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 Richard Foulkes  
 Excerpt  
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## CHAPTER I

*Heralds of change*

ALFRED EVELYN: greatest happiness of the greatest number –  
 greatest number, number one!

Bulwer Lytton *Money*

As the nineteenth century was drawing to its close the drama critic Clement Scott proclaimed: ‘Unquestionably the theatre in this country and all connected with it, be they actors, actresses, managers or dramatists, were never in such a flourishing and healthy condition as they are today, within a few hours of the close of an eventful century’ (1899, vol. II, p. 430). Scott advanced two reasons for the theatre’s healthy condition: ‘1. The first is the strong advocacy for it, and the complete success after winning it, of Free Trade in the Drama. 2. The second is the Independence of journalistic and other criticism’ (p. 432).

The second explanation was obviously coloured by Scott’s desire to promote the importance of the profession to which he himself belonged as drama critic of the *Daily Telegraph* and other journals, but his first explanation requires further consideration. Scott’s claim for the benefits of free trade in the theatre did not rest simply upon the expansion which it facilitated, but also, more significantly, on the elevation which he thought it had brought about: ‘In addition to elevating the artistic tone of the drama in this country, in addition to popularising it as it never was before, free trade with its countless advantages has purified the lighter amusements of the hour in every direction’ (p. 433). By linking the profusion, prestige and propriety of late nineteenth-century theatre to the principle of free trade Scott was making a direct connection with the reforms of the 1830s and 1840s and the political thinkers whose ideas had provided the intellectual driving force for those reforms.

Jeremy Bentham died in 1832, the year in which the theatre, like other parts of the nation’s life, came under the scrutiny of parliament – in its case in the form of The Select Committee appointed to Inquire into the Laws affecting Dramatic Literature. Bentham had applied his principle

of 'utility', or the greatest happiness for the greatest number, to recreations of all kind. In 'Reward Applied to Art and Science' he wrote:

It is not, however, proper to regard the former [the arts and sciences of amusement] as destitute of utility: on the contrary there is nothing, the utility of which is more incontestable. To what shall the character of utility be ascribed, if not to that which is a source of pleasure? All that can be alleged in the diminution of their utility is, that it is limited to the excitement of pleasure: they cannot disperse the clouds of grief or of misfortune. They are useless to those who are not pleased with them: they are useful only to those who take pleasure in them, and only in proportion as they are pleased. (Bowring 1962, vol. II, p. 253)

In Bentham's view 'the value' of amusements lay 'exactly in proportion to the pleasures they yield . . . Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure it is more valuable than either. Everybody can play push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few' (p. 253). Bentham's only concession to poetry and music was that if they 'deserve to be preferred before a game of push-pin, it must be because they are calculated to gratify those individuals who are most difficult to be pleased' (p. 253). What all amusements had in common was that: 'They compete with, and occupy the place of, those mischievous and dangerous passions and employments, to which want of occupation and ennui give birth. They are excellent substitutes for drunkenness, slander and the love of gaming' (p. 254).

Bentham was dismissive of 'those critics, more ingenious than useful, who under the pretence of purifying the public taste, endeavour successively to deprive mankind of a larger or smaller part of the sources of their amusement . . . There is no taste which deserves the epithet *good*' (p. 254). To Bentham the state's role was to facilitate amusements, not to provide them: 'Among rich and prosperous nations, it is not necessary that the public should be at the expense of cultivating the arts and sciences of amusement and curiosity. Individuals will always bestow upon these that portion of reward which is proportioned to the pleasure they bestow' (p. 255). In this respect Bentham was following Adam Smith, who, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), advocated

the frequency and gaiety of public diversions. The State, by encouraging, that is, by giving entire liberty to all those who, for their own interest, would attempt, without scandal or indecency, to amuse and divert the people by painting, poetry, music, dancing, – by all sorts of dramatic representations and exhibitions, – would easily dissipate, in the greater part of them, that melancholy and gloomy humour which is almost always the nurse of popular superstition and enthusiasm. (1838, p. 357)

Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham endorsed the value of amusements for individuals and acknowledged their social use. Bentham rejected the notion of some amusements possessing in themselves a higher or lower value. By the mid nineteenth century Bentham's disciple J. S. Mill had modified this view in his essay on 'Utilitarianism. Its Meaning' (1859): 'It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity: the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone' (Warnock 1972, p. 259). His mind closed to such accommodations Bentham concluded his chapter: 'That which governments ought to do for the arts and sciences of immediate and remote utility may be comprised in three things – 1. To remove the discouragements under which they labour; 2. To favour their advancement; 3. To contribute to their diffusion' (p. 256).

Parliament directed its attention to these issues through The Select Committee appointed to Inquire into the Laws affecting Dramatic Literature, which was constituted on 31 May 1832, just days before the passage of the Reform Bill, extending the franchise and redistributing Parliamentary seats, on 7 June. Of the twenty-four members of the committee Edward Bulwer Lytton (listed as Edward Lytton Bulwer) was the key figure. Already a published novelist and a playwright in the making, he had been returned as the Liberal MP for St Ives in 1831 and was a strong supporter of reform. It was Bulwer Lytton who carried the report of the Select Committee forward as legislative proposals. The views of forty-seven witnesses were heard by the Select Committee before it produced its report in July 1832, but although Bulwer Lytton was undoubtedly influential in framing that report he did not, of course, give evidence. A valuable source of Bulwer Lytton's own opinions is therefore *England and the English*, published in 1833.

Like Adam Smith and Bentham, Bulwer Lytton subscribed to the need for amusements for all, decrying 'the noticeable want of amusements for the poorer classes' (1833, vol. 1, p. 32) and also finding pragmatic social advantages in such provision:

Amusement keeps men cheerful and contented – it engenders a spirit of urbanity – it reconciles the poor to the pleasures of their superiors which are of the same sort, though in another sphere; it removes the sense of hardship – it brings men together in those genial moments when the heart opens and care is forgotten. Deprived of more gentle relaxations the poor are driven to the alehouse. (pp. 34–5)

For Bulwer Lytton, however, amusements were more than a diversion and a safety-valve: 'The physical condition of the Working Classes in Manufacturing Towns is more wretched than we can bear to consider'

(pp. 174–5), and he diagnosed ‘the moral cure is Education’ (p. 190) for which he saw ‘The Christian clergy’, as historically ‘great advancers and apostles of education’ (p. 281), having a responsibility. Compared with continental nations England made ‘the Sabbath dull’ and therefore ‘dangerous’; ‘idleness must have amusement or it falls at once into vice; and the absence of entertainments produces the necessity of excess’ (p. 326). In contrast to Bentham (the subject of an appendix) Bulwer Lytton did see a qualitative scale to pleasures:

In short, with the lower orders, as education advances, it will be as with the higher, – the more intellectual of whom do not indulge generally in frivolous amusements, solely because *it amuses them less* than intellectual pursuits. ‘Why do you never amuse yourself?’ said the rope-dancer to the philosopher. – ‘That is exactly the question’, answered the philosopher, astonished, ‘that I was going to ask you!’ (p. 327)

The sentiments attributed to ‘a mathematician’ at the beginning of Bulwer Lytton’s chapter on ‘The drama’: ‘One may always leave the amusements to the care of the public; they are sure to pay for those well’ (1833, vol. II, p. 133) are a paraphrase of Bentham, reinforced by the mathematician’s subsequent advocacy of ‘free trade’. In reply Bulwer Lytton cites France, as Matthew Arnold was to do four decades later, where ‘amusement is a necessary, while here it is scarcely even a luxury’ (p. 134). Acknowledging the adverse effects of the monopoly of ‘legitimate’ drama enjoyed by Covent Garden and Drury Lane, Bulwer Lytton judges the audiences at the minor theatres ‘not sufficiently guided in their tastes by persons of literary refinement’ (p. 138), those very arbiters of quality whom Bentham had dismissed as ‘those critics, more ingenious than useful, who . . . deprive mankind of a larger or smaller part of the sources of their amusement’.

Reformer as he undoubtedly was, Bulwer Lytton was not content simply to ‘remove discouragements’ to amusement, but went further to argue that there were higher and lower forms of amusements and that the state had a role in promoting the former:

No! Individual patronage is not advantageous to art, but there is a patronage which is – the patronage of the State . . .  
 You must diffuse throughout a people the cultivation of Truth and the love of Beauty. (pp. 176–7)

The patronage of the State is advantageous in producing a general taste and a public respect for cultivation [of art and science] . . . to enlarge and still the assembly, and to conduct, as it were, through an invisible ether, the sound of divine voices amidst a listening and reverent audience. (p. 183)

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Bulwer Lytton's contempt for unrestrained Utilitarianism is reflected in Alfred Evelyn's retort to the political economist Stout in his play *Money* (1840): 'O, Stout, Stout! greatest happiness of the greatest number – greatest number, number one!' (Rowell, 1960, p. 92).

The report of the 1832 Select Committee certainly reflected the principles of free trade in its proposal for the abolition of the monopoly of the patent theatres (Covent Garden and Drury Lane), but its advocacy of 'fair competition' and its reinforcement of the Lord Chamberlain's controlling authority were informed by the commitment to preserve and encourage qualitative standards in the theatre in the context of a freer market:

Your Committee believe that the interests of the Drama will be considerably advanced by the natural consequence of a fair competition in its Representation, they recommend that the Lord Chamberlain should continue a Licence to all the Theatres licensed at present, whether by himself or by the Magistrates. Your Committee are also of opinion partly from the difficulty of defining, by clear and legal distinctions, 'the Legitimate Drama', and principally from the propriety of giving a full opening to the higher as to the more humble order of Dramatic Talent, that the Proprietors and Managers of the said [hitherto minor] Theatres should be allowed to exhibit, at their option, the Legitimate Drama, and all such Plays as have received or shall receive the sanction of the Censor. (*British Parliamentary Papers, Stage and Theatre 1*, 1968, pp. 3–4)

In other words the abolition of the monopoly was perceived as a means of extending 'the higher . . . order of Dramatic Talent' with the Lord Chamberlain exercising his authority as licenser (and censor) of plays. This was hardly unfettered free trade in the Benthamite mould. The report concluded: 'While, as regards the Public, equally benefited by these advantages, it is probable that the ordinary consequences of competition, freed from the possibility of licentiousness by the confirmed control and authority of the Chamberlain, will afford convenience in the number and situation of Theatres, and cheap and good entertainment in the performances usually exhibited' (pp. 5–6). Of the two bills presented to parliament by Bulwer Lytton consequent upon the Select Committee's report, that establishing copyright for dramatic authors was passed, but that proposing the abolition of the patent theatres' monopoly, though approved by the House of Commons, was defeated in the House of Lords and did not succeed until 1843.

Of the witnesses to the Select Committee a particularly doughty defender of the monopoly was Charles Kemble, younger brother of John Philip and Sarah (Siddons), although his own experience at Covent Garden had been deeply troubled. J. P. Kemble had transferred his one-

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sixth share in Covent Garden to his brother in November 1820, and Charles Kemble became manager of the theatre in March 1822 (Williamson, 1970, pp. 143 and 144), but by 1829 he was reduced to bankruptcy, from which he was rescued by his daughter Fanny's stage debut as Juliet. Nevertheless Kemble presented himself as the successor and defender of the patent granted to Sir William Davenant by King Charles II. When asked 'Is it supposed this patent is perpetual?', he replied: 'I have always so understood it' (*British Parliamentary Papers, Stage and Theatre* 1968, p. 43). Kemble further justified his case by claiming that certain forms of entertainment (by implication the higher, including Shakespeare) could only be done in larger theatres and that the pool of acting talent was insufficient to sustain an increased number of theatres. Kemble attempted to scale the moral high ground by arguing that minor theatres provided 'stronger excitement and a coarser species of entertainment at a much cheaper rate' (p. 46) and that 'you will have the rabble of London going to those theatres in preference to others, where they can be instructed and improved' (p. 51). Economic considerations were clearly central to this view and Kemble grasped at the straw of 'indemnification': 'Yes; suppose the Government would step forward and say, you have expended so much money on this theatre, we will sell the theatre and advance you so much money', to which the response was: 'You cannot expect the Government to be responsible for an improvident bargain you may have made' (p. 48). Kemble was, of course, suggesting that the government should buy him out of a venture which would be rendered – even more – uneconomic by greater competition, but in his proposal it is possible to detect the embryo of the idea that higher forms of theatre should be supported by state subventions. Kemble, who had earlier cited 'the increase of religious feeling' as one of the causes of the theatre's decline, concluded his evidence, defiantly or desperately, by asserting: 'The qualifications of a true actor are a gift that God gives, and they are not to be multiplied as theatres may be' (p. 55).

Such a viewpoint was not one to be found on the bench of bishops when the Dramatic Performances Bill was debated in the House of Lords on 2 August 1833. The Bishop of London felt compelled to offer 'a few observations on a subject which in my opinion deeply affects the morals of this great city with which I have so important a connexion' (*Mirror of Parliament*, 1833, vol. iv, p. 3490). He objected to the prospect of new theatres which would not 'contribute to the moral improvement of the public', a view not dissimilar to Kemble's, but went on to say 'indeed, I doubt whether it be possible to conduct theatres so as to effect that

object' (p. 3493). With the zeal of Bulwer Lytton's mathematician he calculated that 'Under this Bill there may be erected within a circuit of two miles from the General Post Office, 250 theatres' (p. 3493) and went on to express his fundamental opposition to the theatre. He exemplified the Garrick Theatre, in Lemon Street, Goodman's Fields, where a 'young woman being enabled to obtain admission . . . for 6d, contracted an invincible taste for theatrical amusements and the dissipations connected with them. She remained out late at night, and at last all night, and the result was the poor woman [the girl's mother] lost her daughter, and the daughter lost her character' (p. 3493). In the bishop's opinion the reduction in admission charges resulting from greater provision and competition would bring the theatre within the means of the humbler members of society who were poorly equipped to resist its potential for ill effect. He spoke of apprentices who had acquired habits which led them to rob their masters and have their indentures cancelled and concluded by warning his fellow peers that 'by consenting to this Bill, you break asunder the bands of society, and throw this great Christian community into confusion' (p. 3494). Suitably chastened, the House of Lords rejected the bill by nineteen votes to fifteen.

The Bishop of London in question was Charles Blomfield who had been appointed to the see in 1828. A Whig early in life, he voted against Roman Catholic emancipation in 1829, but for the Reform Bill in 1832. During his episcopate, which ended with his resignation in 1856, nearly 150 churches were built in his diocese – rather fewer than the number of theatres of which he was fearful. Although unsympathetic to the contemporary theatre Blomfield was a 'Greek play bishop', having produced translations of Aeschylus (Blomfield, 1863, vol. 1, pp. 23–4). Blomfield had been educated at Bury St Edmunds Grammar School and at Trinity College, Cambridge. Coincidentally these were the educational establishments to which Charles Kemble had sent his son John Mitchell, with the expectation that he would make his career in the Church.

For an actor, even a member of the distinguished Kemble dynasty, to aspire to a university education and clerical career for his son was unusual in the early nineteenth century. Charles Kemble's own education had included three years (from the age of thirteen to sixteen) at the Roman Catholic College at Douai in France, which his brother John Philip had also attended. Charles Kemble left Douai with 'a gentleman's education' (Williamson, 1970, p. 13) in the classics, but did not pursue a clerical vocation. Indeed he transferred his allegiance to the Church of

England, as his daughter Fanny's account of the family's religious routine indicates:

Our habits were those of average English Protestants of decent responsibility. My mother read the Bible to us in the morning before breakfast . . . We learnt our catechism and collects, and went to church on Sunday, duly and decorously, as a matter of course. Grace was always said before and after meals by the youngest member of the family present and I remember a quaint old-fashioned benediction which, when my father happened to be at home at our bedtime, we used to kneel down by the chair to receive, and with which he used to dismiss us for the night: 'God bless you! Make you good, happy, healthy and wise!' These, with our daily morning and evening prayers, were our devotional habits and pious practices. (1878, vol. 1, pp. 199–200)

The impression conveyed by Fanny is of a conventional Christian routine and determined respectability rather than deep religious zeal. The Kembles numbered several clergymen in their circle of friends and clearly derived considerable satisfaction from these social connections, in particular that with Henry Hart Milman.

Born in 1791, a younger son of Francis Milman, baronet and eminent physician, Milman was educated at Eton. There in the Long Chamber the boys clandestinely staged plays: 'We acted *Tom Thumb* the other day, and a most ludicrous piece of work it was. I (a future Dean of St Paul's), being of an elegant height and shape, represented the Queen of the Giants, and with wooden-soled shoes of about four inches, a kind of cap about one yard high, managed to cut a pretty Brobdingnagian appearance' (Arthur Milman, 1900, p. 18). At Oxford (Brasenose College), Milman won the Newdigate Prize in 1812 with a poem on 'The Apollo Belvedere'; he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford from 1821 to 1831. Milman was ordained in 1816 and his career was marked by outstanding ecclesiastical and scholarly distinction, the former culminating in his appointment as Dean of St Paul's in 1849. Milman's *A History of the Jews* (1829) caused controversy at the time by treating its subject along the lines of secular history; but it became a standard work, as did his *History of Latin Christianity to the Death of Nicholas V* (1855). These achievements placed Milman in the forefront of his profession, but he was also the author of a successful play 'the tragedy *Fazio*, produced in 1818 at Covent Garden, with a star part beloved of leading ladies for the next forty years' (Smyth, 1949, p. 12), including Fanny Kemble at Covent Garden in 1831.

In his advertisement to the published text of *Fazio* (1815) Milman wrote: 'The following attempt at reviving our old national drama with

greater simplicity of plot, was written with some view to the stage. Circumstances and an opinion of considerable weight induced me to prefer the less perilous ordeal of the press.' Milman had been deterred by the size of the two metropolitan theatres legally entitled to stage his play, but had then been the victim of the lack of copyright when he discovered that it was being staged at the Surrey Theatre under the title of *The Italian Wife* 'and it had been acted some time before I was aware that the piece of that name was my work. That theatre was then, I believe, only licensed for operatic performances, but the company contrived to elude this restriction by performing all kinds of dramas with what they called musical accompaniment' (Arthur Milman, 1900, pp. 33–4). Milman therefore had first-hand experience of the two obstacles to the theatrical progress which the 1832 Select Committee set out to address.

Milman's *Procida, or the Sicilian Vespers* was staged by Charles Kemble at Covent Garden in 1822, but, other considerations apart, the subject matter of his three religious dramas *Fall of Jerusalem* (1820), *Martyr of Antioch* and *Belshazzar* (both 1822) ensured that they remained unperformed, as did his historical tragedy *Anne Boleyn*. Milman maintained his interest in the theatre, partly of course because of the continuing success of *Fazio*. He contributed several articles to the *Quarterly Review* including a lengthy review of J. Payne Collier's *The History of English Dramatic Poetry, to the time of Shakespeare and Annals of the Stage to the Restoration* in which he wrote 'Religion was the parent of the modern, as of ancient drama' (vol. 46, no. 92, January 1832, p. 479), dealing at some length with the development of medieval drama, as he was to do in his *History of Latin Christianity* (1855, vol. VI, pp. 492–9).

A more personal testimony of Milman's commitment to the theatre, as embodied by the Kemble family, was his review of Fanny Kemble's play *Francis the First*, which she had begun in 1827, when she was eighteen years of age. Milman's review in the *Quarterly Review* (vol. 47, no. 93) in March 1832 was of the printed text; the play was staged at Covent Garden the following month. In keeping with her father's belief that the patent theatres were temples of the higher drama Fanny Kemble's play 'was very much in line with current thinking in literary circles' (Marshall, 1977, p. 27). Milman wrote of 'reuniting the poet and the actor in their former close alliance' and continued: 'The most remarkable characteristic, however, of the tragedy before us, is its total and disdainful want of conformity to the present state of the stage. Far from accommodating itself with servile docility to the taste of the day . . . Francis the First is conceived in the spirit and conducted on the plan of a far different

period' (*Quarterly Review*, p. 244). This period was Shakespeare's; the play used a 'double current of interest' (p. 245) and in one incident betrayed 'too close a resemblance to "Measure for Measure"' (p. 254), but in its departure from historical sources *Francis the First* 'is of a holier and purer nature' (p. 255). Milman acclaimed Fanny Kemble's first play as 'the most extraordinary work which has ever been produced by a female at her age' (p. 261).

Such fulsome encomiums from a family friend seem inseparable from personal regard for the youthful authoress. If such was Fanny Kemble's effect on a middle-aged, married scholar and cleric, her impact on her brother's contemporaries at Cambridge can be guessed at. Fanny Kemble described John Mitchell's circle as 'among the jewels of their time, and some of their names will be famous and blessed for generations to come' (1878, vol. 1, p. 299). The undergraduates amongst whom J. M. Kemble found himself during his time at Cambridge, from 1826, included F. D. Maurice, John Sterling, William Donne, Arthur Hallam, W. M. Thackeray, Alfred Tennyson and Richard Monckton Milnes. Most were at Trinity College or Trinity Hall and belonged to the Cambridge *Conversazione* Society, founded in 1820, generally known as the Cambridge Apostles. John Mitchell Kemble's personality introduced a dramatic element into university life: 'giddy and flamboyant . . . handsome, talented extrovert with a compelling personality, some unfortunate mannerisms and traits and a flair for all sorts of things . . . his ability to sing, dance, shoot, row, fence, debate and drink. But Kemble did most things to excess and might fairly be called intemperate, both in character and personal habits' (Peter Allen, 1978, p. 97). If in hindsight ordination seems an improbable prospect for John Mitchell Kemble, Tennyson's sonnet 'To J. M. K.' provides a contemporary testimony:

My hope and heart is with thee – thou wilt be  
 A latter Luther, and a soldier-priest  
 To scare church-harpies from the master's feast;  
 Our dusted velvets have much need of thee:  
 Thou art no sabbath-drawler of old saws,  
 Distill'd from some worm-canker'd homily;  
 But spurr'd at heart with fieriest energy  
 To embattail and to wall about thy cause  
 With iron-worded proof, hating to hark  
 The humming of the drowsy pulpit-drone  
 Half God's good sabbath, while the worn-out clerk  
 Brow-beats his desk below. Thou from a throne  
 Mounted in heaven wilt shoot into the dark  
 Arrows of lightnings. I will stand and mark. (1905, p. 25)