VICTORIAN DRAMA

By John A. Degen

Most historians of Victorian life and art have not given sustained and serious attention to the drama and the theatrical environment in which it was produced. The theatre as a social phenomenon is forgotten in the wake of other, more pressing concerns—the growth of industry, labor legislation, public health, and political enfranchisement—while the drama written during the bulk of the century is generally looked upon as the black sheep of Victorian literature. Indeed, even historians of theatrical art tend to treat the nineteenth-century English theatre with overtones of derision, while most surveys of British drama seem to suggest that the genre underwent a nearly total eclipse between the plays of Sheridan and Shaw. Yet the Victorian theatre was one of the most vitally active in the long history of dramatic art. Particularly after the well-reported attendance of the newly ascended Queen Victoria made it unquestionably respectable, the theatre was a part of the lives of Londoners of all classes. And since the theatre was patronized by such a broad spectrum of the population, the study of the types of dramatic entertainment which were demanded and made available cannot help but be revealing of the society of the time.

As a repository for the resources for such a study, the Lilly Library is as richly endowed with materials relating to the nineteenth-century British theatre as it is in the street literature and other aspects of Victorian popular culture. The core of the Lilly’s holdings in this area is the vast collection of nineteenth-century British
drama assembled by Keith L. Stock, C.B. This collection contains more than ninety percent of the plays published in England during the nineteenth-century, in addition to such invaluable ephemera as prompt books for Victorian productions of plays both contemporary and revived, part books, and advertising bills. Of particular value, in addition to the myriad individual acting editions in the collection, are the several series of plays, notably those of Cumberland, Lacy, French, and Dicks, which form the core of nineteenth-century play publication. As Walter Ray Stump has noted in his brief but effective descriptive article, cited in the general introduction to this issue of the Bookman, “most of those [series] listed in the CBEL are present in complete or nearly complete sets,” and such thoroughness in a single location offers many opportunities for research. Indeed, the wide range of the collection should serve well not only the historian of Victorian drama, but also the bibliographer who finds the courage to attempt to untangle the elaborate web of Victorian play publication, a virtual nightmare of multiple editions (not so noted by their publishers), revisions, variant imprints, piracies, reissues and reprintings.

In addition to several runs of nineteenth-century theatrical periodicals and an array of miscellaneous ephemera relating to the Victorian theatre, the library has, since 1961, been in possession of Carroll A. Wilson’s Gilbert and Sullivan collection. While it is not as strong in manuscript materials and in production ephemera as is the Reginald Allen collection of Gilbert and Sullivan at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, and it does not include sound recordings, the Wilson collection is nonetheless an important resource for the study of Gilbert and Sullivan. It is the most complete collection in this country of published material relating to the work of
these two Victorian artists, and it contains some fascinating ephemeral material not found in the Pierpont Morgan collection. The acquisition of the Stock and Wilson collections has led the Lilly to continue to purchase play-scripts, playbills, prompt books, theatrical biographies and theatrical periodicals as they become available. The Lilly's catalogue of the plays of F.C. Burnand and of Dion Boucicault, to cite only two prominent examples, has been made even more complete since the arrival of the Stock collection. Similarly, the purchase of collections of Adelphi and Covent Garden playbills has expanded the library's resources of theatrical ephemera. These new acquisitions enhance the Lilly's status as the finest repository of materials for the study of nineteenth-century English drama in this country.

Given this impressive resource, there are any number of ways in which the student of Victorian drama might organize and focus his or her research, and it is the purpose of this essay to suggest a few of these directions. Perhaps the most convenient initial approach, given that the cataloguing of the entire Stock collection has now been completed, lies in the examination of the published plays of individual nineteenth-century dramatists.

In taking this approach, it is important to remember that the study of nineteenth-century British drama cannot be essentially an exercise in literary criticism. Not even the most passionate defender of the Victorian theatre could reasonably suggest that most of the plays produced by nineteenth-century English playwrights are worthy of any serious literary consideration. The professional dramatists of the period, unprotected throughout most of the century by any effective copyright legislation, had to turn out an enormous quantity of performable plays if they hoped to earn any kind of decent
living from their craft. As a result, the general body of Victorian dramatic literature tends to be formula hack-work, cranked out without notable artistic inspiration by authors whose prolificity is well attested to by the mass of the playscripts in the Lilly’s collection.

That the Victorian drama is, to the serious critic, little more than a minor adjunct to the literature of the century is perhaps implicit in the absence from the roster of successful dramatists of those authors whom we typically think of in connection with the other fields of Victorian literature. Most of the important novelists of the century followed Thackeray’s example and abjured the stage completely; those who, like Dickens, had an abiding love for the theatre more often than not confined their dramatic efforts to amateur theatricals. Commercial failure greeted most of the dramatic work of most of the major poets who, like Coleridge, Byron and Browning, tried their hands at writing poetic drama, and so they either abandoned dramatic poetry or retreated into the realm of closet drama.

Despite their general lack of success in production, the most famous writers of the nineteenth-century are well represented among the Lilly’s holdings. Taking Lord Byron, for example, the library has both the J. Murray editions of *Sardanapalus, the Two Foscari, and Cain* (1821) and of the collected *Dramas* of 1837, as well as a wide range of editions of Byron’s individual plays. *Manfred* (1817), typically, is present in its first British edition in each of the first three issues, its second British edition, the first and second American editions, and the later acting editions of both Lacy and Dicks, which were based on Macready’s production of 1834.

Of particular interest to the student of the nineteenth-century novel, on the other hand, are the
myriad dramatizations which generally greeted the publication of any popular work of a Victorian writer of fiction, major or minor. Such authors as Scott and Dickens saw their works dramatized with unseemly haste; *Oliver Twist* was being played at the St. James' in a version by J.S. Coyne several months before the final chapters appeared in *Bentley's*, while the deaths of Nancy and Sikes were harrowingly enacted at the Adelphi in George Almar's adaptation within a month of their initial publication in 1838. Similarly, Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1839) was featured in three London theatres in three different dramatizations (texts of all of which are among the Lilly's collection) before the year was out.

It is the professional men of the theatre, however, rather than the poets and novelists of the age who are the figures most extensively represented by the Lilly's vast collection of nineteenth-century playscripts. While they are generally less familiar to most students of the Victorian era, many of these men were fascinating, vital personalities, and their frequently prodigious output as dramatists can be highly revealing in regard to their particular careers, philosophies and the general dramatic climate of the period.

A couple of examples should suffice to indicate the extent to which the work of individual Victorian dramatists is available in the Lilly Library. John Baldwin Buckstone, like so many playwrights of his day, was intimately involved in all aspects of the theatre. One of the leading comic actors of the first half of the century, it is said that the mere sound of his voice from off the stage was enough to convulse an audience. In addition to his work as an actor, he was also a theatrical manager, heading the Haymarket Theatre in one of its finest periods during the 1850s. And finally, he was a most prolific
playwright, authoring more than a hundred stage pieces during a career which crossed five decades, from 1825 to 1865. Nearly every one of these pieces which received publication, approximately three quarters of the total, is represented in the Lilly’s collection. The numbers tell the story of both the scope and the diversity of the representation of Buckstone’s dramaturgy on the library’s shelves; the scholar visiting the Lilly to study Buckstone’s plays will find twenty serious melodramas, nine other plays styled “romantic dramas” by their author, twenty-five short farces, eleven full-length comedies, three pantomimes, two “burlesque burlettas,” an opera libretto, and six more miscellaneous dramatic works given such nomenclature as “a dramatic duologue.” Further, many of these works are available in multiple editions; Buckstone’s most important Adelphi melodrama, Luke the Labourer; or, The Lost Son (1826), for example, has five separate editions in the Lilly’s collection, while another, The Dream at Sea (1835), is present in six.

The extensiveness of Buckstone’s works among the Lilly’s holdings is not at all unique. Let us look, for example, to another theatrical and literary jack-of-all-trades who made his mark on the Victorian theatre between 1857 and 1885, Henry James Byron. H.J. Byron first achieved notice as a prolific and highly successful author of burlesques and pantomime openings, but after 1865 he expanded his dramatic authorship to include all genres, from melodrama to farce. He was especially successful as the author of full-length comedies, achieving his greatest success in that area with Our Boy (1875), which achieved a phenomenal run of 1362 performances in four years and three months, a run unequaled by any other theatrical offering of the century. Despite his success as an author, Byron, like Buckstone, did not limit
himself to playwriting. He was actively involved in the management of three different theatres in London and Liverpool at various times during the 1860s and 70s, and after 1869 he took up a further direction in becoming a very successful actor in light comedy. As if this activity were not sufficient, he was a frequent contributor to sundry comic journals and served as editor of three: Fun (at its inception in 1861), the Comic News (1863-64) and Mirth (1877-78).

As a playwright, Byron was extraordinarily prolific. In less than thirty years of dramatic authorship, he turned out 150 pieces for stage performance. Although he did not publish his stage works as extensively during the later years of his career, and although the Lilly does not hold as high a percentage of his published plays as it does those of Buckstone, the library offers as complete a collection of Byron’s plays as is available anywhere in this country. Representing Byron’s canon in the Lilly’s catalogue are forty-eight burlesque-extravaganzas, sixteen comedies, ten farces, seven pantomimes, four melodramas, and an opera libretto, while for those who wish to investigate his work further there is a complete run of the Byron-edited Mirth.

While the accessibility of the author listings in the card catalogue may make the study of the works of individual dramatists the most convenient approach to the beginning student of the Victorian drama, it is, of course, hardly the only method of organizing and investigating the nineteenth-century playscripts in the Lilly’s collection. As the numerical itemization of the library’s holdings in the corpus of works by Buckstone and Byron cited above might indicate, the plays might also be examined in terms of genre. While the descriptive nomenclature attached to Victorian drama in advertisements and on
title pages might suggest an awesome range of dramatic types, the plays which were most apt to find favor with general audiences tended to be of one of four major genres: melodrama, light comedy, short farce, and burlesque-extravaganza. There were, of course, successful exceptions, but in the main the Victorian playwright was more certain of success if he restricted himself to these perennially popular forms.

Among the various forms of “serious” drama, melodrama was unquestionably ascendant throughout most of the century. The melodramas of the age tend to follow an essential formula. The particular plot might offer any assortment of thrills and chills, harrowing escapes, exotic climes or familiar domestic scenes—but moral retribution was the essential denouement of all such works, for the audience, fully as much as the stage censor, demanded that sin be punished and virtue rewarded. The Victorian playgoer, whether working- or leisure-class, was generally quite comfortable in his conventional morality. Fully aware that virtue did not invariably triumph in real life, audiences sought moral reassurance in seeing it triumph on the stage. Thus the world of Victorian melodrama is one of moral absolutes, in which heroes are entirely good and villains are entirely evil. Indeed, rare are the examples of melodramas like Buckstone’s *Luke the Labourer*, in which the reasons for the villain’s villainy are explained. Such understanding tended to create a modicum of sympathy for the villain, and this blurring of roles made the spectator uncomfortable. In an age filled with the rhetoric of “self-help,” the theatre-goer preferred to escape into a more comfortable world of absolute moral determinism.

While the essential formula of the genre as a whole may have been relatively strict, the plots, subjects and
characters used to flesh out that central formula were of sufficient variety to constitute a number of distinct subgenres, each of which constitutes in itself a rich area of study. This brief article cannot attempt to offer an exhaustive catalogue of melodramatic subgenres; that task has been undertaken by such authors as Michael Booth, George Rowell, Frank Rahill, Maurice Willson Disher, and others whose studies of melodrama are readily available. But it does seek to give the student of Victorian drama some idea of the types of subgenres which existed, and to indicate how each is well represented in the Lilly Library's collection.

Among the more exotic types of melodrama, one might, for example, look into the Gothic and spectral melodramas which were especially popular during the first third of the century. The ghosts and demons which haunted "Monk" Lewis's *The Castle Spectre* (1797) and *One O'Clock* (1811) behaved just as fiendishly in Edward Fitzball's *The Flying Dutchman; or, The Phantom Ship* (1827), which was a sensation at the Adelphi near the close of the heyday of spectral melodrama. A kindred taste for monster melodrama, engendered in large part by J.R. Planché's *The Vampyre; or, The Bride of the Isles* (1820), also arose during the 1820s, a taste which neatly dovetailed with the public's fondness for dramatized novels in such pieces as R.B. Peake's *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* (1823) and H.M. Milner's *Frankenstein; or, The Man and the Monster* (1828).

Equally thrilling, if less supernatural, appeals were provided in the enduringly popular brigand melodramas. During the early years of the century, the thrilling exploits of the robbers were regularly tied to the romantic appeal of exotic foreign settings, as in such masterpieces of the subgenre as Planché's *The Brigand*
(1829) or Isaac Pocock's *The Miller and His Men* (1813) and *The Robber's Wife* (1829). The popularity of the latter, for instance, is attested to by the presence of five separate editions in the Lilly collection. In the 1830s, however, brigand melodrama moved homeward although it still tended to be given the charm of distance through historical rather than contemporary settings. The trend towards romanticized depictions of British highwaymen was firmly established with the success of Fitzball's *Jonathan Bradford; or, The Murder at the Roadside Inn* at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in 1833, and it was furthered in the myriad adaptations of the Dick Turpin legend which followed in the wake of the 1834 publication of Harrison Ainsworth's novel *Rookwood*, a series among which Milner's *Dick Turpin's Ride to York or, Bonnie Black Bess* (1836) and G.D. Pitt's *Rockwood; or, the Legend of The Old Lime Tree* (1846) were perhaps the most prominent. The spate of Jack Sheppard pieces cited earlier in this survey added another enduringly popular brigand to the stage, and although the fervor of their public reception began to decline after mid-century, the romantic highwaymen continued to hold the stage throughout the Victorian era.

The brigands were not confined to land. The same period also saw a rash of pirate melodramas, perhaps best typified by Fitzball's perennial *The Red Rover; or, The Mutiny of the Dolphin* (1828). But in general, nautical melodrama belonged to that dashing, improbable hero, the Jolly Jack Tar. The attractive swagger, ringing patriotism, and shipdeck jargon of such figures as Long Tim Coffin in Fitzball's *The Pilot* (1825), Sweet William in Douglas Jerrold's *Black-Eyed Susan* (1829) and Harry Halyard in J.T. Haines' *My Poll and my Partner Joe* (1835) made these idealized stage representations of a type of
sailor that never really existed a great favorite of the playgoing public and served to establish the nautical melodrama as a readily identifiable subgenre in itself.

Alongside the exotic, the supernatural and the fantastic, another and more domestic set of melodramatic types also arose. In these, the melodramatic formula was applied to situations and concerns more immediately familiar to the members of the audience. Among these types, one might, for instance, choose to examine the series of plays revolving about a factory motif which arose in the 1830s—Jerrold’s *The Factory Girl* (1832), John Walker’s *The Factory Lad* (1834), G.F. Taylor’s *The Factory Strike* (1836), B.F. Rayner’s *The Factory Assassin* (1837), and J.T. Haines’ *The Factory Boy* (1840) notable among them. Although the rage for plays with this particular orientation was shortlived, the theme continued to be used by melodramatists throughout the century, as it was by Dion Boucicault in his sensation melodrama *The Long Strike* in 1866.

More pervasive among the domestic melodramas of the century were the moralizing melodramas which sought to instruct the spectator about the wages of sin through an object lesson. The woes of unwed mothers and straying wives were a favorite subject, as one can see in such works as W.T. Moncrieff’s *The Lear of Private Life; or, Father and Daughter* (1820), Haines’ *Alice Grey, the Suspected One; or, The Moral Brand* (1839) and the long series of adaptations of Mrs. Henry Wood’s novel *East Lynne* (1861) which continued to appear throughout the last forty years of the century. The evils of gambling were exposed in such pieces as Milner’s *The Hut of the Red Mountain; or, Thirty Years of a Gambler’s Life* (1827). But the vice which attracted the greatest number of melodramatic tirades was unquestionably alcohol. Beginning with
Jerrold’s *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard’s Life* (1829) and continuing through such pieces as G.D. Pitt’s *The Drunkard’s Doom* (1832), T.P. Taylor’s *The Bottle* (1847) and Thomas Morton Jr.’s *Another Glass* (1855) to Charles Reade’s *Drink* and Frederick Hazleton’s *Intemperance; or, The Drunkard’s Sin* (both produced in 1879 in the wake of Zola’s *L’Assommoire*), temperance melodrama was a fixture of the London stage throughout most of the nineteenth century.

There are, of course, numerous other subgenres of melodrama which might be profitably studied in the Lilly Library—I have not, for example, even mentioned the “gentlemanly” melodramas adapted from the French or the sensation melodramas so popular during the 1860s—but it is to be hoped that those examples which have been given here will indicate the range of possibilities available to the scholar who chooses to undertake a generic approach to the Victorian drama.

The same approach can, of course, be applied to the lighter dramatic forms, although these tend to be less amenable to subgeneric classification than is melodrama. Of the traditional “legitimate” comic forms, the Victorian staples were full-length comedies and short farces. Comedy, probably the most “literary” of the popular dramatic forms, typically depended upon the twists and turns of plot complexities, as well as on a mannered style of presentation. Farce, the lower and generally more popular form, revolved around absurd situations, comic exaggeration, and physical activity, in which the performers were often more important than the text. Comedy, which required scope for plot development, tended to be written in full-length form with three to five acts; farce, which required only the establishment of situation and character and which required very little intellectual con-

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ternation on the part of its audience, generally consists of one or two acts.

The Lilly Library's holdings in published nineteenth-century comedy and farce are fully as complete as in melodrama. One can readily trace the development of Victorian comedy beginning with the type common in the first third of the century. This kind of play, built upon the model of late eighteenth-century comedy, culminated in 1841 with the appearance of Dion Boucicault's *London Assurance*, although its presence is still apparent in such transitional works as Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin* (New York, 1858; London, 1861). The kind of comedy popular at mid-century, epitomized in the less mannered domestic comedy of T.W. Robertson, is represented by such works as Robinson's *Society* (1865), *Ours* (1866), and *Caste* (1867). The line of development is completed in the late-century social comedy of Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, and George Bernard Shaw. Similarly, one can study the short farces tailored to individual performers, such as John Poole's *Paul Pry*, crafted for John Liston in 1825, or *Cool as a Cucumber*, composed by M.W.B. Jerrold in 1851 for the younger Charles Mathews; or one can delight in such clever situational farces as J.S. Coyne's *How to Settle Accounts with your Laundress* (1847), John Madison Morton's eternally popular *Box and Cox* (1847), and J.V. Bridgeman's *I've Eaten My Friend* (1851). Or one can study the full-length farces which evolved during the last quarter of the century, when the development of the single-play as an evening's bill had effectively dried up the market for short curtain-raisers and after-pieces, farces such as Pinero's *The Magistrate* (1885) and *Dandy Dick* (1887) or Brandon Thomas' still-performed *Charley's Aunt* (1892).

Another fertile area of study is the fourth of the
major popular Victorian genres, that uniquely nineteenth-century entertainment known as burlesque-extravaganza. This peculiar genre, which theatre historian George Rowell has called "the only spontaneous form of Victorian comedy," was, although it has been virtually forgotten today, one of the most popular of British theatrical amusements in its day. Consisting in the main of single act, with dialogue in doggerel rhymed couplets and a plethora of interpolated songs and dances, burlesque-extravaganza was typically an absurdly irreverent treatment of a familiar existing work, such as a fable, a play, a ballad, or a novel. The form drew much of its humor from an endless stream of self-consciously anachronistic allusions to issues, products, events, and persons of the day.

Almost any topic was grist for the burlesque writer's mill; all that was required was a familiarity with the original on the part of the audience, so they could appreciate the distortions brought to it by the travesty. The subject might be Shakespeare, as with Francis Talfourd's Shylock; or, The Merchant of Venice Preserved (1853) or F.C. Burnand's The Rise and Fall of Richard III; or, A New Front to an Old Dicky (1868); it might be a familiar episode from nursery lore, like H.J. Byron's Blue Beard, from a New Point of Hue (1860); or it might be a recent dramatic success, as when William Brough turned one of Boucicault's sensation melodramas based on Scott into The Great Sensation Trial; or, Circumstantial Effie-Deans (1863) or in the case of Burnand's rendering of Lord Lytton's The Rightful Heir into The Frightful Hair (1868). The library's holdings of burlesque extravaganzas are, if anything, even more complete than is the case with melodrama, comedy and farce. Francis Talfourd, for example, wrote nineteen performed burlesques, of
which eighteen were published; the Lilly has at least one edition of all of them. William Brough’s twenty-one published extravaganzas are all on the Lilly’s shelves. H.J. Byron published forty-nine of his sixty-six efforts in this genre; the Lilly has all but one. It is an exceptional mass of material, but, it like the other genres is quite manageable if organized by individual author or by such sub-genres as burlesques of Shakespeare or burlesques of melodrama.

In limiting the discussion of a generic approach to these four major popular genres, we are not, of course, by any means considering all of the dramatic activity of nineteenth-century England. In dealing with only these forms, I have, for example, slighted not only the more serious literary endeavors of such dramatists as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Thomas Noon Talfourd, and W.G. Wills, to name only three, but also the entire range of the many types of vastly popular comic opera. The Lilly collection includes many of the myriad English adaptations of Offenbach, Herve and Lecocq during the 1860’s and 70’s. It also includes the folies musicales of H.B. Farnie and Robert Reece, such as Nemesis; or, Not Wisely But Too Well (1873) and Wildfire (1873), and the works of Gilbert and Sullivan and their imitators. Finally, the collection contains examples of the new musical comedy which began in 1894 with H.J. Dam and Ivan Caryll’s The Shop Girl. Of parallel interest are the paratheatrical and quasi-legitimate stage entertainments like the music hall; although the fact that their bills consisted of a changing series of short skits, songs, and other attractions precluded the extensive degree of publication given to plays during the Victorian era, many music hall songs were preserved in sheet-music form and are included in the Lilly’s Starr collection of popular sheet music.

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Nor does a concentration on approaching the material in the Lilly in terms of author and genre preclude other potentially rewarding methods of investigating that material. One might, for example, examine with the aid of the daily theatre listings in any London newspaper the plays produced at a given theatre over a span of years. Although all theatres sought to appeal to as wide an audience as possible by offering a diverse range of entertainments on their evening’s bill, each house tended to make a feature of one particular form or another. Thus Surrey and the Adelphi specialized in melodrama, while the Strand and the Royalty depended in the main on their production of burlesque. An examination of the listings, and then of the texts, of these plays might show shifting patterns in the offerings of any given theatre that in turn might well lead to some significant insights about the development of audience tastes and dramatic emphasis during the century.

Similarly, one might focus on the plays in which a particular actor appeared. Or one might investigate the trends in the publication of plays during the century. How notable, for instance, would be the discovery that in any given year Lacy chose to publish twice as many farces or burlesques or Shakespearean texts in his series than he had ten years earlier? Or if one were to find that the number of plays produced in East End theatres receiving publication declined while the printing of West End plays increased? The possibilities are as endless as they are intriguing.

For the Victorian scholar interested in a broader view, the drama of the time might also be examined as a reflection of the life and social concerns of the nineteenth-century London streets. Such a study, in fact, would be especially appropriate at the Lilly, as it would
bind the drama to the street literature and other popular entertainments of the period. But before undertaking such an approach, the student should be aware of a few caveats.

In discussing the serious social and political questions of the day in a direct and incisive manner, the dramatist suffered under a significant inhibiting influence from which the pamphleteer, the ballad-singer, and the hawker of street literature were spared—the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays. All plays to be produced in the theatres of London had to be submitted to the Examiner, who had a free hand to demand whatever alterations he saw fit or to ban the piece altogether, with no appeal from his decision. Nineteenth-century Examiners routinely excised most references to matters religious, sexual, political, or (in the case of the major social issues of the moment) too controversial or "inflammatory."

Other considerations further tended to restrict the forthright depiction of London life and its concerns. Playwrights, virtually without copyright protection throughout most of the century, had to produce a vast number of scripts in order to earn a living, and one of their methods was the wholesale translation and adaptation of French plays, which could hardly be expected to speak directly to English issues. The insecurity of their livelihoods also led dramatists to avoid the discussion of serious social questions out of fear of alienating any portion of their potential audience.

The essential melodramatic formula, with its strict moral universe, also tended to work against the realistic depiction and discussion of pressing social issues in the melodrama of the age. But this does not mean that dramatists were unaware of the social and political milieu
or that they were unwilling to trade upon the controversies of the moment. The spate of factory melodramas in the 1830s enumerated earlier in this essay, for instance, were the result of the Factory Act of 1833 and the uproar concerning the administration of the Poor Law, giving the theme an extradramatic appeal beyond the standard conventions of melodrama.

Beyond the consideration of particular thematic motifs, a study of the type of escapism and entertainment sought in the drama by various segments of society can be revealing. One might, for instance, pursue the sociological implications of the fact, pointed out by Michael R. Booth in a recent article ("East End Melodrama," Theatre Survey, 17 [May 1976], 57-67), that exotic melodrama lingered in the theatres of the more predominantly working-class East End long after it had begun to give way to domestic melodrama in the more fashionable West End. Similarly, one might investigate the extent to which the popular brigand melodramas were a manifestation of the same impulse that led the public to delight in such street-literature as the descriptive guidebooks to "dark London."

The comic genres vary in the extent to which they offer promise to the student taking a sociological approach to the study of Victorian drama. Full-length comedy, while it frequently turned on the social fads and foibles of the moment, was generally, in its stylized mannerisms, little concerned with the realistic portrayal of every-day life. Occasionally, the "legitimate" comic stage did present London life. Perhaps the most prominent examples stem from the vogue during the 1820s for plays in imitation of W.T. Moncrieff's Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London (1821), itself derived from Pierce Egan's popular sketches. These plays, which consisted of a series
of scenes in which two comic characters encountered familiar London street scenes, were for a while attractive novelties, although their attractiveness had declined long before the mid-century arrived. The short farces of the century similarly showed a greater concern with comic convention than with contemporary point. Even in those instances in which dramatists crafted their farces about a situation of topical interest, as in the case of William Brough and Andrew Halliday's *A Shakespearean Reverie; or The Bard and his Birthday* (1864), the topicality tended to extend only to the framework within which the usual grotesqueries and absurdities were carried on.

The most potentially rewarding source for the study of Victorian daily life and thought as reflected in the comic genres is unquestionably burlesque-extravaganza. As with farce, extravaganza was occasionally given a central focus on a topical theme, as in the case of J.R. Planché's *The Drama at Home* (1843), in which personified dramatic forms discuss the implication of the theatrical reforms brought about by the Licensing Act of 1843, or in 1851, when such pieces as Shirley Brooks' *The Exposition* proliferated on the burlesque stage. In other instances, the traditional subjects of extravaganza were turned to contemporary point, as was *Robin Hood and Richard Coeur de Lion* (1846) by Charles Kenney, Shirley Brooks and J.H. Stocqueler, which teems with allusions to a recent decision by the Nottingham Planning Committee to promote residential development of parts of Sherwood Forest. But most consistently revealing is the extravaganza's basic device of deriving humor from anachronistic topical allusion. This device makes the genre a most effective barometer of what was on the public's mind at any given time. It also gives evidence of an extraordinary awareness on the part of the audience
of current events and of the artistic, literary and theatrical activity of the moment. Indeed, the shifting tastes and cultural awareness of the public are tellingly reflected in the allusions of burlesque-extravaganza. During the early years of the genre, for example, Shakespearean allusions, drawn from nearly all of the Bard’s plays, abound; by mid-century, Shakespearean allusion tended to be restricted to a few of the more familiar speeches, like “To be, or not to be,” a tendency which clearly testifies to the parallel decline in Shakespearean production and in the general public’s familiarity with the entire Shakespearean canon.

Indeed, the pointed topicality of extravaganza probably serves to make it the theatrical form most comparable to the street pamphlets and ballads of the time. Yet the office of the Examiner of Plays and the bonds of convention served to mitigate any really serious consideration of the controversies of the moment. Burlesque might poke topical fun, but it was out of its element when it tried to proselytize, and such attempts at “serious” extravaganza as Tom Taylor’s Sense and Sensation; or The Seven Sisters of Thule (1864), with its personified virtues and vices and its scenes set in sweatshops and corrupt law courts, were invariably flat failures.

This essay has been an attempt both to indicate the scope of the Lilly Library’s holdings in nineteenth-century theatre and drama, and to suggest a few of the ways in which interested scholars might approach this material. It is hoped that students of Victorian culture will, once aware of the existence of this valuable resource, proceed more closely to examine its richness and to discover that the world of the Victorian theatre is not, as critic James Sutherland has termed it, “a dramatic vacu-
um," but rather a vital and potentially revealing aspect of the life and culture of Victorian England.

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