

Pantůčková, Lidmila

Thackeray's dramatic and theatrical criticism

In: Pantůčková, Lidmila. *W.M. Thackeray as a critic of literature*.

Vyd. 1. Brno: Universita J.E. Purkyně, 1972, pp. 342-369

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/103956>

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Thackeray's Dramatic and Theatrical Criticism

Thackeray's dramatic and theatrical criticism in many respects resembles that of poetry: he did not occupy himself with it as consistently as he did with criticism of fiction and, as far as the quantity of his critical contributions is concerned, paid to it approximately the same attention as to his criticism of poetry. The outcome of his work in this field is one regular review attributed to him by Gulliver (of Bulwer's tragedy *Earl Harold*, *The Times*, September 5, 1837, p. 5), three burlesque reviews (of Bulwer's *The Sea-Captain*, "Epistles to the Literati. No. XIII", *Fraser's Magazine*, January 1840, "A Brighton Night Entertainment", *Punch*, October 18, 1845 and "Thoughts on a New Comedy", *Punch*, February 2, 1850), one review of a new edition of Ben Jonson's *Works* (*The Times*, December 28, 1838,¹ which is, however, more concerned with Barry Cornwall's *Memoir of Jonson* attached to the edition than with the dramatist's works), one critical article ("French Dramas and Melodramas", *The Paris Sketch Book*, 1840), one summary review ("English History and Character on the French Stage", *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, April 1843), a brief critical notice of "one of Mr. Boyster's comedies of English life" (in "A Night's Pleasure", *Travels in London*, *Punch*, January 8—29, February 12, 19, 1848), several theatrical notices ("Drama — Covent Garden", *The National Standard*, June 15, 1833, "Drama — Plays and Play-Bills", *The National Standard*, January 25, 1834, "Covent-Garden Theatre", *The Times*, November 7, 1837, and probably several other notices of this kind in the two last-mentioned papers,² and "Two or Three Theatres at Paris", *Punch*, February 24, 1849), and one half of a lecture in the series dealing with the *English Humourists of the 18th Century* devoted to Congreve (with some critical comments, in the same series, and in *Charity and Humour*, on the production of the latter dramatist as well as that of Addison, Steele and Goldsmith).

As far as his qualifications for dramatic and theatrical criticism are concerned, in one respect Thackeray was perhaps even better equipped, for his passion for the theatre seems to have been greater than his love of poetry. As he himself later confessed, the theatre represented for him in his young days "the realization of the most intense youthful fancy", he was ravished at the play-house, "feasting

¹ This review, which was attributed to Thackeray by Gordon N. Ray on the basis of an undated letter of Thackeray to Mrs. Procter, in which the novelist confesses to have written an "article on Procter" for the *Times* (along with "an attack on Mrs. Jameson"; see *Letters* I, 377—378; Ray suggests for this letter the date of January 1839), had not yet been unearthed, and so could not so far be correctly dated and reprinted. If Ray is right in suggesting that Thackeray's article on Procter concerns the latter's edition of Jonson's *Works*, then I have succeeded in finding it and its correct date is that given in the text.

² See the notices from the *National Standard* reprinted by W. T. Spencer in *Mr. Thackeray's Writings in "The National Standard", and "Constitutional"*, London, 1899, pp. 17, 20—23, and by Gulliver, op. cit., pp. 41—42. "Covent-Garden Theatre" from the *Times* is reprinted by the last-named scholar in op. cit., pp. 96—97; for a comment on Thackeray's *Times* theatrical criticism see also Stevenson, op. cit., p. 80.

the eyes and the soul with light, splendour, and harmony" (in this case he remembers Stanfield's panorama) and seeing the stage "covered with angels, who sang, acted, and danced", all the dancers being "as beautiful as Houris".³ These youthful impressions remained indelibly imprinted in his mind until the end of his life, as we see not only from the above-quoted reminiscence, but also from the following passage from his late novel *Philip*, in which he fondly remembers the plays he saw in London during his study at Charterhouse:

"The yellow fogs didn't damp our spirits — and we never thought them too thick to keep us away from the play: from the chivalrous Charles Kemble, I tell you, my Mirabel, my Mercutio, my princely Falconbridge: from his adorable daughter (O my distracted heart!): from the classic Young: from the glorious Long Tom Coffin: from the unearthly Vanderdecken ...: from the sweet, sweet *Victorine* and the *Bottle Imp*. Oh, to see that *Bottle Imp* again, and hear that song about the 'Pilgrim of Love'!" (*Works* XVI, 18).

In his young manhood London was for him "only the place where the Theatres are",⁴ as he wrote to FitzGerald, and the theatre remained "one of his abiding joys",⁵ as Melville expressed it, until almost the very end of his life, and though maturity and especially old age naturally brought with them gradual disillusion, as we know from his marginal comments, he preserved in his heart a feeling of deep gratefulness to the stage for the many happy moments it gave him in his youth and several times also expressed this in public.⁶ The rich impressions he imbibed from the stage during his whole life, as well as his passion for the theatre, find also reflection in his novels, as Melville has shown⁷ — several of his female characters perform, either professionally or as amateurs, especially in Shakespeare's plays, but also in those of Sheridan and Kotzebue, and many other personages of his, female and male, attend performances, again mostly of Shakespeare's plays, but also of Wycherley's comedy, Home's tragedy *Douglas* and of various operatic performances. As a theatre-goer Thackeray seems to have been capable, too, of discerning and appreciating the specific aesthetic quality of the drama, as the following reminiscence of a friend of his, quoted by Melville, at least suggests:

"Once he asked a friend if he loved 'the play', and receiving the qualified answer, 'Ye-es, I like a good play', 'Oh, get out!' the great man retorted. 'I said *the* play. You don't even understand what I *mean*!'"

Another reminiscence of this sort, quoted by the same scholar, casts doubt upon his critical capacities in this field:

"And Edward FitzGerald went with him in the pit one night to witness a piece which, with its mock sentiment, indifferent humour, and ultra-melodramatic scenes bored the poet so terribly that he was about to suggest they should leave, when Thackeray turned to him, and exclaimed delightedly, 'By G-d! isn't it splendid?'"⁸

On the other hand, however, we have plenty of evidence that Thackeray was not always such an uncritical enthusiast. With the exception of his earliest

³ For the quotations see *Works* IX, 139–140, XVII, 428, 427.

⁴ *Letters* I, 160 (1831).

⁵ Melville, *op. cit.*, I, 214.

⁶ See especially his speech at the Royal Theatrical Fund Dinner in 1858, reprinted by Melville, *op. cit.*, II, 114.

⁷ See *op. cit.*, I, 217–222.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 216–217.

theatrical experiences in his childhood, of which we are of course informed rather from his later reminiscences than from his direct reactions in that period (though we know from his letters how passionately he loved pantomimes in those early days), he was a critical theatre-goer, who in his diaries and letters regularly recorded his impressions and, in most cases, also his critical opinions of the individual performances he saw on the London and Paris stages and at the small court theatre at Weimar.

As was the case with his criticism of poetry, so, too, for his criticism of drama Thackeray was splendidly equipped by his extensive reading of dramatic literature of all ages and several countries, as the list in the first chapter confirms. What should be especially emphasized is his uncommonly wide and profound knowledge of Shakespeare's works, demonstrated by the immense number of his marginal references to or quotations from the plays (recently investigated by Edward P. Vandiver⁹), his almost equal familiarity with Ben Jonson's works (shown in the review quoted above), of the dramatic production of the Restoration period (as we know from his lecture on Congreve) and of Richard Brinsley Sheridan (as his marginal comments betray). How greatly Thackeray loved Shakespeare and how much he knew about him is also proved, as G. N. Ray has it, by his speaking about Shakespeare's last years at Stratford "in a manner that profoundly impressed the great Shakespearean scholar H. H. Furness, though it owed nothing to historical study and everything to general observation".¹⁰

In contradistinction to his criticism of poetry, however, for his dramatic criticism Thackeray was not so well equipped as far as his own creativity in this field was concerned. He was himself convinced that he could write a good comedy,¹¹ but all his attempts, except the last, are tragedies or dramas, none of which he finished¹² (he did finish a little satirical sketch *Reading a Poem*, but it was never intended for the stage, and wrote some chapters or episodes in his stories or novels¹³ in the form of dramatic dialogue). His last attempt was his domestic comedy *The Wolves and the Lamb* (originally entitled *The Shorn Lamb*), submitted to two managers and refused by both (Buckstone of the Haymarket and Wigan of the Olympic), for it lacked the necessary dramatic qualities, containing "too much talk and too little action", and therefore was more

⁹ See "Thackeray and Shakespeare", *Furman Studies*, 1951, quoted in *Victorian Fiction: A Guide to Research*, ed. Lionel Stevenson, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964, p. 186. I was unfortunately not able to read this study.

¹⁰ Furness's introduction to the Variorum *Hamlet*, quoted in *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 333 and in *Letters* III, 203n.; see also Wilson, op. cit., I, 210.

¹¹ See *Letters* I, 216 (1832).

¹² His earliest attempt was a classical drama *Ariadne in Naxos*, to which he was inspired by Horace Smith's *Gaieties and Gravities* (see *Letters* II, 250): in 1830 he began to write (in collaboration with a friend of his) a play on the theme of *Wilhelm Tell*, but burnt it (see *Letters* I, 134); in 1833 he intended "to make a play about the loss of the Amphitrite" (*Letters* I, 265); in 1840 he was writing a play for Covent Garden and had done nearly three acts of the five (see *Letters* I, 475, 482); in 1841 he wrote the first act of a tragedy in blank verse (see *Letters* II, 38); in 1851 he began to write a drama in blank verse about Bluebeard (see *Letters* II, 731-732). Also his heroes Esmond and George Warrington are authors of unsuccessful plays.

¹³ See part of chapter III of *A Shabby Genteel Story*, part of *Fitz-Boodles Confessions* (*Works* IV, 212-213), chapters XLVII and XLIX of *The Newcomes* and chapter XXIII of *Philip*.

suitable for the closet than for the stage, as Melville has pointed out. The same scholar also records Thackeray's reaction:

"I thought I could write a play", Thackeray said, sadly, 'and I find I can't.'"

As Melville emphasizes, however, Thackeray "was never quite convinced . . . that the play might not have been successful": though he admitted that the conversations at the beginning were "needlessly long", and probably "unsuitable for the stage", he thought that the managers were wrong concerning the last act, which he characterized as "very lively and amusing".¹⁴ It should also be pointed out that Thackeray, in contradistinction to Dickens (and with the exception of his early school-days), never performed in private theatricals,¹⁵ for he was quite a different type of man from Dickens, being too modest and diffident, and having a horror of public speaking and any sort of public displays of his own person. But he certainly saw more famous actors (English, French and German) than Dickens did and was also very well informed about the great English actors of the past.

As in his criticism of poetry, so too in that of drama Thackeray's interest in the 1830s and 1840s lay predominantly in contemporary production, while in the following decade it shifted to the drama produced in the Restoration and Augustan periods. What came under his notice, therefore, when he worked as a professional critic, was again inferior work, for the situation in the English drama in that period was perhaps even worse than that in poetry. As the authors of *CHEL* have pointed out, in the first half of the century the English drama reaches "the low-water mark" in quality, "together with a great increase in quantity":

"The death of tragedy; the swift decline of the romantic or poetical drama and the coarsening of comedy into farce are scarcely outweighed by the rapid growth of an honest and fairly spontaneous, but crude, domestic play suitable to the taste of the new theatrical public."¹⁶

It would be very interesting to hear what Thackeray would have had to say, if he had realized his intention to write, in 1842, an article on the dramatists of the Victorian age.¹⁷

The basic critical standards Thackeray applies in his dramatic and theatrical criticism are the same as those he uses when criticizing poetry, but there are of course differences in their practical application and an additional criterion is added — Shakespeare — who becomes for him a critical standard and the most perfect practical example by which the works of other dramatists can be measured. In short, Shakespeare is for him what the ancient writers were for the Neoclassicists. He was probably not fully aware of this himself, for his attitude to Shakespeare was not uncritical: the dramatist's female characters (with the exception of Lady Macbeth) seemed to him too stereotyped,¹⁸ he had

¹⁴ For the quotations see Melville, *op. cit.*, I, 222, 223.

¹⁵ He took part in amateur student theatricals at Charterhouse, in William Barnes Rhodes's burlesque *Bombastes Furioso*, where he played the part of Fusbos and, to the best of Boyes's recollection, "did it very well" (*op. cit.*, p. 119). For Thackeray's later references to the character of Fusbos see *Works* V, 314, XIV, 696.

¹⁶ *CHEL* XIII, 257.

¹⁷ See *Letters* II, 50.

¹⁸ See *Works* VIII, 324; for his opinions on Lady Macbeth see especially *Works* XVI, 278, 364.

critical reservations about *Hamlet* as drama (though clearly provoked to this by the way it was produced¹⁹), and found *King Lear* a bore, rebelling against the uncritical adoration of the dramatist which he denotes as "bookolatry"²⁰ and thus entirely diverging from most of the Romantic critics for whom Shakespeare became "a religion",²¹ as Sisson has it. But in one marginal remark Thackeray did place Shakespeare above ancient writers as a creator of characters, he made Bunch prefer him to the ideal of the Neoclassicists, Corneille, and Pen's father to all Johnson's *Poets*,²² and he did use him as his critical standard much more frequently than he did for instance Sheridan and Molière (in assessing Ben Jonson, Scribe, Bulwer and Congreve). Sheridan and Molière are used as his critical standards in his evaluation of Scribe's comedy *Le Verre d'Eau*, while Sheridan's character, Sir Lucius O'Trigger, is a criterion for measuring the value of the characters created by some Irish novelists of Thackeray's time.²³

One of the main demands Thackeray lays upon drama is the postulate familiar to us from his criticism analysed in the preceding chapters, that literature, and consequently drama, should keep close to the world of men, should be created for the society in which it originated and also express its ideals and aspirations. This demand of Thackeray the spectator was perfectly fulfilled by Shakespeare, whom he ranged among the greatest geniuses of world literature, among those gigantic figures who had no equals among their contemporaries and stood high above them, being mostly obliged to live in solitude, but who loved their fellow creatures, understood their hearts, had a deep sympathy for their sufferings and created their works for them and not for posterity. Thackeray highly appreciates especially Shakespeare's humour, bearing the sacred seal of the dramatist's humanity, and consequently "as eagerly received by the public as by the most delicate connoisseur".²⁴

In his earlier years Thackeray found his demand for a genuine love of mankind on the part of the dramatist also very well met in the dramas of Schiller, of which he especially admired *The Robbers*, obviously sympathizing with the dramatist's republican ideals and the spirit of rebellion and youthful energy pervading this drama (as he pointed out in a letter, he had to go to Erfurt to see this play, for it was "a little too patriotic & free for our court theatre"²⁵),

¹⁹ He especially resented the mannerisms of Macready who was in the performance of October 30, 1850 (and in two others given on November 27, 1850 and January 29, 1851 — see *Letters* II, 702–703n.) taking his leave of the stage, along with the fact that the actor was too old for the role. But he also found the play itself boring and expressed his critical objections to the ghost's prosing about the murder and to the play within the play as being full of the grossest allusions to widows marrying and as "being a very objectionable stratagem for the Prince to choose (see *Letters* II, 702–703). Thackeray also several times took exception to the costumes worn by Shakespearean actors, both in the preceding century and his own, as not being "like nature" (see "Horae Catnachianae", p. 408, *Works* II, 551, III, 551, XV, 611–612, 613, 620–621, XVII, 273, 274, Melville, op. cit., II, 72). Similarly he protests against the costumes traditionally worn by Sir Anthony Absolute in *The Rivals* (see Melville, *ibid.*) and sharply criticizes the scenery and costumes in the performance of Mozart's *Zauberflöte* in his early notice "Drama — Covent Garden", *The National Standard*, June 15, 1833.

²⁰ *Letters* II, 292; see also *Letters* I, 177.

²¹ C. S. Sisson, *Shakespeare, Writers and Their Work*, No. 58, 1959, p. 19.

²² See *Works* II, 47, XVI, 290, XII, 70.

²³ See Garnett, op. cit., p. 174, *Works* VI, 389–390.

²⁴ *Works* II, 420; see also VI, 607.

²⁵ *Letters* I, 141.

and was deeply impressed by the character of Franz Moor, then excellently acted by Ludwig Devrient (to whom Thackeray was also introduced by one of the other actors). It is worth noticing that he chose for the object of his admiration this particular character, sharply criticized by Carlyle as an amplified and at the same time distorted copy of Iago and Richard III, and not the much greater character of the hero of the play, Karl von Moor, the only personage Carlyle excludes from his criticism as being not a mere outline but a genuine depiction, having "a towering grandeur about him, a whirlwind force of passion and of will, which catches our hearts, and puts the scruples of criticism to silence".²⁶ Not many years elapsed, however, and Thackeray seems to have modified his opinion of the *Robbers*, or at least expresses some views upon it which he did not mention before. In his review of Ben Jonson's works he takes exception to Barry Cornwall's general remarks on Schiller's play in the second part of his *Memoir*, remarks which concern the general influence of the drama on the popular mind. Cornwall expresses his regret that in his own time the drama "is a great engine, reserved now for holy-day purposes; instead of being, like the 'press' in general, a power in the state" and recommends to the English dramatists the example of Schiller's story of Karl von Moor which, "told upon the stage", "sent men, wild with excitement, into the forests of Bohemia". Thackeray clearly misunderstands the critic, believing him to posit the demand that the stage should preach party politics (whereas Cornwall obviously has in mind the social commitment of drama), and rejects it altogether, pointing out that this demand is successfully fulfilled by the press, and proceeding:

"With us the theatre has its proper sphere of action assigned to it, and a good dramatic writer is expected to instruct, to refine, or simply to enliven and amuse."

Thackeray ends his polemic with the following comment, sounding indeed very strange from the mouth of the former great admirer of the *Robbers*:

"Does Mr. Barry Cornwall really expect that the audiences of London and Edinburgh are to be so easily worked upon as a set of drunken savages like the *burschen* of a German university? Shade of Canning! how would the author of the *Rovers*²⁷ have laughed at the chimera!"

Yet even if Thackeray may have changed his opinion about the *Robbers*, he certainly remained a genuine admirer of some other patriotic dramas of Schiller, particularly of *Wilhelm Tell* and the trilogy *Wallenstein*, having a great predilection especially for Thekla's song from *Die Piccolomini*.²⁸ It seems to me symptomatic, too, that the only play of Schiller on which he comments negatively is *Marie Stuart*,²⁹ the only historical drama by this playwright in which ideological problems play a subordinate part, and which was therefore not so widely popular in the context of the awakening consciousness of the German people.

²⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of Friedrich Schiller*. Comprehending an Examination of His Works. In one volume, Chapman and Hall Limited, London, 1899, p. 19.

²⁷ *The Rovers* was a burlesque of contemporary German drama by George Canning.

²⁸ He translated it in Germany (see Melville, op. cit., I, 74-75) and quoted it several times throughout his life (see *Letters* I, 147, *Works* VI, 460, XVII, 110, etc.; see also Frisa, op. cit., pp. 16, 17). For his references to *Wilhelm Tell* see *Works* IV, 148, XIV, 866, XVII, 531; to *Don Carlos* *Works* IV, 311.

²⁹ See *Letters* I, 236, II, 23 (in both comments he refers to the French adaptation of the tragedy).

As far as Goethe's dramas are concerned, Thackeray was not so much delighted with *Faust*, when he first read it, as he had expected,³⁰ and yet he was able to discern at least some of its great merits, though he selected rather those which contribute to making its appeal universal for all ages and the whole of mankind than those by which this immortal drama appealed to the poet's contemporaries. This is obvious from his great predilection for the "charming verses which are prefixed to the drama, in which the poet reverts to the time when his work was first composed", the "memory of the past is renewed as he looks at it", and "*die Bilder froher Tage, Und manche liebe Schatten steigen auf*".³¹ He was also obviously fascinated by the "mocking bitterness" of Mephistopheles, rightly seeing in this character a personification of criticism and negation, "*der Geist, der stets verneint*", as his marginal comments suggest.³² We also have evidence that he felt a deep compassion for Margaret and regarded her as an immortal literary character,³³ that he made translations from the drama and that one of his earlier stories found inspiration in the tale of *Faust*.³⁴ His marginal comments suggest, too, that he admired Goethe's *Egmont*, one of the few great dramas in German literature devoted to the struggle for liberty (though some of his references concern Beethoven's rendering of this drama), and positively refer to *Götz von Berlichingen*, assessing the titular character, a robber-chief, rebel and fighter for freedom, as an immortal literary personage,³⁵ and the drama itself, as we have seen before, as an epoch-making play.

Both as spectator and critic Thackeray greatly admired popular melodramas, French and English, which appealed to him especially by always expressing the standpoint of the people regarding the classes in power: the seducer and villain is always an aristocrat, and is punished at the end of the play, thus expiating, and quite justly, as Thackeray emphasizes in his criticism of French melodramas, the wrongs which that class had committed a hundred years before. Thackeray warmly sympathizes with this "republican" tendency of these dramatic entertainments and expresses his wish that it should live on the French stage for a long time yet. In his *Punch* contribution "A Brighton Night Entertainment" Thackeray is concerned with an "old English melodrama", *The Warlock of the Glen*, produced by a provincial theatrical company at Brighton. With great fondness and subtle irony he describes the absurd plot of the play, crammed with sensational and surprising events and acted against pasteboard scenery which does not even attempt to create the illusion of reality, his whole assessment clearly showing how greatly he was amused, but also moved, by this genuine product of popular dramatic art, with its naïve belief in the inevitable victory of innocence and punishment of the villain who is, of course, a nobleman. Worth noticing is also his comment upon "a good old melodrama of the British sort"

³⁰ See *Letters* I, 133.

³¹ For the quotations see *Works* XVII, 592, and the Preface to *A Shabby Genteel Story*; for a reference to this preface see *Letters* IV, 48 and for references to or quotations from the verses see *Contributions*, 180, *Works* II, 415, *Letters* III, 266.

³² See *Works* XII, 517, II, 189.

³³ See *Works* XVII, 598, XII, 607.

³⁴ He translated "several things of Goethes" (*Letters* I, 139–140) during his stay at Weimar and was inspired by *Faust* when writing *The Devil's Wager*, being strongly influenced, at the same time — as Werner and Frisa believe — by the humour of Hoffmann (see Werner, op. cit., p. 19; Frisa, op. cit., p. 19).

³⁵ See *Works* XVII, 598.

which he saw in Ireland, "inculcating a thorough detestation of vice, and a warm sympathy with suffering virtue",³⁶ and his later comment on two popular dramas he saw in two penny theatres in London, though in this case his concluding remark bears traces of the development of his philosophy of life in this period, revealing his later tendency to entertain some sympathies, too, for the belaboured high classes:

"Popular fun is always kind: it is the champion of the humble against the great. In all popular parables, it is Little Jack that conquers, and the Giant that topples down. I think our popular authors are rather hard upon the great folks. Well, well! their lordships have all the money, and can afford to be laughed at" (*Works* X, 625).

Another criterion consistently applied by Thackeray is his demand that the moral content and effect of drama should be unobjectionable and harmless. It is worth noticing, however, that in the period of his professional literary criticism he applies this demand more consistently and emphatically when dealing with French drama than with English. The reason may in my opinion be that in that period he was predominantly concerned with contemporary drama and its possible influence upon the morals of the French and English audience of his time and that among the dramas produced in his own country during his lifetime he found no parallels to the — from his point of view — morally objectionable productions of *L'École romantique* in France. It is true that he objected, on moral grounds, against "a new species of dramatic entertainment" featuring "Women Bathing and Sporting" at the Adelphi Theatre in 1834,³⁷ criticized Bulwer's *The Sea-Captain* for its sham morality and jocosely reprehended, in the guise of Jeames Plush, the author of the comedy *Leap Year*, John Baldwin Buckstone, for propagating ideas dangerous to public morality, as well as to his *alter-ego's* profession,³⁸ yet in none of these cases was moral evaluation his main concern. The same might be said of the judgments he pronounced upon the older English dramatists in this period. Neither at that time (nor later, for he does not vent any either in the 1850s or afterwards) had he any moral objections to Shakespeare, as follows from his comment in the review of Fielding's *Works*:

"As for Hogarth, he has passed into a tradition; we allow him and Shakespeare to take liberties in conversation that we would not permit to any other man" (*Works* III, 385).

Jonson almost perfectly fulfils Thackeray's requirements and is excused when he does not:

"And be it his highest praise, that whatever he wrote was written to recommend virtue, and make vice disgusting; nowhere does he shine forth in such terrible energy as when he lashes the prevailing crimes and depravities. There is but one drawback to the reading of his plays, and that arises from his occasionally calling coarse things by coarse names. But what man or writer was ever free from faults?"

³⁶ *Works* V, 307.

³⁷ See "Drama — Plays and Play-Bills", *The National Standard*, January 25, 1834. Thackeray mentions the title of the play (*Lurline*), but not its author, who was, according to Nicoll, George Dibdin Pitt.

³⁸ See "Thoughts on a New Comedy", *Punch*, February 2, 1850. The plot of the play is based upon the ancient custom that in a leap year it is the women who have the privilege of choosing their husbands; this is made use of by a rich young widow who proposes to her footman and marries him. Thackeray takes exception to the footman's marrying his own mistress, but he does not deny him the right of marrying ladies above his station outside the house in which he serves.

Wycherley and Sedley (and Suckling as a poet) are referred to by him in this period (but not sharply reprehended) as writers whose works contain surprising illustrative passages on the morals of their time³⁹, and he does not explicitly express any serious moral reservations regarding Farquhar's comedies, though that he did have some is implicit in his comparing them to those of Fielding which he condemns as "irretrievably immoral" (excusing, however, the latter dramatist for his "errors" on account of his "excessive and boisterous bodily health"⁴⁰). In his letter of 1841, nevertheless, he places Farquhar above all his contemporaries, though he finds in him an entirely different quality than did Hazlitt:⁴¹

"I'm quite of your opinion about Farquhar, he's the only fellow among them. [He was] something more than a mere comic tradesman: and has a grand drunken diabolical fire in him" (*Letters* II, 38).

On the other hand, however, Thackeray prefers Fielding to Sheridan, for in the former's works there are no pleas for extenuation of the sins of his personages "like those which Sheridan puts forward (unconsciously, most likely) for those brilliant blackguards who are the chief characters of his comedies".⁴²

The French Romantic drama does suffer grievously, however, when measured by Thackeray's ethical standard, though this criterion is not the only one he applies. He assesses the dramatic production of *L'École romantique* as a whole in the prefatory remarks to his article "French Dramas and Melodramas", in the main part of which he examines in detail three plays by Alexandre Dumas-père, and condemns the whole school sharply and utterly as producing drama dealing exclusively in crimes and vices and therefore exercising a very harmful influence upon the spectator, equal almost to that exercised by public executions — it makes him indulge in a "hideous kind of mental intoxication"⁴³ and a morbid interest in, and perhaps even sympathy for, its criminal or vicious "heroes". In this we of course recognize his postulate that criminal characters should be depicted in their "unmixed rascality", familiar to us from his criticism of the Newgate novelists and Eugène Sue. This postulate is consistently applied by him, too, in his assessment of the three dramas by Dumas-père which I investigated in detail in my study on his criticism of French literature. There I have also pointed out that in the same article Thackeray gives preference to French popular melodramas which "do not deal in descriptions of the agreeably wicked, or ask pity and admiration for tender-hearted criminals and philanthropic murderers, as their betters do", depict virtue as virtue and vice as vice and lead all the vicious characters to due punishment. In contradistinction to the dramas of *L'École romantique* they therefore contain, as Thackeray emphasizes, "fine hearty virtue" and "a kind of rude moral":

"So that while the drama of Victor Hugo, Dumas, and the enlightened classes, is profoundly immoral and absurd, the *drama* of the common people is absurd, if you will, but good and right-hearted" (*Works* II, 305).

³⁹ See *Works* VIII, 540.

⁴⁰ *Works* III, 386.

⁴¹ Hazlitt positively appreciated Farquhar's unaffected gaiety, laughing invention, fine animal spirits, cordial good humour and absence of malice (see *Comic Writers*, pp. 111–112).

⁴² *Works* III, 390.

⁴³ *Works* II, 293; see also *ibid*, p. 292.

Ethical evaluation is one of Thackeray's main concerns, too, in the summary review "English History and Character on the French Stage" and in his article "Two or Three Theatres at Paris", both of which are analysed at some length, too, in the above-quoted study. In the former he condemns Dumas's comedy *Halifax* for its perverse morality and indicts especially Scribe as a bad teacher of morals, while in the latter he pillories contemporary French comedy for ridiculing, *inter alia*, moral values, and voices moral objections especially to the play *La propriété, c'est le vol!*

Those who suffer most under such a treatment, however, are the English Restoration dramatists, to whom Thackeray paid formal critical attention in his lectures on the *English Humourists* (as well as commenting on them in *Charity and Humour* and in *Esmond*), that is in that period of his life when he began to apply the ethical criterion much more consistently and emphatically than in the preceding period. In his lecture on Congreve he has much to say on Restoration comedy in general and he condemns it almost utterly — predominantly (but not solely) on moral grounds. He characterizes it as a "merry and shameless Comic Muse", godless, immoral and reckless, and censures it as "a disreputable, daring, laughing, painted French baggage". Congreve's comedies are pilloried by him as plays lacking any moral purpose whatever and presenting utterly wicked and licentious characters, while the dramatist is "a humorous observer" to whom, in contradistinction to Swift and Addison, "the world seems to have no moral at all" and who never thought at all "of any moral legacy to posterity". Thackeray admits that in his private life Congreve must have possessed many virtues, for he was immensely popular and liked for his gaiety, kindness and generosity, but "in public, he teaches dancing. His business is cotillons, not ethics".⁴⁴ As we may see, Thackeray seems to have grasped that the conception of ethics upon which Restoration comedy was based was erroneous and too narrow, the outcome of its being rooted, as Craig has pointed out, in the mechanistic conception of passions current in the 17th century; but he was of course wrong to condemn the whole production of this dramatic school as immoral. In this case he does not prove to be a critic of the highest discrimination, for with such, as Craig has emphasized, the fairly widely spread prejudices against these dramatists, based upon their alleged immorality, do not prevail⁴⁵ (Coleridge excepted, we should add). Although Thackeray does not condemn Restoration comedy utterly and finds in it some positive traits, as we shall see, his standpoint is in fact almost identical with that of Collier, against whose attack in his opinion the comedy was incapable of defence (though Thackeray of course did not go so far as this "sour, nonjuring critic", as Hazlitt characterizes him, who "would have been contented to be present at a comedy or a farce, like a Father Inquisitor, if there was to be an *auto da fé* at the end, to burn both the actors and the poet"⁴⁶). Thackeray's view also coincided largely with that of Addison, Steele, Johnson, Scott, Coleridge and all the adverse critics of this type who were condemned by Lamb for substituting real persons, themselves or their acquaintances, for dramatic characters, and for measuring the behaviour of the characters by a moral test:

⁴⁴ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 512, 512–513, 524, X, 618, 619.

⁴⁵ See *Dějiny anglické literatury* (*A History of English Literature*, ed. Hardin Craig), ed. Zdeněk Vančura, I, 303 and note.

⁴⁶ *Comic Writers*, p. 118.

"We dare not dally with images, or names, of wrong. We bark like foolish dogs at shadows. We dread infection from the scenic representation of disorder; and fear a painted pustule. In our anxiety that our morality should not take cold, we wrap it up in a great blanket surtout of precaution against the breeze of sunshine."⁴⁷

Outside his lectures, and through the mouth of Esmond, Thackeray also expresses his moral indignation at Wycherley's comedy *Love in a Wood*⁴⁸ which his hero goes to see with Lord Castlewood and Jack Newbury:

"Harry Esmond has thought of that play ever since with a kind of terror, and of Mrs. Bracegirdle, the actress who performed the girl's part in the comedy. She was disguised as a page, and came and stood before the gentlemen as they sat on the stage, and looked over her shoulder with a pair of arch black eyes, and laughed at my lord, and asked what ailed the gentlemen from the country, and had he had bad news from Bullock Fair?" (*Works* XIII, 156).

In his youth, however, Esmond read the "delightful wicked" comedies of Shadwell or Wycherley by stealth, hiding them under his pillow.⁴⁹

The only older English dramatist besides Shakespeare who fulfils Thackeray's requirements in this later period is Steele, whom he extols especially for his respect for women, comparing him favourably in this point with Congreve, Swift and Addison, and praising him as the first English writer who "began to pay a manly homage to their goodness and understanding, as well as to their tenderness and beauty",⁵⁰ and who purified English comedy from the immoralities common on the Restoration stage:

"He took away comedy from behind the fine lady's alcove, or the screen where the libertine was watching her. He ended all that wretched business of wives jeering at their husbands, of rakes laughing wives, and husbands too, to scorn. That miserable, rouged, tawdry, sparkling, hollow-hearted comedy of the Restoration fled before him, and, like the wicked spirit in the Fairy-books, shrank, as Steele let the daylight in, and shrieked, and shuddered, and vanished" (*Works* X, 621).

As we may see, his standpoint is totally divergent from that of Hazlitt, who evaluated Steele's comedies negatively as the first "that were written expressly with a view not to imitate the manners, but to reform the morals of the age", as comedies not founded upon nature but taken out of the dramatist's "ethical commonplace book", and introducing "the tone of the pulpit or reading-desk" and "the artificial mechanism of morals" on the stage. The following statement of Hazlitt most convincingly reveals the difference between his and Thackeray's views and at the same time shows that it was he who was in the right and not Thackeray:

"It is almost a misnomer to call them comedies; they are rather homilies in dialogue, in which a number of very pretty ladies and gentlemen discuss the fashionable topics of gaming, of duelling, of seduction, of scandal, &c., with a sickly sensibility, that shows as little hearty aversion to vice as sincere attachment to virtue. By not meeting the question fairly on the ground of common experience, by slubbering over the objections, and varnishing

⁴⁷ *Specimens of English Dramatic Criticism XVII—XX Centuries*, Selected and Introduced by A. C. Ward, Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, London, New York, Toronto, 1946, p. 113.

⁴⁸ According to Melville, it "could not have been 'Love in a Wood', because, for one reason anyway, the disguise of a page is not worn by any of the ladies taking part in that comedy" (op. cit., I, 339–340).

⁴⁹ See *Works* XIII, 42.

⁵⁰ *Works* XIII, 560.

over the answers, the whole distinction between virtue and vice (as it appears in evidence in the comic drama) is reduced to verbal professions, and a mechanical, infantine goodness. The sting is, indeed, taken out of what is bad; but what is good, at the same time, loses its manhood and nobility of nature by this enervating process."⁵¹

The ethical criterion was not the only one, however, that Thackeray used in assessing drama, even in this later period, as we shall see. Yet more important than the moral content of the dramatic productions he evaluates was for him always, and especially in the period of his professional criticism, their relationship to the reality they depicted. He consistently laid upon them the demand, familiar to us from his whole literary criticism, that they should faithfully reflect human life and depict real human beings. As spectator he found this demand perfectly fulfilled especially in Shakespeare's works, in all the dramatic *genres* which Shakespeare cultivated and in all the characters he created. He highly appreciated Shakespeare's perfect knowledge of "the world", of human life and society and of the human heart, and especially the "wondrous versatility" and fertility of his genius in creating lifelike characters. Shakespeare's characters were for him real and living human beings, so real indeed as were for him the personages he himself created. For this we have ample proof in his decided penchant for making comparisons between the appearance, airs, emotions and reactions of his own characters and those of Shakespeare, as well as between the mutual relationships and situations in which he places his own people and those depicted by the great dramatist. He warmly praised, too, Shakespeare's capacity for creating convincing supernatural beings and ghosts, preferring his way of presentation to that of the painters inspired by such figures, as well as to that of the actors performing such roles, as follows (as far as the painters are concerned) from the comment on Banquo's ghost:

"Before the poet's eyes, at least, the figure of the ghost stood complete — an actual visible body, with the life gone out of it; an image far more grand and dreadful than the painter's fantastical shadow, because more simple. The shadow is an awful object, — granted; but the most sublime, beautiful, fearful sight in all nature is, surely, the face of a man; wonderful in all its expressions of grief or joy, daring or endurance, thought, hope, love, or pain. How Shakespeare painted all these; with what careful thought and brooding were all his imaginary creatures made!" (*Works* II, 522—523).⁵²

As a spectator Thackeray found what he was looking for, too, in the comedies of René Lesage, Beaumarchais and Molière (except for the titular hero of *Tartuffe*, whom he did regard as a convincing character but at the same time much disliked, as I have shown in my study on his criticism of French literature). He also admired the main characters in Sheridan's comedies and in Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, finding them so convincing that he often compared them to his own characters or to historical personages, or their situation to his own. Of the characters created by Sheridan he especially liked Sir Lucius O'Trigger, as we have already seen, though the humour of this personage did not seem to him to reach the level of that of Shakespeare's Falstaff.⁵³ He delighted in Joseph Surface and Mrs. Malaprop, but he regarded even other personages

⁵¹ *Comic Writers*, pp. 215—216.

⁵² See also *Works* II, 519, where Thackeray compares the impression gained from reading the episode of the appearance of the ghost in *Macbeth* with that from its performance on the stage, and points out that the latter does not attain the powerful effect of the original.

⁵³ See *Works* VI, 389—390.

as convincing, especially those to whom he compares either characters from his own works or else certain writers he criticizes (Harley and Sir Fretful Plagiary from the *Critic*⁵⁴). In his parody of *Coningsby* in *Novels by Eminent Hands* he borrowed the name of Sheridan's character Isaac Mendoza from the comic opera *The Duenna*.

Of contemporary dramatic production Thackeray liked especially Jerrold's *Black-Eyed Susan* which, in spite of its numerous weak points, has preserved a certain vivacity up to the present day thanks to its lively characters, and appreciated the comedy *London Assurance* by Dion Boucicault (which was indeed the only attempt at that time to continue in the tradition of the 18th-century comedy, as the authors of *CHEL* point out⁵⁵) for presenting a truthful depiction of "the youth of our Clubs".⁵⁶

As a critic he found his requirements best met by the dramas of Jonson, whom he praises for his "deep learning and extensive knowledge", characterizing him as "lord . . . of the humours" (in contradistinction to Shakespeare who is in his characterization "lord of the passions") and emphasizing that "within that more limited circle [Jonson's] sceptre is as powerful, and his sway as undisputed". He dissociates himself from Cornwall's negative opinion of *Every Man in His Humour* as a drama lacking in passion and delicacy of character and containing "no heroism or strong feeling of any sort", points out that the drama was written when its author was only twenty-two and that, in view of this, it "must ever be regarded as one of the proudest achievements of the human mind". He then compares Jonson's characters from this play to similar types to be found in Shakespeare and finds the former as good as, and in one case even superior to, the latter:

"Where, except in Shakspeare, who, be it observed, made no attempt at dramatic composition till he was some years older than Jonson, shall we find equal vigour of conception and power of delineation with that which is shown in the characters of Kiteley and Bobadil? Compare Kiteley with Ford, in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, a character of precisely the same class, and his superiority is placed in a striking light. When was the passion of jealousy ever more forcibly depicted? In *Othello* we have it indeed on a grander and more awful scale, but the portrait is as true and complete in the one case as in the other. Kiteley's breast burns with the consuming glow of a furnace, Othello's rages as if he bore within it-the lava torrent of a volcano."

Of the other dramatists he assessed as critic, the only two who fulfilled his demands were Goldsmith in his "delightful comedy" *She Stoops to Conquer*, to the main personages of which Thackeray always referred as to lifelike creations⁵⁷, and Steele, especially in *The Tender Husband* (*The Lying Lover* is characterized by him as tedious and unsuccessful⁵⁸). In his assessment of the works of the latter dramatist Thackeray again essentially differed from Hazlitt, for he was convinced that Steele followed nature in his depictions, rendering human life and emotions faithfully:

⁵⁴ See *Works* XIV, 9, I, 321-322.

⁵⁵ See *CHEL* XIII, 268-269.

⁵⁶ For his references to Jerrold's play see *Works* VIII, 223, XII, 75, 76-77, XV, 745, XVI, 18 (quoted on page 343), XVII, 487; for his comment on Boucicault's comedy see *Works* IX, 469-470.

⁵⁷ See *Works* II, 417, XI, 616-617, XIII, 676, 681, XVII, 436.

⁵⁸ See *Works* XIII, 555-556.

"The stage of humourists has been common life ever since Steele's and Addison's time; the joys and griefs, the aversions and sympathies, the laughter and tears of nature" (*Works* X, 621).

The depictions of all the other dramatists on whom Thackeray comments as spectator or whom he evaluates as critic are found grievously wanting in their faithfulness to life. In the first place, he negatively assesses, both as spectator and critic, all those dramatic works of the Neoclassicist period whose authors followed the literary dogmas of their time too slavishly and preferred to find inspiration in the classics of antiquity rather than in nature and humanity itself. Thus, as spectator, he had no high opinion of the tragedies of Corneille, Racine and Voltaire, as I have shown in my study on his criticism of French literature, negatively commented on the pomposity and affectation of Dryden's tragedies and placed him as a dramatist (along with Congreve) far below Shakespeare, though otherwise he had warm words of praise for this "noble old English lion" and "the greatest literary chief in England, the veteran field-marshal of letters, . . . the marked man of all Europe".⁵⁹ Nor had Thackeray any illusions about the literary worth of Addison's "tedious" tragedy *Cato*⁶⁰ or of Johnson's *Irene* and, in *The Virginians*, openly dissociated himself (through the mouths of George Warrington and General Lambert) from the uncritical attitude of the Neoclassicist critics and of the 18th-century audience towards Home's tragedy *Douglas*, summed up by him in the following passage:

"Say what you will about Shakespeare; in the works of that undoubted great poet (who had begun to grow vastly more popular in England since Monsieur Voltaire attacked him), there were many barbarisms that could not but shock a polite auditory; whereas, Mr. Home, the modern author, knew how to be refined in the very midst of grief and passion; to represent death, not merely as awful, but graceful and pathetic; and never condescended to degrade the majesty of the Tragic Muse by the ludicrous apposition of buffoonery and familiar punning, such as the elder playwright certainly had resort to" (*Works* XV, 611).

His own attitude is obvious from the way in which the two above-mentioned characters ridicule the "rant and tinsel" of the tragedy and treat the whole thing with derision, "cracking jokes during the whole of the subsequent performance, to their own amusement, but the indignation of their company, and perhaps of the people in the adjacent boxes".⁶¹

As spectator and critic he has also serious reservations regarding the tragedies produced by the Romantic school both in his own country and in France. So he sharply (and justly) condemns Byron's tragedy *Werner, or The Inheritance*; as "a grand collection of clap-trap"⁶², and the tragedy produced by *L'École romantique* in general (not quite so justifiably) as depicting exclusively the most hideous and horrible aspects of life and thus presenting a distorted and one-sided picture of reality. Detailed attention is paid by him to Dumas's tragedy *Kean* and Soulié's drama *Gaëtan, Il Mammone*, both of which, but especially the first, are rejected by him as entirely false depictions of English life, as I have shown in greater detail in my study on his criticism of French literature. As his marginal comments in *Pendennis* show, he also had a sharply critical

⁵⁹ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 580, 510. For his other comments see his review of Tietz's book, *The British and Foreign Review*, January 1839, p. 57, *Works* II, 369, XIII, 143.

⁶⁰ See especially *Works* XIII, 532, 534, XV, 828.

⁶¹ *Works* XV, 614; see also *ibid.*, pp. 611, 621, 704.

⁶² *Letters* I, 349.

attitude to Kotzebue's tragedy *The Stranger*, in which Emily Fotheringay appears as Mrs. Haller.⁶³

Most unsatisfactory seem to him, however, two dramas produced in his own country in his time, Bulwer's tragedy *Earl Harold* and a drama in blank verse by the same writer, *The Sea-Captain*. His review of the former production (if it is really by him) is written in the tone of derisive irony: the anonymous author (though the reviewer correctly guesses at his identity, even if he does not explicitly name him) is treated as one of the greatest dramatic geniuses since Shakespeare's time and his tragedy is consistently compared to Shakespeare's dramas, placed upon their level and several times even extolled above them (in such places the reviewer maintains that Shakespeare was an inferior poet and imitated the author of *Earl Harold*). What particularly arouses the reviewer's deepest indignation is the theatrical figure of the hero, who constantly discourses upon his wrongs and wicked designs in eloquent rhetorical passages and who is obviously regarded by the critic (though he does not state this explicitly) as a totally unconvincing figure. Thackeray (and this time it is undoubtedly he) is more explicit in his total rejection of *The Sea-Captain* as a very bad play, containing only sham sentiment, sham morality and sham poetry and being very carelessly written. Through the mouth of his fictitious critic Yellowplush Thackeray proclaims his familiar principle that in poetry it is generally best if the poet perfectly understands what he means to say, and if he expresses his meaning clearly, using as simple words as possible and calling things by their right names, for these are, in Thackeray's opinion, just as poetical as any others. Bulwer does not fulfil this demand at all — instead of poetry he presents to his audience nothing but sheer windy humbug, which may sound faintly melodious but will not bear the test of common sense. Thackeray proves this by using the same trick as he did in his review of Montgomery's poem — he quotes two lines from the play in several variations, thus succeeding in clearly demonstrating that none of these, nor the original text, has any sense whatever. Also in this review he vents severe objections to the typically Bulwerian hero, "eternally spouting and invoking gods, heavens, stars, angels, and other celestial influences", and points out that people in actual life do not behave and speak in this way, and if they do, one mistrusts them. The characters of the play are not to be entirely despised, however (as the second critic of the play, Yellowplush's friend John Thomas Smith, points out), for the "outlines of all of them are good" and they "might pass three hours very well on the stage, and interest the audience hugely"; but the author "fails in filling up the outlines".⁶⁴

The postulate of faithfulness to life is demanded by Thackeray, too, from the comedies which he assesses as critic. In the 1830s and 1840s he has much to say on the French comedy of his own time. As I have shown in my previous study, he was a great lover of the Parisian vaudeville, but rebelled when the smiling garden of this lighter, but genuine and typically French dramatic Muse

⁶³ *Works* XII, 47, 65, 982. In his young days, however, his attitude to this dramatist seems to have been more positive: he began to translate the play *The Poor Poet* and made Fitz-Boodle a connoisseur of Kotzebue's dramas (see *Works* IV, 302). For a critical comment on a "dismal" comedy of Kotzebue see *Works* V, 444. For a brief assessment of his relationship to this dramatist see also Frisa, op. cit., pp. 23–24.

⁶⁴ For the quotations see *Works* I, 325 (spelling adapted) and *ibid.*, p. 331.

was violated by authors who were too heavy-handed and who had very odd notions of mirth (as has Dumas in *Halifax*, presenting moreover a historically untrue depiction of the titular character), or when it was abandoned by writers who were supreme in the *genre* and who deserted it for the regular five-act comedy, in which they were "last among the great"⁶⁵ (as was the case of Scribe). Of the regular comedies written by the last-named dramatist Thackeray formally criticizes *Une Chaîne*, *Le Verre d'Eau* and *Le Fils de Cromwell*, his anger being especially aroused by the entirely false representation of the real facts of history in the second and third play, as I have demonstrated in detail in the quoted study. Scribe as the author of *Le Verre d'Eau* is also reprehended by him for choosing momentous historical events for the theme of a comedy, thus overstepping the boundary of the given *genre* and encroaching upon the sphere of history and philosophy. More to Thackeray's liking is Madame Virginie Ancelot's comedy *The Two Empresses; or, A Little War*, which was inspired by Scribe's conception of great historical events as being consequences of quite trivial accidents and circumstances (a conception rejected by the critic as erroneous) but was according to Thackeray much better written than Scribe's drama, its author filling in the hard outlines of Scribe's depictions with warm feeling.

In the 1850s Thackeray applied his demand that drama should be a faithful imitation of life to Restoration comedy and his resulting judgments are in this case worthy of special interest. He does realize that Congreve's comedies present a faithful picture of the manners and morals of the dramatist's time, but expresses this explicitly in *Esmond* (in the following comment of his hero on Beatrix's life as maid of honour at the Court) and not in his lecture on the dramatist:

"If the English country ladies at this time were the most pure and modest of any ladies in the world — the English town and Court ladies permitted themselves words and behaviour that were neither modest nor pure; and claimed, some of them, a freedom which those who love that sex most would never wish to grant them. The gentlemen of my family that follow after me (for I don't encourage the ladies to pursue any such studies), may read in the works of Mr. Congreve, and Dr. Swift, and others, what was the conversation and what the habits of our time" (*Works* XIII, 351).

His description of Restoration comedy, in his lecture, as "a wild, dishevelled Laïs, with eyes bright with wit and wine — a saucy court-favourite that sat at the king's knees, and laughed in his face"⁶⁶, shows, moreover, that he was also aware of the narrowness of its social appeal and commitment, of its exclusive and antipopular character. In the same lecture, however, he at the same time explicitly denies that Restoration comedy could possess any instructive value for his contemporaries, expressing his prejudiced judgment in the following memorable words:

"I have read two or three of Congreve's plays over before speaking of him; and my feelings were rather like those, which I daresay most of us here have had, at Pompeii, looking at Sallust's house and the relics of an orgy, a dried wine-jar or two, a charred supper-table, the breast of a dancing girl pressed against the ashes, the laughing skull of a jester, a perfect stillness round about, as the cicerone twangs his moral, and the blue

⁶⁵ Garnett, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

⁶⁶ *Works* XIII, 513.

sky shines calmly over the ruin. The Congreve muse is dead, and her song choked in Time's ashes" (*Works* XIII, 513).⁶⁷

He then muses over the skeleton of this muse and maintains that reading "in these play now, is like shutting your ears and looking at people dancing" and that the reader of his time cannot understand this comic dance of the last century without the music, for it has "a jargon of its own quite unlike life; a sort of moral of its own quite unlike life too".⁶⁸

As we may see, Thackeray (like so many other critics) entirely failed to realize that the purpose of most of the Restoration dramatists was satirical, for most of them were bitter enemies of the vice they endeavoured to castigate in their plays and, whatever their success may have been, at least in intention were sincere in their attempt to reform manners by faithfully depicting the wickedness and licentiousness of the higher social classes of their time. His standpoint therefore essentially differs from that of Hazlitt who recognized Restoration comedy as the only genuine and hence the highest sort of comedy, highly evaluated it as a vivid, gay and satirically sharp picture of the manners of its time, exposing immorality and thus worth many volumes of sermons, and expressed his regret that it was not popular with the squeamish spectators of his own time.⁶⁹ Thackeray admits that Restoration comedy has some positive qualities, points out that it is gay and generous, kind and frank, does not deny that Congreve's comedies are bright and witty (though too outspoken for his taste, as we have seen), and also understands that this comedy was in its substance a protest against the strait-laced morality of the Puritans. But he fails to discern in these works any aesthetic ideal which would at least remotely resemble his own and consequently fails to find in them that quality which he regarded as the highest element of beauty in art — Christian love. As he sees it, the moral implicit in Restoration comedy is the ghastly Pagan doctrine "that we should eat, drink, and be merry when we can, and go to the deuce (if there be a deuce) when the time comes". Congreve's comedy is compared by him (in another very beautiful passage) to a "temple of Pagan delights"⁷⁰ and reprehended for containing no feeling:

"There is no more feeling in his comedies, than in as many books of Euclid. He no more pretends to teach love for the poor, and goodwill for the unfortunate, than a dancing-master does; he teaches pirouettes and flic-flacs; and how to bow to a lady, and to walk a minuet" (*Works* X, 618).

His standpoint is perhaps best expressed in the following comment:

"All this pretty morality you have in the comedies of William Congreve, Esq. They are full of wit. Such manners as he observes, he observes with great humour; but ah! it's a weary feast that banquet of wit where no love is. It palls very soon; sad indigestions follow it and lonely blank headaches in the morning" (*Works* XIII, 516).

In these views of his Thackeray is very near to Lamb, who also saw no connection between the characters in these comedies and people in real life, pointing out that the world of these plays "is altogether a speculative scene of things, which has no reference whatever to the world that is" and characterizing

⁶⁷ See also a similar comment in *Works* XV, 613; yet Chapter XXVIII of this novel (*The Virginians*) is called "The Way of the World".

⁶⁸ *Works* XIII, 514.

⁶⁹ See especially *Comic Writers*, pp. 102, 110, 113, 222–223.

⁷⁰ For the quotations see *Works* XIII, 524, 514.

it as a land outside Christendom — the land “of cuckoldry — the Utopia of gallantry, where pleasure is duty, and the manners perfect freedom”. But this critic, in contradistinction to Thackeray, at the same time emphasizes that for this very reason no “good person can be justly offended as a spectator, because no good person suffers on the stage” — all the characters, judged morally, being “alike essentially vain and worthless” — and that, for the same reason, we “are not to judge them by our usages”, for in their world there are no revered institutions to be insulted, no family ties to be violated and no deep affections to be quieted, since none of these are “of the growth of that soil”:

“The whole is a passing pageant, where we should sit as unconcerned at the issues, for life or death, as at a battle of the frogs and mice. But, like Don Quixote, we take part against the puppets, and quite as impertinently.”⁷¹

The alleged absence of Christian love in Congreve’s comedies is obviously the main reason why Thackeray does less than justice to this brilliant dramatist and pronounces upon him the following damning sentence, in which he places him quite unjustifiably far below Steele and Addison, though quite rightly below Swift:

“When Voltaire came to visit the great Congreve, the latter rather affected to despise his literary reputation, and in this perhaps the great Congreve was not far wrong. A touch of Steele’s tenderness is worth all his finery — a flash of Swift’s lightning — a beam of Addison’s pure sunshine, and his tawdry play-house taper is invisible. But the ladies loved him, and he was undoubtedly a pretty fellow” (*Works* XIII, 522).

Steele of course fulfilled Thackeray’s demands even in this point perfectly, as follows from the latter’s making his hero Esmond write a comedy pervaded by the same kind of sentiment as is characteristic of Steele’s productions, as the novelist himself emphasizes,⁷² and especially from his high praise of Steele as “the founder of sentimental writing in English”, the writer who transferred sentiment and compassion from the heroic tragedy, depicting exclusively the fortunes of kings and monarchs, into common life:

“He stepped off the high-heeled cothurnus, and came down into common life; he held out his great hearty arms, and embraced us all; he had a bow for all women; a kiss for all children; a shake of the hand for all men, high or low; he showed us Heaven’s sun shining every day on quiet homes; not gilded palace-roofs only, or Court processions, or heroic warriors fighting for princesses, and pitched battles” (*Works* X, 621).

The postulate that literature in general and drama in particular should be pervaded by the feelings propagated by the Christian doctrine is in this period of his life applied by Thackeray very consistently and certainly more emphatically than in the period of his professional criticism. This is also confirmed by his sharply condemning (in “Two or Three Theatres in Paris”) French comedy for reflecting the “general smash and bankruptcy” not only of morality but also of religious faith in France and for the cynicism with which it ridicules all beliefs, especially the religious.

In the period we are dealing with we come across one instance, however, in which Thackeray himself, as novelist, failed to come up to the standard he so

⁷¹ *Specimens of English Dramatic Criticism*, p. 116; for the preceding quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 115–116.

⁷² See *Works* XIII, 343.

emphatically demanded from the other writers, and in which he revealed much less Christian love than did Shakespeare in *Othello*, which he uses for his illustration — his novel *Philip*. As Joseph E. Baker has convincingly shown,⁷³ in his earlier novels Thackeray “made powerful new applications of an ethical tradition that goes as far back as Christ and even Plato”, helped teach a century to hate the result of a thoroughly developed class system, as he saw it in his own country, accomplishing all this “by a literary art unsurpassed in English prose, with a creative vision more poetic than most poetry”. In his novel *Philip*, however, as this scholar very rightly says, Thackeray repudiated “his own deepest insights” and “the very humanity he had taught us to value”. This novel is based upon the biblical parable of the good Samaritan but, as Baker demonstrates in detail, the moral which can be drawn from the story is not that of Christ, for Philip is not aided by a despised outsider from Samaria, but exclusively by people of his own class. As Baker emphasizes, throughout the novel Thackeray supports the existing class prejudices that “the best things in life are to be the prerogative of a relatively small class of ‘gentlemen’”, that the given social order is right and necessary and that the lower classes must know their place in this order and subordinate themselves to it without murmuring. According to this scholar, in this novel “the ‘Samaritan’ would have to be the mulatto with the punning name, Mr. Woolcomb”, but Thackeray pursues him with cruel ridicule and recommends his English characters to ostracize him, bitterly scolding England “for not having the prejudice against a mulatto that would be found in the slave states” and very sharply protesting against Woolcomb’s marriage with a white woman.⁷⁴ To these conclusions of Professor Baker I would add, in agreement with him, that the change of Thackeray’s attitude is also reflected in his interpretation of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona given in this novel, which considerably differs from that we know from his previous comments. Whereas in his earlier novels he used this relationship as a symbol of great love and especially jealousy, devoid of racial connotation,⁷⁵ in *Philip* he uses it predominantly (but not exclusively⁷⁶) for illustrating the racial differences between Woolcomb and Agnes Twysden, for protesting against marriage ties of this sort, and ascribing to Desdemona the same purely material motives which made Agnes Twysden marry the mulatto — a husband may be dark, only if he is rich:

“Complexion? What contrast is sweeter and more touching than Desdemona’s golden ringlets on swart Othello’s shoulder” (*Works* XVI, 106).⁷⁷

As I have suggested, Thackeray did apply his postulate of Christian love as the supreme and indispensable component of art also to the dramatists he evaluated in the preceding period as professional critic. It is worth noticing, however, that in its application he does not seem to be so consistent as he became later, for in some cases he does not enforce it at all, at least not explicitly, while in others he applies it very emphatically. Thus of all the English

⁷³ Joseph E. Baker, “Thackeray’s Recantation”, *PMLA*, LXXVII, 1962, pp. 586–594.

⁷⁴ For the quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 593, 594, 589, 592.

⁷⁵ See for instance *Works* XI, 546, XIII, 363, XIV, 830, XV, 673.

⁷⁶ For the exceptions see *Works* XVI, 288, 409, 597.

⁷⁷ See also *Works* XVI, 173, 186, 339, 597, 600; for one previous usage of this symbol in this connotation see *Works* XIV, 98.

dramatists it is only Bulwer as the author of *The Sea-Captain* whom he reprehends for putting into the mouth of his hero "continual sham-religious clap-traps", pointing out that there is "nothing more unsailor-like than his namby-pamby starlit descriptions". But he is most emphatic when he assesses Dumas as the author of *Caligula* and *Don Juan de Marana*. This dramatist aroused his indignation, in the first place, by the defence against the adverse critics of *Caligula* in the preface to this play, where the playwright drew attention to the deep piety pervading his drama and claimed for himself the merit of presenting to the spectator "the solution of a problem which he has long and vainly sought in his waking hours". Angered by these immodest avowals, Thackeray accuses Dumas of trying to present himself as a writer with a divine mission. In the second place, he obviously very much resents the way in which Dumas treats religion in this play, for he stops translating a specimen from this piece at the point when Mary Magdalen is mentioned for the first time, refusing to enter sacred ground "with such a spotless high-priest as Monsieur Dumas". Even more strongly does Thackeray disapprove of Dumas's treatment of religious motifs in *Don Juan de Marana*, which he condemns as blasphemous — the dramatist, in his opinion, "shows heaven, in order that he may carry debauch into it; and avails himself of the most sacred and sublime parts of our creed, as a vehicle for a scene-painter's skill, or an occasion for a handsome actress to wear a new dress".⁷⁸ In this case, however, Thackeray's indignation at having discerned in Dumas's plays a sentiment so signally failing to fulfil his own conception is more justified than it was when he condemned Congreve's comedies, for his anger is not motivated exclusively by moral and philosophical considerations, but also by aesthetic ones, as we shall see.

In the last part of the preceding analysis I have touched upon one aspect of Thackeray's conception of beauty in art, as it manifests itself in his concrete evaluation of individual dramatists or dramatic works. What remains to be discussed is the problem of whether Thackeray as critic was at all capable of discerning and appreciating the specific aesthetic qualities of drama as literary art. When considering his dramatic and theatrical criticism as a whole, we are again inevitably led to the conclusion that even in this sphere of art, as in poetry, he was searching for a sublime of a humbler order and we once more come across an open confession on his part, which is a direct continuation of the one I quoted in the preceding chapter:

"For the same reason, I like second-rate theatrical entertainments — a good little company in a provincial town, acting good old stupid stock comedies and farces; where nobody comes to the theatre, and you may lie at ease in the pit, and get a sort of intimacy with each actor and actress, and know every bar of the music that the three or four fiddlers of the little orchestra play throughout the season" (*Works* VIII, 59).

Although even this confession should not be taken too literally, it is an undoubtable fact that Thackeray's inclinations did lie in the direction he himself insists on. As we have seen, both as spectator and critic he had a negative attitude to the high-flown tragedy of the Neoclassicist period and admired the comedies of Goldsmith and Steele for their gentle depictions of domestic virtues and faithful love, and, as spectator, liked popular melodramas and preferred Schiller to Goethe, for the dramas of the former writer (and especially *Wilhelm*

⁷⁸ For the quotations in this paragraph see *Works* I, 331, II, 294, 297, 301.

Tell, with its "sweet presentment of the love of home", as Merivale has pointed out⁷⁹) spoke to his heart much more than did the more metaphysical poetry of Goethe. To this we can add that he quite positively evaluated, as spectator, the productions of some of those second-rate English dramatists who were not altogether undeservedly very popular in his time but whose art was definitely of a lower order. He was for instance fond of the "facetious little comedy"⁸⁰ *Raising the Wind* by James Kenney, praised the tragedies by James Sheridan Knowles (but in this case his standpoint was identical with that of Hazlitt) and was obviously entertained by the dramas produced by James Robinson Planché (for he saw several⁸¹). Yet he was not wholly unaware of the decline of drama in his own time, as his complaint in "Meditations on Solitude" shows:

"How to pass your evenings? In theatres — to see clumsy translations from the French — to see vulgarized multiplications of Mrs. Caudle" (*Works* VIII, 49).

On the other hand, however, we have a few pieces of evidence which show that he was not entirely insensible even to the sublime of the highest sort. As one of the quotations in this chapter testifies (see page 353), he deeply admired the sublime in Shakespeare's tragedies. In another remark about Shakespeare he again highly appreciated "that frank, artless sense of beauty which lies about his works like a bloom or dew".⁸² His capacity for appreciating the beauties created by Shakespeare is also implicit in his rejection of any curtailing or disrespectful adaptations of plays, in which he reminds us of Fielding and Hazlitt.⁸³ If the review of Jonson I have unearthed is really by him, it removes most of our doubts in this matter. He characterizes Barry Cornwall, the author of the *Memoir of Jonson*, as "a blind guide to the beauties of Ben Jonson" and sharply reprehends him for two basic errors. In the first place, he utterly rejects Cornwall's condemnation of the dialogues in Jonson's masques as being "tedious and somewhat too pedantic":

"This is complete sacrilege. He who finds these exquisite mythological plays tedious or heavy may be set down for a dunce nearly as irreclaimable as the Cockney who thinks the sonnets of Barry Cornwall or Della Crusca superior to those of Wordsworth."

In the second place, he dissociates himself from Cornwall's complaint of a deficiency of poetry in *Every Man in His Humour* and proves that the latter is wrong by quoting one poetical passage from the play, "which is only one among many such". His indignation is especially aroused, however, by Corn-

⁷⁹ Op. cit., p. 81.

⁸⁰ *Works* XIV, 697; he several times used the name of one character from this play, Jeremy Diddler, as a common generic name for cheaters (see e.g. *Works* V, 144, VII, 355, X, 276, XIV, 64, XV, 319, XVII, 128).

⁸¹ For his comment on Knowles see *Letters* I, 194; for his familiarity with Planché's plays see *ibid.*, pp. 23, 190, 416 and note.

⁸² *Works* IX, 124; for another tribute to Shakespeare's genius see Wilson, op. cit., I, 210 to 211.

⁸³ See his satirical poem "Great News! Wonderful News! Shakspeare compressed" (*Punch*, May 4, 1844), in which he ridiculed a cultural event at the Royal Court — the reading of a shortened version of *Cymbeline* by Charles Kemble; and "Round About the Christmas Tree", in his *Roundabout Papers*, in which he takes exception to a Christmas pantomime on the theme of *Hamlet*. For the views of Hazlitt see *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, IV, 300; for the opinions of Fielding see especially his comedy *The Author's Farce*.

wall's totally denying to Jonson the quality of the sublime (in this Hunt, who comments on this review in *Men, Women and Books*, entirely agrees with the reviewer, though he does vent several objections to the evaluation, as we shall see⁸⁴). Thackeray writes here:

"We do not wish it to be understood that he denies all praise to Ben Jonson, but we find none without some qualifying grudge or sneer, or snarl, appended. We meet with nothing like a cordial feeling of affection or veneration for the masculine intellect of Jonson. Now this is not the way in which we should write or talk of a man who is second to none, except to Shakespeare, in the whole catalogue of English poets. To Milton he cannot be called second, for if the one had more intensity, the other had more variety. In Jonson's minor poems we find playful ease, elegance, and smoothness; in his masques exuberant fancy, grace, and elaborate felicity of diction; in his comedies, riotous wit and humour, fertility of character, polish of style, with many passages of great poetical beauty; in his tragedies, sustained dignity, force of expression, elevation, and (although this quality has been denied him) sometimes sublimity."

In this judgment Thackeray differs not so much from Cornwall (who, after all, was not so unjust to Jonson as Thackeray believed and as Hunt pointed out⁸⁵) as from Hazlitt. In this particular case Thackeray proves to be a better judge than the latter critic, who did not deny that Jonson possessed power, but it was to him "of a repulsive and unamiable kind". While Hazlitt praised the dramatist for acute observation and great fidelity of description, he found him wanting "that genial spirit of enjoyment and finer fancy, which constitute the essence of poetry and of wit":

"The sense of reality exercised a despotic sway over his mind, and equally weighed down and clogged his perception of the beautiful or the ridiculous."⁸⁶

An even more difficult problem is the question whether Thackeray was capable of evaluating the purely dramatic qualities of the plays he assessed as critic. As we have seen, he always pays great attention to the characters appearing in the individual dramatic productions and to this we must add that in some of his reviews he also takes notice of some subtler problems of characterization, yet all his comments of this type concern rather the creation of literary character in general than that of a dramatic personage in particular. Thus in his review of Soulié's play he comments on "a total absence" of character as well as of the proper motivation of the action and behaviour of the characters, in his criticism of Scribe on the dramatist's inability to provide "an analysis of inward action"⁸⁷ and on the stereotype figures appearing in his vaudevilles, and in his review of Bulwer's *Earl Harold* on the inconsistent behaviour of one of the characters (Lord Gloster). Similarly, most of his comments on the plots of the plays he critically considers ignore purely dramatic qualities or possibilities and might just as well concern fiction, especially the novel of the romantic type. Thus the plot of Bulwer's *The Sea-Captain* is criticized by Thackeray's fictitious reviewer as unoriginal (taken over from Dumas-père), unintelligible, too complicated, overfilled with singular coincidences

⁸⁴ See *Men, Women and Books: A Selection of Sketches, Essays, and Critical Memoirs from his uncollected Prose Writings*, New Edition, John Murray, London, 1909, p. 197. It is worth noticing that Hunt dates the review (in a footnote) incorrectly (1839), but it is our review to which he refers, for he quotes from it.

⁸⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 198-199.

⁸⁶ *Comic Writers*, p. 52; for the preceding quotations see *ibid.*, pp. 50, 52.

⁸⁷ Garnett, *op. cit.*, pp. 155, 152.

and melodramatic effects. Dumas in *Don Juan de Marana*; *Kean*, and the comedy *Halifax*, and Soulié in *Gaëtan*, are also sharply rebuked for their plethora of intrigues, surprise effects and unexpected *dénouements*. Léon Gozlan, the author of the comedy *La Main Droite et la Main Gauche* is reprehended for lack of originality and inventive power and Scribe, especially in *Le Verre d'Eau*, for his ready expedients which enable him to place his characters into artificial and highly improbable relationships. There are two exceptions to this general tendency of Thackeray's dramatic criticism (in his review of the *Sea-Captain* he does take brief notice, too, of the stage qualities of the play and in the review of *Earl Harold*, if he is indeed its author, he devotes relatively much space to Bulwer's treatment of the climax of the action), yet these do not substantially correct the general impression we get from his criticism of drama as criticism almost entirely ignoring the dramatic and stage qualities of individual productions and having nothing important to say on drama as a literary form. His critical approach is in fact essentially the same as that he uses in evaluating novels and other prose-works: it almost seems as if his judgments were based upon his reading the dramas reviewed in book form and not seeing them on the stage. He is therefore justifiably rebuked by Garnett for ignoring the excellent stage qualities of Dumas's *Kean*, which has always been treated by French critics with the greatest respect as an excellent play from the standpoint of the theatre, even if it contains many mistakes in English history and manners. It should also be duly stressed, however (as I did in my study on Thackeray's criticism of French literature), that some other great European critics of the time did not share the French critics' enthusiasm (for instance Belinski⁸⁸). In the same study I dissociated myself, too, from Garnett's other reproof, when he maintains that Thackeray, apart from the mistakes in the play, concentrated his attention exclusively on its "Frenchiness". In my opinion Thackeray was mainly concerned with whether Dumas's drama depicted actual reality faithfully, as he was when assessing any other dramatist, whether English or French. That the reality in the play was supposed to be English only increased his anger, but was not, in my opinion, its main cause. As I have pointed out, I find myself in agreement rather with Saintsbury who finds most strange the objection "that the French consider *Kean* a very clever if not a very great play, and yet Thackeray makes fun of it" and notes that the absurdities Thackeray pillories *are* absurdities, "sometimes in themselves, sometimes as exhibiting ignorance of his subject, which the author had no business to commit if he took that subject at all".⁸⁹

What is still worth noticing before we come to the conclusions is the interesting fact that in his dramatic criticism Thackeray abstains from applying his familiar criterion that the great work of art can be created only by a good and morally pure man. He formulates it explicitly only when comparing Swift and Shakespeare as men, measuring both by the standard of whether he could live with them in the same house and finding that only the latter writer has stood this test:

"Would you have liked to be a friend of the great Dean? I should like to have been Shakespeare's shoeblack — just to have lived in his house, just to have worshipped him — to have run on his errands, and seen that sweet serene face" (*Works* XIII, 473).

⁸⁸ See op. cit., I, 525, II, 352.

⁸⁹ *A Consideration of Thackeray*, p. 42.

But even if Thackeray assumes in this statement a standpoint criticized by Hazlitt,⁹⁰ nevertheless for him and for Hazlitt the works of the dramatist are much more important than Shakespeare's personal character. This is especially obvious from Jeaffreson's reminiscence of Thackeray's speech at the annual Shakespeare dinner at "Our Club":

"He spoke of the atmosphere of rivalry and contention which Shakespeare breathed, while he was doing his appointed work and making his imperishable fame, — of the tatters who talked saucily about him from mere mental flimsiness, and of the malicious detractors who from spiteful jealousy magnified the defects, and disparaged the excellence of his writings and character. Observing how the tatters and detractors were remembered only by the few persons who remembered them with contempt, and how all their ineffectual efforts to defame their great master had failed to influence the world's judgments, he remarked how tenderly time and fate had dealt with the poet, in causing him to be known to us only by his writings."⁹¹

As far as his formal dramatic criticism is concerned, only two of his reviews pay some attention to the personal character of the dramatists assessed — the review of Jonson's *Works* and of Bulwer's *The Sea-Captain*. In the former, Thackeray, who professes to have a great admiration for Jonson's personality, sharply criticizes Cornwall for casting doubt on the dramatist's veracity and for speaking of Jonson's moral character "throughout in an illiberal, carping, insincere fashion, as if his mind were only half purged from the calumnies of Messrs. Malone and Co." He especially resents Cornwall's rebuking Jonson for unequal temper and conceit, vents his anger, and defends the dramatist, in a long passage which is quoted and criticized by Hunt in *Men, Women and Books*. In the opinion of the latter critic Cornwall has generally done such ample and eloquent justice to Jonson in other respects that he might have objected even more strongly to the dramatist's "tediousness, coarseness, and boasting, and to the praise emphatically bestowed on him for 'judgment'", "and not been either unjust or immodest". Hunt points out that if Jonson "had not been a Tory poet and a court flatterer, the Tory critics (we do not say the present one, but the race in general,) would have trampled upon him for his arrogance, quite as much as they have exalted him", and proceeds:

"And as to the long-disputed question, whether he was arrogant or not, and a 'swaggerer' . . . , how anybody, who ever read his plays, could have doubted, or affected to doubt it, is a puzzle that can only be accounted for, upon what accounts for any critical phenomenon, — party or personal feeling."⁹²

There is no doubt that Thackeray in this particular instance goes too far in his defence of Jonson (for even Hazlitt criticized the dramatist for his overweening admiration of his own works⁹³), but Hunt again is not right in attributing political bias to his criticism and ranking him among the Tory critics, thus casting some doubt either upon his own knowledge of the author of the review or else upon Thackeray's authorship of this piece of criticism. At the beginning of his notice Hunt writes as if he knew who wrote the review, referring to a "critic in the 'Times', whose pen is otherwise so good as to make us regret

⁹⁰ See *English Poets*, p. 194.

⁹¹ Quoted in *The Age of Wisdom*, p. 406.

⁹² *Men, Women and Books*, pp. 198—199; for the preceding quotation see *ibid.*, p. 198.

⁹³ See *Comic Writers*, p. 52.

its party bias",⁹⁴ and this indeed suggests that he must have someone else than Thackeray in mind, for if he perhaps did not yet know Thackeray in person at that time, he must have been informed about his political views from Thornton, his eldest son, with whom Thackeray had collaborated about two years before on the staff of the Radical paper the *Constitutional*.⁹⁵ It is of course true that the review appeared in a Tory paper and that Hunt, for this reason, might have lumped Thackeray (if he had him in mind at all) together with the other contributors, without taking into account his different political views.

In his review of *The Sea-Captain* Thackeray is provoked by Bulwer's preface to the fourth edition of this play, which is entirely on personal matters, to an *ad hominem* discussion with the dramatist, whom he criticizes for his habit of reacting to adverse criticism of his works by extolling his own merits and appealing to the critics' pity by emphasizing his bad health or other objective reasons which prevented him from realizing his purpose, as well as by appealing to posterity which in the author's opinion will appreciate his works better than the critics of his time. Thackeray compares Bulwer to the conceited and envious author Sir Fretful Plagiary in Sheridan's *The Critic* and advises him not to enter into controversies with his critics, for he cannot fare better than he did in his combat with *Fraser's Magazine*, when he was so belaboured that he was the laugh of the whole town. He also resents Bulwer's suggestion that the adverse criticism of his work is motivated by political reasons, points out that his own politics are the same as those of Bulwer and that in any case nobody cares about the writer's politics, but only whether his play is good or not, and reminds him of Sheridan, who was applauded by everybody regardless of his Whiggery, since in contradistinction to Bulwer he was a dramatist of genius. Much space is devoted by Thackeray especially to the refutation of Bulwer's claim to immortal fame. Thackeray here proved to be prophetic in insisting that before the year was out, the small beer of *The Sea-Captain* would turn sour and that there "will come a day (may it be long distant!) when the very best of his novels will be forgotten" and "his dramas will pass out of existence":

"In the meantime, my dear Plush, if you ask me what the great obstacle is towards the dramatic fame and merit of our friend, I would say that it does not lie so much in hostile critics or feeble health, as in a careless habit of writing, and a peevish vanity which causes him to shut his eyes to his faults" (*Works* I, 332-333).

In this case, however, Thackeray's negative opinion of some traits in Bulwer's personal character does not exercise any baneful influence upon his critical judgment, as it does elsewhere in his criticism, nor is it, as we have seen, the only or the most decisive criterion he applies to the drama under discussion. In the concluding words of his review, pronounced by Yellowplush, he himself emphasizes that his criticism is free from any bias of this or similar kind:

"But don't fancy, I beseech you, that we are actuated by hostility; first write a good play, and you'll see we'll praise it fast enough" (*Works* I, 333, spelling adapted).

⁹⁴ *Men, Women and Books*, p. 196.

⁹⁵ We do know that Thackeray counted Hunt among his personal friends from the end of the 1840s (his first letter addressed to the critic is of the year 1847), but we have no evidence of his having done so in this earlier period. For his later comment on Thornton Hunt see *Letters* II, 710; he also wrote two letters to him in 1857 and 1860, and gained him as contributor to the *Cornhill Magazine*.

In the review of *Earl Harold* we also find one ironical but not malicious comment on the adverse critics who pursue the unfortunate dramatist, while the concluding paragraph is a veiled thrust at Bulwer's notorious appeals to futurity:

"The reader, we trust, will pardon us for the length to which this notice has been carried; the Greeks and Romans . . . were in the habit of erecting pillars to commemorate the deeds of their heroes; and we have endeavoured to raise two or three columns to the great name of Tims,⁹⁶ and hereby we render homage to his genius, offer prayers for his prosperity, and hope that when he next shall write, may we be there to see."

As far as the critical value of Thackeray's contributions discussed in this chapter is concerned, the inevitable conclusion to which we come on the basis of our analysis is that he proved himself to be a better critic of English drama than of French. The only blunder he commits in his criticism of English drama is his failure to do justice to Congreve and especially to his great comedy *The Way of the World*. On the other hand, however, Thackeray's evaluation of Jonson's drama is just and very generous, though I must agree with Hunt that he need not have been so sharp in his attacks upon Barry Cornwall, who did the dramatist more justice than Thackeray believed. Thackeray's reviews of Bulwer's dramas are relentless, but not unjust, for neither of them was a great work of art and both have long since fallen into deserved oblivion. His condemnation is, moreover, not absolute, for he does find a few positive qualities in these productions, such as they really possessed, and does not deny talent to their author. His review of *The Sea-Captain* was also positively assessed in the *Spectator* in January 1840:

"As a piece of criticism it is sound and searching; and the playful, yet cutting ridicule, is so adroitly applied that one would think MAGINN himself had donned the masquerade livery of Yellowplush."⁹⁷

We have also evidence that his review hit its target and fulfilled his purpose, for Bulwer had the play taken off from the repertoire and did not give permission for its further publication. Later he revised it substantially and this in fact new play was performed after Thackeray's death under a new title *The Rightful Heir* (1868); it is also included in Bulwer's collected dramatic works.

As far as his criticism of French drama is concerned, I find myself upon the whole in agreement with Garnett, who evaluates Thackeray as a not very good or just critic of French plays, but admits that his ironic humour makes his criticism of the plays depicting English life "exceedingly entertaining".⁹⁸ As I have shown in greater detail in my study on his criticism of French literature, Thackeray certainly did take some share in the campaign of the other critics of his country against the "immoral" drama of Hugo and Dumas, and his judgments, like theirs, are coloured by his national prejudices and strongly influenced by his own strictly moralistic point of view and that of his society. In contradistinction to other criticism, however, which was in most cases not based upon actual knowledge of the dramatic productions assessed, but — as Hooker has it⁹⁹ — sweepingly condemned them merely for being French, Thack-

⁹⁶ A fictitious name which the reviewer adopted for the anonymous author, for reasons unknown to me.

⁹⁷ Quoted in *Letters* I, 408n.

⁹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 301.

⁹⁹ See *op. cit.*, especially pp. 39, 57, 62, 65, 85.

eray's evaluation is based upon a very extensive knowledge of certainly a very large part of and probably the whole dramatic production of *L'École romantique* and is not motivated exclusively by his national prejudices and moral indignation. As I have pointed out in the quoted study, a very important — if not a decisive — role in his criticism is played by his fundamental opposition to the creative approach of the French Romantic dramatists, which was foreign to his own conception of literature, and which also prevented him from appreciating what was really positive in this drama and what made it so epoch-making in its own time — namely its lyricism, its feeling for nature and verse, its romantic protest against social injustice and the choice of heroes (especially in Hugo) from among the declassed elements of society. Although his assessment is negative, however, it is not entirely unjust, for none of the dramas mentioned in this chapter ever found real favour with the public or became part of the permanent repertory of any theatre. Much more justifiable than his criticism of the drama produced by *L'École romantique*, even if again motivated by his national and moral prejudices, is his evaluation of the dramatic production of Scribe and his imitators. Though he overestimates Virginie Ancelot, as we have seen, and too severely condemns Léon Gozlan, as I should add (and as Garnett also points out¹⁰⁰), his assessment of Scribe's pseudo-historical plays is certainly not unjust, for this undoubtedly second-rate dramatist did treat historical facts quite arbitrarily and violated them to suit his *apriori* theses. Thackeray was also able to appreciate some of Scribe's strong points, especially his talent for observation, skilful management of plot and witty colloquial language, and praised one of his comedies, *Bertrand and Raton*, which he juxtaposes to the reviewed comedy *Le Verre d'Eau*, as a good play with excellent purpose, well-sustained action, and very happy language.¹⁰¹

*

As follows from my analysis, Thackeray's criticism of drama represents, like that of poetry, a not very significant part of his critical legacy, yet in spite of this should not in my opinion be treated in the way it is by Enzinger. While this scholar does pay brief attention to Thackeray's criticism of French drama, he mentions that of English only to dismiss it, "for, in the first place, the form itself was so insignificant in Thackeray's time that he says very little about it, and in the second place, what he does say is not really dramatic criticism since it is in no way concerned with the special problems of drama as a form".¹⁰² Enzinger's second objection is of course justified, as I have pointed out before. Thackeray had obviously only very general notions about drama as a literary form and about stage production, which did not go beyond his experiences of that form and production as a critical reader and spectator. He analysed dramatic works first and foremost from the same point of view as he did fiction — seeking in them especially for the depiction of characters and manners and an interesting but probable plot. The formal and technical aspects of drama, however, the process by which a written drama is transformed into a powerful play

¹⁰⁰ See op. cit., p. 304.

¹⁰¹ See *ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁰² Op. cit., vol. 21, No 2, p. 145.

performed on the stage, failed to draw his attention or at least did not stand in the forefront of his critical interest. It should be pointed out, however, that in his theatrical notices (at least those included in this chapter) he never failed to comment on the performance of the actors and occasionally noticed decorations, costumes or music, though he never once paid attention to stage production. In spite of this basic limitation of his critical approach, however, and of the several critical errors he commits in consequence of it or owing to his too strong an application of the ethical criterion, his dramatic and theatrical criticism does not deserve of being wholly dismissed. If nothing else, it confirms some of the conclusions at which I arrived in the preceding chapters — especially that Thackeray as a critic also of drama did consistently adhere, at least until 1850s, to the firm and substantially sound principles of his aesthetic creed, the most important of which was his postulate of truthfulness of drama to life and his concern about the moral content and effect of the individual dramatic productions. As we have seen, most of the plays he assessed did not come up to his standard in this respect and he therefore levelled at them the sharp weapons of his criticism and satire. On the other hand, however, he also reveals a strong predilection for some productions of genuine folk dramatic art, especially for melodramas and pantomimes, the former of which mostly treated the truth of life in a very off-hand manner, while the latter were not concerned with it all, but which were both honestly unreal and, moreover, unobjectionable from the moral point of view, the melodramas possessing yet the further asset of being sound in their social tendency. A similar conclusion has been arrived at by Enzinger:

“On the stage as in novels, Thackeray liked something truthful or something honestly unreal; for he does refer affectionately to pantomime and genuine melodrama.”¹⁰³

It should be also duly pointed out, however, that in his comments upon individual plays Thackeray did also prove his capacity for appreciating at least some of their dramatic qualities (if only in very few exceptional cases), that he paid due tribute to the genius of most of the great practitioners in this art who wrote before him (except Congreve and Hugo) and that he even used the work of the greatest of them as one of his critical standards. That Thackeray was not insensible to the sublime in the drama is shown by his newly-discovered review of Ben Jonson, and confirmed by his feeling for Shakespeare.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 145–146.