect silence must be observed during this scene to give effect to the performance'.⁷⁸ In the notes, Eric Jones-Evans gives more detail: 'The actors, treading on a thick canvas stagecloth, wear soft-soled shoes and make no sound when moving in this dream sequence'.⁷⁹ Having signalled the advent of the extraordinary by a process of clear preparation, Irving ensured that the spectacle itself would be suitably unreal, with not even human footfalls being heard. This imposition was not purely intended for the performers, but for the audience, too. The stakes had been raised upon the stage by the use of occult techniques, and this required a response from the audience: awe. Irving imposed total silence on all parts of the house as his Mathias stepped into the supernatural court that would determine his future. The anticipation

⁷⁸ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p.68.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.92.

of the extraordinary had been established with Mathias's spectral arrival in Act One, and confirmed by the 'business' of the character and the sudden rise of the Vision inside the confines of the inn. In the final section of the play, Irving demonstrated that careful preparation could have a spectacular pay-off.

3:8:2 The Court Scene

The final phase of the performance began with a shift into the supernatural world previously glimpsed in the Vision scene. A curtain rose to reveal the Court Vision, presented behind a gauze. Mathias's room could still be made out, standing before the gauze, but the audience's attention was drawn to the actions that unfolded behind this screen. The machinery of the court room is depicted with eight named personnel represented: the President, two judges, two gendarmes, three barristers and an unspecified number of spectators. In his personal script of the play, Irving's lighting directions are very specific and suggest an appropriately subtle and other-worldly quality: 'The Court is lighted by Lime Lights from O.P. flies, and the lights must follow MATHIAS during his action throughout the scene'.⁸⁰ Thus Irving placed the focus of the audience on his body for the entire section. The actor John Martin-Harvey played one of the jurymen in this sequence of the play. He wrote of the experience in his autobiography:

Seated in the semi-darkness of the Hall in the Court House I watched Irving, within a few feet of him, go through the agony of his dream and once again, under the spell of the mesmerist, experience all the horror of that night when

⁸⁰ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 68.

he murdered the Polish Jew. It was a marvellous opportunity for studying his every movement and noting every cadence of his voice. I see the alabaster-like outline of his face cutting clear across the gloom of the Hall; I see his frantic efforts to resist the skill of the mesmerist'.⁸¹

The Mesmerist had been summoned when Mathias refuted both the charges against him, and the statements of several witnesses. At first, Mathias questions the credentials of the Mesmerist, and the value of such activity: 'I will not be made the subject of this impostor's experiment'.⁸² Despite Mathias's protests, the Mesmerist succeeds in putting him into a trance. He 'comes down behind L and makes passes – gradually MATHIAS succumbs under the influence'.⁸³ Mathias begins to relive the events of the night the Polish Jew died. His statement of motives may have met with some sympathy from the audience: 'I am thinking that I must have money. That if I have not 2000 francs by the 31st, the inn I hold will be taken from me'.⁸⁴ Mathias then weighs up possible courses of action, deciding finally upon murder. At this point in the play, Mathias, who has been seated upon a stool, becomes suddenly and terrifyingly active, springing up he: 'backs up R, then suddenly, as if following something, springs forward and gives two terrific blows, accompanied by a savage yell'. This is the beginning of an astonishing passage of physical activity that has the previously-gentlemanly burgomaster violently transformed into something terrible and murderous. The transition is reminiscent of descriptions of Edmund Kean, and the

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 91

⁸² Ibid., p. 71

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 72

mime that followed recalls earlier forms of melodramatic performance. Yet the specific lighting upon Irving must have made this an original and haunting spectacle. Having killed the merchant, Mathias mimes moving the corpse: 'Three times he bends down and appears to lift the body, and walks a step or two appearing as though bearing a weight'.⁸⁵ Finally, he burns the body: 'He crawls on hands and knees towards the kiln and looks in, then with a terrific shriek falls back'.⁸⁶ Once brought out of the trance, Mathias realises he has confessed and protests. He is sentenced to be hanged and a Death Knell tolls along with: 'big knocks 3. Seven knocks twice up stage, repeated by several knocks twice at door L. At bell, all lights out quickly'.⁸⁷ The curtain covers the gauze, and the action returns to Mathias's room, where the citizens are attempting to break in. Once they are in, Mathias appears:

His eyes are fixed, and his appearance deathly and haggard. He clutches the drapery convulsively, and staggers with a yell to C. (Catherine), is caught in the arms of Chris., who places him in chair brought forward to C., hastily by HANS. MATHIAS sinks in chair, holds one hand to ANNETTE L. Then to CHRIS. R.⁸⁸

The play's final line is spoken by Mathias: 'Take the rope from my neck – take – the – rope – neck'.⁸⁹ Ellen Terry's description gives a strong sense of Irving's power in the final moments:

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 74

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 73

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 75.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

He used always to turn quite white – there was no trick about it. It was imagination acting physically upon the body. His death as Mathias – the death of a strong, robust man – was different from all his other stage deaths. He did really almost die – he imagined death with such horrible intensity. His eyes would disappear upwards, his face grow grey, his limbs cold.⁹⁰

Like Edmund Kean, Irving's enactment of the process of dying left his audience shocked and emotionally drained.

3:9 Conclusion

The Bells of Leopold Lewis was not simply a translation of *Le Juif Polonais*, but an adaptation that sought to capitalize on growing interest in the occult and the supernatural. Henry Irving's further development of both the text and the visual aspects were vital in making *The Bells* a success, especially considering the failure of an earlier dramatisation of the same material earlier in 1871. Both the Vision scene, as written by Lewis and developed by Irving, and the Court Vision, which was beautifully and compellingly realised by a complex combination of lighting effects and a gauze, were essential to the overall spectacle. The aesthetic approach perhaps displayed a debt to Phelps, or accounts of Phelps, just as Irving's physical approach may have owed something to anecdotes of Edmund Kean's performance of death. However, the specific combination of effects, along with the specific lighting of Mathias's body, were original aspects attributable wholly to Irving.

⁹⁰ Terry, op. cit., p. 338.

The Bells has been classified as a melodrama but, as David Mayer has made clear, that term is a simplification that does not do justice to the play. It is true that *The Bells* has some prevalent elements of melodrama: it concerns, at least superficially, crime and villainy. It is about the threat to domestic harmony. It is both sensational and spectacular. And yet, in Irving's hands, it became something far richer and more complex. Irving offered a conflicted protagonist, a new kind of character who embodied villainy, but also its opposite. He incarnated warring priorities. His Mathias had acted villainously, but his motivation had been the protection of the cherished family unit.⁹¹ To use Elaine Hadley's term, the 'spectacular familial tableau' was the objective of much melodrama, but in the case of this play, the price for this would be the destruction of the conscience-stricken and dependable patriarch, who would undergo a harrowing that presented mental collapse inscribed upon the body. We can therefore categorize *The Bells* as a form of late-melodrama, a conflicted and psychologically-sophisticated work that locates the 'Manichean' struggle of the genre within the suffering body itself. Irving confronted his audience with a stunning and subjective vision of a dutiful husband and father tormented by conflicting expectations placed upon the patriarch. This led, in the play's final act, to a catastrophic loss of control. The reality of an inn in Alsace fell away, to be replaced by a subjective and nightmarish harrowing. It gripped the majority of its audience, and presented them

⁹¹ Interestingly, this is also the motivation of the character Walter White in one of the most lauded recent American television programmes, *Breaking Bad*. White, played by Bryan Cranston, discovers he has a tumour that his health insurance will not pay for. With months left to live, White turns to crime or 'breaks bad'. His transformation – a physical tour de force from Cranston, showing the journey from kindly chemistry teacher to drug baron - has gripped and moved viewers worldwide for five seasons.

with a performance that was reminiscent of older forms of melodrama, but more challenging and psychologically credible.

In conclusion, Irving redesigned Leopold Lewis's text to serve his needs as an actor, and to assist in the realisation of his own aesthetic vision. This involved a careful and precise process of choreography. By subtle changes to dialogue and stage-directions, Irving transformed Mathias from a criminal and bully to a kind of everyman, a decent character who had committed a crime in order to protect his home and family. In the realisation of the gripping final act of *The Bells*, Irving appears to have made use of certain techniques he learned in the burlesque of the Davenport brothers six years earlier. These helped to raise the stakes of the drama, and also marked the shift between a presentation of objective reality and a decisive shift into a subjective one. This placed the body of Mathias at the centre of the drama, as the burgomaster became subject to powerful forces that were apparently beyond his conscious control. The process compelled and troubled Irving's audience. This challenges the idea, proposed by George Bernard Shaw, that Irving's works were somehow nostalgic for the simpler melodramas of the nineteenth century and did not connect to contemporary concerns. The success of *The Bells* shows otherwise. The play engaged with anxieties regarding mesmerism and loss of control and the influence of the performer. It also addressed the idea that aspects of an individual's identity could be concealed or even buried. Irving's reworking of the character of Mathias offered what David Mayer has called 'the divided hero-villain', a respectable and respected individual driven to extremes of behaviour by society's expectation that he provides

for his family. The character's crime is revealed to the audience early in the process, switching the dramatic focus to the attempt to conceal the crime. This placed the protagonist on the threshold of another reality, and one in which forces would be unleashed and control would be lost. The play's journey is not undertaken by a melodramatic villain, but by a dignified and kindly patriarch who deeply regrets his mistake.

Irving amplified the supernatural elements in the play. This had presumably already been done, in part, by Lewis. The techniques of occult performance were employed to raise audience expectation that extraordinary forces were to be displayed. Yet the forces revealed, although located within a dream world, were all explicable and perhaps uncomfortably familiar to an audience. These forces were not psychic, but psychological. The process of suffering was inscribed upon the body, via a lack of control and mental 'absence'; towards self-punishment and self-destruction. In his subsequent roles, Irving often attempted to recreate this model, with a range of modifications. It was applied to plays that were undeniably melodramatic, such as *Eugene Aram*. But, more radically, Irving sought to apply it to Shakespearean tragedy.

Chapter Four

The Melodramatic Hamlet

4:1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will consider Irving's approach to *Hamlet*, one of the most successful productions in his repertoire from 1874 onwards. Here, Irving continued to apply the techniques I have previously described, placing his unique physicality at the centre of the drama. This approach culminated in a production of the play in 1878 that displayed the effects of hysteria upon the male body.

4:2 Irving and Hamlet

Irving first performed the role of Hamlet at the Lyceum in 1874, under Bateman's management. His initial approach to the play in 1874, as lead actor and stage-manager, was similar to that taken with *The Bells*. Irving emphasised melodramatic aspects, and focused once again on a convincing and credible account of psychological crisis. However, as aesthetic control and, eventually, management of the Lyceum came to him, Irving evolved his Hamlet into a display of male hysteria that was unique. Throughout his approach to the play, I argue, Irving sought to separate it from the routine of 'points' that sometimes made it incomprehensible to those outside of the play's traditions. Irving's approach was therefore both original and progressive, and more influenced by European interpretations of the role than is presently acknowledged.

4:3 Irving's Roles in Hamlet

Before Henry Irving took the lead role in *Hamlet* on the stage of the Lyceum in October, 1874 he had already performed eight of the play's roles in his eighteen year career. According to John Parker, editor of *Who's Who in the Theatre*, who made his records available to Laurence Irving for the publication of his biography of his grandfather, Henry Irving appeared as: Guildenstern, Horatio, Claudius, the Priest, the Ghost, Osric and Laertes between 1856 and 1859, including appearances in Glasgow and Edinburgh.⁹² Later in 1859, he appeared briefly as Osric at the Princess's, London under the management of Augustus Glossop Harris. I have discussed this encounter in an earlier chapter. During his membership of the company at the Queen's Theatre, Dublin in March, 1860 he played the role of Laertes. During his five year period of employment at the Theatre Royal, Manchester, he played Laertes again, along with his first attempt at Hamlet, performed for his benefit on 20th June, 1864. During the summer closure, he played the lead role again at the Theatre Royal, Oxford between August and September of the same year. In the summer of 1865, following his departure from the Theatre Royal, Manchester he played Hamlet for a benefit performance in Bury, then Laertes again at the Prince of Wales's theatre in Birmingham in September and October, before returning to work with Charles Calvert at the Prince's Theatre, Manchester. Here, he played the Ghost in the summer of 1866, the part Calvert had played in the benefit performance two years earlier at the Theatre Royal.

⁹² Laurence Irving, *op. cit.*, Appendix B, p. 685.

4:4 Hamlet and the Irving Narrative

Irving must have known the play intimately. According to Charles Hiatt, the *Hamlet* of Samuel Phelps was the first professional performance Irving ever saw: 'From this time onwards he saw most of the classical plays which Phelps presented during his tenure at Sadler's Wells'.⁹³ Laurence Irving describes this in typically picturesque terms: 'It was during Phelps's seventh winter season that Johnnie Brodribb sat at Sadler's Wells, cold with excitement, waiting for the curtain to rise upon the battlements of Elsinore'.⁹⁴ The author goes on to write:

Only two years had passed since the boy had openly professed to a spiritual conversion in the chapel at Halsetown. That night, at Sadler's Wells, he inwardly underwent a second conversion, as intense and heartfelt as the first.⁹⁵

Here we detect the Irving Narrative at work once again. There is no doubting the actor's ambition, of course, but the approach of Irving's devotees, and the work of his family after his death, tend to dwell on certain aspects and gloss over, or even jettison, others. The Irving Narrative asserts that the actor, seemingly from youth, knew that he was preordained to be a great tragedian, and his privations and apparent exile were all points upon an inevitable journey. As Madeline Bingham wrote:

The omens were not good for Irving. A feeling was about that this time he would overreach his powers. He may have played Hamlet in the provinces, but

⁹³ Hiatt, op. cit., p. 19. Hiatt is presumably referring to Phelps's productions of Shakespeare. *Hamlet* was performed at Sadler's Wells in the winter season of 1849-'50.

⁹⁴ Laurence Irving, op. cit. p. 46.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 46

that was not the same as pitting himself against the toughness and glitter of a London audience.⁹⁶

Some of the key characteristics of rags to riches can be detected here: the sense of overwhelming odds stacked against the actor, the talent tested to its very limit, the London-centric view that demoted the provinces in order to make the approval of the capital the only thing truly worth attaining. Irving's journey, as I have demonstrated, has been simplified or over-written by this narrative.

Bingham's fanciful narrative also views the performance of *Hamlet* as some form of creative summit, held in view by the actor since childhood. As principal actor of the Lyceum, and manager from 1878, Irving contributed to such an image via his addresses, and by attaching himself to projects of so-called 'reclamation'. He undoubtedly wanted his versions of *Hamlet* to contribute somehow to this process. However, Irving's productions were more radical than he perhaps understood, since they presented new aspects of the play to an existing audience, and made *Hamlet* more relevant to the expanding and socially diverse audience at the Lyceum.

I will now go on to present a new interpretation of Irving's productions of *Hamlet*, concluding with the first Lyceum performance on 31st October 1874. The 1878 production, which was undertaken during Irving's exclusive artistic control of the Lyceum, will provide further evidence for the argument that Irving was more progressive and original than either the Irving Narrative or Shavian critical derision will allow. Irving's approach to *Hamlet* altered over time, to the point where the actor

⁹⁶ Bingham, op. cit., p. 102.

began to work with scholars such as Frank Marshall to create definitively 'authentic texts', whilst also developing an increasingly gripping drama of the body, caught in the throes of male hysteria. This requires a separate chapter. I will begin this one by considering Irving's view of the play from the 1880s, when he delivered a series of lectures about performance to various respectable bodies, including the unions of Oxford and Harvard universities. I will then go on to consider how the play was viewed in the mid-nineteenth century, before analysing the performances that Irving could have seen. These will include Samuel Phelps, for obvious reasons; Charles Kean, whose *Hamlet* at the Princess's developed spectacular and melodramatic aspects of the play; the French actor Charles Fechter, who undertook a radically different and innovative approach to the play in a performance at the Lyceum that, I will demonstrate, heavily influenced Irving's initial performance in the role of Hamlet in 1864; and finally the production at Crystal Palace staged by Tom Taylor in 1873. This highly-progressive version produced a strong and polarised response from British critics, and had a profound effect on Irving's view of how the play might be realised. I will consider responses to Irving's performance as Hamlet in Manchester in 1864, before moving on to discuss the 1874 Lyceum *Hamlet* presented under Bateman's management. This continued the process of abandoning the traditional 'points' of Hamlet, and created a more consistent and integrated approach to the play, which also made it more comprehensible to a new audience.

4:5 Influences On Irving's Hamlet

The role of Hamlet undoubtedly held a special fascination for Henry Irving. If it is correct that Phelps's performance of the role was both the first professional performance he saw, then this interest is clearly understandable. Irving's experiences of theatre in Halestown, Cornwall, where he spent his formative years, must have been severely limited, and there is no reason to doubt Haldane MacFall's statement that the only theatrical events Irving had actually seen during the period were the scenes from plays acted out in Cornish fairground booths.⁹⁷ It is important to understand, especially when considering Irving's supposed dislike for new and 'literary' plays, that the stock plays of melodrama were, in all probability, new to him. Despite Hiatt's assertion that Irving always studied play texts in depth before he saw them, it is likely that he initially encountered many plays simply by reciting them in the City Elocution class he joined whilst working as an apprentice in London and then as a young actor. Irving's education was limited, and his refashioning of himself into a Shakespeare scholar in the late 1870s, 'restoring' *Richard III* in 1877, represented the first phase in a bid for literary and intellectual credibility. In his own words – or at least those of Stoker or Austin – 'I undertook a duty which the stage had long owed to Shakespeare's reputation. This was the restoration of the play (Richard III) in the form so long displaced by Colley Cibber'.⁹⁸ By doing this, Irving was contributing to the perceived, ongoing process of textual reclamation of Shakespeare's work. Gary Taylor describes

⁹⁷ MacFall, op. cit., p. 8.

⁹⁸ Richards, p. 239.

this process in *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History From The Restoration To The Present*:

The demand for historical authenticity also led British managements to begin ousting the adaptations that had held the stage for so long, replacing them with Shakespeare's own texts, heavily cut but otherwise little altered.⁹⁹

By attaching himself to the process of reclamation, Irving was shoring up his own position against the anonymous critic of *The Fashionable Tragedian*, actually William Archer, which appeared in 1877. Irving was also demonstrating his commitment to a growing tendency to revere Shakespeare as the British 'national poet'. Irving's approach to *Hamlet* can therefore be seen as part of this process. It is possible that Irving's desire to play the part began with seeing Phelps in the role in the winter season at Sadler's Wells in 1849-50. But such assertions by authors of the Irving Narrative must be treated with a degree of scepticism. Irving's professional interest in *Hamlet* may, just as plausibly, have occurred in the mid-1860s, inspired by the success of Charles Albert Fechter. Fechter's interpretation, which will be considered in more depth shortly, may have made the role seem more accessible to an actor who was by no means a natural choice for a tragic lead, and it is quite possible that Irving either saw Fechter's portrayal of Hamlet, or was inspired by reviews and commentaries upon it. Fechter was an unlikely Hamlet; he was a French actor best known for melodrama, who made a considerable impact in Hugo's stage version of *Ruy Blas* under Harris's management shortly after Henry Irving left the Princess's in 1859. Fechter managed to

⁹⁹ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History From The Restoration To The Present* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1989), p. 200.

transform his accent for the performance of the role, and he favoured a presentation of *Hamlet* that was both decorous and domestic. Fechter's performance demonstrated the effectiveness of a supposed melodramatic actor in the role, and the overcoming of vocal drawbacks to create an innovative interpretation. Irving's performance of Hamlet drew upon a number of different performance styles and traditions, and a study of Irving's success in the role demonstrates how actors from supposedly differing traditions borrowed from each other, and were consistently influenced and inspired by rivals. Alan Hughes, author of *Henry Irving: Shakespearean*, has written:

A performance of Hamlet had become more ritual than play. First night audiences were familiar with the usual acting text and the traditional business. Above all, they knew the 'points'. These were the moments when the actor was supposed to make a sensation by revealing, with a single, vivid strike, the meaning of some speech or action.¹⁰⁰

Irving's growing acquaintance with the play over twenty years led him to become fully aware of the traditions and key points. In an article for the *English Illustrated Magazine's* edition of September 1893, Irving wrote about four of his favourite roles, including Hamlet. In this article, Irving wrote the following: 'For Hamlet I have that affection which springs naturally in the actor towards the most intensely human of Shakespeare's creations'.¹⁰¹ Irving was aware of Hazlitt's belief that the play was fundamentally unactable on account of the complexity of the character. Irving responded:

¹⁰⁰ Hughes, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁰¹ Richards, op. cit., p. 238.

To achieve so complete a command over all these elements as to place the impersonation beyond cavil has been given to none of us. But to represent in Hamlet the type of filial love, to suggest that sense of the supernatural which holds the genius of romance like a veil, and that haunted look of one who is constantly with the spirit which has “revisited the glimpses of the moon”, to disentangle the character from traditions which are apt to overlay with artifice one of the most vividly real of all the conceptions in art, to leave upon your generation the impression of Hamlet as a man, not as a piece of acting – this is, perhaps, the highest aim which the English-speaking actor can cherish. This is why one or two Hamlets – Edwin Booth for instance – have an enduring hold upon the memories of playgoers. Something of the chivalry, the high-strung ecstasy, the melancholy grace of the man clings to the mind when the sterner grandeur of other creations of the poet may have lost its spell.¹⁰²

Irving’s conception of Hamlet’s character reflected the concerns of his time. In the article, he also uses terms that applied specifically to qualities from his previous productions: ‘melancholy’, ‘chivalry’ and ‘supernatural’. Irving appears to suggest a more ‘natural’ approach; the presentation of Hamlet as an actual human being purged of the ‘artifice’ of previous interpretations. And yet several critics seeing Irving’s performance of Hamlet in the 1870s found it artificial and less credibly ‘real’ than the work of many of his predecessors. In brief, what Irving’s writing about *Hamlet* demonstrates is his own specific version of the character, his intention to somehow restore the character to a period before ‘artifice’ - but without a clear definition of

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 239

what this might mean – and his view of the role as the summation of the actor’s journey: the ultimate technical challenge. What is most fascinating is Irving’s paradoxical connection to respectable, literary approaches to drama and Shakespearean textual reclamation, and his own distinctly unorthodox physical instincts as a performer. These instincts were informed by aspects of melodramatic and occult performance. The extraordinary nature of Irving’s interpretation of the character of Hamlet depended upon this tension, a fact the actor seemed quite oblivious to during his lifetime.

4:6 Irving’s Contemporaries as Hamlet

Before going on to consider Irving’s various interpretations of the character of Hamlet, I intend to examine interpretations of the role that he could conceivably have seen in his own lifetime. The first of these performances – according to Hiatt and subsequent biographers, the first one that Henry Irving ever saw – was that of Samuel Phelps.

4:6:1 Samuel Phelps

I have considered Phelps’s style in some detail in a previous chapter. His versatility was often remarked upon by critics of the time. He played in Shakespeare exclusively at Sadler’s Wells, using the end of the patent monopoly in 1843 to establish his own approach to the works of Shakespeare, and eschewing melodrama to remain within the ‘legitimate’ drama. But he was frequently ground-breaking in his choice and interpretation of roles, moving freely between tragedy and comedy. As Westland

Marston states in *Our Recent Actors, Vol II*, his Falstaff was deliberately more 'dry and sarcastic' than other versions, something Marston believed the majority of the audience would not have valued as highly as a traditionally 'unctuous Falstaff'.¹⁰³ His interpretation of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was similarly influential, and has already been discussed here. Of his performance of Timon in *Timon of Athens*, a play practically unknown to nineteenth century audiences, and presented in 1856, Henry Morley reflected in his *The Journal of a London Playgoer* that it possessed a truly poetic and romantic quality: 'Mr Phelps in his own acting of Timon treats the character as an ideal, as the central figure in a mystery'.¹⁰⁴ Irving saw Phelps play Hamlet in 1850 at Sadler's Wells. Phelps's interpretation was similarly poetic, and his success in the role led to his reviving Shakespeare's neglected tragic roles in the years that followed. According to Marston, the ability of Phelps to deliver Shakespeare's lines beautifully and poetically was his principal asset.¹⁰⁵ According to Morley, speaking well was common to all companies trained by Phelps, who continued Macready's approach to rehearsal: 'Nobody rants...nothing is slurred...a servant who has anything to say says it in earnest'.¹⁰⁶ Although his portrayal of Hamlet was spoken beautifully and clearly, there were criticisms of Phelps's movement, particularly his reliance on certain poses and gestures. A critic of the *Theatrical Journal* referred to Phelps's 'attitudinizing' as being distinctly non-natural, and he may have owed this aspect to his early work alongside William Charles Macready.¹⁰⁷ Phelps was undeniably a romantic actor, but

¹⁰³ Marston, p. 108.

¹⁰⁴ Morley, op. cit., p. 96.

¹⁰⁵ Marston, op. cit., p. 108.

¹⁰⁶ Morley, op. cit., p. 106.

¹⁰⁷ Unsigned review, *Theatrical Journal*, 1st March 1864.

he was consistent in his interpretation, and developed the role creatively over time. It should also be pointed out that Sadler's Wells was a smaller space than Drury Lane or Covent Garden, and that Phelps presumably tailored his performances accordingly. His performance as Hamlet simply required less vocal power than previous versions, and the space rewarded vocal variation, subtlety and nuance. His gestures, although still in evidence, were similarly subdued by the proximity of his audience. Phelps was at Sadler's Wells from 1843 to 1862. This long association meant that the actor was absolutely aware of the possibilities of his space. Each performance could therefore be precisely judged in terms of vocal clarity, audibility and gesture. As David Bevington has observed:

Phelps at Sadler's Wells paid special attention to poetic touches, faithfulness to the Shakespearean text, and tasteful scenic arrangements managed within a modest budget; Kean played for big effects with a sizable budget and large casts. Part of this was simply pragmatic; Phelps had limited resources and a smaller house.¹⁰⁸

4:6:2 Charles Kean

Charles Kean's resources permitted him to expand the scale of spectacle he could present. At the Princess's theatre 'he could boast of employing as many as 550 actors', staging crowd and battle scenes with a scale and precision reminiscent of his father's rival, William Charles Macready.¹⁰⁹ His ability to stage melodrama was highly

¹⁰⁸ David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet Through The Ages*, (Oxford: OUP. 2011), p. 121.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

praised, and his set for the 1852 production of *The Corsican Brothers* was considered by G. H. Lewes to be unsurpassable. His realisation of Elsinore in an 1850 production was Gothic, expansive and highly detailed.

Lewes admired Kean's showmanship, but became increasingly exasperated by his shortcomings in tragic performance, most notably in his production of *Macbeth* of 1853. Lewes wrote that Kean took 'the literal and unintelligent interpretation, so that almost every phase of the character is falsified'.¹¹⁰ In contrast to the style of Phelps, Kean fails to show a suitable 'metaphysical influence' in his response to the witches. His response was 'to stand still with his eyes fixed and his mouth open, in the way you know'.¹¹¹ In a review of *The Corsican Brothers* in the year before *Macbeth*, Lewes labelled Kean as bad 'in any part demanding some sympathy with things poetical', meaning, presumably, Shakespearean tragedy. But Lewes praised Kean as 'unrivalled...in gentlemanly melodrama', and further stating that: 'the successful portions of his tragic performances are all melodramatic'.¹¹² Like Phelps, Kean developed his portrayal of Hamlet over time, and showed a willingness to learn from his mistakes. His vocal delivery, sometimes imprecise and often the target of humour and impersonation, became an outstanding aspect of the 1850's *Hamlet*, with an *Athenaeum* critic describing his speech as 'rapid yet dignified'.¹¹³ In spite of the criticism of Lewes, Kean appears to have used his experiences in melodramatic performance to create a production of *Hamlet* that was contemporary and compelling

¹¹⁰ G H Lewes, *Leader*, 19th February 1853.

¹¹¹ Rowell, op. cit., p. 94.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 97

¹¹³ Unsigned review, *Athenaeum*, 16th January 1858.

to audiences. He was less reliant on the picturesque self-styling of Phelps, and his performances imported from melodrama a sense of domesticity, eschewing poetry for believability and a quicker tempo. However, a review of Fechter's interpretation of Hamlet published on 20th April 1861 compared Charles Kean unfavourably to the French actor, citing a familiar flaw in Kean's approach: 'M. Fechter's Hamlet it would be an insult to compare with the admirably laboured, but entirely unpoetical Hamlet of Mr Charles Kean'.¹¹⁴

4:6:3 Charles Fechter

Charles Albert Fechter joined the company at the Princess's theatre in London under the management of Augustus Glossop Harris shortly after Irving's departure in 1859. He had previously appeared in London as early as 1847, in a series of French plays given at the St James's theatre. In his *The Journal of a London Playgoer*, Henry Morley describes a series of performances given by a German company in the summer of 1852, also at the St James's. Included in this series was a production of *Hamlet*, with the lead played by Emil Devrient. Morley describes the differences between continental approaches to the play and those of English companies:

Herr Devrient's Hamlet differs in a great many respects from the Hamlets of the English stage. He has applied his own genius to the play, and develops his part according to his own conception. German acting does not rely at all upon the "points", and many passages which on our stage are especially made to stand

¹¹⁴ Unsigned review, *Examiner*, 20th April 1861.

out, of course fell back into the ranks on Thursday night. Every line by every actor is studied with an equal care.¹¹⁵

Fechter, as a European actor, came from a performance culture with a different approach to the realisation of the drama. This was viewed with some suspicion by English critics, and there were some initial misgivings about Fechter's attempting the part of Hamlet. Yet his interpretation became a huge success and ran for 115 performances. According to the scholar Alan Hughes, writing in *Henry Irving: Shakespearean*, this was 'a record Irving deliberately set out to break'.¹¹⁶ For reasons I have already given, Fechter's Hamlet was deeply impressive to Irving, and may also have suggested that an actor might overcome certain drawbacks to take on the great role. Added to this, Irving supported Fechter in 1865, playing Laertes to his Hamlet in Birmingham, and therefore had the chance to observe his approach at close quarters. David Bevington summarises Fechter's approach to the production:

Fechter did away with traditional courtly dress in favour of rustic Viking costumes. The set and furnishings were similarly primitive. The architecture was more medieval Norman than Scandinavian, but Fechter himself as Hamlet sported flaxen hair. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were thick-bearded Viking warriors in rugged cross-gartered leggings.¹¹⁷ Particular attention was paid to the realisation of the Ghost who 'stood first in what appeared to be full

¹¹⁵ Morley, op cit., p. 41.

¹¹⁶ Hughes, op. cit., p. 27.

¹¹⁷ Bevington, op. cit., p. 122.

moonlight; then, as dawn neared, the lighting on the Ghost seemed to diminish until he vanished altogether'.¹¹⁸

Given Irving's documented interest in the supernatural in his choice of dramatic readings at Crosby Hall in 1859, and demonstration of the skills required to produce dramatic supernatural effects in order to debunk the Davenports in 1865, there can be no doubt that this realisation would have interested him, at least from a practical point of view. Before becoming an actor, Fechter had trained as a sculptor, and brought a clear, cohesive and striking approach to the physical stage arrangements of the play, another factor that would have appealed to Irving's developing aesthetic sense.

The *Morning Chronicle's* critic, in a review of Fechter's production of *Othello*, praised the actor's earlier *Hamlet* highly, describing it as an 'immensely attractive, immensely striking and proportionately remunerative achievement'.¹¹⁹ Remarkably, the actor's success was due in large part to his standing outside of English acting tradition: '...the actor having come to his task entirely disencumbered of precedent, as to reading, or action, or stage points'.¹²⁰ Fechter's strength was the fact that he had acted outside of tradition, avoiding the 'ritual' of Hamlet as described by Alan Hughes. The actor's novel approach was highly praised as contributing to an ongoing evolution of the play's stage development: 'Hamlet seems increasing with each representation. The new light in which the character is presented on the stage, and the different

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 123

¹¹⁹ Unsigned review, *Morning Chronicle*, 24th October 1861.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

aspect under which the familiar situations appear, can hardly fail to have an influence on the future rendering of the Shakespearian drama'.¹²¹ The *Examiner* of 20th April 1861 stated that Fechter disdains 'the hacknied artifices of the stage' and 'The manner of his being left alone upon the stage is cared for thoughtfully and the famous soliloquy that follows is spoken more faultlessly than any other in the play, better, we think, than we have heard it delivered by any other actor'.¹²² Fechter's ability to realise domesticity and close relationships is also praised here: 'In the pleading with his mother all emotions of the scene are perfectly expressed and at their parting the thrusting between them of his father's image on the miniature, when the son's embrace is sought by the mother and refused to her, gives new force to the accustomed sternness of the separation'.¹²³ This echoes Devrient's earlier performance of the scene at the St James's in 1852, as witnessed by Henry Morley: 'Herr Devrient marked very strongly Hamlet's natural affection for his mother'.¹²⁴ Fechter's version of the church yard scene was considered to be even more effective than Phelps's, and the confrontation with Laertes contained 'an anguish-stricken wildness' which suggests that Fechter was strong at conveying natural emotion. Although his realisation of the ghost was stunning and original, Fechter was criticised for not showing sufficient awe at the supernatural manifestations during his first attempt at the play. "'Alas poor ghost" is said with simple human tenderness' reported the *Examiner* and the actor seems unsurprised by the phenomenon of his dead

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Morley, *opp. cit.*, p. 40.

father's reappearance.¹²⁵ However, Fechter's performance received an overwhelmingly positive response, and convinced critics of the possibility of an actor from outside the perceived 'tradition' triumphing in the role.

Fechter and Irving held certain qualities in common. Both were not considered as obvious tragedians for different reasons. For Fechter, it was his nationality and French accent; for Irving the problem was one of physicality, as outlined previously. Irving's casting, as his early performances in Edinburgh with J. L. Toole suggested, was primarily comic. He developed an aptitude for melodramatic, and mostly villainous, performance during the 1860s, culminating in his performance as Rawdon Scudamore in Boucicault's *The Two Lives of Mary Leigh*, as it was given in Manchester in 1866. When the play was re-titled *Hunted Down* and staged at the St James's Theatre in the same year, under the management of Louisa Herbert, it altered Irving's casting decisively and began the process that would lead him to the Lyceum, Bateman's management, and *The Bells*. Fechter had performed predominantly in French comedy and melodrama. As the theatre historian Jane Louise Billaux has written:

Fechter's training in "genteel comedy" equipped him admirably for the lighter scenes in Hamlet which he played with natural ease and a spirited sense of fun. This and his marvellous powers of facial expression were the best features of Fechter's style, and they illuminated his portrayal of Hamlet.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Unsigned review, *Examiner*, 20th April 1861.

¹²⁶ Jane Louise Billaux, *Hamlet on the Nineteenth Century Stage*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, King's College, London, 1977. p. 130.

This lighter and rather more domestic quality extended to Fechter's vocal performance: 'Fechter went far beyond Macready in replacing an idealised delivery with an almost prose-like one [...] he was not primarily a tragic actor'.¹²⁷ We can therefore conclude that Fechter combined within his production of *Hamlet* a number of qualities that were significant to Henry Irving. Fechter was outside any perceived English tradition of tragic acting; Fechter struggled to overcome existing public and critical perceptions of him; Fechter overcame vocal disadvantages; Fechter brought melodramatic aspects of performance to the role, as Charles Kean had done; Fechter brought a new approach to the physical staging of the play, and his background as a sculptor helped him to realise an authentic and beautiful spectacle; Fechter used new technology to realise supernatural elements. Bearing all these factors in mind, we can conclude that the French actor's performance inspired and influenced Irving, and may well have been the crucial factor in Irving's decision to attempt the role as his Manchester benefit under Calvert's management in 1864. Before proceeding to a study of Irving's initial attempts at the central role, it is first necessary to consider an influential production that occurred in 1873, the year before Irving's first attempt at the Lyceum under Bateman's management. This was Tom Taylor's production of *Hamlet* at the Crystal Palace.

4:6:4 Tom Taylor's production of Hamlet

Taylor combined the occupations of critic, scholar and playwright. In the spring of 1873, he set about staging a new production of *Hamlet* in London. He sought

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 133.

to produce a version of the play that would emphasise the story over the points, focusing upon performance over spectacle. He selected the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, south London, as his venue. This was a controversial choice. The *Era* was entirely pessimistic as to its prospects. It damned the idea of a production ‘without much attention to scenery, and above all with a “scratch” company of actors’. The venue was also considered to be inappropriate, as was the time of the performance, an afternoon: ‘Is it fit we are constrained by this adventure to ask that Shakespeare should be set up to rival a company of acrobats, that Hamlet should be a foil to the performer on the trapeze, and Ophelia be regarded as vieing with a cat show or a poultry exhibition?’¹²⁸ The production ‘ought to be condemned’ said the critic ‘for the sake of dramatic art and the public’. Taylor himself could not avoid the attack, being described as ‘illogical and inconsistent’ in his approach. But Taylor defended his proposal. In a newspaper article of 5th May 1873, Taylor stated that a number of factors regarding the play’s usual staging alienated new audiences. Prominent among these factors was stage business: ‘the universal acceptance of the traditional stage business [...] has blunted the perception in actors and audiences as to the force of language and the significance of situation’.¹²⁹ Taylor believed that the accumulation of stage business over time, the ‘ritual’ of Hamlet, was obscuring the text of Shakespeare’s play. As Jane Louise Billaux has written ‘Taylor further wanted to see a representation of *Hamlet* in which the play was not produced for the sake of the leading actor’.¹³⁰ This desire was similar to the outlook of continental companies, such

¹²⁸ Unsigned article, *Era*, 27th April 1873.

¹²⁹ Tom Taylor, *Morning Advertiser*, 5th May 1873.

¹³⁰ Billaux, op. cit., p. 137.

as Devrient's. As Henry Morley wrote of his *Hamlet* of 1852: 'every line by every actor is studied with an equal care. This conscientious rendering makes it almost as difficult to extract from the actor as from the author any one-sided theory of Hamlet's character'.¹³¹ Taylor was therefore seeking to apply continental approaches to the play. In order to support his desire to produce the play, and not simply to create a star vehicle, Taylor chose an almost unknown American, French-trained actor called James Steele Mackaye to play the lead. According to Winton Tolles, the production was financially supported by Mackaye's father, who advanced Taylor £200.¹³² Every detail of the production was overseen by Taylor himself, who followed Fechter's example by giving the play a medieval setting. Taylor's production was carefully researched, and followed the detailed 'archaeological' approach that had been applied to Shakespearean productions since Macready. Although visually simpler than Charles Kean's productions, the *Observer* of 4th May praised 'the dresses, decorations, costumes, arrangements, the study and finish of every detail' which it found to be 'beyond praise'.¹³³ Taylor was described as 'an excellent stage manager'.¹³⁴ However, the critic found the actors' performances to be unsatisfactory: 'If these fine summer or spring afternoons we are to sit in the Crystal Palace theatre from three o'clock 'till the chimes strike seven we really require something better than Mr Mackaye and his feeble companions'.¹³⁵ The performance, the review goes on to state: 'would not be

¹³¹ Morley, op. cit., p. 41.

¹³² Winton Tolles, *Tom Taylor and the Victorian Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 73.

¹³³ Unsigned review, *Observer*, 4th May 1873.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

tolerated in a well-conducted London theatre'.¹³⁶ Of Taylor's Hamlet, Steele Mackaye, the critic stated 'His voice went, his power was not forthcoming, and the scenes with Ophelia and the Queen were almost painful as regards the struggle to force down a hopeless performance'.¹³⁷

James Steele Mackaye had studied in France under Francois Delsarte. Like Fechter, he was considered to bring a more conversational and domestic quality to the role. For critics, his disengagement from the traditional points led to an incoherent performance. The *Standard* attributed this to his lack of professional experience: 'Mr Mackaye...should have essayed himself in parts of less importance before embarking and risking all his future – or at least many years of it – on so great a venture'.¹³⁸ Returning to the production a week after opening, the *Era* discovered: 'Both Mr Leathes as Laertes and Mr Boleyn as Horatio have improved much since the inaugural performance, while the Ophelia of Miss Carlisle advanced her still further in our good opinion'.¹³⁹ But Mackaye remained poor, in the critic's view. Specific attention was drawn to Mackaye's gestures, which continued to be 'absolutely painful' and he 'mouths a sentence as dogs mouth a bone'.¹⁴⁰ Although attention was drawn to Mackaye's accent, that does not appear to have been the principal problem. Whereas Fechter played some of the traditional business, but in a style derived from French melodrama, Mackaye appears, presumably on Taylor's advice, to have removed himself almost entirely from 'the ritual'. Mackaye subsequently toured in Taylor's

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Unsigned review, *Standard*, 5th May 1873.

¹³⁹ Unsigned review, *Era*, 11th May 1873.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

production of *Hamlet*, alternating with the lead role in the playwright's melodrama *Arkwright's Wife*. It should be added here that Mackaye went on to become a celebrated actor and playwright in the United States, apparently continuing the development of acting techniques that derived from his training with Delsarte.

Taylor's *Hamlet* was not, then, a critical success. But it is possible to view his production as being highly progressive, with its emphasis on the entire story of the play, and the proper delineation and detailing of each individual role as important and significant. This may be seen as a development of the techniques of Macready, and of Samuel Phelps, especially in Shakespearean comedy. It should also be considered that this was an example of a playwright, and not an actor, leading the production. His choice of an afternoon performance was, of course, entirely in accord with the scheduling of a performance in an Elizabethan playhouse, and Taylor may have viewed this as a contribution to the archaeological reclamation of Shakespearean drama. It is possible that flaws in the performances, as seen by the critics, were actually problems relating to space or an unexpected location. It is also possible that the critics, who had seen a succession of *Hamlets* played using the processes of the 'ritual', including the playing of the traditional 'points', were incapable of appreciating the helpful nature of Taylor's approach, and its potential importance to those who had never encountered the play before. Taylor's interest in every aspect of the performance is also revealing. As he wrote in an article in the *Times*: 'I have myself chosen the actors,

cast the parts, seen to the designing of the costumes, the conduct of the rehearsals, the stage business, and the scenic arrangements'.¹⁴¹

Taylor, then, was original in his approach to *Hamlet*. Since Macready, actor managers had gone beyond simply playing the lead role in Shakespearean productions, and had begun the process of 'producing' the play, taking great pains to realise it in a detailed and historically accurate form. And yet these actors were also *within* the play, usually performing the lead role and fulfilling the expectations of the leading man of the company. Here, however, Taylor appears to have sat outside the action and presented his version of *Hamlet* as an objectively-observed and coherent aesthetic vision, drawing on his own experience as a playwright. Despite the *Standard* critic's failure to appreciate the performance of James Steele Mackaye, it still praised Tom Taylor's project: 'The attempt has been made with spirit, courage and intelligence, to interest the public in high dramatic art, the public have responded eagerly, willingly and, above all, very good-naturedly'.¹⁴² Irving hired Taylor's Laertes, Edward Leathes, to reprise the role at the Lyceum in 1874.

Taylor's *Hamlet* was undoubtedly an important production of the play. The absolute control he exercised over his actors and the production, along with his desire to cultivate an audience who did not necessarily consider the theatre as a legitimate or appropriate type of entertainment, appear to have influenced Henry Irving in his first attempt to produce *Hamlet* at the Lyceum in 1874. Taylor drew on Fechter's 'medieval' production, continuing the 'archaeological' approach to the play. He also

¹⁴¹ Tom Taylor, *The Times*, 5th May 1873.

¹⁴² Unsigned review, *Standard*, 5th May 1873.

cast his Hamlet from outside existing tragedians, deliberately selecting an actor the audience would be unfamiliar with in order to decouple the play from the 'ritual' aspects Alan Hughes describes. Henry Irving, as I have shown, was hardly an obvious choice to play the part of Hamlet, with both vocal and physical shortcomings, and there were concerns in the Manchester press before Irving's *Hamlet* benefit that the actor would be laughed at. In the next section, I will show how Irving applied a variety of different techniques to his production of *Hamlet*, derived from Phelps, Fechter and Taylor, alongside performance strategies he had already explored in the production of *The Bells*.

4:7 Irving as Hamlet in 1864

Irving first attempted the role of Hamlet at the Theatre Royal, Manchester in summer 1864. He chose the play as his benefit performance. Charles Fechter was concluding his run of the role at the Lyceum in London at this time. The play's closure was lamented in an article published in the *Manchester Times*: 'This looks unfavourable for the prospects of what we call the legitimate drama, when at the same establishment a French melodrama could draw a succession of large audiences through the year'.¹⁴³ Fechter, of course, was an actor who had made his name in such melodrama, and transferred many of the required performing skills to his production of *Hamlet*. The summer of 1864 also saw the death of Charles Kemble. The author of his obituary considered Charles's version of Hamlet to be inferior to that of his brother

¹⁴³ Unsigned review, *Manchester Times*, 18th June 1864.

John Phillip: 'Such was the opinion, I am informed... delivered by Mrs Siddons'.¹⁴⁴ The year 1864 also represented the three hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, and as I have discussed in a previous chapter, Henry Irving was chosen to represent John Phillip Kemble in a tableau designed to commemorate the date. The year saw a great deal of writing about Shakespeare, and about *Hamlet*. Much of this centred upon the familiar argument regarding whether the play was genuinely dramatic, or was instead a literary poem that defied practical interpretation. The *Manchester Times* published an article called *Shakespeare's Characters* which stated the following:

Anyone who, after some interval, takes down his Shakespeare from the shelf and, without any preconception, reads through the play of Hamlet, will have before him something very different from the pensive and refined portraiture of either Coleridge or Goethe.¹⁴⁵

The author is referring to the tendency displayed in both authors to see Hamlet as a romantic, self-regarding character who struggles to steel himself to action. This was, as David Bevington writes, a form of self-portraiture for the poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: 'To see Hamlet like oneself in being a person whose powers of action are consumed by thought is to see the tender-hearted, blameless, and spiritually beautiful Hamlet of Goethe and Coleridge'.¹⁴⁶ An article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* of 28th August confirms that the literary view of the play was still a powerful one, and that Hazlitt's view of it still held considerable influence:

¹⁴⁴ Obituary, *Manchester Times*, 23rd July 1864.

¹⁴⁵ Unsigned article, *Manchester Times*, 13th August 1864.

¹⁴⁶ Bevington, op. cit., p. 116.

How beautiful a dramatic poem we have in Hamlet it is superfluous to say; but no ingenuity in the world can reconcile all its parts. A sort of religious veneration steals over great poets as over great philosophers or great prophets...we read more and we read less: we read with preconceptions and predilections that disguise the literal meaning from us.¹⁴⁷

The image of *Hamlet* as a play that was too complex to be properly interpreted was a common one. Indeed, Irving wrote of the play in such terms in his article for the *English Illustrated Magazine* of 1893, which has already been discussed here. As David Bevington suggests, Hamlet had undergone an extraordinary transformation over time, from a piece of popular Elizabethan revenge drama, played to a diverse public in a London playhouse, to an inherently mysterious and probably unsolvable literary riddle, too rich in meanings to be properly interpreted in mere performance. As well as the audience's knowledge of the points of the performance, the expectation of failure in conception and presentation of the play was also, we must conclude, part of the 'ritual'.

Henry Irving's decision to attempt the play was informed by a number of factors: the anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, playing John Phillip Kemble in the celebratory tableau, and the conclusion of Fechter's successful run at the Lyceum. It should be added that the performance was a benefit, an opportunity for an actor to make money via an evening of selected performances. Irving must have been confident that such a performance, at such a time, would attract a good-sized

¹⁴⁷ Unsigned article, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 28th August 1864.

audience. Considering the Shakespeare celebrations and volume of writing about *Hamlet* appearing at the time, the decision must have seemed a reasonably shrewd one to the management. Charles Calvert supported Irving's choice and agreed to play the Ghost. Irving chose to play Hamlet in a blond wig, which clearly demonstrates the influence of Fechter's recently-concluded Lyceum production. One Manchester critic commented on Irving's apparent weaknesses:

A more robust physique than Mr Irving has is wanted to make a Prince of Denmark, and consequently his voice was unequal to the demands which Hamlet makes upon it. This is a failing which no art can supply. But study can give a greater command over the vocal tones than Mr Irving displayed; and by more variety in the intonation, and greater clearness, the deficiency in power may be, as it were, hidden, if not compensated.¹⁴⁸

The critic also records the warmth the Manchester audience clearly felt for Irving. His *Hamlet* was well-supported by theatre-goers:

A generous sympathy with commendable emulation was evinced by a well-filled house, disposed to be considerate as well as critical. Having perhaps unnerved Mr Irving by an early display of good feeling, it sought to reassure him by calling him before the curtain at the close of each act.¹⁴⁹

Irving's ability to cultivate and develop a relationship with an audience is important here, since it was a quality he successfully demonstrated at the Lyceum during the

¹⁴⁸ Unsigned review, *Manchester Guardian*, 21st June 1864.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

period of his management. In terms of his approach to *Hamlet*, we can see connections to Fechter's performance in the selection of the blond wig of the 'Viking' *Hamlet*, and also in other aspects of this performance. Irving was following Fechter in undermining aspects of the ritual and bringing it closer to the type of performance that he was most comfortable with. Irving's knowledge of Fechter's challenge to the traditional points and business of *Hamlet* emboldened him to attempt the role, and to defy his own casting in light comedy and melodrama.

Irving's action was undoubtedly bold, but cannot simply be viewed as the fulfilling of an ambition conceived on first seeing Phelps at Sadler's Wells upon his arrival in London. The choice might have been unusual, but it was clearly considered, and met with the approval and support of the Calverts. It took place amidst the festivities presented for Shakespeare's anniversary, with Fechter's Lyceum *Hamlet* within recent memory. The choice therefore had context, and a degree of press interest. As with Irving's choice of readings at Crosby Hall in 1859, and his insistence that *The Bells* was produced by Bateman in 1871, it showed intelligence and awareness of public taste. From this point on, *Hamlet* entered Irving's repertory of roles. Irving played the role again at the Theatre Royal, Oxford during the summer vacation period of 1864, and again at the Athenaeum in Bury in June 1865, after his departure from the Theatre Royal Manchester under Knowles's management. At the Prince of Wales's theatre in Birmingham, he played Laertes to Fechter's *Hamlet*, touring after his departure from the Lyceum. This would have given him ample opportunity to study Fechter's performance closely. Returning to Manchester, to the Calvert-managed

Prince's Theatre, he played the Ghost in the summer of 1866. This was the last association he would have with the play before his first attempt at the lead role at the Lyceum in 1874, under the management of the Batemans.

4:8 Irving as Hamlet in 1874

Despite the success of *The Bells* in 1871, the Lyceum production of *Hamlet* still represented a risk for the management of Hezekiah and Sidney Bateman. Prior to *The Bells*, they had experienced limited commercial success and had sought additional funding from friends in the United States, as described previously. *The Bells* improved the situation to a degree, and the subsequent shows shrewdly capitalised on Irving's ability to play troubled characters concealing a secret. This type of melodramatic role undoubtedly played to Irving's strengths, the kind of part he had been successfully playing since the Davenport burlesque in Manchester, with Rawdon Scudamore in Boucicault's *Hunted Down* an early example. This casting had altered the emphasis of Irving's performances and demonstrated his ability to incarnate villainy. In 1872, Irving played the part of Eugene Aram, the school-master with a guilty secret adapted by W. G. Wills from the poem by Thomas Hood, a work that Irving had originally included in his repertoire of public readings. This was preceded by Irving's performance as Charles I in Wills' *The Happy Days of Charles the First*. This role allowed Irving to play higher in social status than was usual, and also showed his ability to play the dutiful father, an aspect he had undoubtedly introduced into his portrayal of Mathias in *The Bells*. Before embarking upon the role of Hamlet, Irving performed as the lead character in

Richelieu, the first play he had performed professionally in Sunderland (as Gaston) and then in the play *Philip* in which he played Philip of Miraflore. These roles showed the expanding parameters of Irving's casting, but they were still essentially melodramatic, with even Charles I appearing as a wronged individual, going to an undeserved and untimely death. This interpretation led to some controversy.¹⁵⁰ Irving's portrayal of Hamlet was designed to capitalize on what had gone before, but would also seek to break new ground in other ways.

Charles Hiatt portrays the actor as being heavily burdened by the weight of expectation. Irving could not afford a failure after the success of his previous roles at the theatre: 'He therefore approached his task fearfully weighted with responsibility, terribly alive to the consequences of defeat'.¹⁵¹ The account is, of course, freighted with the imagery of the Irving Narrative. But there was undoubtedly a great deal of expectation surrounding Irving's portrayal. The *Graphic* announced: 'The great dramatic event of this evening is the appearance of Mr Irving at the Lyceum in the character of Hamlet'.¹⁵² *Lloyd's Weekly* stated that: 'Every seat in the boxes and stalls was booked, and money was only taken at the pit and gallery, around the doors of which persons began to assemble as early as 4pm'.¹⁵³ *Lloyd's* further reported that Irving's first appearance was received 'with immense cheering, and it was early perceived he had adopted an easy, natural and unstilted style of acting. This gave freshness and great effect to the colloquial passages of the play'. Hiatt emphasises the

¹⁵⁰ For a full account of this dispute, see Richards, *Sir Henry Irving*, pp. 327-9.

¹⁵¹ Hiatt, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

¹⁵² Unsigned article, *Graphic*, 31st October 1874.

¹⁵³ Unsigned article, *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 1st November 1874.

simplicity of Irving's portrayal, quoting an unnamed critic's description: 'a tall, imposing figure, so well dressed that nothing distracts the eye from the wonderful face; a costume rich and simple, and relieved alone by a heavy chain of gold; but, above and beyond all, a troubled, wearied face, displaying the first effects of moral poison'.¹⁵⁴ The *Lloyd's Weekly* critic wrote that 'the large audience followed him with rapt attention', and yet the Irving Narrative insists that the entire project was conducted upon a knife-edge. According to Hiatt, the first two acts 'passed without applause'. It was 'Irving's Marengo up to the third act the battle seemed lost...The third act produced a complete change. From the scene with the players and the description of the imaginary portraits the evening was a complete triumph'.¹⁵⁵

Laurence Irving embroiders Hiatt's earlier description:

During the early scenes of the second act, actor and audience remained out of touch with one another. In Hamlet's scene with Polonius, though his assumption of insanity was intellectually perfect and rich in subtle and sardonic humour, his tone was so colloquial and natural that he appeared again and again to miss the traditional points [...] Irving fought a profound depression caused, not by their apparent indifference, but by the fear that he had fallen below his own ideal.¹⁵⁶

Yet, as regularly occurs during the accounts of the Irving Narrative, a sudden and dramatic change of fortune was not far away:

¹⁵⁴ Hiatt, p. 126.

¹⁵⁵ The texts of the Irving Narrative frequently connected Irving with Napoleon. See Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences Vol. I*, p. 259.

¹⁵⁶ Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 246.

In the act interval, an awareness of his purpose seemed to have spread amongst the audience. During Hamlet's scene with Ophelia Irving knew that at last he had them with him...when he caught sight of the King and Polonius and realized that the girl he loved was their decoy, he was seized by a paroxysm of rage...In a few lines he had stupefied his audience with a psychological revelation of such power as none of his hearers had ever experienced...A crash of applause followed his exit, genuine and heartfelt as though it was an atonement for their obtuseness in failing earlier to grasp his intention'.¹⁵⁷

The key elements of the Irving Narrative assert themselves again here: the genius of the artist and the scale of his vision, unperceived at first by the audience; the adversarial nature of the performance described in terms of a military campaign; the battle going against the striving, industrious genius; the sudden moment of realisation that wins the day. However, *Lloyd's* suggests that the audience were with Irving from the beginning, and their rapt attention can be attributed to the way they had viewed *The Bells*, especially its third act. They were expecting something similar with *Hamlet*, and engaged with it in a similar way. Irving's removal of the points undoubtedly helped this process, and he worked to create a production that coherently and smoothly told the story. Irving's *Hamlet* was an involving piece of theatre that took his audience into the world of the play, resulting in lengthy applause once they were 'released' at the end.¹⁵⁸ The *Pall Mall Gazette* stated that: 'Mr Irving was applauded as though he were

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Craig describes his first experience of this phenomenon at the end of a production of *The Corsican Brothers* at the Lyceum in 1880, pp. 8-10.

another Garrick; he was recalled at every opportunity and rewarded with as many crowns of laurel wreaths as though he had been Madame Patti herself'.¹⁵⁹

Irving had already demonstrated that he was a unique actor. Like Charles Fechter and Tom Taylor, he largely dispensed with the ritual of expected points. As I have demonstrated, Fechter succeeded because he came at the role from outside the accepted traditions of the part, and approached it as he would a role in French melodrama, emphasising domesticity. Irving's *Hamlet* was similar: the actor calculated that someone of his unique physiognomy and performance background must create a new way of performing the role. This combination of creativity and pragmatism was part of Irving's approach, and perhaps key to his successful years of sole management of the Lyceum from 1878 onwards.

4:9 Conclusion: Towards a Hysterical Hamlet

Irving's 1874 production of *Hamlet* was innovative and progressive. Contemporary notices gave a strong sense of Irving's commitment to a new approach to the play. *Lloyd's* stated that: 'there were very slight departures from the regular acting edition in the first two acts, but in the third Hamlet's diabolical speech following the King's soliloquy was introduced'.¹⁶⁰ This was particularly daring, since the speech was considered to remove sympathy from Hamlet and shift it towards Claudius. Yet, as a piece of melodramatic performance, the decision makes sense, since it allowed Irving to expose the potential for villainy in an otherwise dutiful and virtuous character.

¹⁵⁹ Unsigned review, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 3rd November 1874.

¹⁶⁰ Unsigned article, *Lloyd's Weekly*, 1st November 1874.

Irving's impulse here was to incarnate both forces in the body of one individual, as he had with Mathias in *The Bells*, a play I have reclassified as a 'late-melodrama'. Irving thus made Hamlet into a type of character considered in the previous chapter: the conflicted hero-villain, or at least, the hero capable of villainy. Irving developed a detailed and consistent approach that was informed by his close observation of Fechter's work in the role. In general, Irving presented a dutiful son who was called to extreme acts by the presence of criminality. By emphasising the process of psychological collapse, Irving offered Lyceum audiences a Hamlet who was somewhat like Mathias. In Irving's version of *The Bells*, a virtuous man is driven to criminality by the need to provide and to be a good father. This represented a radical departure from the French original. In Irving's *Hamlet*, duty to a father conflicted with morality, and placed Irving's Hamlet under extreme psychological pressure. This allowed the actor to reveal new qualities in the character. The 1874 *Hamlet* contained much of Irving's version of Mathias, and was presented to an audience who had probably seen Irving play both Mathias in 1871 and Eugene Aram in 1872. It is perfectly conceivable that elements of this audience might not have previously seen *Hamlet*, but had seen *The Bells* because of the extraordinary critical reception and press coverage it received. Like Mathias, Irving's Hamlet was a believable study of psychological collapse inscribed upon the body. This version of *Hamlet* was one that would have played successfully to an audience who had little or no knowledge of the rituals of previous performance. The same tendencies that were at work in Tom Taylor's production at the Crystal Palace in the previous year were also at work in Irving's version. These elements, which included approaching the play as a play and not simply as a star vehicle, had

their origins in Phelps's approach to Shakespearean production at Sadler's Wells, and in continental productions of *Hamlet*, such as Emil Devrient's at the St James's in 1852. Irving's portrayal of the role of Hamlet was still at the centre of the play, of course. As Michael R. Booth has written:

Irving's *Hamlet* of 1874 was a Victorian benchmark for psychological analysis on the actor's part and the meticulous construction of a psychologically complex but credible character within the bounds of the doctrine, which Irving did not question, that the meaning of the play could be found in the meaning of the central character.¹⁶¹

The success of *Hamlet* enabled Irving to eventually take sole management of the Lyceum. He chose to inaugurate his regime with a new production of the play that would outstrip the previous one. The 1878 production of *Hamlet* represented a summation of the actor's highly original approach to performance. It was also progressive in its use of new technology. Despite Irving's growing, and very public, interest in literary scholarship, textual authenticity and reclamation, the 1878 production emphasised the male body as the site of powerful, contending forces. Indeed, I have argued that Irving's bid for literary respectability was, quite possibly, a kind of unconscious counterweight to his principal dramatic, non-literary project: the presentation of the male body in crisis. The result was a melodramatic, or rather a late-melodramatic, approach to Shakespeare's play that was gripping, accessible and highly original. Like so much of Irving's work, it has been wrongly dismissed as a mere

¹⁶¹ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), p. 137.

continuation of previous practice. Irving certainly believed in the romantic conception of *Hamlet*, in as much as he believed the key to the play was an understanding of Hamlet himself, as Booth suggests. But Irving was also committed to telling the story of the play in total, using approaches that were influenced by progressive, European versions. Additionally, his desire to apply the techniques he'd successfully used in his production of *The Bells* to Shakespearean performance led to an increasingly complex realisation of the role.

Chapter Five

The Hysterical Hamlet

5:1 Introduction

Henry Irving's approach to *Hamlet* built upon previous interpretations. The work of Phelps, Kean, Devrient and Fichter all sought to offer new interpretations of the play, and to prevent it from being purely a star vehicle for the lead actor. Perhaps Tom Taylor's approach was the most radical of all, casting an unknown in the lead role and ensuring that all parts were played in a thoughtful and detailed way. Taylor's production did not meet with unanimous critical approval, but some critics were sufficiently insightful to understand Taylor's attempt to decouple the play from the ritual of points.

In this chapter, I will offer a new interpretation of Henry Irving's performance in the 1878 production of *Hamlet* and briefly consider the works that followed. Although the Irving Narrative has located the actor in a supposed apostolic succession of great tragedians, I have argued throughout this thesis that this narrative is inaccurate, and actually obscures Irving's achievements just as surely as George Bernard Shaw's criticism does. Irving was an actor who came from outside tradition. He had, in all probability given his family's religious views, seen very few plays before his arrival in London as a teenager. The Irving Narrative asserts that Phelps' *Hamlet* was the first. This is possible. Irving's approach to performance and production was a complex one, informed by a number of factors, including his understanding of actors of the past,

gained mostly by anecdote, his interest in occult performance and the need to select roles he could adapt to incorporate his unique physical qualities. His initial casting was that of a light comedian, with melodramatic and villainous opportunities emerging only in the mid-1860s after his involvement in the burlesque of the Davenport brothers in Manchester.

Although many aspects of Irving's interpretation of the role of Hamlet remained unchanged from 1874, Irving's management of the Lyceum allowed him to commit fully to his own vision, altering the theatre, its company and technical capacities to suit his unique aesthetic vision. The 1878 *Hamlet* represented for Lyceum audiences an involving and arresting experience. At the centre of this experience was Irving's extraordinary interpretation of the lead character. Irving's version of the role presented characteristics that derived from his performance of Mathias in *The Bells*, displaying a body deep in the throes of psychological crisis. The mechanics of this performance of Hamlet were established in 1874, but Irving grew aspects of the role in the interim period, and by 1878, he offered a compelling new version of the character.

Although the 1878 Lyceum production of *Hamlet* met with almost unanimous praise, Irving's personal performance continued to be met with many of the same criticisms regarding his voice and body. It was only in the United States, where Irving toured the play in 1884, that his performance was fully appreciated. The *New York Tribune's* critic, William Winter, gives the greatest sense of Irving's theatrical power experienced by an audience who were seeing him for the first time, free of established prejudice regarding the actor's supposed flaws. In this chapter, I will use Winter's

observations to suggest a new interpretation of Irving as an actor with extraordinary levels of presence and control over himself and his audience. His ability to take his audience within the process of subjective, psychological collapse was challenging and progressive. It is Irving's subsequent claims to respectability, leadership of the theatrical profession, and knighthood that have led to him being viewed as the reactionary romantic of Shavian criticism. I will consider performances from the post-*Hamlet* period by way of contrast, specifically Irving's performances as Mephistopheles and King Arthur.

In 1878 Irving was a compelling and insightful performer who offered a new vision of the Victorian body conflicted by unseen forces. This necessitated the deployment of melodramatic techniques in his presentation, but this, as I have argued, brought the works of Shakespeare to a growing and diverse audience. In the 1874 *Hamlet*, it's likely that the audience withheld their applause in the first two acts because they were deeply immersed in the drama, a sensation experienced previously by audiences in both *The Bells* and *Eugene Aram*. It is significant that William Archer, no fan of Irving, acknowledged the actor's contribution to the rapid growth of theatre-going as an activity during this time.¹

5:2 Irving's Leadership of the Lyceum

Henry Irving took over the lease of the Lyceum theatre from Mrs Sidney Bateman in 1878. He announced a revival of *Hamlet* as his inaugural performance in the press. Hezekiah Bateman had died in 1875 shortly after hosting a party at the

¹ William Archer, *Henry Irving: Actor and Manager* (London: Field and Tuer, 1883), pp. 28-29.

Lyceum to honour his leading actor for his success in *Hamlet*. The production had run for 200 consecutive performances. For three years, from 1875 to 1878, Hezekiah Bateman's wife Sidney continued to manage the theatre, hoping that it would continue to offer opportunities for her daughters, Isabel and Kate. Laurence Irving described Mrs Sidney Bateman in the following terms 'she had a tremendous capacity for work and wide experience of theatrical business[...]Irving's position was that of a salaried actor'.² Alan Hughes describes the transition to Irving's management as one conducted 'in an atmosphere of thinly veiled acrimony. He was rumoured to have told Mrs Bateman that he needed actors to work with, not dolls, an unkind cut at the daughters she had resolutely starred'.³ The break divided the company, some of whom joined Mrs Bateman on her new venture taking over the lease at Sadler's Wells. Irving moved swiftly to appoint his own staff, including Bram Stoker, whom he invited to become his business manager. Irving was aware that he was appointing a manager with strong journalistic and literary connections. Irving had already augmented the acting company with the likes of W. H. Chippendale and Thomas Mead, older actors with connections to Edmund Kean and Macready. Arthur Wing Pinero had joined the company in 1876, proving himself valuable both as an actor and author of short pieces or 'curtain-raisers'. Most significantly, Irving replaced Isabel Bateman with Ellen Terry, an actress he had first worked with in 1867.⁴

² Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 253.

³ Hughes, op. cit., p. 23.

⁴ In *Katherine and Petruchio* at the Queen's theatre, London.

5:3 Ellen Terry as Ophelia

Ellen Terry described Irving's transition in the following terms: 'In ten years he had found himself, and so lost himself – lost, I mean, much of that stiff, ugly, self-consciousness which had encased him as the shell encases the lobster'.⁵ The hiring of Ellen Terry was an insightful act on Irving's part. As Jeffrey Richards has written: 'They complemented each other perfectly: her warmth, beauty and femininity offsetting and humanizing his aloof and chilly austerity. His fondness for tragedy and 'horrors' was matched by Ellen Terry's preference for comedy'.⁶ The contrast in bearing is perhaps best summed up in one of the actress's own anecdotes:

It was a long time before we had much talk with each other. In the "Hamlet" days, Henry Irving's melancholy was appalling. I remember feeling as if I had laughed in church when he came to the foot of the stairs leading to my dressing room, and caught me sliding down the banisters! He smiled at me, but didn't seem able to get over it!⁷

Laurence Irving states that:

...the real Ellen Terry was an agglomeration of baffling complexities and contradictions. Her features were irregular and ill-matched; yet they made a sum of rare beauty. Her figure had a certain lanky masculinity, yet on the stage she was the picture of feminine grace and charm. Her voice had a husky thickness, yet a whisper of it was heard clearly in the extremities of any

⁵ Terry, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁶ Richards, *Henry Irving*, p. 37.

⁷ Terry, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

theatre. Her eyes, brilliant and expressive on the stage, were weak and delicate-perhaps from working for many months on tracings of Godwin's architectural drawings.⁸

In Irving's 1878 production of *Hamlet*, Ellen Terry's warm and often playful performance as Ophelia made the play seem more effective as a family drama, binding her closer to Chippendale's Polonius and to the Laertes of Frank Cooper. Terry's clear and unmannered display of affection raised the emotional and human stakes in the domestic sections of *Hamlet*. This domesticity was an important aspect of much melodrama, and connected Shakespeare's play to the popular genre that was most familiar to Lyceum audiences. This made *Hamlet*, in some ways, a kind of thematic companion-piece to *The Bells*, with Hamlet as the dutiful son undergoing a similar process of psychological crisis and exclusion as the similarly dutiful patriarch, Mathias.

5:4 Transformation of the Lyceum Theatre

Henry Irving borrowed heavily to finance the upgrading of the Lyceum. According to Laurence Irving, he accepted a loan from Baroness Burdett Coutts, with whom Irving had politely corresponded after a fundraising reading of scenes from *Hamlet* at the Crystal Palace in summer, 1876.

5:4:1 Auditorium

Irving commissioned the Manchester architect Alfred Darbyshire to undertake structural and decorative restoration of the space. The seats were improved

⁸ Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 317.

throughout, and the benches of the pit and gallery were supplied with backs. The auditorium was refurbished 'in sage green and turquoise blue', and the interior decorations and figures were restored.⁹ Hawes Craven, who had painted impressive scenery during the Bateman management, often with limited financial resources, was promoted to lead a team of designers and painters that included William Telbin and Joseph Harker. Craven designed new sets for *Hamlet* and created a new act drop. The 'working curtain', of green baize, was kept in place. Laurence Irving describes the dream-like effect of the refurbishment:

When the house lights were lowered and only the lower part of it was softly illuminated by the footlights, this green curtain seemed to fade into infinity – veiling, as Charles Lamb once said – a heaven of the imagination[...]It was the veil between the world of reality and of make-believe.¹⁰

5:4:2 Lighting

The creation of a space in which remarkable, and even supernatural, transformation appeared possible was vital to Irving's aesthetic vision. The Lyceum's lighting stock was also overhauled in order to enable the production of dream-like stage pictures. Bram Stoker's article on stage lighting in the periodical *Nineteenth Century and After* was published in 1911. It describes the scale of Irving's commitment to new technology in this field. Having outlined the types of lighting available during the period, Stoker then addresses Irving's approach:

⁹ Laurence Irving, op. cit., p. 311.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Now as these two methods of lighting – gas and limelight – were already in existence when Henry Irving managed a theatre for himself, his part in the general advance was primarily to see that both these means were perfected. To this effect he spared no expense. The equipment of the Lyceum theatre so as to use gas-light most readily and to the best advantage was a costly job...But when the mechanism was complete it was possible to regulate from the 'Prompt' every lamp of the many thousands used throughout the theatre. This made in itself a new era in theatrical lighting. By it Irving was able to carry out a long-thought-of scheme: that the auditorium should be darkened during the play. Up to this time such had not been the custom. Indeed, it was a general aim of the management to have the auditorium as bright as possible. The new order of things was a revelation to the public.¹¹

In addition to these radical improvements, which centralized control of the lights and made the co-ordination of detailed effects possible, Irving experimented with the application of complex numbers of coloured lacquers to the limelight lamps, producing rich colour variations and painterly effects. The placing of the audience in darkness was a bold and innovative move that enhanced the sense of the theatre as a place of extraordinary, or even other-worldly, experience. What was different in Irving's approach was that the audience were now encouraged to focus closely on the stage picture, and often placed deliberately in awe of it. This connected Irving's theatre to the traditions of Philip de Louthenberg's magical Eidophusikon as a place of magical

¹¹ Bram Stoker. 'Irving and Stage Lighting' reproduced in ed. Russell Jackson. *Victorian Theatre* (London. A.& C. Black), p. 186.

vistas.¹² It also permitted a fluid and unbroken unfolding of dramatic action over longer periods. To those who did not view Irving's innovations favourably, this made the audience passive and intellectually inert. But for many attending the Lyceum, it made plays beautiful, mysterious and dream-like. For Irving, it created an atmosphere in which the stage picture was everything, and the transforming body could dominate and become the absolute focus of attention. As Alan Hughes has written:

An audience that sits in the dark becomes less conscious of itself. All eyes are drawn to the stage, which becomes more vivid and, simultaneously, remote. The framed world is set apart by a barrier of light, strongly marked by the glare of gas footlights.¹³

The decision to darken the auditorium of the Lyceum was taken, in part, to make the stage pictures appear even more entrancing. The audience was placed into darkness during occult performances, too, and such performances were well-known to audiences of the period. Irving, of course, had appeared in a burlesque version of the Davenport brothers' séance in 1865. This event was far more important in Irving's development than has been generally appreciated.

In the Victorian séance, the room was darkened for a number of reasons. For sceptics, darkness allowed the concealing of machinery, disguises and other material for performance. For the spiritualist believer, darkness was required because the

¹² De Louthenberg had designed sets for David Garrick, and the Eidophusikon contained a complex arrangement of scenes and lighting in miniature. In terms of its spectacular qualities, there are similarities between its sea pictures and the appearance of the Ghost over the sea in Irving's 1878 production of *Hamlet*.

¹³ Hughes, op. cit., p. 20.

phenomena that would appear were fragile, and the mediums needed to become entranced in near-darkness to bring them forth. Arguments were put forward by men, including the chemist William Crookes, that the appearance of spirits was connected to the processes of photography. The spirit chamber was viewed as a kind of dark room for the development of images that could not be viewed conventionally. For Irving, this use of darkness created a state of excitement similar to that experienced in a séance: there was the expectation of something extraordinary or miraculous within the room. Mediums, of course, possessed forms of the spectacular body that could embody strange forces. They could transform and be transformed. By creating the possibility of darkness within the auditorium, Irving increased the sense of wonder within the space and prepared his audience for the spectacle that was to follow. In 1878, all the theatre's resources were deployed to support the actor's artistic vision.

5:4:3 Music and Sound Production

On taking on the lease of the Lyceum in 1878, Irving made extensive changes to the theatre's capacity for musical production. He replaced the theatre's musical director, Robert Stoepel, with the composer James Hamilton Clarke, and renamed the Lyceum Band the Lyceum Orchestra. The number of musicians was increased to over thirty members, and augmented by a chorus of nine singers and 'a ballet corps of eight'¹⁴. According to Jeffrey Richards, Irving spent £47,000 on the development of the orchestra during a twenty year period. Clarke was an important addition to Irving's team, and wrote full scores for the produced plays. Musical accompaniment was

¹⁴ Ibid.

expected in melodrama, but Irving used music, as he had done with Singla's score for *The Bells* in 1871, to augment the stage picture and to draw his audience into the crisis of the individual at the heart of the drama. As Alan Hughes has written:

Besides the songs and dances required by the plays, the orchestra provided overtures and entr'actes selected or composed by the resident musical director and guest composers. But there was also unmotivated incidental music which prepared moods and underlined emotions very much as it still does, unnoticed, in films.¹⁵

With control of his own theatre, Irving was able to ensure that music and sound played its part in the creation of a total theatrical experience. This assisted in placing his audience in a kind of dream-like thrall to the play, and the centre of it: Henry Irving's drama of the body. This was Irving's principal idea, and its realisation required a sound working knowledge of all aspects of production. His centralisation of the elements of theatrical production therefore served this end. As Edward Gordon Craig wrote of Irving:

To resume, Irving was not primarily a producer or a stage manager. He was neither a writer, a designer, nor a musician, nor did he ever claim to be a singer or a showman. There is a heap that he was not, and yet if called on to do anything the theatre demands, he could as a rule do it and do it perfectly: but

¹⁵ Hughes, op. cit., p. 117.

he did it as an actor, and, once more let us rehearse it, for one actor – himself.¹⁶

5:5 Irving's Text of Hamlet

Irving's changes to the text of *Hamlet* did not greatly alter the play from its 1874 version. His principal dramatic purposes were: to expand the physical opportunities for his presentation of the lead character; to maximize the benefits of technical changes and set decoration to augment his aesthetic vision; to shorten the play to make it more tolerable to a Lyceum audience.¹⁷ As the Victorian Shakespeare scholar Frank Marshall wrote in his introduction to Irving's published edition of *Hamlet* in 1878:

Whenever any departure has been made from the text of the 'Cambridge' Shakespeare (edited by W.G. Clark and W. Aldis Wright), on which this edition is based, it will be found that the authority for such departure is one of the three independent early editions of the play; viz, the two first quartos (1603 and 1604) and the first folio (1623). Mr Irving has endeavoured to select what is best in each, and retain as much as possible of Shakespeare's play in the representation. It is to be hoped that, both in what has been retained and what has been omitted, a wise discretion has been exercised; and that the

¹⁶ Craig, op. cit., p. 90.

¹⁷ The 1874 production regularly over-ran.

effectiveness of this grand tragedy as an acting play has been increased rather than diminished.¹⁸

Marshall was a scholar and critic who had been a friend of Irving's since the late 1860s. Marshall provided Irving with a literary perspective and a degree of academic credibility. Irving had little formal education, and his experience of Shakespeare came largely from his own reading and performances. The cultivation of his friendship with Marshall, and publicizing of their working relationship, can therefore be seen as a bid to gain respect in the wake of the attacks of the *The Fashionable Tragedian*, published in 1877. From a letter written by Marshall on January 9th, 1879, to the Editor of the *Era*, the scholar appears to have been afforded an undue share of praise for the success of the 1878 *Hamlet*. He wrote:

I would not trouble you and your readers with any letter on the subject were it not that I feel very strongly the gross injustice – none the less because it is honestly unintentional - of attempting to rob Mr Irving of the credit due to a success achieved only by months of hard work and hours of deep thought, as well as the most careful personal supervision of every detail.¹⁹

The letter is rather strong in its condemnation of an unspecified querying of Irving's actual input regarding *Hamlet*, and perhaps suggests a degree of publicity-seeking. Irving's *Hamlet* was an extraordinary success, and played for one hundred and eight performances. The letter may therefore be viewed as an attempt to further maintain

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: A Tragedy in Five Acts, As Arranged For The Stage by Henry Irving* (London: Chiswick Press, 1879). p xiii.

¹⁹ Frank Marshall, *Era*, 9th January 1879.

the play in the public consciousness. Irving's relationship with Marshall represented a bid to further establish Irving as a 'legitimate' actor of classical drama, and not simply as a melodramatic actor. However, as I have already demonstrated, Irving's success was largely due to his capacity to make Shakespeare's plays thematically similar to those of melodrama, with a particular emphasis on the family and domesticity. In his approach to the text of *Hamlet* in '78, Irving made choices that played to those strengths and also placed the body of the actor at the heart of the drama.

Alan Hughes has written extensively about Irving's changes to the text of *Hamlet*. He states that:

Irving followed a theatrical tradition as old as Davenant in omitting all of the matter relation to Fortinbras and the mechanism by which Hamlet returns from the sea. The broad effect is to domesticate the action by expunging all reference to a world outside Denmark and to lose the sense that providence had brought Hamlet safely home.²⁰

The idea of domesticity was all-important to Irving. As I have demonstrated, his performance of Mathias differed from the previous French version by deepening the protagonist's relationships with his family, especially his daughter. Irving's Mathias was a lovable patriarch who committed a crime in desperation to save his family. His treatment of the character of Hamlet required him to present the prince as a loving, and lovable, son who had been set a task that conflicted with his essentially kindly nature. Irving was prepared to make an exception if it suited his need to play to his

²⁰ Hughes, op. cit., p. 30.

own performance strengths. As Alan Hughes states: ‘the speech in which he [Hamlet] debates whether to kill the praying king (III iii 73-96) reveals such ferociously unchristian sentiments that Dr Johnson thought it “too horrible to be uttered”’.²¹ In spite of some critical controversy, Irving included the lines again in the 1878 production, and also restored a line that would have offended Victorian sensibilities: ‘Nay but to live in the rank sweat of an incestuous bed’ (III iii 92-3).²²

Irving’s published text of the 1878 Lyceum production reduced ‘the original twenty scenes to thirteen in 1874 and fourteen in 1878 by cutting and amalgamating’.²³ This served his purpose of creating a spectacle that could play almost unbroken, with set changes accomplished swiftly and with the minimum of distractions. The play was reduced somewhat in order to place the focus, even more tightly, upon Hamlet’s domestic situation and his response to the events of the play. This required a physicalisation of a psychological condition that was, as we have seen, already Henry Irving’s preferred mode of performance. Although there were not many significant textual changes to the *Hamlet* of 1878, those that were made were carefully judged to raise the stakes of the play even further in terms of the cost of a criminal act to a family. Irving’s *Hamlet* was a thematic companion-piece to *The Bells*, with expectation and demand upon the male causing profound anxiety and internal schism. Previously, I suggested that it was somewhat anachronistic to consider Irving’s performance of Mathias in 1871 as being suggestive of a hysterical condition. However, in 1878, the condition was better known, and the male hysteric was

²¹ Ibid. p. 31

²² Ibid. p. 32

²³ Ibid. p. 34

considered to be a medical possibility. Irving's Hamlet, supported by Ellen Terry's warm and lovable Ophelia, displayed the crisis of the son as surely as *The Bells* had dramatized the crisis of the father. In the 1878 production, a recognisable family unit was placed in jeopardy, and filial expectations led to the presentation of a male body in the throes of hysterical collapse. This was detected in Irving's performance by several critics, who took different positions regarding the appropriateness of such a presentation.

5:6 Responses to the 1878 Hamlet

Much criticism of the 1878 *Hamlet* comments upon the technical improvements Irving had achieved as manager of the Lyceum, and drew attention to the actor's rise through the ranks to a position of near-prominence. It is possible that what I have termed the construction of the Irving narrative began during this period. Recalling the 1878 *Hamlet*, Joseph Knight wrote: 'The one vital alteration of conception appears to consist in presenting Hamlet as under the influence of an over-mastering love for Ophelia'.²⁴ This expression of 'profound emotion' and 'passionate longing' created an unstable Hamlet, a character presenting inner conflicts between filial duty and emotional need.²⁵ The *Standard* wrote that, in the confrontation over Ophelia's grave: 'the actor seems unable to resist the torrent, tempest, and whirlwind of the passion which inspires him'.²⁶ The *Pall Mall Gazette* considered Irving's interpretation to be the culmination of the actor's war with his own wayward physiognomy: 'The ungainliness

²⁴ Rowell, op. cit., p. 116.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 117

²⁶ Unsigned review, *Standard*, 2nd January 1879.

of the actor's figure, even the uncouthness of his voice, were forgotten'.²⁷ Although generally positive about the production, the critic frowned upon Irving's effect upon his audience, who evidently struggled to contain themselves: 'Unable to restrain themselves, they burst into overwhelming applause at Hamlet's *fausse sortie*, and thus spoiled the conclusion of one of the best pieces of acting we have ever witnessed'.²⁸ Irving's performance had led to a loss of proper control in those watching during Hamlet's confrontation with Ophelia in act I, scene I, and this was the fault of the actor who displayed 'a too reckless exhaustion of physical vigour'.²⁹ Irving's deep engagement with the emotional life of his character could not be considered a good thing: 'for any man to hurl himself into the character as Mr Irving did on Monday, night after night, is enough to account for mannerisms and debasement of style'.³⁰ The display of unrestrained and wayward energy clearly disturbed some elements of the critical fraternity. Rather than holding back these aspects, Irving continued to develop them. As Alan Hughes has written, Irving elaborated further in this section: 'with wild gestures and a burst of hysterical laughter[...] He worked himself up into an hysterical passion and chased her (Ophelia) about the room with his abuse, making his final exit in a rush of invective'.³¹ As in *The Bells*, Irving offered a powerful display of emotion and a compelling picture of a tormented psyche inscribing itself upon the body. Irving's performance of male hysteria divided his audience, and raised challenging questions about the nature of male mental illness. It was far from a conventional or predictable

²⁷ Unsigned review, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2nd January 1879.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.* This comment is reminiscent of responses to the work of Edmund Kean as discussed in Chapter One.

³¹ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

interpretation of the role. As with Irving's portrayal of Mathias, Hamlet demonstrated a dutiful male losing control and acting in ways that appear to be beyond them or outside of their expected behaviour. In this sense, Irving's performance contributed, thrillingly, to audience concerns about identity and criminality.

5:7 Irving and Hysteria

Irving's performances had already been linked to hysteria. In 1877 William Archer's *The Fashionable Tragedian* criticized Irving's Lyceum audience and their devotion to the lead actor's style. In Archer's view, they 'applauded every jerk, every spasm, every hysteric scream – we had almost said every convulsion'.³² Archer developed his condemnation further. Henry Irving 'lays bare the quivering nerves of the characters'.³³ For Archer, Irving's performance was distinctly feminine, and suggested the distinctly unmanly absence of self-control. This is best shown in the actor's voice: 'alternating between basso profundo and falsetto'.³⁴ Most damningly, Archer connected Irving's performance even more deeply to illness, referring to it as 'a representation of the last stage of Asiatic cholera – that is, total collapse'.³⁵

Archer considered Irving's performances to be insufficiently masculine, and even to demonstrate the symptoms of hysteria. This debate continued throughout the actor's career and even after his death. In *We Saw Him Act: A Symposium On The Art of Sir Henry Irving* published in 1939, a point in time when those who had seen Irving on stage were beginning to dwindle in number, Eden Philpotts wrote that Archer 'who so

³² Archer and Lowe, op. cit., p. 3.

³³ Ibid. p. 5

³⁴ Ibid. p. 7

³⁵ Ibid. p. 22

enriched our theatre with Ibsen, decried Irving and proclaimed an intensely feminine streak in all he did – an indictment which we denied and resented'.³⁶ In Irving's performance as Mathias in *The Bells*, the actor's presentation of inner-conflict certainly suggested behaviour that had hysterical overtones. However, Jean-Martin Charcot had not yet begun his public demonstrations in 1871. By 1878, his demonstrations of women showing hysterical symptoms were ongoing and widely-known, and his work *Clinical Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System* was published in English in 1878, the year of Irving's revival of *Hamlet*.

Although Charcot made it clear that hysteria could be suffered by males, the condition was generally associated with females. In the *Clinical Lectures*, Charcot outlined several notable cases of hysteria in women, and included a description of the various points on the body that displayed hysterical symptoms. Hysteria was associated with a lack of control over the body, the mind and even consciousness itself. Women, being considered frail in the construction of their nerves, were more vulnerable to this condition. They were therefore given to sudden moments of change, inconsistency and supposed moral weakness, and they were also capable of falling into states of absence, or trance. Hysteria was also deeply connected to performance. As the editor of the most recent edition of the *Clinical Lectures* in English, Ruth Harris, writes: 'There is no denying that, at least in the elaboration of grand hysteria, Charcot and his associates were most concerned with patients who demonstrated dramatic

³⁶ Saintsbury, op. cit., p. 86.

symptoms'.³⁷ However, as Herbert Sussman argues, male hysteria was conceived in different terms to its female equivalent:

For nineteenth century men, manhood was conceived as an unstable equilibrium of barely-controlled energy that may collapse back into the inchoate flood or fire that limns the innate energy of maleness, into the gender-specific mental pathology that the Victorian saw as male hysteria or male madness.³⁸

Irving's performance of Hamlet can be interpreted as a dramatisation of energy out of control. Just as Irving's Mathias represented the turmoil of the father, torn between the need to provide for his family and the desire to clear his conscience, so the 1874 *Hamlet* presented a son similarly conflicted between duty and morality. In the 1878 version, this changed somewhat, offering heroic duty and romantic love as the contending imperatives at work in the male psyche. The *Pall Mall Gazette* critic focused on Irving's 'weakness or over-exertion', and it is clear that the actor presented male energy in a wayward state, before showing it 'collapsing back' to use Sussman's term. Peter Thomson suggests that Irving could not be disconnected from the characters he portrayed: 'It was through performance that he strove to resolve the inner conflicts that oppressed him. What the Lyceum audiences witnessed, and what the most suggestible of them experienced, was a sort of psychomachia, a struggle

³⁷ Jean-Martin Charcot, *Clinical Lectures of the Nervous System* (London: Routledge, 1990. Reprint.) p. xvi.

³⁸ Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Arts* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008). p.13.

within the psyche'.³⁹ In both of Irving's most successful and most effective roles, Mathias and Hamlet, the actor demonstrated psychological pressure as a process of harrowing, a display of physical suffering caused by inner conflict and its resulting, wild and out of control energies. These physically expressive roles clashed with Irving's off-stage, public presentation of sobriety, calmness and near-monastic devotion to his art, and added to the sense that Irving was secretly incarnating some mysterious or even spiritual power. Irving appeared reclusive even to many of his closest friends, yet he took every opportunity to speak publicly about his art. As James Eli Adams writes in his work on the poetics of Victorian manhood:

Ascetic discipline dictates the presence of an audience: hence the paradox that the central point of the ascetic's desire for self-transcendence, the flesh that he seeks to mortify, becomes the palpable, visual index of spiritual excellence.⁴⁰

Irving was certainly a very public type of ascetic. He presented a scholarly and self-sacrificing public persona via addresses, good works and public lectures. This also served to make his extrovert displays of power on stage appear even more extraordinary. Irving's performances of Mathias and Hamlet showed the journey of the male psyche in a state of crisis, and the subsequent effects upon the body. Both performances ended in the dissipation of astonishing energies in the release of death. For this to work convincingly, the actor's body had to dramatize and incarnate a profound inner crisis. This was the reason for Irving's overwhelming success with

³⁹ Thomson, op. cit., p. 150.

⁴⁰ James Eli Adam, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 35.

audiences who were 'suggestible' to him. Irving was laying bare a problem that affected men during the period: the unbearable pressure of societal expectation. This deeply-felt connection to the central figure of both plays, augmented by a compelling stage spectacle, resulted in the kind of loss of emotional control in audiences that is so commonplace in responses to Irving's work during the 1870s. Bram Stoker's description of their first meeting in Dublin in 1876 is, perhaps, the most detailed description of the process. Although many aspects of Irving's interpretation of the role of Hamlet were undeniably melodramatic, his physical performance had at its heart something far more troubling, and more modern: the realisation of psychological division, breakdown and its effect upon domestic life.

5:7:1 William Winter's Response to Irving

For many watching Irving's work at the Lyceum, it constituted the greatest display of acting they had ever seen. Irving held those members of the audience in his thrall, taking them on emotionally demanding journeys that presented the drama of a tortured mind inscribed upon the body. Its effects upon those who were suggestible to Irving were undeniable, and at their conclusion the release of emotional energy in the form of applause was often described in elemental terms, as a storm, cataract or even a hurricane. Irving dramatised powerful internal forces and, in doing so, drew strong responses from his audiences, too. Eden Philpotts imagined what might have happened if Irving had been able to portray 'the shadowy abstractions of Greek Tragedy' concluding that Irving might have 'risen to stupendous heights of spiritual

significance'.⁴¹ In the same volume of Irving appreciation, Henry W. Nevison wrote of Irving's portrayal of Hamlet: 'Next to Sarah (Bernhardt) he was the greatest actor I have ever seen'.⁴² It is clear that the effects of the Irving Narrative, in operation perhaps from the late 1870s onwards, and the scorn of George Bernard Shaw, have detracted from our appreciation of the unsettling power that Irving displayed in performance, and imparted to a diverse and international audience.

In many respects, the reception to Irving's work in the United States represented the clearest depiction and evaluation of the actor, since these responses were largely disconnected from distinctly English anxieties about Irving's femininity or strangeness. American audiences also had the benefit of seeing different performances in close proximity to one another, a privilege denied to the Lyceum audience, who generally saw long runs of Irving's principal roles. On the 30th October, 1883, Irving performed for the first time in New York with the Lyceum Company. This was the first of eight North-American tours that would conclude in 1904, the year before the actor's death. These tours became increasingly lucrative for Irving, and the tours helped offset growing losses at home as the Lyceum's shows became increasingly lavish and spectacular throughout the 1880s. In 1883, the Lyceum Company opened with *The Bells* at New York's Star Theatre. Upon the next night, Irving appeared as Charles I and then, six days later, as Louis XI, then as Shylock and the double role of Lesurques and Dubosc in Charles Reade's version of *The Lyons Mail*. Doricourt in *The Belle's Stratagem* was also included, a role which required Irving to present a character

⁴¹ Saintsbury, op. cit., p. 86.

⁴² Ibid. p. 88

enacting madness again. In a month-long period, Irving performed twenty nine times, alongside recitations and other engagements. It was a typically punishing and exhausting routine during which the actor displayed modesty and composure in his daily engagements, and extraordinarily expressive performances upon the stage by night. *Hamlet* was not produced in the United States until a year later, in November 1884, by which time Irving had established himself as an important British actor. Laurence Irving describes the responses of American critics to the first tour as being not entirely unlike their British equivalents:

Those, headed by Winter, who hailed his genius with measured eulogies; those who, though conscious of his mannerisms and critical of his eccentricities, were swept away against their better judgement by his manifest power; and those, a small voice in the din of general acclamation, who found him and his company altogether unacceptable .⁴³

William Winter was the senior critic of the *New York Tribune*. He attended all of Irving's performances during the first two tours, and gave a detailed evaluation of them in his work *A Record of Henry Irving's Professional Career Upon the New York Stage and a Study of His Acting*, which was published in the United States in 1885. Winter's reviews of Irving are not uncritical, but they do give a strong sense of the actor's method in plays he developed over time. As I have already stated, American audiences saw the roles of Irving in a compressed state, played together within a

⁴³ Laurence Irving, op. cit., pp. 424-5.

matter of days. Before his review of the first night of *The Bells* in 1883, Winter gave a description of the actor's approach. It is worth quoting at length:

His art methods [...]are affected by physical impediments – visible wherever repression is substituted for utterance, and the shuddering quiver of the quicksand stands for the explosion of the tempest. But- allowing for every physical inadequacy, and looking through all spiritual vagueness and mystery – the sensitive and thoughtful observer cannot fail here to discern a glorious instrument of dramatic emotion, sensitive, tremulous, true, a soul and mind rich in the capacity to feel and to translate the tragic aspects of humanity. And, surely, this in acting is the main thing: not simply a professional skill; not simply a felicity of special effort; but the potency of individual resource.⁴⁴

Winter's description is one of the most interesting, since it was written by an observer who was doubtless 'suggestible' but not entirely uncritical. The collection was gathered shortly after the second American tour, and represents the views of a critic who had seen Irving's performances juxtaposed in a unique way. There is no equivalent of this in the domestic criticism of Henry Irving. The long runs at the Lyceum prevented audiences, except for touring audiences later in Irving's career, from seeing and appreciating the subtle differences in his presentations of characters.

Most importantly, Winter appears to have tacitly understood what Irving was seeking to dramatise upon the stage: the problem of unfocused and uncontrolled

⁴⁴ William Winter, *A Record of Henry Irving's Professional Career Upon the New York Stage and a Study of his Acting* (Memphis: Classic Textbooks, 2010. Reprint), p. 5.

male energy. Winter described Irving's presentation of hysteria, not as a feminine weakness, but as a vibrant and unsettling strength. In Winter's appreciation of *Hamlet*, this awareness on the part of the critic was at its keenest.

Winter saw *Hamlet* at the Star theatre, New York on 27th November, 1884. The critic found the production to be almost-overwhelming and stated that it was 'one of the most difficult to analyze or to describe'.⁴⁵ Winter focused upon Irving himself and gave a detailed description of the actor's approach to the part of Hamlet:

He begins with repose. His level speaking is cleared, measured, even, precise, and always steadily effective. Soon his nervous forces become excited; the imagination, working upon the feelings, throws the whole system into a tremor of emotion; and there upon both his walk and enunciation are in a peculiar way (peculiar and not disagreeable), constricted in some slight degree, by a sort of inflexibility. He now moves a little stiffly. The character and the feeling have obtained control of the man and his intellectual will is forcing the man to become representative and expressive of them.⁴⁶

Winter's description is somewhat similar to the physical symptoms enacted by the female hysteric in the beginning phase of a seizure, which displays a loss of control. Charcot detailed the phases of hysteria in the following, highly theatrical way, giving them a kind of dramatic structure. The first phase, or 'epileptoid', involved convulsions. The second, 'grands movements' phase saw expansive and frequently

⁴⁵ Winter, op. cit., p. 36.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 38

elegant gestures made. In the third phase, 'hallucinatory', visions were experienced and consciousness was lost. The final phase was the 'grand attaque', or terminal delirium. As Claire Kahane argues, the symptoms of the hysterical seizure have an inherently dramatic quality. They have 'structure and spectacle, a sequenced story told through the hysterical body'.⁴⁷

Elaine Aston detects a dramatic structure at work in descriptions of Sarah Bernhardt's performance of Marguerite in *La Dame aux Camellias* in 1881, and suggests that Bernhardt may have been a visitor to Charcot's clinic in Paris.⁴⁸ For Charcot, hysteria represented a type of absence that was more likely to occur in a nervous female body than in a supposedly more robust male one. For male hysterics, vacancy represented a failure to master energy, and to direct it towards a realisable goal or purpose. Irving's portrayal of Hamlet represented a dramatisation of this state. Winter believed that Irving's power as a performer was so great that the actor was involved in a continual battle for self-mastery that he could not always win. When the actor's 'intellectual will' failed, the result was 'a coruscation of ever-changing fires; and the eye knows not where to rest'.⁴⁹ Winter even observed in Irving's Hamlet a quality similar to that described by Sussman: 'a sweet nature, outraged, shocked, and turned back upon itself'.⁵⁰ The blockage and throwing back of energy creates madness and breakdown, which is then realised upon the male body in a stage picture of suffering,

⁴⁷ Claire Kahane, *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative and The Figure of the Speaking Woman 1850-1915* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). p. 79.

⁴⁸ Elaine Aston, 'Studies in hysteria: actress and courtesan, Sarah Bernhardt and Mrs Patrick Campbell' in Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion To The Actress* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007). pp. 253-271.

⁴⁹ Winter, op. cit., p. 39.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

and a process of mortification. Ultimately, for Winter, Irving's performance of male hysteria was neither feminized nor a failure. Winter was prepared to find fault with Irving: 'There was not a perfect correspondence between the actor's ideal of Shakespeare's conception and the actor's faculty of expressing it'.⁵¹ Yet he describes Irving's role in a more complete way than any British critic of the period:

...viewed as an ideal Mr Irving's Hamlet is profoundly true on the side of the emotions; rightly saturated with sorrow; touched with glittering scorn and pathetic bitterness; tainted, as on Shakespeare's page, with the morbid tinge of mental disease; and, above all, and in spite of irregularities of form and excess of impulse over will, it is fused by passionate intensity into one continuous, fluent strain of vital personification.⁵²

Unlike so many British critics, Winter accepted and understood that Irving was dramatising male energy in a state of crisis. He was performing the loss of control, the tension between the requirement of duty for the Victorian male and the needs of physical desire and appetite. The result was a kind of wildness, a display of wayward energies that was both exciting and compelling to those who understood it, or who were suggestible to it. Irving's performance in the role of Hamlet was different from any previous portrayal in that it showed the effect of male energy moving 'back into the inchoate flood', to use Sussman's term, and the loss of control that followed. In Irving's portrayal of both Mathias and Hamlet, he demonstrated this process, showing in the first instance nervous anxiety, then vacancy and the loss of control of the body.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Finally, there was the frenzy of wild energy: in *Hamlet*, this was presented as the expression of love towards Ophelia, and the consequences of its obstruction.⁵³ Irving's ability to display these forces, and then to step back into everyday life, made it possible for his audience to safely enjoy the presentation of extremity. It should be remembered that the gruelling mortification of Mathias in 1871 was followed, moments later, by the actor's reappearance in the role of Jingle. Irving consistently demonstrated his mastery of performance in astonishing ways. His self-fashioning as a humble ascetic preserved clear lines of demarcation between public and private life.

5:9 Conclusion: Henry Irving Reconsidered

The 1878 production of *Hamlet* represented the culmination of Irving's drama of the body. His relationship with the role of Hamlet began at Sadler's Wells in 1850. The Irving Narrative has the realisation of the role as Irving's long-term artistic objective, but it is just as likely that he first saw the possibility of playing the part in 1864 in Manchester. His first performance as Hamlet showed his commitment to Fechter's progressive changes, and the 1874 production at the Lyceum was clearly influenced by Tom Taylor's production at the Crystal Palace in the year before. The 1878 *Hamlet* brought all the elements Irving had developed over fifteen years together. His playing of the role was psychologically credible, and the majority of critics found his playing sufficiently 'natural'. However, as William Winter understood, Irving showed his audience a drama of the body, and a loss of control that was very like a

⁵³ In *The Bells*, the frenzied climax was the struggle with the 'rope' at the play's conclusion.

male version of hysteria. The body became a place for contending emotions, resulting in a kind of vacancy and, ultimately, a violent outpouring of passionate feeling.

In *The Bells*, Irving used specific moments from the Davenport routine to heighten anticipation in the Lyceum audience, before showing the crisis of the psyche inscribed upon the body. In *Hamlet*, the body in crisis was further transformed into the place of obstructed male energy, a form of hysteria. The tormented psyche of a loving son was presented, divided between duty and love, and a process of nervous and increasingly hysterical activity was initiated. The culmination and release of this was Irving's expression of passionate emotion towards Ophelia. It was this drama of contending forces that so compelled those who were suggestible to the work of Henry Irving. Paradoxically, such displays required an extraordinary level of self-control in the performer.

The most important aspect here is the loss of control of the body. It's the dramatic action that connects *The Bells* with both the Lyceum productions of *Hamlet*, in 1874 and 1878. In *The Bells*, Mathias was transformed by Irving's performance into a respectable, and even kindly, village burgomaster. His guilt was established at the end of the play's first act, transforming the play into a kind of harrowing in which conscience wracked the body. Using the techniques of occult performance, Irving prepared his audience for a loss of control that would prove catastrophic for Mathias. As the burgomaster stepped from the domestic world into that of the supernatural court, the patriarch was divested of power. Having already been sealed into a chamber from which there was no escape, Mathias lost his self-control and confessed to his

crime via the process of re-enactment. To Irving's audience, this was a gripping and unsettling spectacle. It suggested, as David Mayer has pointed out, the possibility of other selves and other emotional identities that could manifest themselves at any moment under certain conditions. Irving's version of the play succeeded where F. C. Burnand's had failed because he emphasised the play's tragic dynamic. Indeed, he made it all the more powerful because the burgomaster was so familiar to the audience as a model of good patriarchy. Mathias was this, in all but one aspect. Mathias' mistake was enough to see him tormented and destroyed by concealed forces that were seemingly beyond his comprehension.

The symptoms that wrack Mathias appear to adumbrate demonstrations of the hysterical conditions usually associated with females during the period. In *Hamlet*, especially the 1878 production, Irving offered a version of the dutiful son that rivalled his earlier presentation of a dutiful patriarch. In this instance, the body was placed under intense pressure once again. Irving's *Hamlet* failed to effectively govern the energies that were the source of male power. This led to violent activity juxtaposed with moments of calm and near-absence. As in *The Bells*, the emphasis upon domestic life and its significance, the very real sense of a family upturned and in turmoil, made the drama even more affective to the Lyceum audience. In a description of the 1874 production, Alan Hughes describes a particularly interesting moment regarding the Ghost:

When Hamlet said, 'Look where he goes even now out at the portal', the Queen glimpsed the apparition and screamed. Even this was ambiguous; the *Times*

wondered whether the Ghost was really there, or had Hamlet infected Gertrude with the hysteria?⁵⁴

This gives a very clear reason for Irving's success in the presentation of these roles. He was continually engaging with ideas of loss of physical and mental sovereignty. These were genuine anxieties experienced during the period. How easily might the most respectable person be driven to extremity by a powerful sense of duty; by the need to perform to the very best their designated role within a family or community? The stakes were always high in Irving's dramas. The protagonists he played usually stood to lose everything. Their journey towards that loss involved an emotional connection with the audience. It represented a challenge because it made its subject matter so familiar, and almost everyday. In that respect, it had more in common with aspects of the emerging theatre movements than we presently understand. As Hughes writes of Irving's immediate successors in English acting:

Tree and Martin-Harvey could duplicate the form but not the substance. While they belonged to the past, Irving, who grew out of the past, belonged equally to the future [...] The essential Irving was unlike any predecessor; as an actor, his real successors were Konstantin Stanislavski and even Vsevolod Meyerhold, and as a stage-manager his true disciple was Gordon Craig.⁵⁵

This throws into question the conventional, conservative view of Irving that has become the dominant. Irving was undeniably influenced by anecdotal descriptions of

⁵⁴ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁵⁵ Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp. 242-3.

Kemble, Edmund Kean and Macready, and by his own observation of Samuel Phelps. But he was equally influenced by actors from a European tradition who sought to present Shakespeare's tragedies as complex and involving stories and not simply as opportunities to create a star vehicle. Irving's attitude to the points in *Hamlet*, and the critical response to his decision, proves the actor's boldness and desire to present the play as an entity for its own sake.

The criticism of George Bernard Shaw, which continued beyond Irving's death, has overwritten our understanding of the actor in negative ways. Theatre historians have often placed Henry Irving in direct opposition to the works of Henrik Ibsen, and the development of plays that addressed matters of social concern. Irving's resistance to this material is, perhaps, the single most powerful reason for his continued misclassification today. Irving's preoccupation with spectacle has supported Shaw's cause, and the productions of *Faust* and *King Arthur* contributed little to the drama of psychomachia. These later dramas appear to have avoided such complex forms of engagement entirely. However, in his early work, Irving showed his capacity to both challenge and entertain his audience and to dramatise crisis in a compelling way. The actor Marius Goring described the opening night of *The Bells* as a landmark: 'a revolution in the English theatre took place and an audience, already weary of stereotyped melodrama in Red Barns and Barber Shops, first peered into the labyrinths of Dostoyevsky and Freud'.⁵⁶ Irving deserves more credit as an artist who contributed to theatrical modernism. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will consider why Irving

⁵⁶Mayer, op. cit., pp. xi-xii

retreated from his own drama of the body in crisis, and looked increasingly to the realisation of the spectacular stage picture.

Chapter Six

After Hamlet: Irving Miscast?

6:1 After Hamlet

The 1878 *Hamlet* represented the high-point of Henry Irving's drama of psychomachia, to use Thomson's term. From this point onwards, Irving took fewer risks creatively and failed to develop the performance of the suffering body, despite retaining *The Bells* in his repertoire. This chapter will endeavour to explain this restriction of Irving's approach. It will also consider Irving's relationship with the work of Henrik Ibsen. Irving's understanding, or misunderstanding, of Ibsen is one of the factors that most strongly identifies the actor as an opponent of progressive theatrical movements. I will consider the adversarial position that Irving adopted via the *Addresses* of the 1880s and offer a revised version of his relationship to Ibsen's work.

6:2 Faust

On 12th November 1885, Irving's production of *Faust* opened at the Lyceum. It was based upon part one of Goethe's poem, and had been adapted by Irving's house playwright, W.G. Wills. Bram Stoker gleefully describes the production's extraordinary success:

Altogether it was performed in London five hundred and seventy-seven times; in the provinces one hundred and twenty-eight times; and in America eighty-

seven times. In all seven hundred and ninety-two times, to a total amount of receipts of over a quarter of a million pounds sterling.¹

The play was a benchmark for the use of technology in theatrical production. Stoker continues:

The fight between Faust and Valentine – with Mephistopheles in his supposed invisible quality interfering – was the first time when electric flashes were used in a play. This effect was arranged by Colonel Gouraud, Edison's partner, who kindly interested himself in the matter. Twenty years ago electric energy, in its playful aspect, was in its infancy; and the way in which the electricity was carried so as to produce the full effects without the possibility of danger to the combatants was then considered very ingenious. Two iron plates were screwed upon the stage at a given distance so that at the time of fighting each of the swordsmen would have his right boot on one of the plates, which represented an end of the interrupted current. A wire was passed up the clothing of each from the shoe to the outside of the india rubber glove, in the palm of which was a piece of steel. Thus when each held his sword a flash came whenever the swords crossed.²

The visual effect astonished audiences. Interestingly, Irving employed the magician J. M. Maskelyne as his consultant for the illusions in *Faust*. Maskelyne had, of course, replicated the effects used by the Davenport brothers one year after Irving, Day and

¹ Stoker, op. cit., p.175.

² Ibid., p.176.

Maccabe's burlesque in Manchester. As Jeffrey Richards has written: 'Audiences loved it, responding to the spectacle, the performances and the message. Alongside *The Bells*, and unlike *Vanderdecken*, *Eugene Aram* and *The Iron Chest*, it remained in the repertoire until almost the end'. However, as was often the case with Irving's work, the production deeply divided critics.³ Some praised the play for its depiction of evil and its message: the need to be morally resolute. By contrast, Henry James offered a withering indictment of Irving's production in an article in *Century* magazine, published in December 1887.

James regularly criticised Irving's work, and was one of a small but influential group of writers who generally disapproved of the Lyceum's output. Whereas Shaw viewed Irving as an opponent of a credible and realistic stage world, James saw Irving as a kind of anaesthetist of the imagination, providing such a vast amount of spectacle upon the stage that audiences became passive and mentally inert. However, James's criticism of *Faust* went beyond this, and fundamentally attacked Irving's understanding of Goethe's poem. Wills' adaptation was attacked as being 'so meagre, so common, so trivial'.⁴ This supposedly empty drama was located 'in the midst of the wilderness of canvas and paint'.⁵ Even Ellen Terry could not escape the critic's scorn. James wrote of her performance as Margaret:

Besides having a strange amateurishness of form (for the work of an actress who has had Miss Terry's years of practice), it is, to our sense, wanting in

³ Richards, op. cit., p. 417.

⁴ Rowell, op. cit., pp. 126

⁵ Ibid.

fineness of conception, wanting in sweetness and quietness, wanting in taste. It is much too rough-and-ready.⁶

However, the worst condemnation was reserved for Irving's portrayal of Mephistopheles. According to James, Irving's portrayal lacked any discernible substance or depth. Effects had been used as a masking device, a way of hiding the lack of true connection with the arguments of Goethe's work:

That blue vapours should attend on the steps of Mephistopheles is a very poor substitute for his giving us a moral shudder. That deep note is entirely absent from Mr Irving's rendering of him, though the actor, of course, at moments presents to the eye a remarkably sinister figure. He strikes us, however, as superficial – a terrible fault for an archfiend – and his grotesqueness strikes us as cheap. We attach also but the slenderest importance to the scene of the Witches' Sabbath, which has been reduced to a mere bald hubbub of capering, screeching, and banging, irradiated by the irrepressible blue fire, and without the smallest articulation of Goethe's text.⁷

6:2:1 Mephistopheles or Faust?

After the extraordinary success of *Hamlet*, Henry Irving might have been expected to develop the drama of the body further. In the case of both *The Bells* and *Hamlet*, Irving had presented the male body undergoing profound psychological pressure, leading to vacancy and a loss of control. In proposing a production of

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.128.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Goethe's poem, one role stands out as being Irving's casting. It is the central role of Faust. The character contains many of the qualities associated with his casting during the period. Faust is a priest and scholar. He is troubled by overwhelming desires and undergoes internal conflict or psychomachia. And yet Irving chose not to play this role, but instead to take the part of the devil, Mephistopheles. This decision requires some consideration.

Accounting for Irving's decision in 1885 takes us, inevitably, into the realms of speculation. Irving had not generally fared well when attempting to perform roles of absolute villainy. He preferred the dramatisation of conscience and its impact upon the body. In this sense, he was at his best when performing change, the villain's recovery of conscience, or the good man's fall into an error of judgement, usually made to protect the family. Mephistopheles offers a sense of melancholy – a quality Winter isolated as a particular strength of Irving – yet the part offers little opportunity for change. The devil here is already fallen, not tempted, and presents throughout the play as a suave emissary of the seductive qualities of the material world. The role of Faust, which entailed acting several scenes with Ellen Terry, was not selected. It was initially given to the actor H.B. Conway, but he appears to have suffered an overwhelming attack of nerves on the first night of the play, and was replaced by George Alexander, originally cast in the role of Valentine, for the remainder of the run.

The press response to *Faust* was generally very positive. According to the *Standard*, the play offered, in its scene on the Brocken 'the most startling and exciting

scene of the kind that the English stage has ever produced'.⁸ Several critics noted a shift in the significance of the roles in Wills' adaptation, from Alexander's Faust to Irving's Mephistopheles, which was not particularly well-received. The *Morning Post* wrote that 'In the precedence of characters there is no doubt a change, Mephistopheles being now so much a more important person than Faust that the play might be more fitly named after the former'.⁹ The *Pall Mall Gazette* praised Irving, but appeared to endorse the response of Henry James to a degree: 'Saturday's audience accepted with enthusiasm the brilliant entertainment provided by Mr Irving without considering it too closely from the point of view of literature'.¹⁰

6:2:2 An Occult Body

The hiring of J.M. Maskelyne shows that Irving's interest in the phenomena of occult performance had not diminished since the Davenport burlesques of twenty years previously. In *Faust*, Irving got the opportunity to create a variety of illusions that stunned audiences and baffled critics. James mentions the blue flames that appeared everywhere during the production, but the strangest effects emanated from the body of Irving's devil. Ellen Terry, did not care for Wills' version of the poem or for Irving's portrayal of Mephistopheles, calling it 'a two pence coloured part'.¹¹ Yet she was awe-struck by the phenomena created in the production: 'when he wrote in the student's book, "Ye shall be as gods knowing good and evil" he never looked at the book, and

⁸ Unsigned review, *Standard*, 21st December 1885.

⁹ Unsigned review, *Morning Post*, 22nd December 1885.

¹⁰ Unsigned review, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21st December 1885.

¹¹ Terry, op. cit. p. 243.

the nature of the spirit appeared suddenly in a most uncanny fashion'.¹² At the point where Mephistopheles asserts his authority as a spirit over the rebellious Faust, Terry wrote: 'Henry looked to grow a gigantic height – to hover over the ground instead of walking on it. It was terrifying'.¹³ Irving's devil presented a range of phenomena associated with occult performance, including levitation, the production of light and flame, 'psychic force' (as William Crookes had termed telekinesis in 1870) and elongation of the figure. Techniques of mediumship were, with the advice of Maskelyne, designed, made more elaborate and imported into a work of serious literature. In many respects, Irving's production of *Faust* sums up the combination of physically thrilling visual spectacle within a supposed literary framework that characterised the actor's approach during this period. Henry James, like Shaw, disapproved, but *Faust* was Irving's greatest box office success.

6:3 The Magical Body Untransformed

Mephistopheles represented a movement away from the radical approaches that had characterised Irving's early years at the Lyceum. At the time of *The Bells* in 1871 he was a salaried actor. By 1874, he was very much the leading actor in the company, still under the management of the Batemans. By the time of the 1878 *Hamlet*, he was the manager of the theatre with all the attendant financial pressures and risks. Refurbishment of the house had led to his taking on significant amounts of debt, and the staff of the theatre had risen in number to over 600. As an actor who had worked his way up in the profession, Irving was very much aware of the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

consequences of financial failure. This is not to endorse the insistent high stakes and happy endings of the Irving Narrative, but rather to acknowledge the pragmatic and shrewd qualities that Irving had displayed in reworking his casting from the mid-1860s onwards. It is possible that, with the burdens of management upon his shoulders, Irving could not commit as he once had done to the gruelling processes of bodily transformation. As Ellen Terry, Edward Gordon-Craig, Eric Jones-Evans and Martin-Harvey all attest, Irving's commitment to the physical realisation of a role was total and gruelling in its intensity. From 1878 onwards, it is possible that he simply lacked the energy to perform as he had once done. Irving, of course, went on to perform several major Shakespearean roles, but none required the same level of energy, or generated the same depth of response from his audience, as Mathias and Hamlet. Irving ceased to show his audience the journey, and instead focused upon the realisation of an overwhelming spectacle.

Irving's casting of himself as Mephistopheles therefore makes some sense. The role was villainous and allowed its creator to display a sinister comic élan – even Henry James acknowledges this - without the punishing process of psychological vacancy, collapse and death. Most interestingly, it allowed Irving to indulge in a form of presentation he had valued since his encounter with the Davenports in 1865: the magical body. This type of performance contained the suggestion that the body held some secret, mysterious power that could be unleashed under the correct conditions. Once William Fay sealed the Davenports into their chamber, a pause ensued, the lights were darkened, and astonishing activity generally ensued. This involved the production

of lights, disembodied arms, and the throwing of articles out of the cabinet and around the séance room. In the criticism of Henry James, we see a familiar type of response to the work of Irving by an author who faults the work for its vulgarity, for simply not being high-minded enough. However, as Jeffrey Richards suggests, the majority of audiences were enthralled by the orchestration of theatrical elements and the sense of immersion in a world that seemed at times to be a kind of dreamscape. Despite Irving's continual attempts at re-fashioning, his attachment to the business of Shakespearean reclamation and courting of academics, his instincts remained overwhelmingly theatrical and not literary. Irving sought to create astonishing and immersive moments of drama that were, primarily, visual. Irving's version of *Faust* was spectacular and gripping, but it lacked engagement with the thematic depths of the poem. However, it was hugely popular with a diverse and growing audience. Irving's choice to play Mephistopheles showed a commitment to the instincts that motivated him most strongly, but also saw the end of the enacting of the psychomachia. He would not connect with the anxieties of his audience again in such a way, except in the playing of Mathias, which he continued to perform even in his final years. The realisation of dreamscapes, without the nightmarish qualities of breakdown and collapse, would constitute the output of the Lyceum in its final decade of his management. However, the dreamscape was not necessarily without its own aesthetic merits.

6:4 King Arthur

Such a dreamscape constituted one of the Lyceum's greatest box-office successes, *King Arthur*. Irving made a number of attempts to commission an Arthurian drama, approaching Tennyson, who did not accept the Lyceum's offer. He then commissioned Wills, but did not find that his version offered sufficient opportunities. Finally, he hired Joseph Comyns Carr, and produced his version of the myth in 1895. Although not reaching the level of success enjoyed by *Faust*, *King Arthur* played for a hundred and five performances at the Lyceum, twelve on tour in Britain and seventy four in America. Irving recruited the artist Edward Burne-Jones to design the scenery and costumes, and commissioned a musical score from Arthur Sullivan. Stoker described the extraordinary world Burne-Jones realised on the Lyceum stage:

To my own mind it was the first time that what must in reality be a sort of fairyland was represented as an actuality. Some of the scenes were of transcendent beauty, notably that called "The Whitethorn Wood." The scene was all green and white – the side of a hill thick with blossoming thorn through which, down a winding path, came a bevy of maidens in flowing garments of tissue which seemed to sway and undulate with every motion and breath of air. There was a daintiness and a sense of purity about the whole scene which was very remarkable.¹⁴

The 'fairyland' described by Stoker was perhaps influenced by Phelps' Sadler's Wells production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, presented during the period when Irving

¹⁴ Stoker, op. cit., p. 254.

first lived in London and began attending the theatre. This type of supernatural location had also been presented in Act Three of *The Bells*, but here Irving had used the full resources under his control to create a stage location that was in its entirety a kind of other world. Kate Terry Gielgud praised the staging of *King Arthur*: 'The Lyceum is perhaps the only theatre in which such a theme as this could be handled with due effect – the poetry, the chivalry, the romance, above all the picturesqueness of the subject fully appreciated and reverently treated'.¹⁵ However, she found Irving's version of the character of King Arthur somewhat difficult to believe in. Her criticisms were familiar: 'There is a lack of robustness, of virility in the King's careworn face'.¹⁶ Irving struggled to portray the young Arthur, for obvious reasons, and realised the part best in the scenes that showed the break-up of the Round Table. Although she praised the quality of the production highly, Kate Terry Gielgud concluded of its atmosphere 'It is always the same bloodlessness and asceticism that strikes me'.¹⁷ Irving had ceased to dramatise the process of change that characterised his greatest successes of the 1870s.

After Irving's production of *Hamlet* in 1878, *Faust* and *King Arthur* represented two of his greatest successes, yet both lacked the focus upon the body and its transformation that his greatest acting successes displayed. In both plays, a case can be made for Irving being miscast, or rather, miscasting himself. The obvious part for Irving in *Faust* was the lead role, since he is a character who makes a choice to advance himself, seeks to travel beyond mortal limits, and undergoes a series of supernatural

¹⁵ Kate Terry Gielgud, quoted in Richards, pp. 28-29.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

encounters that produce a terrible effect upon his physical self. Irving excelled at the performance of transformation, and yet he failed to take that opportunity in *Faust*, choosing instead to portray the spectacular but unchanging Mephistopheles. This decision is hard to understand, given his previous successes. In *King Arthur*, produced when Henry Irving was approaching the age of fifty-seven, the role that would have seemed most appropriate is that of Merlin, a mysterious character who embodies supernatural power and uses it on occasion for questionable purposes. Like Mephistopheles, Merlin would have offered Irving the ability to perform the magical body without the process of psychological harrowing. He is not the lead, but is central to the action, effectively setting the story in motion. *King Arthur* was the lead role, allowing Irving to meet audience expectation as the star of the Lyceum and to appear in a patriotic leadership role that reflected his desire to be considered as the leader of the profession in England. The casting is therefore explicable. But *Faust* remains a somewhat baffling choice of role. Irving's performance as the conflicted philosopher would have stood at the heart of the spectacle, with his terrible bargain generating a dramatic version of the crisis that Irving had performed so well elsewhere.

6:5 Abandoning the Magical Body

It is undoubtedly true that Irving became preoccupied with the realisation of lavish spectacle. The fact that he chose to recruit Maskelyne to the creative team at the Lyceum shows that his interest in the techniques of occult performance was still present. And yet, in *Faust*, it is hard to get away from James' scathing observation that the actual dramatic action had been replaced by a performance 'in the spirit of a

somewhat refined extravaganza'.¹⁸ It may be that Irving, although never truly departing from the centre of the stage, took less gruelling roles in order to take an even greater hand in creating stage pictures, which audiences seemed to have considered exquisite. Indeed, the box office success of these productions cannot be overlooked. In *King Arthur*, the staging of the 'fairyland' described by Stoker was breathtaking. Yet the complete and detailed representation of this world appears to have taken precedence over the drama of the body and its realisation.

Irving's greatest strength was the enactment of change. When portraying fixed roles, he was not able to take his audience on the journey that characterised his greatest acting successes. As I have stated, the pressures of management and its responsibilities probably weighed heavily on him, and led him to create increasing spectacular productions that would attract large audiences. But it is also possible that to continue developing the drama of the psychomachia, with its connection to male hysteria, was too much of an artistic risk for a man who was committed to courting social elites, and preoccupied with leadership of the theatre and the idea of respectability. Consciously or unconsciously, Henry Irving turned away from the approach that made his work as a performer so physically extraordinary in favour of a series of expensive and beautiful stage pictures.

6:6 Henry Irving and Henrik Ibsen

By the late-1880s, Henry Irving was established as the pre-eminent English actor-manager of the period. He was often identified as the leader of his profession,

¹⁸ Rowell, op. cit., p. 126

and increasingly styled himself in this way, supporting his stage appearances with lectures and addresses to various august bodies in Britain and North America. It was during this period that he first encountered the work of Henrik Ibsen. Irving's understanding of Ibsen, or rather, his misunderstanding and even ignorance of Ibsen, is one of the principal reasons why Irving is considered a reactionary opponent of new and supposedly progressive movements in the theatre. Yet there are common territories in their respective artistic backgrounds that link actor and playwright. In this section, I will explore the points of connection.

I will begin this reconsideration by outlining Ibsen's relationship with English writers and actors prior to the controversial London production of *Ghosts* in 1891. I will then consider the critical reaction to Ibsen in context, particularly Irving's response to the London productions of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*.

6:6:1 Ibsen in England

Prior to the London productions of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* in 1889 and 1891 respectively, the works of Henrik Ibsen were not very well known in England. When these plays were first professionally presented, opinion of them was strongly divided. As Tracy C. Davis has written in *Critical and Popular Reaction to Ibsen in England 1872-1906*:

Two types of nineteenth century English commentary on Ibsen are available: reprints of reviews by the 'new critics' Archer, Walkley, Shaw, Grein and Beerbohm, and the pithy apothegms by Clement Scott and other anti-Ibsen 'old

critics'. The sound and laudatory judgements of the former are weighted against the spiteful and reactionary assertions of the latter which, although indicative only of reaction to the initial performance of *Ghosts*, are usually mistaken as representative of critical and popular response to all of Ibsen's plays throughout the Victorian period.¹⁹

In the wake of the controversy caused by the productions of *A Doll's House*, George Bernard Shaw published his essay *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891. Shaw's defence of Ibsen's work met a response from Henry Irving via two speeches given by the actor in Liverpool and Glasgow, the texts of which have been preserved. These *Addresses* represent a problem for the scholar, since it is unclear if they are the work of Irving, Bram Stoker, L. F. Austin or a combination of the three. As Jeffrey Richards has written:

both speeches...have lengthy hand-written interpolations in both Irving's and Stoker's hands, suggesting they were continually being revised and updated in the light of fresh developments'.²⁰

The *Addresses* need careful consideration, since they represent the first evidence of Irving interacting with the work of Ibsen, or rather, his idea of what Ibsen's writing represented.²¹ It should be emphasised here that Irving was not a 'literary' actor. He attempted to obtain such a reputation via his relationship with the Shakespearean

¹⁹ Tracy C. Davis, *Critical and Popular Responses to Ibsen 1873-1906*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick, 1985. p. xii

²⁰ Richards (ed.), *Sir Henry Irving: Theatre, Culture and Society*. p.131.

²¹ It is unclear as to whether or not Irving had seen an Ibsen play. According to Laurence Irving, he attended the 1889 production of *A Doll's House* in London, with Janet Achurch as Nora. However, Irving speaks in the *Addresses* as though he had not seen Ibsen's work.

scholar Frank Marshall and his subsequent attempts to connect himself with a perceived movement of reclamation. Yet Irving's instincts were undeniably melodramatic and actorly. He was driven by the need to find roles that could accommodate his extraordinary physicality. He therefore selected and commissioned plays as vehicles for himself, and the physical embodiment of a role was generally the key to the artistic success of any Lyceum production. Irving's relationship with literature, especially foreign literature in translations by men who had been previously hostile to him critically, was not particularly well-developed.

In the first *Address*, given in Liverpool at the Adelphi Hotel, at a reception by the Philomathic Society on 14th October 1891, Irving chose to engage with Shaw's suggestion that English actors needed to change their working methods in order to perform Ibsen's work successfully. Irving's response suggests that he had little or no direct relationship with Shaw's actual text. He does not name Shaw, referring to the author of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* as an 'authority'. Irving's tone is scornful and occasionally sarcastic:

I understand from this authority that one of the qualifications for playing Ibsen is to have no fear of making yourself "acutely ridiculous" and I can easily believe that the exponent of Ibsen is not troubled by that kind of trepidation'.²²

Irving's response is revealing in several ways. It suggests that, by this time, he viewed himself not simply as the leader of the profession, but as the protector of English theatrical integrity against undermining foreign influences. It also shows his growing

²² Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

concern with the idea of dignity upon the stage. In his earlier roles he had, of course, played comic parts. But, from his arrival at the Lyceum onwards, he became increasingly interested in portraying characters of status, characters that lost positions of high social standing through a process of psychomachia that impacted powerfully upon the body. Irving occasionally performed in comedy, in roles that were established in his repertoire, or in the works of Shakespeare. Irving saw Ibsen, via his advocate Shaw, as the enemy of the poetic, physically picturesque and actor-centred form of performance that he viewed himself as exclusively representing by the 1890s.

In the second *Address*, given at the Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts on 27th November, 1891, Irving developed his theme, and turned his fire on the Independent Theatre and its Dutch producer, J. T. Grein. He refers to their work as ‘imported goods’, and again without naming Shaw, refers to the Norwegian playwright’s ‘prophets’:

Ibsen, it is said, is in the future to be our dramatic teacher, and I learn from one of his prophets that his plays have abolished God, duty, the devotion of a mother to her children, and the obligation of man to his fellow man.²³

This new literature placed itself fundamentally in opposition to ‘British codes of morals, manners, and social usage’.²⁴

From the text of this *Address*, it appears likely that Irving’s view of Henrik Ibsen’s work was not drawn from any first hand encounter. It, therefore, represented an

²³ Ibid., p. 134.

²⁴ Ibid.

accumulation of prejudice on the actor's part, possibly allied to his own insecurities about literature that did not offer a starring part for him. Neither Irving nor Clement Scott wanted to be seen as necessarily opposing innovation, and in Scott's outraged response to the English production of Ibsen's *Ghosts* in 1891, the critic wrote:

Was not Robertson in his light and delicate way an opponent of stupid and obstinate convention? Were not the Bancrofts the prime movers of the unconventional school of pleasant comedy? Has not Henry Irving been the most unconventional manager and actor in the century?²⁵

Irving had indeed been radical and groundbreaking in his performance choices up until the beginning of the 1880s, when, I suggest, he began to accept the press's suggestion that he was the 'leader' of the acting profession. Irving's craving for status and respectability has allowed his nuanced and complex history to be overwritten by both his admirers and his detractors, each offering a wildly different version of the actor to aid their respective causes. However, if we consider the Irving of *The Bells* and *Hamlet* in isolation for a moment, we are able to disconnect from unhelpful narratives of hagiography and invective and see the innovative nature of Irving's creative decisions. His relationship with the work of Ibsen was, in all likelihood, based on second hand reports, and heavily influenced by Ibsen's connection to Archer and Shaw. Thomas Postlewait states that Irving's relationship to the work of Ibsen was further affected by the fact that he had given the actors Janet Achurch and Charles Charrington the money to stage a play entitled *Clever Alice*, but they had used the gift

²⁵ Clement Scott, *Illustrated London News*, 21st March 1891.

of £100 to stage *A Doll's House*: 'his anger over the behaviour of Charrington and Achurch surely complicates our neat category of negative reviews'.²⁶ Irving's relationship to the works of Ibsen was complicated by a number of factors. It was far from simple, yet it has frequently been simplified by critics of Irving.

Irving was aware of the challenge offered by works of theatrical realism, and the requirement of a contemporary setting. He therefore attempted to meet this challenge without reducing his own status within a production. However, his attempts to do this were not entirely successful.

6:7 The Medicine Man

In 1898, seven years after the controversy regarding Ibsen's *Ghosts* in London, Irving agreed to take the role of Dr. Tregenna in the play *The Medicine Man* by H.D. Traill and Robert Hitchens. According to Bram Stoker, Irving had 'contracted on reading the scenario' in 1897.²⁷ Although melodramatic in its central concerns, the play had a contemporary setting and did not attempt any spectacular or subjective transformations. The character of Tregenna is an unscrupulous doctor who manipulates vulnerable individuals, luring them to his clinic in Hampstead and attaining control over them. In his first appearance, Tregenna seems to be a virtuous figure, as he breaks up an incident of domestic violence in Whitechapel. However, Tregenna is soon revealed to be villainous. He abuses his powers of mesmerism in order to gain control of his subjects. These include the vulnerable aristocrat Sylvia

²⁶ Postlewait, op. cit., p. 134.

²⁷ Stoker, op. cit. p. 266.

Wynford, played by Ellen Terry. In order to revenge himself upon her father, Tregenna sets out to drive Sylvia mad. The critic of the *Era* endeavoured to be supportive, making it clear how eagerly the production had been anticipated:

The appearance for the first time for many years of Sir Henry Irving on stage in modern dress; the anticipation of weirdness created by the title of the piece, and by what was known of its nature, and the literary reputations of the authors combined to raise expectations to a high degree. Ever since the experiments of Dr. Charcot and other French scientists established the power of ‘suggestion’ and ‘influence’ in certain organisations, fiction has frequently used ‘will power’ as a motive for a novel or a play.²⁸

The play had a number of detailed and realistic settings, which the critic described favourably, including the interior of the University House and Tregenna’s treatment rooms in Hampstead, known as The Retreat. Although Irving acted well, the play offered ‘little profundity or variety, and what emotion it contains – as in the occasional throes of distress and remorse felt by the Doctor – does not touch one too deeply’.²⁹ Ellen Terry was singled out for her powerful enactment of Sylvia’s entranced state. She acted ‘simply, poetically, impressively’.³⁰ Irving was exempted from blame by the critic for the production’s failure to completely engage. It was ‘the fault of the authors and not the actor, who has chiefly to depict throughout a polished, intellectual

²⁸ Unsigned review, *Era*, 7th May 1898.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

insensibility'.³¹ However, the *Morning Post* critic was less inclined to be charitable: 'It is hard to say, after last night's performance, who is most to be pitied, the unfortunate audience, the unfortunate actors, or the unfortunate authors'.³² The play was 'an outrage to an intelligent audience' that did not know if it was intended as a burlesque or not.³³ The critic suspected that: 'The authors may have supposed that they were merely laughing at 'Trilby', but the essence of that sort of fun consists in it being evident to an audience, and last night the audience was mystified and displeased'.³⁴ The *Era's* review, and account of Irving's closing speech and reception, suggests that responses to the play were mixed, and far from entirely negative. It is, of course, highly unlikely that Irving intended to present a burlesque. The play undoubtedly engaged with an anxiety familiar to Irving's audience: the possibility of mental absence and loss of control. Yet although Irving established that his character had power, its nature was never really specified. Irving had again shifted his casting, as in *Faust*, from controlled to controller. But he did not present clearly the mechanism or ritual of such control. As S. R. Littlewood, the critic of the *Morning Leader* wrote:

I think the play might be more explicit in these details with great advantage – Tregenna does nothing with them beyond aweing them with his personality and getting their minds into complete subjugation to him.³⁵

Littlewood, an admirer of Irving, was reduced to describing the actor's costumes in the production:

³¹ Ibid.

³² Unsigned review, *Morning Post*, 7th May 1898.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ S.R.Littlewood, *Morning Leader*, 6th May 1898.

Sir Henry, by the way, wears all the suits of the day, from morning to night – serge reefer, velvet jacket, grey frock, immaculate swallow-tail. Otherwise he makes no attempt to appear as other men are. The marvellous face is, all through, framed in the rough-lying hair just over the collar that we know so well.³⁶

It is clear from Littlewood's description that Irving could not easily find a way of appearing in dramas that required a more even-handed approach and a conventional or contemporary setting. Irving's most successful roles demanded that his body be the central focus of audience attention. *The Medicine Man* could not be termed a realistic play, but it required that a recognisable, contemporary environment be placed upon the stage. Irving, with his own physicality removed from the foreground, could not make this work a success. The play failed financially and was withdrawn from the repertoire after only twenty-four performances. Three years previously, Herbert Beerbohm Tree had succeeded in the play *Trilby*, taking the role of Svengali. But Irving could not replicate this success because *The Medicine Man* did not permit the use of occult techniques beyond the rather vague concept of 'mastery' over another person's mind. In a contemporary setting, and without the pacing, technique and spectacle of occult performance, Irving could not entirely convince as Tregenna. The dramatisation of Svengali's mind control in *Trilby* showed that it was still possible to put such phenomena upon the stage, but Irving required more than this: he required the creation of fully-fledged spectacular episodes such as the supernatural court in *The Bells* or the Ghost's appearances in *Hamlet*. Such illusions, as I have shown, were

³⁶ Ibid.

generally moving out of theatrical fashion at the end of the nineteenth century, despite the fact that they thrived in the literature of the period. The *Morning Post's* critic suggested that the *The Medicine Man* was parodying 'the production upon the stage of morbidity and horrors'³⁷, yet it seems more likely that Irving, in attempting to reproduce the kind of sensational response secured in *The Bells*, had misread changing tastes. Tree had shown that specific types of occult performance, with clear processes displayed, could still grip an audience and engage with their fears, but Irving could not perform this without the picturesque elements that he had come to rely upon.

The Medicine Man was clearly not the abject failure that some critics claimed it to be. Indeed, carefully considered, it appears as a genuine attempt to contribute to the genre of late-melodrama in an interesting way. It shows the power of the therapist as untrustworthy and questions the position of the scientist who divorces himself from conscience and the common good and acts singularly in his own interests. But Irving, even when in everyday dress, always brought with him the picturesque associations of his previous, spectacular, work. As with the productions of *Faust* and *King Arthur*, Irving's selection of role denied him the opportunity to develop the drama of psychomachia, and in this case also removed him from the spectacular contexts of his greatest box office successes.

6:8 Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have attempted to describe and account for Henry Irving's failure to develop the drama of bodily crisis. I have attributed his conservative

³⁷ *Morning Post*, op. cit.

decisions to a number of factors. I have also sought to clarify the relationship between Henry Irving and the works of Henrik Ibsen.³⁸ Henry Irving, by the 1890s, had become strongly associated with the British establishment. In 1895, he accepted a knighthood. Productions such as *A Story of Waterloo*, produced in 1894, and *King Arthur*, produced in 1895, were unapologetically patriotic and even jingoistic. Irving was inclined to resist any work that was too closely associated with his critics, especially Shaw. But arguments for a more progressive and influential Irving cannot be won here. It is the Irving who underwent a complex series of changes in casting in the 1860s, who made the body the centre of powerful contending forces in *The Bells*, and offered a vision of embodied male hysteria in *Hamlet* in the 1870s, that offers the key to a revised view of the actor. Irving's boldness in his approach to staging plays has been widely accepted, but his physical approach has been largely neglected for reasons I have described. Irving was, of course, heavily influenced by melodrama, but he also understood its limitations. Via collaboration with the text and the application of techniques learned in occult performance, Irving was able to create in *The Bells* a shocking and original spectacle of crisis and collapse that advanced the possibilities of melodrama.

The 1878 production of *Hamlet* was the high-point of Irving's artistic career in many respects, combining elements of performance in a unique and sophisticated way to create a highly original version of Shakespeare's tragedy. However, for complex reasons I have sought to describe, Irving found the enacting of psychological pressure inscribed upon the body difficult to sustain and develop. In the production of Wills' version of Goethe's *Faust*, commissioned by Irving and with the part of

³⁸ The relationship is considered further in the appendix to the thesis.

Mephistopheles deliberately written up, the actor shifted his casting from controlled to controller. With the help of J.M. Maskelyne, he again presented a magical body with all its attendant effects, but the processes of change and transformation that so gripped audiences in the previous decade were reduced and finally abandoned. Attempts to show aspects of the magical body, realised in a contemporary framework in *The Medicine Man*, failed because of Irving's associations with the spectacular aspects of occult performance. Although some elements of the occult, such as mesmerism, could still be presented on the stage, the visually spectacular version of the occult was generally in decline at the close of the nineteenth century. Irving's response in his final years was to fall back on the realisation of astonishing and beautiful stage pictures, realised via the sophisticated application of technology.

Conclusion:

Henry Irving Re-Visited

This thesis has proposed that the career of Henry Irving has been misunderstood and misrepresented in the histories of nineteenth-century theatre. Shaw's pre-eminence as an artist of modernity has led to an acceptance of his view of Irving. This has detracted from the fact that Irving was a startlingly original performer who drew from previous acting traditions, melodramatic performance and occult presentations to create a drama that focused upon the crisis of the body under extreme psychological stress. Irving's audience, for the most part, found this psychomachia to be an extraordinary and compelling spectacle. It is true, of course, that Irving became seen as the leader of the acting profession in Britain from the 1880s onwards, and appeared happy to be considered as such. He grew close to those in power and was eventually knighted by Queen Victoria in 1895. But this adoption by the establishment should not be permitted to overwrite the originality and power of Henry Irving's work, particularly the performances at the Lyceum in the 1870s. As Alan Hughes has observed: 'How many of us have ever been part of an audience which was simply compelled to leap to its feet and cheer for twenty minutes, as sometimes happened at the Lyceum?'¹

¹ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

Such a response suggests a powerful, emotional release. In 1939, James Agate, a former critic of the *Sunday Times* wrote that, although he did not regard *The Bells* as great literature:

I would rather see the old man in it than any ten of today's young men playing *Oedipus, Lear*, and the entire classical repertory. In my considered view great acting in this country died with Irving, and I haven't seen smell or sight or hearing or feel or taste of it since. If our young playgoers saw Irving they would burst like electric-light bulbs.²

As I have demonstrated, pro-Irving accounts were exaggerated by the passing of time and the influence of the Irving Narrative. But is important that we do not lose sight of the sheer power Irving was able to demonstrate in performance. Agate's response is not an isolated one. The vast majority of eye-witness accounts of Irving dwell upon his presence, power and ability to involve his audience deeply in the drama. As Agate's comments suggest, Irving was a performer who seems to have demanded a full sensory immersion in the drama he created. His work was not speculative, or particularly cerebral, despite his attempts to secure academic and intellectual credibility. It presented the body at the mercy of contending forces. This physical presentation drew a similar level of commitment from the audience. It is worth quoting Craig at some length here as he describes the moments after Mathias first hears the bells:

² Saintsbury, op. cit., p. 45.

A long pause, endless, breaking our hearts, comes down over everything, and on go these bells. Puzzled, motionless...he glides up to a standing position: never has any one seen another rising figure which slid slowly up like that. With one arm slightly raised, with sensitive hand speaking of far-off apprehended sounds, he asks, in the voice of some woman who is frightened yet does not wish to frighten those with her: "Don't you...don't you hear the sound of sledge bells on the road?" "Sledge bells?" grumbles the smoking man; "Sledge bells?" pipes his companion; "Sledge bells?" says the wife – all of them seemingly too sleepy and comfortable to apprehend anything...see anything...or understand...and, as they grumble a negative, suddenly he staggers, and shivers from his toes to his neck; his jaws begin to chatter; the hair on his forehead, falling over a little, writhes as though it were a nest of little snakes. Every one is on his feet at once to help: "Caught a chill" "Let's get him to bed"...and one of the moments of the immense and touching dance closes – only one – and the next one begins, and the next after – figure after figure of exquisite pattern and purpose is unfolded, and then closed, and ever a new one unfolded in its wake.

I can write no more; you may perhaps have felt something. I don't know – but, if you did, I know it was one-thousandth part of what we felt. As we watched this figure we felt as silent and as still as when we hear of things too sad to

realize; and when it was over and we might move, we knew that this was the finest point that the craft of acting could reach.³

Craig is describing the dramatisation of deep feeling, and the transference of that feeling to an audience, via an extraordinary process of physical control. The result is a condition sometimes called suspense. It is a rather under-valued quality. It is most regularly associated with the traditions of melodramatic performance that I have already outlined. The stakes are always high in melodrama. Homes, reputations and lives are frequently at risk. These traditions are still very much alive in the majority of film and television dramas produced today, particularly those involving crime and its detection. Perhaps the modern theatre is mistrustful of this kind of feeling, inscribed upon the body in both performer and spectator? If such a drama is well-realised, then the result is tension and then release, a process that Irving understood intuitively. In spite of his intellectual pretensions, Irving's strength was in his total appreciation of the experiential nature of drama: its capacity to put an audience through something. Actor and audience both contributed to this contract. To return to the words of Joseph Roach: 'together they concentrate the complex values of a culture with an intensity that less immediate transactions cannot rival.'⁴ As I have asserted in this thesis, such a relationship between performer and audience is not always fully appreciated today. The actor-manager's connection to their audience was ongoing and complex. Irving believed his audience came to the theatre to see him, because they knew he had the capacity to draw them in, and to continue an already-established journey. Ellen Terry

³ Craig, *op. cit.*, pp 60-61.

⁴ Roach, *op. cit.*, pp 11-12.

describes how Irving used a cedar in the scenic design of several plays, the so-called 'fate tree', to represent the power of fate in different circumstances, a point only Alan Hughes has chosen to write about in detail.⁵ This suggests that Irving was fully aware of the ongoing dialogue his work shared with an audience over a period of time.

In the introduction to this thesis, I described the production of the play *The Woman in Black*, which is still running successfully in London as I write. This play, one of the few contemporary works to refer to Henry Irving, is viewed very much as a piece of popular entertainment. It is richly theatrical, showing the transformation of a shy and introverted man into an astonishing performer. The audience often become deeply involved in the drama, accompanying the play's revelations with gasps of shock and audible sighs of relief when the tension momentarily slackens. Most significantly, the audience enters into a sense of physical connection with the characters as they contend with invisible, or briefly-glimpsed, supernatural forces.

The Woman in Black has remained upon the British stage for close to three decades, but it is not considered particularly worthy of scholarly study. It is quite simply not taken seriously. This is a mistake, a flaw in our interpretation of the theatre that originates in the 'reclamation' narratives of the nineteenth century and continues to persist to this day. Dramas that place a focus upon the body in crisis or at the mercy of hidden, occult forces; dramas that generate a powerful tension and release response in audiences, are not sufficiently respected, no matter how complex the emotions embodied, or the theatricality of the presentation. Plays are still

⁵ Terry, op. cit., p. 178.

overwhelmingly assessed upon their literary merits before proceeding to production. And yet, once a play is upon the stage, its ability to make us experience something is hugely important, and can create successes that defy critical hostility or incomprehension. As I have demonstrated, Irving's theatre was an immersive experience that placed its audience in thrall to the stage picture. A complex series of techniques combined to maintain the audience in such a relationship.

Irving's lack of formal education, and his visceral sense of what the theatrical experience ought to be, led him to create a kind of drama that was melodramatic in its origins and included a number of different strands of performance. Despite his pursuit of respectability, and the downgrading of occult performance as described in the previous chapter, *The Bells* remained in his repertoire. On the night of his death on 13th October, 1905, he had been scheduled to undergo Mathias' journey to the supernatural court once again. As I have argued, Irving's alliance with the scholar Frank Marshall was essentially a counterweight to his most powerful impulse: to enact the body in crisis upon the stage. What made this presentation unique and more than melodramatic was its sophistication: the awareness of psychology and the pressures of living up to societal expectation. Irving's application of the devices of occult performance raised the stakes even higher, suggesting the release of powerful forces that could lead to a catastrophic loss of control. This made Irving's performances as Mathias original and gripping.

In the case of *Hamlet*, Irving largely decoupled the play from tradition and produced a version of the character that was highly original. His display of hysteria, of

an acted-out lack of control brought on by overwhelming expectation, spoke to his audience clearly. For this, he has received insufficient praise and recognition. If Irving had lived into the age of film, with the camera able to follow in close-up the journey of bodily crisis, we would think of him differently, perhaps as a forerunner of the protagonists of the European Expressionist cinema. Certainly, the performance of Max Schreck as Count Orlock in F. W. Murnau's 1922 film *Nosferatu* has the qualities associated with Irving's portrayal of villainy, particularly his interpretation of the part of Louis XI. Here is H. M. Walbrook's description of Irving as Louis:

The part of the old king hovering between earth and the next world was really the play. We saw him conscious of the near-approach of death, fighting against it to the last; growing more evil as he became more senile.⁶

Irving performed characters that stood upon the threshold of change. His lighting designs always required a specific focus on the actor's face to give emphasis to the possibility of transformation. A 'pin-light' followed Irving's face throughout, according to Percy Nash, and the actor's face was always visible, even in the darkest scenes.⁷ This guiding of the audience's attention seems to prefigure the operation of the camera in a film. Irving drew the attention of the spectators at all time, rarely leaving the stage in his most significant roles.⁸

The changes he made to the Lyceum space, and to the nature of performer-audience relations, were designed to enthrall. From his experience of occult

⁶ H.M. Walbrook quoted in Saintsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁸ Richards, *op. cit.* p. 224.

performance, Irving gained the knowledge that the audience must never become self-conscious, and never stop believing in what they were seeing. Bram Stoker describes how scene changes were undertaken with extraordinary precision at the Lyceum during Irving's management:

In the practical working of the scheme it was found possible to open new ways of effect. In fact, darkness was found to be, when under control, as important a factor in effects as light. With experience, it was found that time could be saved in the changing of scenes. It used to be necessary, when one "full" scene followed another, to drop a curtain temporarily so that the stage could be lit sufficiently for the workmen to see what they were doing. But later on, when the workmen has been trained to do the work as Irving required it to be done, darkness became the curtain. The workmen were provided with silent shoes and dark clothing, all of which were kept in the house and put on before each performance. Then, in obedience to preconcerted signals, they carry out in the dark the prearranged and rehearsed work without the audience being able to distinguish what was going on. Later on, when electric power came to be harnessed for stage purposes, this, with different coloured lights, was used with excellent effect.⁹

The desire to conceal the tricks, to hide how it is all done is, once again, reminiscent of occult performance. The stagehands can be likened to the confederates of the medium who were supposedly concealed around the séance room. Careful control of light and

⁹ Stoker in ed. Jackson, op. cit., p. 190.

sound ensured a more vivid sensation for those participating. Irving's approach was inspired by Phelps's at Sadler's Wells. Of his production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1853, Henry Morley wrote: 'There is no ordinary scene-shifting; but, as in dreams, one scene is made to glide insensibly into another'.¹⁰ This effect was made to work by the use of gauzes. But, by the imaginative use of light in a darkened house, Irving took this approach to entire performances from the 1878 *Hamlet* onwards. Indeed, it might be argued that his intention was to create a kind of dream-state. Again, this combination of spectacle and fluidity, a near-continuous present moment, is close to the experiences that cinema would create in the twentieth century.

Irving's approach placed his audience into a specific state: they must be subject to the theatrical experience at all times. But this did not mean they were inert, inactive or simply entertained. From the accounts of those who saw Irving when they were children or teenagers, there is a powerful sense of having been imaginatively activated and immersed in another world. Edward Gordon Craig first saw Irving backstage, about to ascend to the stage via a piece of machinery. It's remarkable that, even with the trickery of illusion visible, Craig did not lose the sensation of being gripped by Irving's performance. Irving's awareness of the power of subjective states, his ability to focus the gaze of his audience with light and his capacity to maintain a suspenseful experience via a heightened expectation of change seems, once again, to adumbrate the rise of 'moving pictures'.

¹⁰ Morley, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

Why does Irving not have a surer connection to the artistic culture of the twentieth century? This question is, of course, mostly answered by an appreciation of the contending strands of narrative: the Irving Narrative, a species of the far older 'rags to riches' narrative, and George Bernard Shaw's version of Irving as a convenient representative of all that was showy, hollow and anti-intellectual in the theatre of the late-nineteenth century. It is true that, as the Lyceum became increasingly successful during the period of his management, Irving became preoccupied with the deeply questionable idea of respectability, and so the theatre's repertoire changed. The actor became increasingly reliant on the deployment of an overwhelming, though exquisitely beautiful, series of pictorial effects. Works such as *Faust* and *King Arthur* and, later, away from the Lyceum, *Dante*¹¹ were among the most extraordinary visual achievements of the period. To realise them, technology was combined in highly innovative ways. However, the production of dramas that presented the body in crisis gave way almost entirely to these extravagant and lavish stage spectacles. This has eclipsed awareness of Henry Irving's highly original contribution to acting.

I began this thesis by stating that Irving's work is in need of reclassification. His legacy is undoubtedly difficult to assess. Jim Davis describes the complexity of attempts to categorize him as both manager and actor. It is useful to consider once again his thoughts on Irving's legacy:

There are perfectly good reasons to see Irving as the last of the great nineteenth-century English actors, triumphantly drawing to a close the theatre

¹¹ *Dante* was produced at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in 1903.

of the Victorian period and even lending his name to a distinct era, 'the age of Irving'. Yet there is also a case for linking Irving's name with those of Saxe-Meiningen, Antoine and Stanislavski when we consider new developments in staging.

Davis goes on to consider Craig's version of Henry Irving:

Moreover, Craig's Irving is an actor whose combination of theatricality and physical precision and control anticipates not only the ubermarionette, but also the theatres of Meyerhold and even Grotowski. The theatre of Irving, far from being a contained and unified segment of theatre history, should be viewed as a transitional force with a certain degree of seepage into the theatrical thinking that informed the modernist movement.¹²

At the beginning of this process, Davis's writing, along with that of W.D. King, led me to consider Irving's position further, and to investigate possible connections to theatrical modernism. My research centred on Edward Gordon Craig and his sister, Edith Craig. Both admired Irving hugely as an actor and as a manager. Edward Gordon Craig's belief in the value of Irving's work has been well-documented. He saw Irving as a model for the ideal performer; an actor who could express an almost impossibly perfect control over the body. Mostly, however, Craig craved the kind of astonishing aesthetic control that Irving was able to attain: control of a building, its personnel, its artistic output and even its audience. It's this all-pervading control that Craig saw as vital to the artist, and it was something that he could not himself acquire. In his work

¹² Davis in ed. Foulkes, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

Henry Irving, he gives voice to a character he calls the Actor of Genius: 'I'm a tree, not a lot of cut flowers. Put a tree in a delicate vase, and it will burst it...this can't be helped – but don't blame the tree for its power – blame the vase for its fragility'.¹³ To perform such power, the artist must have an Irvingesque full command over the resources of the stage.

Edward Gordon Craig liked to create dialogues with Irving in his writing. In these texts, he cast Irving as a kind of Virgil figure to his own troubled and neglected Dante. In one such dialogue, a ghostly Irving asks what Craig is doing:

Then his mood instantly changed. "And what do you do for a living, my dear Ted, he asked. "Oh, I write books, and make woodcuts, and- "But" he interrupted "You're a celebrated man in the theatrical profession...a kind of leader, what!" There the cock crew.¹⁴

Irving's model for theatre, which owed much to pre-existing traditions of actor-management, was becoming unworkable and impossible in an age that was slowly becoming more egalitarian. Gordon Craig was unable to obtain such control. Edith Craig also drew directly from Irving in the formation of her own distinctly original approach to design and direction. But Irving's influence upon her was not exclusively concerned with control. As Katherine Cockin has written: 'If, as Nina Auerbach has

¹³ Craig, op. cit., p. 257.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 247

suggested, Henry Irving was Edith Craig's role model, it was as an innovator, not as an autocratic conservative'.¹⁵

Both Edward Gordon Craig and Edith Craig inherited from Henry Irving a sense of theatre as pictorially expansive and richly imaginative. It was, in some respects, a distinctly nineteenth-century viewpoint. But neither of the Craig siblings could be described as anti-progressive. In Edith's connection to the *Masquers* and the plays of W. B. Yeats, she retained Irving's focus upon the body and its possibilities, and the importance of the pictorial and symbolic. But neither of the Craig siblings could secure what they most desired: a space and company with which to experiment and develop their unique version of the Irving legacy. If this had occurred, and a company had developed inspired by Irving's model, we would view its inspiration in a very different light. Ellen Terry's children performed with Irving, yet also saw their mother engage with the works of Ibsen, with realism and the performance requirements of twentieth-century theatrical approaches. This combined sensibility might have created a theatre that acknowledged the originality of Irving's approach, but also sought to connect it to developments in performance from across the world. The question of what the Craig siblings might have achieved if either had taken over the Lyceum is certainly an intriguing one. Katherine Cockin has written of Christopher St. John's call for a memorial to Irving in 1905: 'It is likely that she envisaged Edith Craig as the inheritor of Irving's memorial theatre'. Cockin describes the catastrophic impact of Irving's death upon her:

¹⁵ Katherine Cockin, *Edith Craig*, (London: Continuum International Publishing, 1998), p.54.

By 1905 Craig had lost the Lyceum and the Imperial Theatre as spaces in which to cultivate and develop her experiments. Not only having access to a theatrical space but also controlling it became a crucial factor in the development of directors in theatre at this time.¹⁶

This lack of a physical legacy of continuation has left Henry Irving somewhat isolated, and vulnerable to the Shavian dominant argument: that he was a reactionary and anti-progressive. But this thesis opposes that dominant narrative and has attempted to challenge it. Jim Davis has compared Irving to Richard Wagner, and there are clear similarities in their respective desires to combine theatrical elements in a highly sophisticated way.¹⁷ Irving's critics suggested that, if his need for control was so total, then the actor should write his own plays. This criticism was valid in some respects. However, it fundamentally misunderstood Henry Irving's approach. Each play produced by Irving was Irving's version of it. Despite his literary pretensions regarding Shakespeare, Irving's focus was performance and its presentation on the stage. This required him to effectively co-author the work. In a period where the rights of the playwright were asserting themselves, and a more egalitarian realism was taking the stage, Irving's approach seemed tyrannical to some. Sarah Bernhardt described him as 'a mediocre actor but a great artist'.¹⁸ Vision and total control were central to Irving's approach. As I have shown, Macready took similar pains over his set, his actors and the entire spectacle. Irving's control was of a different kind: an absolute insistence on complete and sustained audience attention. The body of the actor, the power it

¹⁶ Cockin, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁷ Davis in ed. Foulkes, op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁸ Bernhardt, S., *The Art of the Theatre*, trans. H. J. Stenning (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1924), p. 65.

somehow incarnated and might express at any moment, was central to the drama. The audience were required to follow it at all times, and to allow the actor's performance of suffering to bodily involve them, too

To conclude, because of the contending and powerful narratives that have so distorted our view of Irving over time, and the absence of a clear performance legacy, it is not easy to trace a clear line of artistic descent. Where does the influence of Henry Irving reside in the theatre of the twenty-first century? I would argue that it exists, indirectly, in the pleasingly maverick approach of theatre-makers working to realise a singular vision. Amongst such current artists I would include Katie Mitchell, Robert LePage and Simon McBurney. Their roles go beyond those of the twentieth century theatre director, and are closer to Irving's commitment to a total vision of theatre. While watching Simon McBurney's company Complicité perform his adaptation of Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* at the Barbican Theatre, London in December 2012, my thoughts often turned to Irving. Firstly, there was the authorship of the piece. It was certainly Bulgakov, but McBurney had collaborated with his text to create a version that was physically co-authored. His approach did not compromise the complexity of Bulgakov's novel, it augmented it. Secondly, there was the visually compelling nature of it: a Moscow park transformed effortlessly into the palace of Pontius Pilate in Judea, or a sky filled with Woland the devil's fleeing associates. The gasps of awe around me were similar to the responses described by those watching the Brocken scene in Irving's version of *Faust* at the Lyceum in 1885.¹⁹ Thirdly, and perhaps most tellingly, there was a focus upon the body and its magical,

¹⁹ See Saintsbury and Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 259-263.

transformative power. In one astonishing concluding moment Woland, the devil incarnate, suddenly revealed himself to be the Christ. As David Mayer has observed, the late-melodrama located contending forces within the same body. Irving's greatest achievement was to dramatize this conflict vividly. As William Winter wrote of *Faust*: 'it is the greatest of all delusions to suppose that you can escape from yourself. Judgement and retribution proceed within the soul and not from sources outside it.'²⁰ Irving's spirit was indirectly honoured in this extraordinary moment of psychomachia in McBurney's version of Bulgakov.

Finally, it is important to consider once again the sense of Irving as a live performer. H. A. Saintsbury's description of him, recalled in 1939, is particularly striking:

And now that he has passed, that large and gracious spirit can still touch, through memory, those of his friends and lovers and faithful comrades as surely, as deftly, as deeply, as when he held communion with them in the flesh – or was it spirit then? That serenity, so rarely ruffled, seemed at times inhuman. A paradox he was, so human yet so remote, so little servile even to that public whose 'faithful servant' he proclaimed himself, yet so much the slave of his art; aloof and convivial, ribald on occasion; ascetic as any anchorite. None was better loved, none more revered, more execrated and traduced. Children and dogs adored him.²¹

²⁰ Winter, quoted in Richards, Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor And His World, p. 416.

²¹ Saintsbury, op. cit., p. 11.

The tropes of the Irving Narrative are in place, of course, particularly that strange ascetic quality that Irving cultivated in his own outward displays of self-fashioning during the time of his management. Yet those tropes are also contradicted. There is undoubtedly a remarkable performer in view here, an astonishing talent who held those who were suggestible to him in a kind of thrall. Irving was, first and foremost, a performer of change, from one state to another, one persona to another and, ultimately, from life into death. He suggested that the desires of his characters could be complex and even contradictory. He demonstrated via his performances that the energies of suppression might seek escape in the wild spectacle of a vision, or a dance, or a vivid and agonizing nightmare.

The historian Jane Goodall attempts to understand what we mean by the expression 'stage presence'. Her definition concludes with an appreciation of colliding powers:

Presence is often bound up with paradox, a holding together of contraries, as if the one who embodies it is a convergence point for opposing forces. An alchemist would have understood this also as a switching point, the coniunctio oppositorum, through which transformation occurred.²²

Henry Irving's work can be seen in just these terms, as Goodall goes on to suggest:

Perhaps the metaphysical and mystical dimensions of human imagination that science had tried to excise were coming back with a vengeance, answering to a

²² Jane Goodall, *Stage Presence* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 188.

need for the greater energies to be manifested not just in technological spheres but also as a part of individual life experience.²³

Henry Irving's use of occult techniques is the most neglected aspect in studies of the actor. He enacted a burlesque of a séance in 1865, but in doing so, came to appreciate the creation of mystery, tension and the possibilities of realising powerful and often contrary forces in the performance space. The séance suggested there was untapped power implicit in the body. This idea influenced Irving throughout the most original and creative period of his performing life. As I have suggested, it is highly likely that changing attitudes to the occult affected Irving's stage presentations from the 1880s onwards. Yet *The Bells* remained in his repertoire until the end. Its power was presumably blunted by repetition and audience familiarity. But Irving understood that it was a pivotal performance, and one that had created extraordinary opportunities for him. Mathias's journey to his trial and subsequent death transformed Irving from comedian to tragedian, and demonstrated the success that could occur when the body was made the centre of stage activity.

Irving, then, is a figure who resists being easily compartmentalised. He was melodramatic in his approach to play texts, and yet he saw the need to advance melodrama, pushing the genre to a new level of psychological complexity. This extended into his approach to *Hamlet*, resulting in a melodramatized version of the play that was original for its dismissal of the traditional points, its acceptance of the changes made by European practitioners such as Fechter and Devrient, and its daring

²³ Ibid., p. 107.

portrayal of a male body driven to hysteria. I have concluded from this that, when studying Irving, it is best to resist ideas of imposed movements and instead focus on areas of connection in terms of characters and situations. If this approach is undertaken, then Irving's work is shown in a different light. He is revealed as a restless and largely progressive talent whose awareness of the experiential nature of drama influenced and continued to inspire his audience into the twentieth-century. His visionary approach and insistence upon the centrality of the body in performance remain indirectly influential upon the theatre of today.

Appendix

Irving and Ibsen: A Speculation

1: Irving's Brand?

What might have happened if the actor Irving of the late-1860s had encountered the playwright Ibsen of the same period? Irving was a young actor still searching for the most effective style of performance and attracted to poetic and expansive texts. Ibsen was a playwright who doubted whether the stage could contain the expansiveness of his own vision. The question I wish to briefly pose is this: What if Irving had encountered an English translation of Henrik Ibsen's verse drama *Brand* in 1868? This operation may, at first sight, appear somewhat unscholarly, but my point is to demonstrate the powerful connections that existed between the two artists in earlier phases of their careers, before Irving became leader of the acting profession, and before Ibsen became the author of the social plays. Such an investigation illuminates areas of common interest and agreement upon the nature of theatrical presentation.

Ibsen's play *Brand* was originally conceived as an epic poem. In July, 1865, he rewrote it as a drama, which was published in Norway in March, 1868. Ibsen intended it as a play to be read and not staged. As such, *Brand* was a considerable success in Scandinavia, but was only produced for the stage in Stockholm in 1885 at the Nya Teaten. The play's reputation did not reach as far as England, and the first full production in London finally occurred in November 1912 at the Court Theatre.

However, Act IV of the play was produced by the Opera Comique theatre company in June of 1893. As early as 1875, the British Society of Scandinavians had published translations of Ibsen's verse, including sections from *Brand*. In 1872, Edmund Gosse wrote about Ibsen in an edition of the *Spectator* of 16th March. He entered into a correspondence with the playwright, who expressed regret that his work could not penetrate English culture.¹ Gosse particularly admired Ibsen's poetic writing, and initially appears to have disapproved of the writer's movement into prose works later in the decade. Tracy C. Davis also mentions the interest of the scholar Phillip Wicksteed, who taught Norwegian in London in the 1880s, using examples of Ibsen's poetic works in his classes. As Tracy C. Davis writes: 'Wicksteed was anxious to ensure that the poetic dramas which are his main interest were not ignored as the controversy over Ibsen's social plays escalated'.² With the controversy over *A Doll's House* and, especially, *Ghosts* in 1891, Ibsen's earlier verse dramas were eclipsed and largely ignored in London. To most, he was simply the author of the troublesome and divisive social dramas.

I mention *Brand* because it is a part that Irving could have played very effectively. Ibsen's play concerns itself with a protestant minister – the eponymous Brand – who strives after impossible ideals, losing those closest to him in the process. Henry Irving had a particular attraction to portraying men of faith, sometimes dubious faith, such as the Reverend Ferguson in the Davenport burlesque. But even his version of Ferguson was performed with great sincerity. The final performance of Irving's life

¹ Edmund Gosse, *Spectator*, 16th March 1872.

² Tracy Davis, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

was as Tennyson's Beckett in Bradford in October, 1905. Priests, kings and scholars formed a significant section of Irving's repertoire by the 1890s, roles that included Richelieu, Louis XI, Charles I and Eugene Aram. Even Mathias in *The Bells*, far from being priest-like in the French original, became gentle and conscience-stricken in Irving's interpretation. It is highly likely that Ibsen's *Brand* would have appealed to him, given his love for poetic and picturesque drama, and his later commissioning of such projects from W. G. Wills and Tennyson. Brand's speech in act II of the play would certainly have attracted Irving and his capacity to play dignity and authority, even in characters of low social status. In this scene, Brand rejects his mother for being too worldly:

BRAND: When you repent I shall be there

But I make my conditions too

Everything that fetters you

To this world, everything you'd save,

You must willingly renounce,

Settle temporary accounts,

And go down to your grave.³

To Brand's wife, Agnes, who is seemingly mesmerised by Brand and looks at him 'with shining eyes'⁴, the minister states the following:

³ Henrik Ibsen, *Brand*, translated by Robert David MacDonald (London: Oberon, 1990), p. 41.

BRAND: Visions of strength and bravery

Like flocks of wild swans, came to me

Lifting me up on beating wings,

I saw myself rebuking sins,

The arch-chastiser of the age,

Striding across the world's great stage,

Processions, anthems, flags and bands,

Hymns of victory, and the hands

Of vast crowds beating in applause

For my life's glorious work, my cause.

A mirage, empty, dazzling, frightening

Made half of sunlight, half of lightning.

Now I stand where darkness falls

Long before evening, where high walls

Of rock, and seashores hem me in.

Cut off from the great world's din,

⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

I have come back to my home ground:

Unsaddled Pegasus, and found

A higher aim than holy war.

Daily duty, daily toil,

To the praise of God is all,

All I have been aiming for.⁵

Brand displays physical prowess. He is a compelling but remote figure, representing an impossible ideal. He is picturesque in his physicality, appearing against a background of dramatic and romantic landscapes. At the heart of the play is a spiritual war for the soul, an internal conflict that Irving could have dramatised via his extraordinary body. Brand's final line, a question to God himself, requires extraordinary poise and presence in its delivery. Both these qualities were possessed by Henry Irving in abundance:

BRAND: In my last extremity,

Hear me, God, and answer me!

Without will, can man ever be redeemed?⁶

In 1883, after having seen Henry Irving play the part of Louis XI, William Winter made some observations about the dramatic situations that best suited Irving. These

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 132.

included the effective realisation of 'spiritual isolation'. Winter was hugely impressed by Irving's ability to enact transition, praising his 'incessant vitality and complex method, and especially that picturesque mystery of manner through which his magnetism plays'.⁷ The part of Brand undoubtedly fulfils these criteria: he is a man of faith torn by internal conflict: guilt and idealism. Added to this is the play's extraordinary setting: a mountainous and snowy landscape and a church constructed from ice. It was, of course, a play written for reading only. However, as Robert David Macdonald writes in the introduction to his translation of *Brand*: 'such plays lie in wait only for a theatrical equal to their demands, and theatricians for whom avalanches, troll-caverns, shipwrecks, huge casts, and inordinate length are no more, if no less, problematical than fashionable adultery in well-decorated drawing rooms'.⁸ Had Irving encountered Ibsen's works in the 1860s and early 1870s, it is tempting to speculate that he may have been drawn to the opportunity for spectacle and poetry that they presented. At the time Irving was performing for the first time in the role of Hamlet in Manchester in 1864, Ibsen was in Rome working on the verse text of *Brand*. At the time Ibsen began to rework the poem into a play, Irving was finding new ways to present his strange physicality upon the stage, via the techniques of the Davenport burlesque, and his performance in the role of the apparently sincere man of faith, the Reverend Ferguson. It should also be remembered that Irving developed a repertoire of readings from 1859 onwards, and he was still presenting them in 1876, when he performed Thomas Hood's poem *The Dream of Eugene Aram*. Had Irving encountered

⁷ Winter, op. cit., p. 13.

⁸ Ibsen, op. cit., p. 6.

a suitably poetic English translation of *Brand*, it is hard to imagine the actor not being drawn to the work as, at the very least, a dramatic poem for solo performance.

There is one further matter of interest here. As Peter Thomson has written of Irving's upbringing:

Irving was brought up in the context of a humourless Cornish Methodism, and the best educated part of him was his conscience. The defect of a conscience is that it doesn't obstruct sin, it simply ensures that you suffer for it [...] He had the sermons of the evangelical Edward Irving read to him in childhood. He would spend his whole theatrical life on the threshold of the forbidden.⁹

It's fascinating that *Brand* dramatises the choices of artists and those of faith. In the opening act of *Brand*, Brand finds himself in conflict with a free-living artist called Einar. The two men argue about different types of calling, and Einar cannot understand Brand's uncompromising sense of mission. In the play's final act, Einar appears again as a convert, a frighteningly inflexible fundamentalist preacher, who sees all artistic diversions as forms of sin against God. The constant themes of faith and art in the work were undoubtedly relevant to Irving. His mother, Mary Brodribb, practically cut her ties with him when he embarked upon an acting career in 1856. In the scene from *Brand* I have already quoted, the image of a mother rejecting her son was inverted. As I have stated, once Irving took artistic leadership of the Lyceum in 1878, he styled it as a place of the upmost seriousness, a 'temple', as both admirers and detractors termed it, for the elevation of theatrical art. Irving turned his theatre into a place of worship

⁹ Thomson, op. cit., pp. 153-4.

and respect that made it a kind of secular equivalent to a cathedral. *Brand's* themes were undoubtedly those of Irving's life, too. Whether Irving's younger self would have understood that is, of course, open to question. But the parallels are striking, and worthy of a brief digression.

2: The Bells and A Doll's House: Two Late-Melodramas?

The artistic concerns and aesthetics of Ibsen and Irving in the 1860s show areas of agreement, and had Irving had the capacity to produce *Brand* in 1868, perhaps he would have chosen to do so. Instead, Irving opposed himself to what he believed Ibsen stood for, imagining Ibsen as the malign influence behind the work of his most critical and implacable opponent, George Bernard Shaw. In his best work, Irving demonstrates shared ground with Ibsen, and the themes of art versus faith, conscience versus will and duty versus necessity are played out in the works of both men. I will now go on to consider two works side by side: Irving's 1871 production of *The Bells* and Ibsen's 1879 play *A Doll's House*. Despite the fact that the former is often classified as merely a melodrama, and the latter a groundbreaking work of realism, I will demonstrate some powerful points of connection between the two works, culminating in the reclassification of both plays as species of 'late-melodrama'.

Henry Irving and Henrik Ibsen are connected by their relationship to a specific figure in theatre criticism of the late-nineteenth century: William Archer. As I have already described, when Archer was a young man he was strongly critical of Irving, writing a pamphlet, *The Fashionable Tragedian*. Archer used his satire to make a serious point: that Irving was potentially 'a good or even great actor', but that he was

being destroyed by 'adulation'.¹⁰ Over time, Archer became partially reconciled to Irving's style, writing a book about the actor's time at the Lyceum. Ten years after the first production of *A Doll's House*, Ibsen's play received a professional production in London. Amidst the attendant controversy, Archer wrote a defence of the work, and of its author, that was published in the *Fortnightly Review* in July, 1889. This piece was later to serve as an introduction to Archer's translation of the play. The article begins with its author separating himself from any suggestion of being a 'mouthpiece' for Ibsen: 'I view his plays from the pit, not from the director's box'.¹¹ He then goes on to offer a defence of the playwright, refuting criticism in three distinct sections. Irving's addresses, given two years later in the wake of the furore over the production of *Ghosts* in London, form a kind of further response to Archer.

The first accusation of conservative critics, as interpreted by Archer in his text, is that Ibsen is sermonizing like a preacher, a view apparently held by Irving. Archer offers as Ibsen's defence the extraordinary power of his characters and their situations: 'Ibsen is singularly successful in vitalizing his work, in reproducing the forms, the phenomena of life, as well as its deeper meaning'.¹² This is demonstrated most effectively in the role of Nora: 'Habitually and instinctively men pay Ibsen the compliment (so often paid to Shakespeare) of addressing her as though she were a real woman'.¹³ The second accusation to be addressed is that Ibsen's work is unoriginal. Again, Archer's defence centres upon the kinetic nature of the stage world Ibsen was

¹⁰ William Archer and Robert Lowe, op. cit., p. 6.

¹¹ Rowell, op. cit., p. 281.

¹² Ibid., p. 282

¹³ Ibid., p. 283

able to depict: 'His function is to seize and throw into relief certain aspects of modern life. He shows us society as Kean was said to read Shakespeare – by flashes of lightning – luridly, but with intense vividness'.¹⁴ Ibsen, he writes, did not invent the ideas of modernity, he simply seeks to show them to an audience. The third accusation is perhaps the one that is most relevant to the rejection of Ibsen's work by conservative critics. Archer disputes the accusation that the playwright is 'coarse, morbid and prurient'. Here, Archer sets out to show that *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* are exceptions within Ibsen's large body of poetry and plays: 'He has written some twenty plays, of which all except two might be read aloud, with only the most trivial omissions, in any young ladies' boarding school from Tobolsk to Tangiers. The exceptions are *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*'.¹⁵ Writing specifically of *A Doll's House*, Archer added:

There are two passages, one in the second and one in the third act, which Mr Podsnap could not conveniently explain to the young lady in the dress circle. Whether the lady in the dress circle would be any the worse for having them explained to her is a question I shall not discuss.¹⁶

Archer concludes by drawing attention to Ibsen's previous, poetic and historical works: 'The creator of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* is one of the great poets of the world', he then calls for one of the playwright's history plays to be staged, suggesting that the only reason it could not be was cost: 'that would involve an outlay for costumes and

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 284

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 285

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 286

mounting not to be lightly faced'.¹⁷ In 1889, one of the few theatres in Europe with sufficient resources, vision, archaeological interest and design talent to stage one of Ibsen's historical works was Irving's Lyceum. Had Irving not encountered a version of Ibsen drawn in the late-1890s from second-hand reactionary criticism and a misreading of Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, there is little reason why such a project would not have been viable.

So far, I have attempted to draw the positions of Irving and Ibsen closer together in order to show that categorising works of drama into certain genres or movements often creates an artificial antithesis. I now intend to compare Irving's version of Leopold Lewis's *The Bells*, a play that has been largely dismissed until now as a conventional melodrama, with Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. My aim is to show the many areas of connection between the two works and to demonstrate that, far from the latter play being a revolutionary text that contributed to the extinction of the melodrama, *A Doll's House* is, in some ways, a development of melodrama, or a species of 'late-melodrama'. Although the nature of the criminal acts portrayed in the two plays are very different, I argue that there are certainly similarities in the respective punishments of the protagonists that have not previously been discussed.

William Archer was very much aware of the aspects of *A Doll's House* that were melodramatic. He attempts to explain this away by suggesting that Ibsen was somehow still learning his craft. This is odd, since Archer also asserts Ibsen's experience and mastery, and the large body of work the playwright had already

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 287

created. When *A Doll's House* was first performed, Henrik Ibsen was fifty one years old. Yet Archer chose to view the play as, in some respects, an immature work. In the introduction to his 1879 English translation of the play, he drew attention to the pictorial aspects of the production: 'the great attraction of the part of Nora to the average actress was the tarantella scene. This was a theatrical effect, of an obvious, unmistakable kind'.¹⁸ This was just one of a number of elements that derived from the spectacular traditions of the melodrama:

The festal atmosphere of the whole play, the Christmas tree [...] the masquerade ball, with its distant sounds of music – all the shimmer and tinsel of the background, against which Nora's soul-torture and Rank's despair are thrown into relief, belong to the system of external, artificial antithesis beloved by Romantic playwrights.¹⁹

For Archer, *A Doll's House* showed Ibsen's development as a playwright before the eyes of his audience. He identifies the precise point of change in the third act of the play, where Torvald and Nora speak honestly with each other, without pretence:

It was at this point – or more precisely a little later in the middle of the third act – that Ibsen definitely outgrew the theatrical orthodox of the earlier years. When the action, in the theatrical sense, was over, he himself stood on the threshold of the essential drama.²⁰

¹⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, translated by William Archer (London: Baker, 1890), p. xiv.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xv

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xiv

There is no doubt that the third act of *A Doll's House* contains an extraordinary transformation, in which the deceptions and lies of the first two acts have to be exposed, and existing personae must be changed. But it seems highly unlikely that Archer's assertion about Ibsen's method could be correct. Michael Meyer, in his biography of Ibsen published in 1967, perpetuates this misunderstanding: 'Only in the sub-plot of Krogstad does a trace of the old melodramatic machinery remain'.²¹ However, *A Doll's House* is full of the devices of melodrama, or certainly its subset: mortgage melodrama, in which a home or a family's status is placed in peril by villainy. The setting itself: a home in winter, and at Christmas, is certainly designed to permit spectacle, and to create the 'festal' atmosphere of which Archer writes. Secrecy pervades the play, from Nora's concealing of the macaroons to her revelation to Mrs Linden that she has committed fraud in order to save Torvald's life. There is the constant fear of being overheard, heightened by Ibsen's detailed description of the house, with its many entrances: 'In the back, on the right, a door leads to the hall; on the left another door leads to Helmer's study. Between the two doors a pianoforte [...] In the right wall, somewhat to the back, a door'.²² This permits the development of tension, as we become increasingly aware of the risks of giving secrets away. Tension, of course, the sense of being almost physically engaged with the dramatic action, was a key element of nineteenth century melodrama. This quality is realised fully in the play. Ibsen then introduces a blackmailer, Krogstad, to the action, with information that, if publicised, will ruin and destroy the family. Krogstad, from his first appearance,

²¹ Michael Meyer, *Ibsen*, (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 477.

²² Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, trans. William Archer (London: Baker, 1890) p. 17.

appears to fulfil the role of melodramatic villain: 'Now the door is half-opened and KROGSTAD appears. He waits a little'.²³ The audience is given a picturesque preview of the villain in the doorway, sadistically choosing his moment. Dion Boucicault created just such an entrance for Irving's character Rawdon Scudamore in *The Two Lives of Mary Leigh*, which became better known in London as *Hunted Down*, produced in 1867. Indeed, the villain had appeared this way in English melodrama since Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* in 1802. It seems quite clear that Ibsen was using a familiar body of melodramatic tropes in order to raise the stakes and to ensure that his play did not alienate an audience expecting melodrama. Indeed, Ibsen wanted an audience who would attend plays 'of the French school' to see his work.²⁴ Villainy is, of course, upended with some brilliance, as we discover that even Krogstad has a motive. He is vulnerable and psychologically wounded, a male facing the ultimate failure during the period: an inability to successfully provide. Like all those in the play, he is trapped in a situation over which he has no control.

Similarly, Nora appears at first to be a version of the melodramatic fallen woman, a type seen in English melodramas such as *East Lynne* by Mrs Henry Wood, which was adapted for the stage on a number of occasions in the 1860s. In fact, she is both victim and villain, having undertaken a redemptive act that is considered criminal in the eyes of the law. The brilliance of Ibsen's play is that it takes a number of melodramatic personae and places them under considerable stress so that they must become somebody else: they must shed their mask, leading to the moment of

²³ Ibid., p. 40.

²⁴ Ibid.

rediscovery of self in the final act. This is not the work of a playwright developing his task as he works. Ibsen displays total understanding of melodrama: its dramatic strengths and weaknesses. He is not scorning melodrama in *A Doll's House*, but using its techniques to raise issues of inner-conflict, doubt and moral uncertainty. Nora's dancing of the tarantella is undoubtedly spectacular, and indicates a deep psychological insight on the part of the dramatist. Nora's need to perform for others has now reached a crisis, and this crisis has become physicalised, with her body undertaking its desperate dance. Nora's dance is a spectacular version of her relationship with Torvald, that of a body that is no longer in control of itself:

HELMER (Torvald): Slower! Slower!

NORA: Can't do it slower!

HELMER: Not so violently, Nora.

NORA: I must! I must!

HELMER: (stops) No, no, Nora – that will never do.²⁵

As the music recommences, Nora's dancing becomes wilder and more uncontrolled. Stress works itself out upon the body, to the point of hysteria and collapse. This is the high-point of spectacle in the play, as the body is pushed to its limits by the expectations and requirements of others. As I have suggested, this is precisely what occurred in Henry Irving's performance as Mathias in *The Bells* in 1871, nine years previous to *A Doll's House*. Like Ibsen, Irving used the essential qualities of melodrama:

²⁵ Ibid., p. 74.

the spectacular, the fear of discovery, sensation and perceived villainy to demonstrate the effects of societal expectation upon the body. As David Mayer has written:

From the 1870s, a further development appeared. While villainy remains the propelling force in melodrama, a new generation of dramatists, leagued with a handful of leading actors, devise a conflicted protagonist who, though criminal and frequently dissolute, longs desperately to perform good actions. This role might be called “the divided hero-villain”.²⁶

I have already demonstrated that Mathias is such a character. It is more surprising to find Ibsen’s Nora as another example. Their respective crimes cannot, of course, be readily compared. But both have been forced into transgressive behaviour by society’s expectations of their gender. Both long to confess, and their attempts to keep a secret lead to a kind of hysterical acting out, culminating in the collapse of the body. Both protagonists leave the domestic situation, shattering the greater pictorial objective of melodrama in the words of Elaine Hadley ‘the spectacular familial tableau’. As Ibsen’s Nora walks from the home, into the freezing and potentially fatal night, so Irving’s Mathias strives to free himself from an imagined noose. Both protagonists therefore remove themselves from the domestic setting in a way that possesses tragic grandeur.

As David Mayer, writing of late-melodrama, has stated: ‘these plays are fuelled by a growing scientific and lay interest in human psychology and awareness that there are deep fissures between outward behaviour and inner lives’.²⁷ Here, in a comparison

²⁶ Mayer, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159

of *The Bells* and *A Doll's House*, the perceived boundary between melodrama and realism blurs. That is not to say there are not pronounced differences between the two dramatic texts. Most significant is the aspect of *A Doll's House* that caused such uproar: a woman voluntarily leaves her husband and children, seemingly abandoning her duty. It is her self-willed exit that is so important. This was deeply troublesome to men like Irving in 1889, for whom the pursuit of respectability had become habitual.

The Bells is, of course, dissimilar to *A Doll's House* in many ways. The crimes of the protagonists are different, although the bodily enacting of suffering has some arresting similarities. Ibsen's Nora walks away from the house that has become oppressive to her, but Mathias undergoes the dramatic justice associated with villainy in much melodrama. However, I have sought here to demonstrate the similarities in two pieces of drama that are rarely considered together, despite being produced a mere eight years apart. *The Bells* is certainly a play that deserves further consideration as a compelling and revealing dramatic text.

3: The Bells Neglected

Perhaps the principal reason why *The Bells* is so readily dismissed is Irving's connection to it. Irving, whose commitment to the play, rewriting of it and physical enacting of Mathias's journey made it such a huge success, is now a hindrance to its reputation. Irving has not been portrayed as the type of Victorian modern liberal sensibility can be comfortable with. As I stated previously, he is often perceived as statuesque and ossified. Irving has been portrayed almost exclusively as a romantic reactionary who blocked, unsuccessfully, the inevitable tide of theatrical progress,

failing to arrest the advance of theatrical realism. But that convenient narrative does little justice to Henry Irving, the late-Victorian theatre, or *The Bells*. Irving's ownership of the play transcended even the actor's death, the annotated text passing to his son, Henry Brodribb Irving in 1905. As the actor Eric Jones-Evans has written:

After the death of Sir Henry Irving, I saw most of the revivals-in both London and the provinces-of this splendid drama which had brought fame and fortune to our first actor-knight. Sir Henry's son H.B. ('Harry' to his friends) who, physicallyfacially, vocally and temperamentally was a perfect replica of his distinguished father, had valiantly essayed the role of Mathias in Chicago, on 18th December 1906, when making his first and only professional visit to the U.S.A. His performance was politely received, but created no particular stir.²⁸

H.B. Irving's continuation of the role served to confirm his father's relationship to it. Amongst those who had seen, and loved, Irving's performances, the play was always to be overshadowed by Henry Irving's extraordinary performance as Mathias. After the Second World War, new imperatives in British drama further sidelined *The Bells*, and it has had few productions since that time. It is additionally hindered by something that was, for Henry Irving, the play's greatest strength: it is a 'one-part play'. Edward Gordon Craig observed that the Lyceum company were seen to best effect in the first fifteen minutes of the play, before the arrival of Mathias.²⁹ From that point on, all attention was focused upon the body of the guilt-ridden criminal, and that was exactly

²⁸ Mayer, *Henry Irving And The Bells*, p. 24.

²⁹ Craig, op. cit., p. 51.

what Irving intended. Irving's *The Bells* was precisely that: a dramatic project perfectly tailored to the highly unusual physiognomy and performance-style of the lead actor.

But that is not to say that *The Bells* could not be successfully revived with an actor talented enough to take on the challenge of the lead role. He would, of course, need to express the strangeness Irving brought to Mathias. Lewis and Irving's text provides great opportunities for a physically-committed performer. The success of the stage adaptation of *The Woman in Black*, mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, and other such dramatisations of the supernatural, suggest that the play could still speak to a modern audience, and it would provide ample opportunity for spectacle conveyed via projection or other such modern techniques. As Irving demonstrated, the beauty of the play is the way in which it lends itself to a kind of co-authorship. It undoubtedly requires an extraordinary central performance, and an innovative approach to the realisation of subjective conditions. The emphasis on crime and the process of detection would still grip an audience. As I have stated, the principal obstruction to revivals of the play in the twentieth century was its connection to Henry Irving. However, with Irving's reputation reconsidered, there exists the possibility that the play might be produced once more, and with the same progressive and creative spirit that Irving applied to it.

Illustrations

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Figure 1

Figure 1: Irving's entrance as Mathias in act 1 of *The Bells*. The portrait is by Cyrus Cuneo. According to David Mayer, Cuneo reversed the image, with the door opening on the other side. The image shows Irving dwelling in the doorway, a typical positioning of the melodramatic villain, seen in English drama since Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery*. Irving's subsequent, gracious behaviour was designed to challenge the audience's assumptions regarding the nature of Mathias.



Figure 2

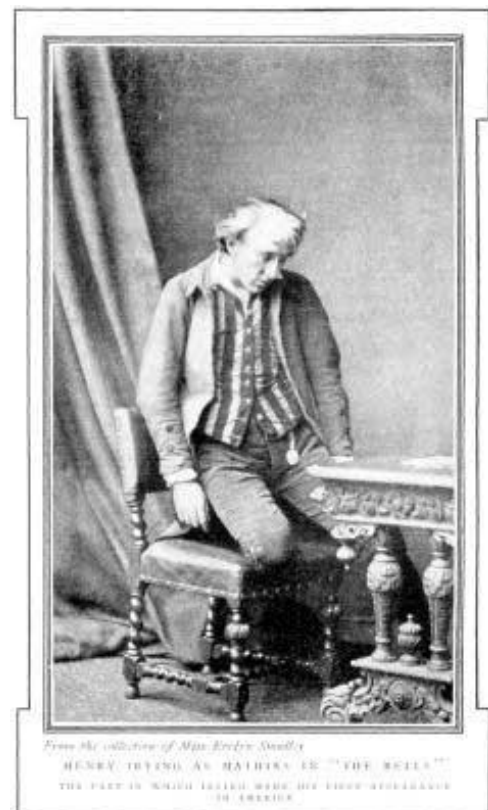


Figure 3

Figure 2: This image was part of a selection of postcards produced by the London Stereoscopic Company in 1872 in response to a demand for images of Irving's performance in *The Bells*. The pictures were posed in a studio using the props and furniture from the 1871 production. In this image, Irving exchanges his shoes for boots. Irving took stage centre here. Mathias listens to discussion about the Mesmerist. In his commentary on the play, David Mayer corrects Edward Gordon Craig, who states that the discussion was of the murder of the Polish Jew. In Mayer's words: 'Mathias then gives Annette the gift of a necklace, an action which holds his fear at bay. It is only after this respite from fear, as Mathias prepares to eat his supper and take a final glass of wine with departing Hans and Walter, the conversation turns to the Polish Jew.'¹ Craig writes of how Irving made the process of buckling the show compelling, describing the hands as appearing 'motionless and dead'.²

Figure 3: This is also from the London Stereoscopic Company's set. The image is staged as part of the money counting routine in act II of the play. The process exhausts Mathias as he relives the events that led to his becoming rich. According to Eric Jones-Evans, Irving changed Lewis's text and had Mathias reach the number 13 before stopping. During this section: 'There is a continual change of tempo-like driving a coach and horses: now whipping up, now pulling in, continuously varying the pace'³ Irving strongly conveyed the sense of exhaustion at the end of the process that Mathias believes will secure his daughter's future. Illustrating the pressure upon the dutiful patriarch enabled the transformation of the character from villain to conflicted hero-villain.

¹ Mayer, op. cit., p. 81.

² Craig, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

³ Mayer, op. cit., p. 87.



Figure 4: A 1902 drawing by the artist Charles Buchel of Mathias and the Mesmerist from act III of *The Bells*: ‘the whole effect was hazy and like a dream. Even Mathias was a figure with a dream-like, insubstantial and almost spectral appearance; though his facial expressions could be clearly seen’. Eric Jones-Evans wrote: ‘Mathias resists the Mesmerist, but all the audience sees clearly is Mathias’s face and the white undulating hands of the Mesmerist who stands behind him. Mathias throws back the hood of the blouse when commencing his very first speech in the dream sequence’.⁴ The attention drawn to apparently disembodied limbs throughout *The Bells*, from Mathias buckling his shoes to the arm that extinguishes the light and prefigures his journey to the spectral court,

is reminiscent of the Davenport séance and the highly theatrical presentations of the medium Daniel Dunglas Home. Home attracted considerable press attention in 1868, when he was accused of using trickery to deceive a widow called Jane Lyons.⁵ The trial was widely reported, and the alleged phenomena occurring in Home’s séances were discussed, with explanations given for the ‘fraud’. In 1870, a year before the successful production of *The Bells* at the Lyceum, Home submitted himself to a laboratory test overseen by the chemist William Crookes.

Figure 4

⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵ A detailed account is given in Peter Lamont, *The First Psychic* (London: Abacus, 2006).



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5: Another image from the London Stereoscopic Company's set. Having been placed under mesmeric influence, Mathias is seen here physically re-enacting the process of the crime. He has lost conscious control of his body, and obeys the direction of the Mesmerist, speaking and acting his confession. The following text accompanied this sequence of actions: 'Listen, you will be rich, your wife and child will no longer want for anything-you will pay all you owe-you will be in debt no more-it must be that I kill him! (back to table. Pause.) No one on the road! No one on the road. No one! What dreadful silence! (Wipes his forehead with his hand.) You are hot, Mathias, you're hot, you have run too fast across the fields! How your heart beats! How it beats! The moon shines out. The clock strikes! One! One! One! The Jew has passed! He's passed, thank God! Thank God! Thank God! (Sinks by table on his knees, head in hands. Bells pp. L. A pause. He listens, starts up.) The Bells! The Bells! He comes! He comes!'⁶ Irving's version of Mathias emphasised the preservation of the family as the character's principal objective, presenting crime as the only way to preserve the 'spectacular familial tableau'.

Figure 6: The London Stereoscopic Company's final image of Irving as Mathias. Prior to this moment, the guilty sentence has been announced, followed by a slow tolling 'death knell' bell. This was then cleverly supplanted by the peal of wedding bells to celebrate the forthcoming marriage of Annette, the daughter Mathias has given everything to save, to the gendarme Christian. Mathias's entrance is described in the following terms in Irving's personal script: 'Mathias rushes on dressed as he was at the time he retired behind the curtains. His eyes are fixed, and his appearance deathly and haggard. He clutches the drapery convulsively and

⁶ Mayer, op. cit., p. 73.

staggers with a yell to C., is caught in the arms of CHRIS., who places him in chair brought forward to C. hastily by HANS. MATHIAS sinks in chair, holds one hand to ANNETTE L. then to CHRIS. R.)⁷ This gesture, which shows Mathias effectively joining Annette and Christian together, emphasised the motivation of the burgomaster's crime: to avoid the shame of bankruptcy and to guarantee his beloved daughter's social status. A version of the familial tableau is created, but the cost of its realisation is the death of the patriarch.



Figure 7

Figure 7: Henry Irving as Hamlet, painted in 1880 by Edwin Longsden Long. Irving's 1878 version of the play shifted the emphasis of the 1874 production. This had centred upon the effects of contending forces upon the body of a dutiful son, torn between morality and duty. The later version replaced this tension with the conflict of duty and desire. This was more

⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

easily-realised given the casting of Ellen Terry as Ophelia, with whom Irving had far greater chemistry than Isabel Bateman. The 1878 *Hamlet* offered the heroic male as an unpredictable mix of energies. In the words of Herbert Sussman: 'For the Victorians manhood is not an essence but a plot, a condition whose achievement and whose maintenance forms a narrative over time'. Sussman's description seems particularly relevant when considering Irving's final version of the character: 'These individual formations of masculinity often failed to resolve their own internal contradictions, and instability that manifests larger strains within the culture's constructions of the masculine'.⁸

⁸ Herbert Sussman, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

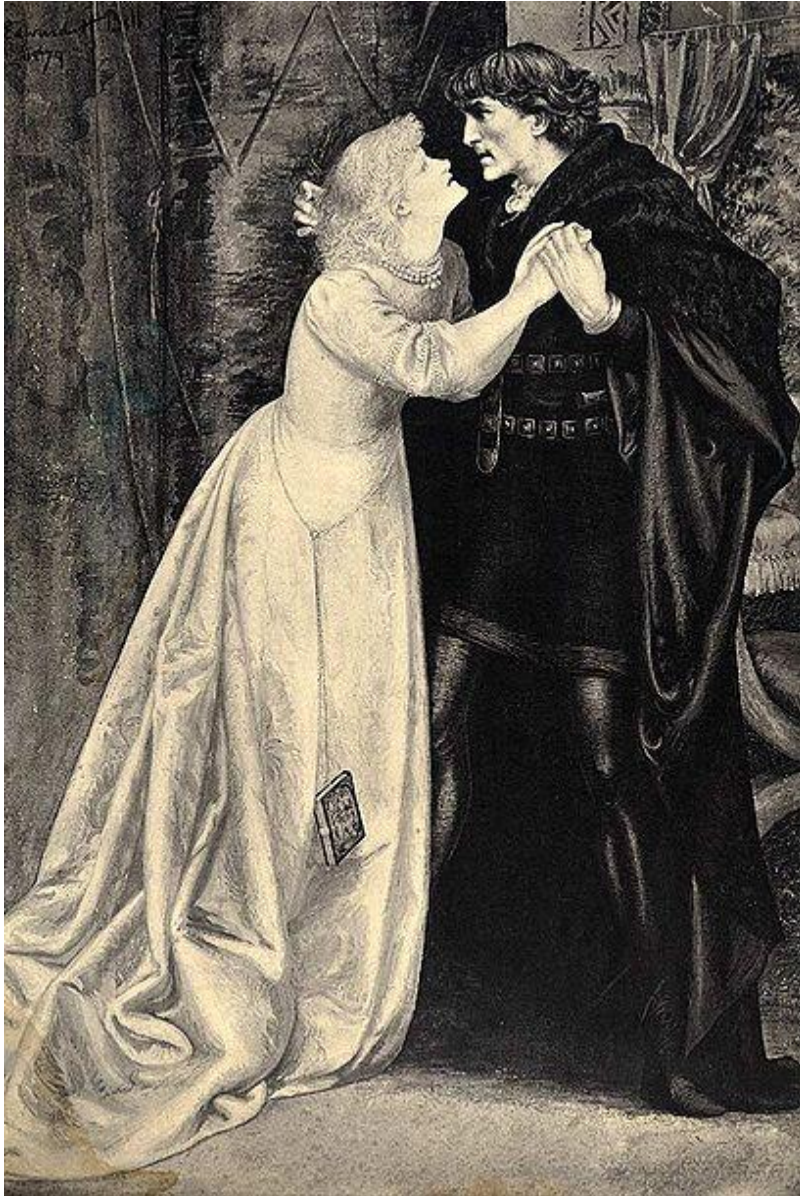


Figure 8

Figure 8: Ellen Terry and Henry Irving from the 1878 production of *Hamlet*. The image is a lithographic print of a painting by Edward H. Bell and depicts the Nunnery scene. As David Bevington has written: ‘Irving’s Hamlet could not hide the depths of his feeling for her; in the words of a contemporary reviewer, “his whole frame seemed to tremble with heartfelt longing”.⁹ Some critics suggested that hysteria operated as a kind of contagion within the production, and that it might even be passed on from one sufferer to another.¹⁰ Although the principal focus was undoubtedly on the body of Irving’s Hamlet, Ellen Terry made her own personal studies of such behaviour. Visiting a hospital, she made the following observations: ‘I noticed a young girl gazing at the wall. I went between her and the wall to see her face. It was quite vacant, but the body expressed that she was waiting, waiting. Suddenly she threw up

⁹ Bevington, op. cit., p. 124.

¹⁰ Hughes, op. cit., p. 54.

her hands and sped across the room like a swallow. I never forgot it. She was very thin, very pathetic, very young, and the movement was as poignant as it was beautiful'.¹¹ Terry also sought to present Ophelia as very much the daughter of a family : 'Her father and her brother love her'.¹² This emphasised again the domestic cost of the play's action, making the fate of Ophelia even more powerful. As in *The Bells*, father and daughter relations were given particular attention. Terry writes of her own adding of domestic details in her first appearance.¹³

¹¹ Terry, op. cit., pp. 154-155.

¹² Ibid., p. 156.

¹³ Ibid., p. 154.

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Performance

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov, adapted and directed by Simon
McBurney/Complicite, Barbican Theatre London, 14th December 2012.

The Woman in Black, adapted by Stephen Mallatratt from the novel by Susan Hill,
directed by Robin Herford, Fortune Theatre, London, 20th March 2011.

Film

Nosferatu, Dir. F.W. Murnau, Prana Film/Film Arts Guild, 1922.