

VI · *Drama*

W.D. HOWARTH

'THE MOUSE THAT STIRRED . . .': SHAKESPEARE AND THE
FRENCH

Of the 8000 plays known to have been performed in Paris between 1830 and 1850,¹ only a handful are ever considered to be examples of 'Romantic drama': whatever that term does signify, it is certainly not a purely chronological label. The period around 1830 was one of unprecedented activity in the French theatre: new establishments proliferated in Paris – Balzac's novels provide a vivid record of the vital role played by the theatres in the social life of the capital – and there was a vigorous theatrical activity in the major provincial cities. The vast majority of the plays performed, however, were as unambitious as they were undistinguished: they are the theatre's equivalent of the ephemeral journalism of the day. Standing out from these are the plays which represent the successful commercial drama of the period. Eugène Scribe was the most successful, the most popular, and in many ways the most representative playwright of his age; but he is rightly not considered a Romantic dramatist. Scribe gauged to perfection the taste of the public for whom he wrote, and if he is remembered somewhat condescendingly today for his manipulation of the mechanics of plot-construction according to the formula of the 'well-made play', this was a formula calculated to produce the blend of suspense and surprise that his patrons required.

The body of works we call Romantic drama was in contrast the product of an avant-garde minority. If there is a common denominator linking plays as different as *Hernani* and *Antony*, *Chatterton* and *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, it is surely this: that they were all created to express the ideology, or the sensibility, of a cultural elite, and to express this in a consciously literary or artistic manner. Hugo, Dumas, Vigny and Musset were above all innovators, determined to impose on the Parisian theatregoing public new forms, new ideas, and a challenging theatrical experience, the product of an aggressively iconoclastic aesthetic. The

W.D. HOWARTH

most forceful expression of that aesthetic is to be found in the Preface with which Victor Hugo accompanied his historical drama *Cromwell* in 1827; however, in order to understand the originality and the impact of Hugo's ideas, it is necessary not only to look at the cultural context of the 1820s in France, but also to trace the development of what may be called 'pre-Romantic' attitudes to drama in the previous half-century or so.

If the term 'pre-romanticism' has any validity, it surely denotes – and this is more abundantly true in the field of drama than elsewhere – that intermediate stage in French cultural evolution, when the ideology and the sensibility that we call 'Romantic' were already widely in evidence, but when the literary and linguistic medium did not yet exist that could have given them effective expression. If we look sideways at the German example, there is no such gap between 'fond' and 'forme' in the masterpieces of *Sturm und Drang* drama, Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773) and Schiller's *Die Räuber* (1782), both of which express a vigorous challenge to established values in the name of a revolutionary individualism. But whereas Lessing had already prepared the way in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767–8), by persuading his fellow Germans to reject the restricting influence of French neo-classicism and to look favourably on the example of Shakespeare, in France the determined resistance to Shakespeare by the theatrical establishment provides an excellent indicator of the narrow-minded conservatism which governed the writing of serious drama throughout the eighteenth century. Voltaire, who in the eighteenth letter ('Sur la tragédie') of his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) had put himself forward as the champion, albeit a somewhat patronising one, of English drama, hitherto unknown to the French, had moved by the end of his life to an attitude of uncompromising hostility: Shakespeare, hailed in 1734 as a poet of genius, had become, by the time of the Preface to *Irène* (1778), 'un sauvage avec des étincelles de génie qui brillent dans une nuit horrible'. It is true that by this time the English dramatist had acquired more sympathetic interpreters in France; but not only was the prestige of Voltaire such as to outweigh the favourable attitudes of Letourneur, Ducis or Mercier, whose 'translations' or adaptations of Shakespeare in any case stopped well short of a faithful, unadulterated rendering of the English text: his rooted distrust of any genuine innovation in the field of the arts was also in line with the conservatism of the Théâtre-Français whose position as a monopoly theatre, enabling it to resist all change, was a major factor in ensuring the survival of the derivative neo-classical forms of tragedy and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Drama*

‘haute comédie’, with hardly any modification at all, from the late seventeenth until well into the nineteenth century.

Voltaire’s denigration of Shakespeare had focused on three principal heads: uncouth construction, typical of a poet who wrote ‘sans la moindre connaissance des règles’; ‘le mélange des genres’, which offended against that implicit fourth unity, unity of tone, which was even more important than the notorious three unities of time, place and action; and failure to preserve the dignity required of tragic diction. Repeatedly, Voltaire returned to the attack; and one of his prime targets was the passage from the beginning of *Hamlet* where the guard Francisco, asked if he has had a quiet night, replies: ‘Not a mouse stirring’. This banal colloquialism is scornfully contrasted (in the *Lettre à l’Académie Française*, 1776) with the line from Racine’s *Iphigénie* in which the stillness of the night is also evoked: ‘Mais tout dort, et l’armée, et les vents, et Neptune’, a line Voltaire commends for its ‘beauté admirable’ and its ‘harmonie’. He continues:

Je vous dirai qu’il n’y a ni harmonie ni vérité intéressante dans ce quolibet d’un soldat: *Je n’ai pas entendu une souris trotter*. Que ce soldat ait vu ou n’ait pas vu passer de souris, cet événement est très-inutile à la tragédie d’Hamlet; ce n’est qu’un discours de gilles, un proverbe bas qui ne peut faire aucun effet. Il y a toujours une raison pour laquelle toute beauté est beauté, et toute sottise est sottise.

Such total inability to accept a freer and more suggestive poetic expression, as a valid alternative to ‘le style noble’ from which all concrete, technical or everyday vocabulary was excluded, was the principal obstacle to the creation of a drama capable of expressing the new ideas of the Age of Sensibility. Voltaire’s translation of the ‘To be or not to be . . .’ soliloquy from *Hamlet* in the *Lettres philosophiques* (no. 18) is a clear demonstration of the incompatibility of two imaginative processes: Shakespeare’s rich, colourful imagery is throughout replaced by the colourless abstractions and the cliché-like epithets that characterised the neo-classical tragedies themselves. And the tragedies of 1820 showed little change from those of 1720 in this respect. The same hierarchical attitude to language still prevailed, and although the setting might now, as an alternative to Greek mythology or Roman history, be medieval France, Palestine at the time of the Crusades, or South America at the time of the Spanish conquest, dramatists were still deprived of the linguistic resources with which to represent local colour, or to express ideas and feelings specific to a given time or place. If the hero of Voltaire’s *Mahomet* (1742) wants to refer to the Moslem practice of total abstinence, he must say:

W.D. HOWARTH

J'ai banni loin de moi cette liqueur traîtresse,
 Qui nourrit des humains la brutale mollesse;

if De Belloy, in *Le Siège de Calais* (1765), wants to express the idea that the beleaguered citizens were reduced to eating their dogs, he can get no nearer than this laboured periphrasis:

Le plus vil aliment, rebut de la misère,
 Mais, aux derniers abois, ressource horrible et chère,
 De la fidélité respectable soutien,
 Manque à l'or prodigué du riche citoyen;

and that matters were not changed in this respect by the French Revolution is shown by the following example, cited by Stendhal, from Legouvé's *La Mort de Henri IV* (1806), in which the King's famous saying, 'Je voudrais que le plus pauvre paysan de mon royaume pût du moins avoir la poule au pot le dimanche', is rendered by an equally absurd circumlocution:

Je veux enfin qu'au jour marqué pour le repos
 L'hôte laborieux des modestes hameaux
 Sur sa table moins humble ait, par ma bienfaisance,
 Quelques-uns de ces mets réservés à l'aisance².

Some progress was made, however, especially in the period following the Revolution, in the gradual familiarisation of the French public with the example of Shakespeare. Mme de Staël, arguing in *De la littérature* (1800) that a nation's cultural taste depends on specific geographical, political and social factors affecting that nation, justified Elizabethan drama by reference to the historical background against which it had been produced – though her cultural relativism did not disguise her preference for the greater refinement of taste that had produced Racinian tragedy. Similarly Benjamin Constant, though a sympathetic translator and interpreter of Schiller's *Wallenstein*, lacked the courage to go beyond an unadventurous compromise with 'la dignité de la tragédie'; and it was Guizot, a historian with a specialist interest in Tudor England, who in his *Shakespeare et son temps* (1820) showed the most enlightened understanding of a valid alternative to neo-classical tragedy, an alternative actually to be preferred because of its vigour and its truth to life.

Even the Théâtre-Français itself now possessed, in the person of Talma, the greatest actor of his generation, a devotee of Shakespeare – at any rate, of Shakespeare as acclimatised in France by the timid pen of Ducis. After Talma's death in 1826, an outstandingly successful visit by

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Drama*

a company of English actors in 1827–8 brought a much wider public into contact not only with Shakespeare's language, but also with the less formal, more 'natural' style of acting associated with Kemble, Kean, Macready and Harriet Smithson. Finally, the performance of Alfred de Vigny's adaptation of *Othello*, *Le More de Venise*, at the Théâtre-Français in 1829 played an important role in breaking down the residual opposition. However, to accept *Othello*, the most regular of Shakespeare's tragedies, accommodated as it was into Vigny's more or less blameless alexandrines, was one thing: the real challenge was still to come, in the shape of a native French drama which much more provocatively rejected the rules and the conventions on which serious French theatre had been based for two hundred years. It was the arrival of such a play, the publicity which attended its first performances, and the head-on collision between its enthusiastic young supporters and the conservative upholders of tradition, that produced the 'bataille d'*Hernani*' in 1830.

The story is a familiar one; and the opening line of Hugo's play, with its outrageous enjambement:

Serait-ce déjà lui? C'est bien à l'escalier
Dérobé

is deservedly memorised by every student of Romantic drama. But provocative as this was, it was not metrical innovation that constituted Hugo's most fundamental challenge to the established order of things. A more significant portent of the subversive nature of his dramatic verse was to be found in the opening line of his *Cromwell*:

Demain, vingt-cinq juin mil six cent cinquante-sept . . .

In this line which, in George Steiner's phrase, 'drew tragic verse down to the gross world of clocks and calendars',³ the young Hugo was already proclaiming the full measure of his linguistic revolution. And it was as a revolutionary in matters of vocabulary especially that he saw himself, as is shown by his proud boast in the poem 'Réponse à un acte d'accusation':

Je fis souffler un vent révolutionnaire.
Je mis un bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire.
Plus de mot sénateur! plus de mot roturier!
Je fis une tempête au fond de l'encrier . . .
Je massacrai l'albâtre, et la neige, et l'ivoire;
Je retirai le jais de la prune noire,
Et j'osai dire au bras: Sois blanc tout simplement.⁴

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[More information](#)

W. D. HOWARTH

‘LA “PRÉFACE DE CROMWELL” N’EST PAS LA PRÉFACE DE
“CROMWELL”’

In 1825, Stendhal had formulated this forthright definition: ‘Le Romantisme appliqué au genre tragique, c’est une tragédie en prose qui dure plusieurs mois et se passe en divers lieux.’⁵ As an ambitious young dramatist, at the spearhead of the assault on the Théâtre-Français, Victor Hugo knew better: neo-classical verse tragedy could be successfully challenged only by Romantic drama in verse. And to take the strictest possible view of the history of Romantic drama, this can be almost exclusively identified with the fortunes of Hugo’s verse dramas. The Théâtre-Français may have opened its doors to historical melodrama in prose, with Dumas’s *Henri III et sa cour*, in 1829; Hugo may himself have made his début in the theatre with a prose play, *Amy Robsart*, in 1828; he was also to return to prose for the sequence *Lucrece Borgia – Marie Tudor – Angelo* in the middle 1830s; and it would be impossible to ignore the distinctive contribution made by such plays as *Antony*, *Chatterton* or *Lorenzaccio* in arriving at an assessment of the achievements of the major Romantic writers in the field of drama. But *Lorenzaccio* was a ‘spectacle dans un fauteuil’, not written for stage performance; *Antony* was played at a boulevard theatre, the Porte-Saint-Martin; and even *Chatterton*, though played at the Théâtre-Français, was a prose drama in a modern setting. So that if one takes the view, as contemporary playgoers and critics evidently did, that the vital issue was the Romantics’ challenge to verse tragedy at the Théâtre-Français, then the series of plays *Cromwell* (1827), *Hernani* (1830), *Marion de Lorme* (1831), *Le Roi s’amuse* (1832), *Ruy Blas* (1838), *Les Burgraves* (1843), has a quite unique importance⁶. And it is as a manifesto for this whole sequence of plays Hugo was to launch as an attack on the theatrical establishment that the *Préface de ‘Cromwell’* should be regarded.

In many ways, the *Préface* is Hugo’s most accomplished achievement as a dramatist: a ‘profession de foi’ that deliberately turns its back on two hundred years of French drama, and proposes entirely new aesthetic principles for the theatre of the future. Its devastating criticism of the sterile neo-classical tragedy goes hand in hand with positive recommendations for a distinctive new form; and the whole is presented within the framework of a historical survey which, though highly subjective, still impresses us with its imaginative sweep and its suggestive power. World literature is divided by Hugo into three ages: the first, primitive, era is characterised by the simple lyrical expression of the ode, while the second, theocratic era has the epic as its characteristic

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form – though the basic affinity between epic and ancient tragedy is stressed: ‘mêmes fables, mêmes catastrophes, mêmes héros . . .’; and it is only with the advent of Christianity that the necessary conditions were produced for the development of the third, modern, epoch: Christianity, with its peculiar insistence on the double nature of man: ‘Pour premières vérités, elle enseigne à l’homme qu’il a deux vies à vivre, l’une passagère, l’autre immortelle; l’une de la terre, l’autre du ciel.’ And to this philosophical dualism corresponds an artistic duality: ‘Tout dans la création n’est pas humainement *beau* . . . le laid y existe à côté du beau, le difforme près du gracieux, le grotesque au revers du sublime, le mal avec le bien, l’ombre avec la lumière.’

The vital aesthetic intuition of a need for the synthesis of ‘sublime’ and ‘grotesque’ had been grasped by such writers as Dante, Rabelais or Cervantes, and by Callot and Goya among the visual artists; but in the field of dramatic writing, says Hugo, Shakespeare offered a unique example that had been ignored by the neo-classical tradition, with its much more limited aspiration towards an exclusive notion of the sublime. The new drama, ‘le drame’, must reject any such constraints:

La poésie née du christianisme, la poésie de notre temps est donc le drame; le caractère du drame est donc le réel; le réel résulte de la combinaison toute naturelle de deux types, le sublime et le grotesque, qui se croisent dans le drame, comme ils se croisent dans la vie et dans la création. Car la poésie vraie, la poésie complète, est dans l’harmonie des contraires. Puis . . . tout ce qui est dans la nature est dans l’art.

Rather than the moral challenge of Christian dualism – the exhortation to man to subordinate his earthy nature to his finer, spiritual potential – which Chateaubriand, for instance, had stressed in *Le Génie du christianisme*, it is the aesthetic possibilities of *contrast* that attract Hugo; and this essential basis of his approach to character in a dramatic context has an obvious affinity with the way in which other Romantic artists approached the human personality: most clearly, perhaps, Baudelaire with his compelling pair of opposites ‘le spleen’ and ‘l’idéal’.

When Hugo writes ‘tout ce qui est dans la nature est dans l’art’, he is far from adopting the ‘naturalism’ of Diderot and other eighteenth-century exponents of domestic drama. In a vital paragraph, he takes up the familiar notion of art ‘holding a mirror up to nature’ – but only to stress the particular qualities essential to such a mirror, as he sees it: ‘Si ce miroir est un miroir ordinaire, une surface plane et unie, il ne renverra des objets qu’une image terne et sans relief, fidèle, mais décolorée . . . Il faut donc que le drame soit un miroir de concentration qui, loin de les affaiblir, ramasse et condense les rayons colorants.’ As this striking image demonstrates, the *Préface* presents a blueprint for a poetic drama,

W. D. HOWARTH

offering an idealised, heightened picture of life. The nature of this 'heightening' may be very different from that adopted by the classical dramatist, in that it consists in the selection of 'grotesque' elements to provide the necessary contrast with the 'sublime'; but Hugo's *drame* has this in common with neo-classical tragedy (as well as with Shakespeare), that the representational portrayal of everyday life is rejected out of hand as lacking aesthetic interest.

The philosophical conviction that the human personality is composed of two contrasting elements, 'ange' and 'bête', and that these must both be reflected in any art form that claims truth to life, not only provides the key to the characterisation that typifies Hugo's theatre; it has other important corollaries affecting both the structure and the style of his plays. If we accept the thesis of the *Préface de 'Cromwell'*, then 'le mélange des genres' is no structural idiosyncrasy, but an essential part of any attempt to portray life in its entirety; as Hugo says of 'le grotesque':

Grâce à lui, point d'impressions monotones. Tantôt il jette du rire, tantôt de l'horreur dans la tragédie. Il fera rencontrer l'apothicaire à Roméo, les trois sorcières à Macbeth, les fossoyeurs à Hamlet. Parfois enfin il peut sans discordance, comme dans la scène du roi Lear et de son fou, mêler sa voix criarde aux plus sublimes, aux plus lugubres, aux plus rêveuses musiques de l'âme.

Similarly, the linguistic richness and metrical virtuosity of the new drama are no mere superficial embellishment; they are an essential consequence of an aesthetic programme which called for a comprehensive poetic representation of reality. And this is how Hugo defines the stylistic medium of the new drama:

un vers libre, franc, loyal, osant tout dire sans pruderie, tout exprimer sans recherche; passant d'une naturelle allure de la comédie à la tragédie, du sublime au grotesque; tour à tour positif et poétique, tout ensemble artiste et inspiré, profond et soudain, large et vrai; sachant briser à propos et déplacer la césure pour déguiser sa monotonie d'alexandrin; plus ami de l'enjambement qui l'allonge que de l'inversion qui l'embrouille; fidèle à la rime, cette esclave reine, cette suprême grâce de notre poésie, ce générateur de notre mètre . . . lyrique, épique, dramatique, selon le besoin; pouvant parcourir toute la gamme poétique, aller de haut en bas, des idées les plus élevées aux plus vulgaires, des plus bouffonnes aux plus graves, des plus extérieures aux plus abstraites, sans jamais sortir des limites d'une scène parlée; en un mot, tel que le ferait l'homme qu'une fée aurait doué de l'âme de Corneille et de la tête de Molière. Il nous semble que ce vers-là serait bien *aussi beau que de la prose*.

Although the *Préface de 'Cromwell'* can be said to have predicted with some measure of success the form that the most notable Romantic drama of the next fifteen years was to take, this does not mean, of course, that all prose theatre was incompatible with the essence of Hugo's theoretical programme. The banalities of everyday life, the ordinariness of everyday

Drama

language, were excluded, certainly; but prose dialogue of a more ambitious literary character, capable of expressing the feelings and ideas proper to the young avant-garde of the day, was a different matter, and in any assessment of the achievements of the Romantic dramatists, Musset's sensitive handling of imagery and prose rhythms in *Lorenzaccio* deserves especial consideration. This is poetic drama in the only sense that counts, and in the final analysis, *Lorenzaccio* is surely the most successful embodiment of Hugo's aesthetic doctrine.

HEROES AND ANTI-HEROES

What Lilian Furst implies in her chapter title 'The Romantic hero, or is he an anti-hero?'⁷ is particularly valid in the context of French Romantic drama: one of the essential features of the Romantic hero is that he calls in question heroic attributes that had been taken for granted for centuries. Corneille's Rodrigue or Nicomède, self-reliant, self-confident, and acting in the name of principles endorsed by those around them, represent the supreme avatar of conventional heroism; but the Romantic dramatists reject moral distinction as well as elevation of rank. Instead, they look for the psychological singularity which is the distinguishing feature of post-Cartesian man. 'Si je ne vauds pas mieux, au moins je suis autre', Rousseau had said in the preamble to his *Confessions* (1781); and to suit the tastes of a generation brought up on *Adolphe* and *René*, playwrights now set out first and foremost to portray clearly delineated individuals. The Romantic hero is forever conscious of what distinguishes him – indeed, sets him apart – from his fellows. He is no leader of men, for he lacks both the commitment to the common good, and the common denominator of shared human qualities, that marked his predecessor in the classical age. Whether he is cast in the dynamic, Byronic mould, or reproduces the reflective indecision of a Werther, he is an 'être d'exception'. If on the one hand he is inordinately susceptible about his real or fancied disadvantages, physical or social, he can be equally arrogant about his intellectual superiority. But the concept of the divided self to which Hugo gave explicit expression in the *Préface de 'Cromwell'* was adopted more or less consciously by other playwrights, too; as a result, the new-style hero is beset by doubts, and has constantly to justify himself both against the misunderstandings of others and against the tortures of self-criticism. Far from being an exemplary figure like the Cornelian *généreux*, the Romantic hero is an outlaw (Hernani), a bastard (Antony), or physically deformed (Triboulet); he is a flawed genius (Kean), or a social parasite (Chatterton). Where altruistic

W. D. HOWARTH

idealism exists, it is corrupted, as in Musset's Lorenzo, by cynicism and disillusionment; and if a gift for political leadership is to be found, it is in the unlikely person of Ruy Blas, a lackey.

Hugo had argued for the juxtaposition of 'grotesque' and 'sublime' on the grounds that the synthesis of these contrasting elements would produce a greater truth to life; but more often than not in his own practice a convincing synthesis is lacking, and characterisation stops short at antithetical contrast. Perhaps the crudest example of such an antithesis is Triboulet, the central character of *Le Roi s'amuse*. As we see him in Act I, Triboulet, the court jester to François I, is the epitome of physical and moral deformity, his misanthropy symbolised by his hunched back as he gloats over the misfortunes of the noblemen whose wives and daughters have been seduced by the King. The act closes with Saint-Vallier, one of these courtiers, pronouncing a curse on Triboulet; and a phrase from Hugo's Preface provides an unconscious clue to the reason for the lack of coherence in the central character: 'Cette malédiction, sur qui est-elle tombée? Sur Triboulet fou du roi? Non. Sur Triboulet qui est homme, qui est père, qui a un cœur, qui a une fille.' The character we see in Act II – indeed, throughout the rest of the play – is no less idealised, as the devoted father of Blanche, than the perverted pander of Act I had been a caricature. This is not a viable synthesis, and it is almost as if retribution were falling on an innocent person: as if the sins of the court jester were being visited on a complete stranger in Blanche's father.

'La paternité sanctifiant la difformité physique, voilà *Le Roi s'amuse*; la maternité purifiant la difformité morale, voilà *Lucrèce Borgia*', writes Hugo in the Preface to the latter play. Here we have another case of schematic characterisation on the a priori basis of the contrast between 'sublime' and 'grotesque': Lucrece's 'difformité' – the monstrous evil of the legendary poisoner – is contrasted with the self-abnegation of her love for her son Gennaro, brought up, like Triboulet's daughter Blanche, away from the corruption of the court. However implausible such a juxtaposition may seem in the light of normal human psychology, there is no doubt that the contrast produces a powerful dramatic effect – sustained, in this case, throughout the play. For while Triboulet's physical deformity remains constant, his moral depravity gives way completely after Act I to what we are intended to see as the 'sublime' side of his character, and the dramatic interest centres on his attempts to avenge himself on the King for the seduction of Blanche; in the case of Lucrece, however, it is the opposition within the character herself between lust for evil and remorse that provides the dramatic focus of the later play.