

Plays from Pictures: the Aesthetics of the Nineteenth-Century Stage

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I'm concerned with an interesting phenomenon of the nineteenth-century English stage: the conversion of well-known paintings into plays. This practice raises some important questions about the relationships between theatre, painting, and writing in the popular aesthetic response of the nineteenth century to both the generic decorums of the eighteenth century and the revolutionary spirit of Romanticism in painting and literature.

In general, the theatre of the nineteenth century relied greatly on the creation of 'telling' scenes; that is, the creation of arresting and interesting situations. As Edward Mayhew explained in 1840: 'To theatrical minds the word "situation" suggests some strong point in a play ... where the action is wrought to a climax, where the actors strike attitudes, and form what they call a "picture".'¹ Such stage pictures played a dual role: they were of interest in themselves as theatrical events quite independent of the immediate action of the plot, as they introduced novelty and sensation into the performance, and, in the case of the realisation of familiar paintings, they introduced an extra-theatrical dimension to the play. They also strategically highlighted important ideas communicated by the play, and required a 'multiconscious' spectator;² that is, one who was able to recognise and comprehend the shift in modes and combination of genres, and the extra-theatrical dimension of the performance. The reference to familiar paintings within the stage performance provided a point of contact between audience and stage which reinforced the active participation of the popular mass audience of the nineteenth century theatre, and contributed to the theatre's role in the democratisation of previously elite art forms. This was particularly the case with the performance of melodrama, which has been called the 'poor man's catharsis',³ in the nineteenth century. And melodrama as the democratisation of tragedy is an important sub-plot of my argument here.

Obviously, the theatre's three dimensionality and the combination of verbal and non-verbal elements are features which set it apart from the other arts, and are not confined to the productions of the nineteenth-century stage, nor to plays derived from pictures. However,

it was in the nineteenth century that the theatre was seen as an important site for a synthesis of all the arts, with its combination of speech and gesture, visual and oral signals, cerebral and plastic communication. In 1875, actor and speech tutor Henry Neville articulated what had been a guiding principle for dramatists, actors, and managers throughout the nineteenth century:

Painting and sculpture embody impressions of simultaneous action and effect only; but acting gives us the succession of events in vivid representation, accompanied with the power of language, and the exquisite changes of feature, rapidity of action, delicate bye-play, and the power of the eye which has a special poetry of its own that touches our tenderest sensibilities—all of which are entirely lost in painting and sculpture.⁴

Such formulations as Neville's constitute a Victorian reworking of the theory of *ut pictura poesis*, extending the theory to incorporate the ideals of theatrical performance, and refuting the claim that this close relationship between poetry and painting, the verbal and the visual, was on the decline in the nineteenth century.⁵

This is an important point, and one which focuses on the Victorian inheritance of the Romantic rebellion against the eighteenth century. The negation of the principle of *ut pictura poesis* in the eighteenth century constituted an ideological separation of the word and the image, as, according to W. J. T. Mitchell's study of iconology, theorists such as Lessing and Burke 'treat[ed] the image as the sign of the racial, social, and sexual other, an object of both fear and contempt ... [and] a site of special power that must either be contained or exploited'.⁶ Thus the consistent breaking down of generic distinctions on the nineteenth-century stage was, as Neville's essay exemplifies, part of the radical re-ordering of aesthetics and epistemology which began with the Romantic movement. The convergence and interpenetration of art forms in this period, demonstrated so clearly in plays from pictures, was part of the gradual breaking down of traditional generic boundaries and hierarchical structures in the arts—and I refer here particularly to the hierarchy in painting which Reynolds' *Discourses*, for example, established.⁷ (And, although I don't have space to go into it here, the challenge to the hierarchy of painting implicit in the popularity of Victorian domestic and genre painting parallels the challenge of melodrama to high cultural notions of tragedy.) The tendency of this dissolution was to democratise the arts, a process which can be seen as symptomatic of the general cultural and political transformation of English society in the first half of the nineteenth-century.

The adaptation of well-known paintings into plays demonstrates the appropriation and adaptation of élite or high cultural modes of communication into popular mass entertainment (a process which continues in even more strength today). An early adaptation of this nature is W. T. Moncrieff's melodrama, *The Shipwreck of the Medusa; or, The Fatal Raft*,⁸ which dramatises the subject of Géricault's painting, *The Raft of the 'Medusa'*. Both play and painting are based loosely on the actual events of 1816, when the French ship *La Méduse*, carrying soldiers and settlers to the French colony of Senegal, foundered in shallows and was wrecked. Published accounts of the shipwreck included stories of murderous foul play, panic, near-mutiny, and, most sensational of all, cannibalism. Moncrieff's melodrama was first performed in 1820, while Géricault's painting was having a highly successful and lucrative showing in London, and the play quite blatantly exploits this exhibition. Furthermore, the factual status of *The Shipwreck of the Medusa* is emphasised by Moncrieff throughout the production.⁹ This emphasis on the documentary nature of the play was common in the nineteenth century: the power of the 'true story' was potent, as though the horrors of the shipwreck on stage were all the greater because they represented actual events, and furthermore the play assumed an authority not given to products of the imagination only. By producing a play about an historical event—and moreover, an event which also formed the basis of an art work deemed to be of great significance—Moncrieff was able to satisfy his audience's demands for both fact and sensation, while repudiating contemporary cultural and religious sanctions against the popular theatre.

As a topic for a sensational melodrama or a large and important painting, the disaster was highly suggestive: what is interesting to us now is the different emphases of melodrama and painting. Géricault's use of the disaster as the topic of a major painting, and its subsequent display at the Salon of 1819, can be seen as deliberate political criticism of the current French administration.¹⁰ Yet the painting itself appeared to be aloof from immediate political concerns, eliciting a subjective and passionate response from the viewer, and, in Lorenz Eitner's words, 'resist[ing] classification by the accepted stereotypes of the time ... present[ing] a tragedy without a hero, a scene of physical suffering without redemption'.¹¹ As George Landow argues, the painting was to become 'one of the most important and influential images created by the Romantic imagination' in its representation of a moment of crisis in a post-Christian world.¹²

Moncrieff's play introduces a standard range of melodramatic characters. Playing on the vogue for nautical melodramas in the 1820s, Moncrieff introduces Jack Gallant, an honest English sailor, whose 'British heart of oak stands firm for ever!' (p.16) as his central character. Not only does Gallant appeal to the chauvinism of Moncrieff's audience, but such a character also provides an immediately recognisable character type, whose social class, way of life, and point of view are closely aligned with those of the audience. Jack Gallant is part of a crew of weak and unmanly Continental sailors who attempt to steal, murder, and mutiny. Jack, the ship's captain, Captain Louis and his heroic lieutenant, Constant, are joined by Eugenie, the heroine (and Captain Louis' daughter) disguised as a cabin boy so that she can follow Constant, her beloved (unknown to him and the rest of the crew), and the evil Adolphe, the aristocratic villain of the piece. Adolphe also loves Eugenie and is jealous of Constant, which provides part of the motivation for his villainy later in the play. The crew is made up of other sailor characters part comic and part villainous, and a comical *vivandière*, Mother Gabrielle, a part which reads as a drag role, rather like the traditional pantomime dame. The play is loosely based on the true story of the 'real wreck' of the *Méduse*, with the survivors of the wreck putting to sea in a long boat and a raft; the evil Adolphe unties the tow rope between the longboat and the raft, thus setting Jack Gallant, Captain Louis, Constant and Eugenie helplessly adrift on the ocean. The survivors make landfall in an unspecified part of Arabia (rather like Shakespeare's Bohemia), where the Europeans are pursued by King Zaide, who swears revenge 'to the Christian race!', and prays for the opportunity to drink their blood (p.39). The portrayal of a Moorish king as blasphemous and excessively violent reveals the cultural absoluteness of popular theatre, and is a parallel to the English sailor Jack Gallant's dealings with the French and German characters in the rest of the play. However, as is the conventional pattern of this sort of play, the survivors on the raft are eventually saved by the actions of King Zaide's daughter, Liralie, who swears undying love for Adolphe and rescues all the Europeans in order to save him. In a fittingly imperialist ending, Constant and Eugenie are reunited, and the evil Adolphe is paired off with Liralie—as if marriage to a heathen and exile to Arabia is a fitting punishment for his sins!

While the stage play *The Shipwreck of the Medusa* does not reproduce the painting in a set piece—Géricault's use of nudity alone was enough to make any recreation of the painting impossible for the

London stage of 1820—the play calls for a number of pictures to be created in the course of its staging, and several of these are reminiscent of the painting. The first of the stage pictures occurs at the end of the final scene of Act I, a scene of action which involves no dialogue at all. It is a good example of the melodramatic appeal to all the senses, and also demonstrates the typical placement of this kind of scene.

The ocean agitated by a storm—Peak of Arguin discovered.—Thunder and lightning;—the elements rage furiously.—The Medusa is seen at a distance, tossed on the waves.—Music plays "The Storm;" after much raging the Medusa strikes on the Peak—a general shriek is heard from the vessel.—The drop falls for the end of Act I. I, vii, p.25.

Here Moncrieff makes inventive use of available theatrical technology to stage the shipwreck. More importantly, the stage directions indicate only action and sound, so that this climactic scene is presented completely non-verbally and the action is directed to create the illusion of events occurring at a distance. Moncrieff uses the proscenium arch stage to frame the action like a picture, and the music, a well known piece of the period, as well as stage sound effects, signal the emotional and sensuous experience, and suggest to the audience an appropriate response to the situation. Such stage directions demonstrate the force of the emotional manipulation of the spectator and the range of expression available to melodrama in its appropriation of the Romantic use of the pathetic fallacy in Géricault's painting.

The dire consequences of the storm have actually been foreseen by two characters earlier in the play: in Act I, scene v, the Captain has a premonition that 'the skies are clouded, I forbode some storm' (p.24), while in I, vi, the heroine, Eugenie (disguised as a boy), soliloquises:

These lowering clouds forbode some dreadful storm,—all is confusion on the deck, but there's a greater tumult in my bosom. ... Good heavens! what means that dreadful tumult? I, vi, p.5.

By developing a romance and revenge plot in the scenes preceding the storm, Moncrieff combines the large and disastrous forces of Nature with human and personal concerns of the characters, so that the forces of human evil are placed in combination with the impersonal arbitrary forces of Nature. This opposition of suffering humanity against elemental forces strengthens and gives breadth to the oppositional structure of melodrama, suggesting also (as Géricault's painting does not¹³) that there is some Providential or Divine force operating in the play. In Géricault's painting, on the other hand, there is no light on the horizon, no hope of rescue or deliverance within the frame of the

picture.

The story of the play proceeds through narrative pictures—after the spectacular storm which closes Act I, Act II opens with a tableau, with immediate narrative impact, that tells the audience who has survived, and how.

The fatal raft, anchored near the Peak of Arguin, which is seen, in the distance, with the wreck of the Medusa—Governor, Captain Louis, Adolphe, Constant, Jack Gallant, Victoire, Jan Kobold, Canteen, François, Mother Gabrielle, Eugenie, Sailors &c, discovered on the raft.

II, i, p.26.

The rest of the scene shows the struggle for survival, and the heroic actions of Jack Gallant, as well as the evil intentions of Adolphe, who plans to cast off the raft and leave it to drift. Cannibalism is contemplated as the survivors run out of food and water. After drawing lots, Eugenie (still in disguise as a boy) is to die, and her father, Captain Louis, is to kill her. At this point, Eugenie reveals her identity and her father refuses to kill her, Constant offers himself in Eugenie's place, while Jack Gallant, true to his name, proposes that they all die together if that is to be their fate. Rescue or escape from their situation is foreshadowed at this point by Jack's estimation that they can survive for another twenty four hours (p.33) but, at the end of this scene, they are all saved by the catching of a turtle. The act ends with a further picture, representing Jack Gallant's words: 'Thank God!—thank God!—we for another day are saved!' (p.35). This tableau completes the process of Moncrieff's inversion of Géricault's painting: the anonymous and helpless mass of bodies in the painting has become a resourceful and active group of individuals, inspired by hope and the belief in Divine providence. In Moncrieff's version, the shipwreck is not an arbitrary, meaningless, careless, or Godless disaster, nor as Eitner interprets the painting "an example of the fundamental conflict between men and nature",¹⁴ nor the result of political manoeuvrings beyond individual control, as argued by contemporary accounts of the 'real' disaster, but a familiar, domestic, even comic, story of identifiable individuals triumphing over injustices and almost unimaginable physical difficulties.

Géricault's representation in *The Raft of the 'Medusa'* of the struggle for transcendence over the material world and his simultaneous recognition of the impossibility of such transcendence—in his final version of the painting Géricault resolutely paints out the rescuing ship on the horizon which appears in his sketches of the subject—is transformed by Moncrieff into a formulaic melodrama, which

reinforces a patriotic (indeed imperialist) and Christian view of the world. Through the process of adaptation, Moncrieff's play extends the political significance of Géricault's image beyond that of the party politics of the Bourbon ministry or the cultural politics of Romantic epistemology, to a much wider democratisation and popularisation of Romanticism. However, in appropriating and adapting Géricault's image of crisis into a narrative incorporating documented 'fact', Moncrieff transforms the powerful metaphorical mode of Romanticism into the metonymic mode generally associated with realism.¹⁵ This transformation is a prime example of the way in which melodrama exploited the aesthetic energy of Romanticism—Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'—while portraying a world view closely attuned to the realities of the life of its urban industrial working class audience.

As Moncrieff's play was written from the inspiration (or perhaps exploitation) of Géricault's painting, so the affective structure and powerful narrative of melodrama influenced the visual arts. In George Cruikshank's temperance narrative sequences and the plays derived from his engravings, we have a dramatic demonstration of the breaking of generic boundaries and decorums in nineteenth century popular art. George Cruikshank's sequences of temperance drawings, *The Bottle* (1847) and *The Drunkard's Children* (1848), are simple narratives, showing the inexorable path of alcohol addiction, and the destitution, delirium, and death into which victims of 'the Bottle' descend. The two sequences are reminiscent of Hogarth's *Marriage a la Mode* and *The Rake's Progress* sequences (and there were nineteenth-century dramatisations of at least the former of these sets of paintings), but Cruikshank's unadorned and graphic record of contemporary domestic life, and his didactic attitude, which uses both sensational and sentimental events to emphasise his tectotal message, set him apart from Hogarth even before we consider their comparative worth in terms of conventional aesthetic values. Cruikshank's engravings are set firmly in the world of the urban working-class, and his realist approach to his pictorial narratives does not stop short of rendering the squalid details of gin shops, ragged poverty, *delirium tremens*, prostitution, murder and suicide. These details are produced with documentary clarity in the engravings, which are devoid of the picturesque qualities of most popular genre paintings. However, in spite of the domestic detail of the engravings, the images concern a generalised family—the husband, wife and sundry children—drawn in a series of schematised poses. The combination of realistic, and,

no doubt, familiar detail, with broad generalities and schematised gestures makes the sequences powerfully propagandist, by suggesting that the story is true in its particulars, but also universally applicable.

The engravings are inherently suitable for adaptation to the nineteenth century stage: they have a strong narrative and dramatic through-line, recognisable character types, and are essentially melodramatic in the clarity of their delineation of the battle between good and evil. They also offer sufficient sensational and sentimental interest for adaptation for the popular stage. While Moncrieff changes the documented story of the shipwreck of the *Medusa*, and Géricault's doomed image of that crisis, into the shape of the triumphant melodrama, Cruikshank's engravings seem predicated on their realisation on the popular stage. Their visual representation of the battle between virtue and vice anticipates their physicalisation on the stage, with the consequent concentration of emotional interest in the characters and their fates. The recreation of Cruikshank's engravings on stage involves a particularising of his generalised and propagandist images, to create audience identification with the feeling and moral individual who is pitted against unfeeling and general evil—the essence of action in melodrama.

I will discuss just the first sequence, *The Bottle*, because the effect of dramatisation for *The Drunkard's Children* was essentially the same. Playwright T. P. Taylor made adaptations of both sequences. His version of *The Bottle* was (according to the playbills) 'supervised' by George Cruikshank at the City of London Theatre in October 1847, and his version of *The Drunkard's Children* was produced in July 1848. The City of London's production of *The Bottle* was, as nearly as was possible in those days of theatrical piracy, the authorised stage adaptation of his drawings.¹⁶ The City of London was a minor theatre specialising in domestic and sensation melodrama, whose audience was described by Frederick Tomlins as being 'very much at home with the realisation of the Newgate calendar'. The sensationalism, which was the City's stock-in-trade, was not in the manner of the water dramas of Sadler's Wells, or the grand pantomimic spectacles of Drury Lane, but consisted in a realistic representation of its dramatic subjects. Tomlins notes a managerial policy of replacing the schoolmaster in order to instruct the audience:

consequently 'Jack Sheppard' appears in fetters of the exact fashion he wore, no pains are spared to copy the dresses of the Greenwich and Chelsea pensioners, and other *recherche* means are taken to give the costume of the time from Hogarth's prints and the Ladies' Magazine.¹⁷

This documentary realism is in itself sensational, indicating the illusionistic powers of the theatre, in a display of mimetic power intended to impress its audiences, as well as to inform them. Again, the authority of 'truth' and historical fact is claimed for performances which might otherwise be considered as catering for morbid curiosity or immoral licentiousness—criticisms of the popular theatre which were frequent in the nineteenth century. Thus, the representation of a family's descent into poverty, crime, and mania, through alcohol, is represented as a cautionary tale. However, the visual emphasis on the horror of the drunkard's dissolution and the sufferings of his family, through the reproduction of Cruikshank's engravings on stage, and the strong physical presence of the symbols of the family's decline, tends to subvert the morally didactic message of the play, and transform it into a spectacular showcase of horror and wonder. Again, I would speculate that we are dealing with an experienced and sophisticated audience, able to absorb the mixed messages of this type of performance: as a general point, I think it is important never to underestimate the capability of the popular audience.

The Bottle establishes Ruth and Richard Thornley, and their children, Nell, Tom, and the baby, as a happy, hard-working, and respectable family, who are ruined by drink. Richard Thornley loses his job, his home, his youngest child, his wife, his sanity, and finally his life, through his dependence on the bottle. His surviving children are corrupted, and embark on lives of crime because of their father's degradation. The Thornley family, introduced in the first engraving and the opening tableau of the play, [PLATE I] is shown to be prosperous and harmonious, living in an apartment crammed with symbols of their virtue and prosperity. Dominating the scene are a grandfather clock, and the picture of a village church: not only are these valuable belongings for the family, but they emphasise the family's past in the countryside, and their emulation of that former peaceful existence amid the crowded life of the large city. This family room remains as the frame for six of the eight engravings and their corresponding stage realisations: the state of the room itself records the financial decline and moral degradation of the family as, object by object, their respectability disappears [PLATES II AND III].

The presence of the bottle permeates the play. This presence is strongly visual, and is also emphasised by the verbal text. The bottle is also an *active* force within the melodrama. Thornley's fall is due not only to his own weakness, but to the malevolent presence of the bottle. This is suggested by the caption to the first engraving: 'The

bottle is brought out for the first time: the husband induces his wife "just to take a drop" [PLATE I], and its realisation in tableau on stage, where the first line of the play echoes Cruikshank's caption. In both the first engraving and the first scene of the play, the bottle is physically and verbally at the centre of the stage, as Thornley urges his wife to 'just take a glass'. The wife, Ruth, immediately states the argument of the play:

You know my aversion, Richard, to strong drink of any kind; it is the forerunner of all evil. The very sight of it inspires me with dread. ... It is *that* which causes me sorrow. [*points to bottle*] Its progress is slow, but sure; it is the pest of the humble home; it is the withering curse of the happy circle; the deadly poison that corrupts and withers, changing the good to bad; it fascinates but to destroy; it charms in its progress, but its end is the grave. II, i, p.26.

Her fear even of the sight of the bottle focuses attention on its power, and its position in the play as an icon for evil. Notice that in the play, Ruth stands for virtue and temperance, whereas in the drawings the wife is a happy party to the first drop of alcohol.

Once Thornley starts to drink, he begins a decline into social and familial displacement. Not only is his life devoted to 'supplying the bottle' [PLATE IV], but he is also tempted into other vices, such as gambling, low company, and unemployment, which are represented as inevitable companions to drink, each contributing to Thornley's degradation. Here Taylor adds to the tableaux provided by Cruikshank, in both stage pictures and by adding a virtuous hero, George. In Act I, scene iii, Thornley is shown in the '*Parlour at the High-Mettled Racer—past midnight*', losing at cards. This development and extension of the bare narrative of the engravings demonstrates, through action, the corrupt consequences of Thornley's association with the bottle, and Thornley's moral degradation is contrasted with George's moral rectitude throughout the play.

As an inevitable result of his indulgence, Thornley is cast out of his job by an employer who states that he will not employ any man who drinks. In Act I, scene v, Thornley returns to the domestic setting of the first scene, to find that this idyllic, comfortable, and harmonious environment is beginning to disintegrate [PLATE II]. An execution for the rent has been served on the family, who will all suffer for the father's weakness. In contrast with the weakening man, the role of strong moral and physical guardian of her children and home is assigned by Taylor to Ruth and, throughout the play, the stability and fidelity of family life is shown to devolve into women's hands. Ruth's



PLATE I.

The Bottle is brought out for the first time: the husband induces his wife, 'Just to take a drop'.



PLATE II.

He is discharged from his employment for drunkenness: they pawn their clothes to supply the Bottle.

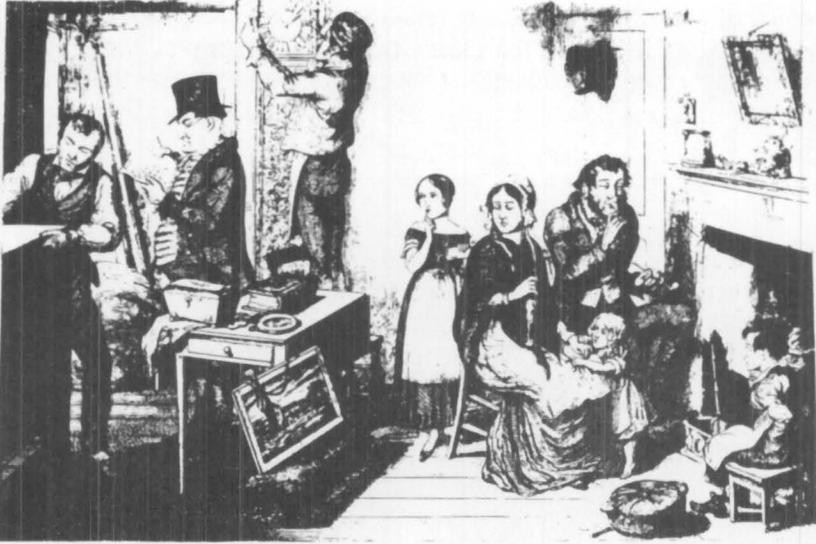


PLATE III.

An execution sweeps off the greater part of their furniture: they comfort themselves with the Bottle.

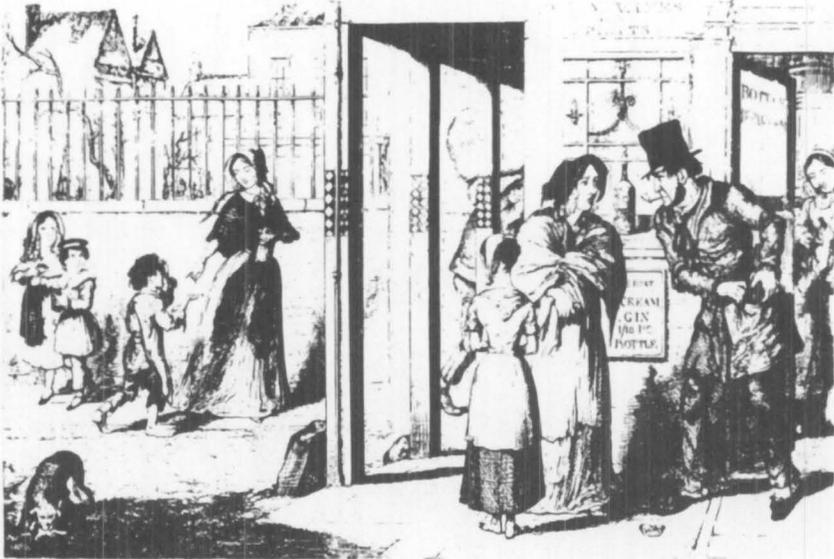


PLATE IV.

Unable to obtain employment, they are driven by poverty into the streets to beg, and by this means they still supply the Bottle.

voice of moral and spiritual revelation becomes increasingly strong, combined as it is with the clear visual iconography of the play. A simple but powerful exchange at the end of scene v stresses the peril of the family's situation by a combination of stark dialogue and gesture :

Thorn. Who has done this?

Ruth. This —the bottle!

Tableau

I, v, p.20

Here, Taylor controls the creation of 'telling situations' in the play, by constructing the conjunction of words and gesture into a realisation of the familiar visual image, so as to make maximum use of the schematic connection of pictorial and thematic themes in the melodrama.

In Act I, scene vii, when Dognose, the bailiff, and his assistants, Spike and Tom, are heartlessly arranging to dispose of the Thornleys' household possessions, Ruth's role as a passionate protector of the family is emphasised as she protests against the loss of her children's bedstead and other comforts. Her most impassioned pleading is for a picture of her village church, formerly given pride of place on the family's wall.

I must beg of you not to take that; it is the picture of the village church where I worshipped as a girl, that saw me wedded in my womanhood; there are a thousand dear recollections connected with it, humble though they be.

I, vii, p.22.

Ruth's desire to keep the painting of her village indicates an alternative and ideal set of values in the play, sited in the pastoral idyll represented by the village church. Like the presence of the bottle as a symbol of corruption, degradation, and death, this theatrical concentration on a symbol of a lost Golden Age¹⁸ is a visual reference to a strongly ideological world view in the play, which represents the problematic nature of contemporary urban life for the working-class and poor.

Ruth's picture reappears in Act II, Scene iii, still connected with hard work and fidelity, which are identified as feminine characteristics in the play. The picture now hangs in Esther's apartment, and is given special attention in the stage directions. Esther is the sweetheart of the romantic hero George, and is forced by poverty to earn her living sewing. She soliloquises on her fate:

This is weary work, hardly earned, badly paid, and wearily goes the time, when there are none by to solace, to console ... Work, work, work, and yet of no avail; it will not clear away the poverty by which I am surrounded.

II, iii, pp.30-31.

Esther's pose and words present a theatrical version of the isolated

seamstress, immediately recognisable as an icon of feminine hardship and defencelessness. This familiar pose is an extension of the visual and iconographic dramaturgy of the play, and a use of an image already invested with moral, emotional, and political significance through Thomas Hood's poem, 'They Sang the Song of the Shirt', and paintings such as Richard Redgrave's 'The Sempstress'.¹⁹ In common with earlier dramatisers and adaptors of visual material for melodrama, Taylor moves beyond Cruikshank's specific images to incorporate other potent icons of contemporary culture and life within a dramatic structure which emphasises the theatricality of these icons.

When Esther exits after her desperate soliloquy, Ruth enters and sees the picture of her village church. Her expression of the memories it evokes foreshadows the mode of Thornley's dying hallucinations which provide the sensational ending of the play. The sensory power of Ruth's memories emphasise the power of the picture as a symbol.

Again I am wandering over the green turf—again I meet the companions
of early days—again I see the old village church—the days that are past
spring up again in all their brightness: but I do not meet *him* who led me
there! no—no—no!
II, iii, pp.30–31.

Indeed, the picture of the village becomes a fetish object and emphasises the tension between the two worlds—that of the village of childhood, and the contemporary industrial city—and Ruth's position as intermediary between them.

In the second act of the play, the inescapable doom of the family is shown in a further affecting scene, in which both verbal and visual signals are strong and clear. The youngest child, unnamed, has died [PLATE V]. The death is a result of Thornley's drinking. The scene opens with this exchange:

Thorn. Why do you take the glass from me?
Ruth. Look around (*points to coffin*). There is my answer.

II, iv, p.33.

Ruth's strong gesture to the coffin which occupies centre stage makes another icon for the play. The coffin joins the bottle as a focal image, fulfilling Ruth's prophecy in the very first scene of the play, of the death that will come from alcohol. While such a scene derives its affective power from the death of an innocent child, it is not represented with the cloying sentiment so often connected with children in Victorian drama and painting. Cruikshank's image, and Taylor's melodramatic realisation of it, are harshly realistic in their detailed yet stark representation of the family's condition. Again, however, the role of Ruth is significantly altered from engraving to stage. While



PLATE V.

Cold, misery and want, destroy their youngest child: they console themselves with the Bottle.

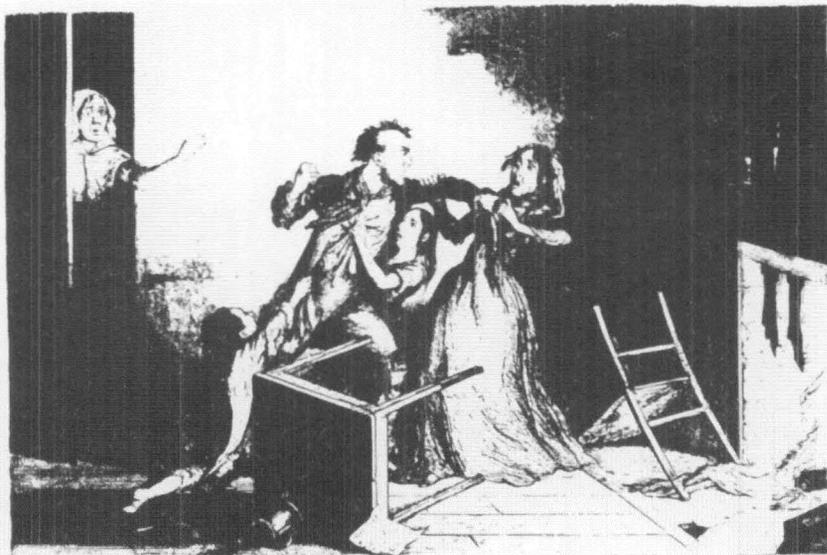


PLATE VI.

Fearful quarrels, and brutal violence, are the natural consequences of the frequent use of the Bottle.



PLATE VII.

The husband, in a state of drunkenness, kills his wife with the instrument of all their misery.

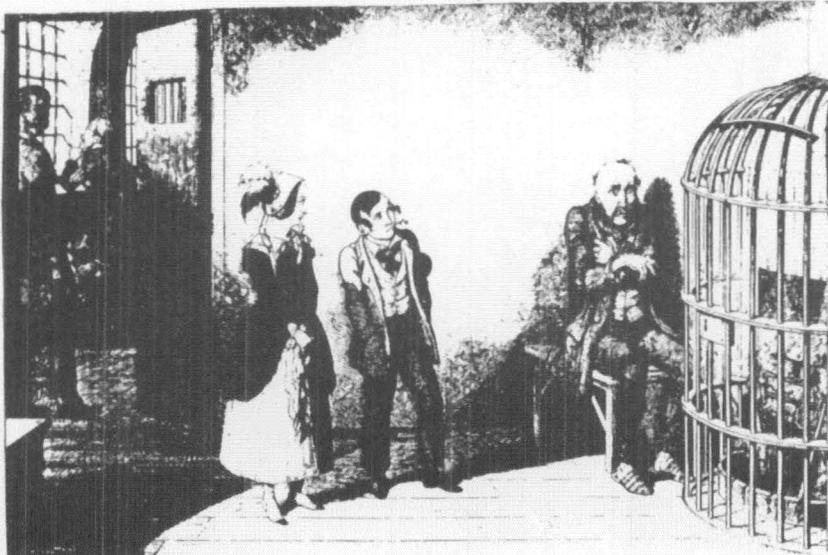


PLATE VIII.

The bottle has done its work—it has destroyed the infant and the mother, it has brought the son and daughter to vice and the streets, and has left the father a hopeless maniac.

Cruikshank depicts the wife cowed and grief-stricken, hiding her face, but with a glass in her hand, Taylor portrays Ruth as the passionate and articulate truth-teller, speaking out against her husband's behaviour.

Ruth's assumption of the public role of protector and provider for the family makes her vulnerable to her husband's jealousy and resentment. The explicitly violent scenes of Cruikshank's plates are realised amidst the mounting dissolution of the Thornley family [PLATES VI AND VII]. Thornley's resentment of Ruth's behaviour is expressed in explicit words and actions, as he blames her for their plight:

Thorn. This is all your doing—all. You've ever the bitter word upon your lip, ever taunting; I can't stand it, even from you, and I won't.

II, vi, p.36.

The stark depiction of violence and injustice is completely unmitigated in both visual and stage versions of *The Bottle*: its contemporary and realistic setting in fact serving to emphasise the documentary nature of the play, in contradiction of most accounts of melodrama which see it as providing its audiences with fanciful wish-fulfilment.

Thornley's loss of control culminates in his murder of Ruth with the bottle. The final scene opens with a tableau realising Cruikshank's last plate: 'The Bottle Has Done Its Work' [PLATE VIII]. Thornley's recollections in the final scene of the play are of different substance to Ruth's memories of her village past, but they are expressed in a similarly physicalised and passionate manner. His *delirium tremens* is theatrically sensational, both verbally and visually. In the style of Gothic horror, strong images of blood and the bottle are connected in his ravings:

Look at the red stains around; look! it flows like a river; it creeps up to my feet; ... And, oh! what a face is that glaring full upon me from the crimson pool! It is her's [*sic*—Ruth's; ... And what is that by her side? It is the weapon of death; and a grinning fiend rises from the vapour and mocks and points. It is the bottle! and the spirit of evil now madly laughs at its victim.

II, vi, p.36.

Through this dramatic and highly theatrical speech, the bottle reaches its point of most potent symbolism. The physical presence of the bottle becomes devilishly alive through Thornley's speech and displays actively the power with which it has been invested throughout the play. Through the emotions and actions of the principal characters of *The Bottle*, the physical objects in the play are given more importance than merely properties necessary for the acting of the play. They assume an emblematic status and play out the conflict between characters, and between the forces of good and evil, in a directly

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visual mode. The bottle, the coffin, a picture of Ruth's village church, and finally the very appearance of the Thornley family, are metonymic forms of representation which 'convey ... some intangible state in terms of the tangible and immediate: ... [as] a stage character reduces a general spiritual condition to a particular problem'.²⁰ Thus, the bottle stands for all strong drink, as the coffin denotes death, and the picture represents past innocence. In this way, Taylor uses the immediacy and intimacy of melodrama and its pictorial dramaturgy, to communicate the intensity and epic nature of the contemporary urban life of the working-class.

The general interest in the combination of word and picture on the early nineteenth century stage is suggestive, not only of an interest in novelty and sensation (in both senses), but of a great confidence in the theatrical medium itself. Contrary to the critical doctrine of the 'decline of the drama' held by the custodians of high culture of the period, those working in the theatres, and particularly the minor theatres, expressed great confidence in the almost infinite capacity of the stage as an effective means of representation and communication, and its capacity to absorb and incorporate all other art forms. In contrast to the theories of decorum of genre of the eighteenth century, the stage in the nineteenth century broke such proprieties and divisions, expressing confidence in the powers of the medium to express everything, without becoming overwhelmed. For the practitioners of the nineteenth-century popular stage, the image did not constitute 'the Other',²¹ but was another device with which to tell a story; not an invader into the integrity of the word, but a device to assist in the greater exploitation of the power of the word.

Notes

- 1 Edward Mayhew, *Stage Effect: or, The Principles Which Command Dramatic Success in the Theatre*, London, 1840, pp. 43-44.
- 2 S. L. Bethell, *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (1944), repr. in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication*, vol. VII, *Theatre and Song*, eds. Peter Davison, Rolf Meyerson, & Edward Shils, Cambridge, 1978, p. 25.
- 3 Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama*, London, 1965, p. 198.
- 4 Henry Neville, *The Stage. Its Past and Present in Relation to Fine Art* (1875), *The Victorian Muse Series*, New York, 1986, p. 67. Neville's book is an expanded version of a lecture delivered to the Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts on 13th July, 1871.
- 5 This claim, and its refutation, is argued in Richard Altick, *Paintings From Books*, Columbus, 1985, p. 57.
- 6 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, 1986, p. 151.

- 7 For an account of the establishment of this hierarchy in the eighteenth century, see Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in the Eighteenth Century*, Princeton, 1970, particularly Chapters VII, 'The Art of Reynolds' Discourses', and XI, 'Pope, Warburton, Spence, and the Uses of Literary History'. The dismantling of this hierarchy, and, in particular, the 'fortunate fall' of history painting, is discussed by Altick, *Paintings From Books*, p.61ff.
- 8 William Thomas Moncrieff, *The Shipwreck of the Medusa; or, The Fatal Raft*, London, n.d.; first performed Monday, 19th June, 1820, at the Coburg Theatre. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- 9 Bill for the Coburg Theatre, Monday, 19th June, 1820, *Playbills and Programmes from the London Theatres*. The story of the shipwreck was not the only element of documentary 'truth' which Moncrieff incorporated into the play: in his 'Remarks' to the printed script, he assures us that the scene portraying the crossing of the equator is also factual and that details of such rituals may be found 'at length, in Turnbull's Voyages', p.viii.
- 10 Lorenz Eitner, *Géricault's Raft of the Medusa*, London, 1972, p.1. Eitner makes the point that the Salon of 1819 'was as much a political as an artistic event'.
- 11 Eitner, p.6.
- 12 G. P. Landow, *Images of Crisis*, p.39. For Landow's discussion of the term 'post-Christian' see pp.17-27.
- 13 According to Eitner, p.6.
- 14 Eitner, p.55.
- 15 This distinction between the modes of representation in Romanticism and realism is made by Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism. The Mythology of Nineteenth Century Art*, London, 1984, p.26.
- 16 T. P. Taylor, *The Bottle* (Lacy's Acting Edition, London, n.d.), first performed on 18th October, 1847 at the City of London Theatre. Allardyce Nicoll, in his 'Hand-List of Plays', *A History of English Drama, 1660-1900*, vol. IV, *Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1880-1850*, notes two other plays based on Cruikshank's engravings: C. Z. Barnett, *The Bottle and the Glass; or, The Drunkard's Progress*, first performed 18th October, 1847, at the Albert Saloon, and G. D. Pitt, *The Bottle Bane*, first performed 20th October, 1847, at the Britannia Saloon.
- 17 F. G. Tomlins, *A Brief View of the English Drama*, London, 1840, p. 65.
- 18 For a discussion of the myth of the Golden Age in melodrama, see Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador, 'Myth and Victorian Melodrama', *Essays and Studies*, 32, n.s., (1979): 107ff.
- 19 For a detailed discussion of the visual and fictional representation of the seamstress in early Victorian England, see T. J. Edelstein, 'They Sang "The Song of the Shirt": the Visual Iconology of the Seamstress', *Victorian Studies*, 23, No. 2, (1980).
- 20 J. L. Styan, *Drama. Stage and Audience*, Cambridge, 1975, p.234.
- 21 Mitchell, p.151.