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1 Childhood in Ireland

Harriet Smithson is known today because in 1827 she chanced to play Ophelia and Juliet in a season of English theatre in Paris; Hector Berlioz was present, fell in love with the Shakespearean image, and pursued it in his life and in his music. Harriet comes to the world first through the medium of his music, his letters and his memoirs, and secondly as an aside on record sleeves and programme notes or as a diversion in books whose emphases properly lie elsewhere. The tone of many of the comments (other than those by Berlioz) is faintly dismissive and disparaging, suggesting that the *coup de foudre* which the actress so unconsciously delivered was slightly absurd, a romantic aberration, almost a figment of Berlioz's own imagination; the image of Harriet–Ophelia–Juliet is regarded as a self-engendered, self-delighting ideal which bears only a tenuous relation to the shadowy reality that was Harriet. There is enough truth in the general attitude to make it simple to accept. Berlioz's personal absorption was echoed, though to a lesser degree of intensity, by a generation of French writers and artists, Hugo, Dumas, Vigny, Delacroix, but in their case the interest can be accounted for as a temporary fashion, a tactical episode within a long and complex reaction against the classical tradition. What Harriet did, and how she acted, becomes submerged. Even the form of the name by which she is known – Harriet, Henrietta, Henriette – is variable and elusive.

The faintness of Harriet's image is to some extent inevitable, given the ephemeral nature of theatrical performance. Berlioz, quite apart from his greatness as a composer, is a supremely evocative writer, and his letters and memoirs are the most important evidence about Harriet and the events of her later life, and more vivid than any other description could hope to be. Harriet herself left comparatively little in writing from which to construct a portrait, most of her few surviving letters

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being concerned with business arrangements and stage performances. Yet there is sufficient in the way of external comment to encourage an attempt, and it is right that the focus should be on Harriet's professional career, for it is her acting which brought her, however fortuitously, to the notice of Paris and Berlioz, and on which her wider claims to attention, together with the response she aroused, must rest.

Harriet Smithson's whole life was controlled by the theatre. She was born Harriet Constance on Tuesday, 18 March 1800 in the west of Ireland, at Ennis, County Clare, where her father had settled his family for a few months while he organised one of several short seasons in the playhouse.[1] In view of Harriet's later career, it seems suitable to anticipate the actual date of birth and associate her first public appearance with a performance given the previous week on 10 March for her mother's benefit. Smithson had himself enjoyed a remarkably successful benefit at the end of February, with more people turned away at the doors than had gained admission, which moved him to insert a fulsome acknowledgment in the *Ennis Chronicle*. Mrs Smithson, an occasional actress over the years, was not a regular member of the company and can scarcely have taken a part on this particular evening; probably Smithson calculated that her advanced state of pregnancy might draw sympathetic interest from the Ennis public. The entertainment was a contrasting programme consisting of a new musical play, *The Irishman in Naples* (including a 'distinct view of Mount Vesuvius on Fire'), and *Romeo and Juliet* accompanied by 'a solemn Dirge and Funeral Procession'[2] (these obsequies for Juliet Capulet were part of Garrick's interpolations): hardly the most auspicious greeting for the expected arrival, but an entirely apposite association for Harriet.

Harriet's father, William Joseph Smithson, was 'descended from a family of that name in Gloucestershire'.[3] Harriet was anxious later in life to stress the English connection and the polite circles of society in which she moved. But whatever her father's ancestry, for years he had been earning a slightly precarious living in the country towns of Ireland. Towards the end of the eighteenth century provincial theatrical activity expanded there as rapidly as in England, and Ireland as a whole provided an attractive alternative for the growing ranks of professional players; besides the people's enthusiasm for drama, there was a generally more open and welcoming attitude towards the actors themselves, in contrast to the social condescension which still prevailed in England. Smithson earned himself a modest place in Ireland's theatrical history. In 1784 he was acting for Robert Owenson in the theatre at Fishamble

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Street, Dublin. Three years later, he was engaged to appear in Chalmers's company at Kilkenny but left in mid-season because, according to his explanation in the *Leinster Journal*, he was not allowed to perform the roles which had been agreed. Showing the independence and enterprise which his daughter inherited, he took up the hazardous business of strolling manager, and for the next twenty years moved principally between Wexford, Kilkenny, Galway, Waterford and Ennis.[4]

Ennis, however, was the place with which the Smithson family formed the strongest ties. Sited on the banks of the River Fergus, the town was an important market as well as the county capital, with assizes and race-meetings to draw people to it in addition to the ten thousand or so inhabitants. Smithson's energy and ambition had been apparent there from the start. Towards the close of 1789 he had busied himself in fitting up a building in Cooke's Lane, formerly Bridewell Lane,[5] as a playhouse to accommodate two hundred or so spectators, which would be 'as neat and comfortable, for the size, as any in the Kingdom, an Agreeable surprise to those who were accustomed to the temporary theatres hitherto made use of in this town'.[6] With entrance fees of two shillings for the pit and one shilling for the gallery, Smithson's budget was tight, and it may well be that he carried out much of the reconstruction with his own hands. Later plans for a purpose-built theatre were never fulfilled. The repertory he provided, though trimmed to the shifting capacities of his company and relying heavily on comedies and light musical plays, suggests a man of wider taste or higher ambition than the common run of strolling manager. Otway's *Venice Preserved*, later a favourite context for Harriet, was given in the first season. For his own benefit in 1791 Smithson presented *The Sheep Shearing*, an adaptation of *The Winter's Tale*, with himself as Autolycus, while contemporary events were reflected in the concluding item, a 'Grand Transparency of that terrifick Mansion, the Bastille, on Fire'.[7]

Smithson was a Mason, and used this connection to swell the attendance whenever he could. On special occasions – such as his benefit – the Ennis Lodge Number Sixty would parade in full regalia through the streets, and were then disposed upon a specially constructed amphitheatre at the back of the stage, where the members formed a colourful backdrop. Those brothers who might be reluctant to appear in so public a position were cordially assured that they were welcome to purchase tickets in the regular manner. In ways like this Smithson prudently cultivated his audience, and the *Ennis Chronicle*, which consistently supported his efforts, seems to indicate a genuine warmth

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(and perhaps a fellow Mason in the proprietor Foster Parsons) when writing of him that 'as an Actor he has been much caressed, as a Brother much beloved, and as a Fair Dealer, much admired'. Not all his actors shared this view.

No manager, however popular, could afford to stay in such a comparatively small centre as Ennis for long. The 1800 season was extended for a number of additional performances, and concluded on 3 April with yet one more Benefit for Brother Smithson: the play chosen, wishfully, was Dibdin's *Five Thousand a Year*. Mr and Mrs Smithson departed with the proceeds and their baby daughter in the direction of Waterford.

The common experience of strolling actors' children was to pass their infant years trailing tediously from one playhouse and town to another, and then to find themselves at an early age eking out the company's resources on stage. Harriet was spared this phase. The Smithsons returned to Ennis in October 1801 to mount another short season.[8] Either then or shortly after, it was agreed to leave Harriet in the care of the Reverend James Barrett, who became her guardian and brought her up as though she were his own daughter.[9] The Smithsons came to see her from time to time, certainly in 1803 and 1805, but Ennis was Harriet's childhood home. According to Oxberry's *Dramatic Biography*, whose writer seems to have relied upon Harriet's own account, Harriet was 'the pet of the inhabitants'.

Dr Barrett was in his eightieth year, and for forty years had been Pastor of the Church of Ireland parish of Drumcliffe, and latterly Dean of Killaloe. He was greatly loved in the district, by Protestants and Catholics alike, and Harriet was fortunate to be in his care, and to grow up in the calm of his house in Chapel Lane. Dr Barrett instructed Harriet 'in the precepts of religion', states Oxberry, adding that 'everything connected with the stage was carefully kept from her view'. This comment is difficult to reconcile wholly with an announcement for 15 February 1808 for 'Theatre Ennis', headed 'By desire, and under the patronage of the Rev. Dean Barrett, For the Benefit of Miss A. Smithson'[10] – a remarkably tolerant gesture on the Dean's part for that age. The initial of the Miss Smithson who was to dance and sing remains a puzzle; conceivably it is a misprint, which would advance Harriet's début by some six years.

However, that well-intentioned involvement with the theatre was Dr Barrett's last public action. Early the next morning he died, 'a character as near perfection as the lot of humanity admits of'.[11] The Ennis shops

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closed down, and a general gloom settled on the community; at his funeral, Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy alternated in the procession while tears ran down the faces of all the spectators;[12] and in the Pro-Cathedral some years later a monument was placed by members of 'All Religious Persuasions' to 'Perpetuate the Memory of so good a Man'.

Harriet had not lost a parent; but she had lost the person who for the greater part of her eight years had provided her with affection, a home and education. Once again, the Smithsons had to decide whether to take their daughter with them on their travels, or to provide some alternative. They chose stability in the form of a school at Waterford kept by a 'Mrs Tounier'[13] – an 1824 directory lists a ladies' boarding-and-day academy in William Street, headed by Mrs Mary Tourner. Oxberry comments, relying 'on the information of a friend', that Harriet then showed herself 'actually averse even to witnessing dramatic exhibitions'. This attitude suggests an attempt on Harriet's part to distance herself from the humdrum family theatrical background. Certainly, her early isolation from the world of theatre did nothing to prepare her for the unglamorous realities to come.

Whatever Harriet's own hopes and inclinations may have been, the joint pressure of family tradition and pinched finances swiftly prevailed. Her father's health began to fail; and there were others in the family, a brother Joseph and an invalid younger sister to provide for. The explanation of failing health given by Oxberry may conceal a straightforward commercial disaster. Some manuscript verses by an anonymous actor accuse Smithson of every conceivable misdeed of a provincial theatrical manager. Entitled 'The Smithsoniad, or Chapter of Managers',[14] and set to the tune of 'Scots wha hae', it contains 'an Actor's advice to such of his brethren of the Sock and Buskin, as may have been trepann'd into the company of a certain Manager, in the South of Ireland'. Harriet might well wish to dissociate herself from the dismal life outlined in these verses:

> Wha wad be a Strolling Gag?
> Wha wad be a Barn vag?
> Wha for Benefits wad beg, –
>   and in a Garret lie?
> Wha wad e'er be Smithson's slave?
> Wha wad e'er support a knave?
> Or for him chaunt a single stave, –
>   an' by starvation die?

The verses are provided with copious notes and glosses: 'Strolling Gag' – 'An Itinerant humbugging performer'; 'Smithson' – 'William Joseph Smithson, Manager of the South, universally and execrated by the Whole Profession – "Ecce Homo!"'

By your wives' an' children's moans!
By the Gall'ries Shouts an' groans!
Yea! By Frederick Edward Jones –
  The Royal Patentee!
I conjure you fly wi' haste: –
Your precious time na longer waste;
For if ye stay ye'll be *uncased* –
  Ay, surely *dudded* be!

'Dudded' – Performers who have continued any length of time in Smithson's Co know too well the meaning of this phrase to need any explanation; however for the information of others I must remark that the word undudded would be more applicable, as it signifies being *dispossessed of a wardrobe*, an accident to which Smithson's Co is often subject!

Smithson is not the only manager to be lambasted in this diatribe, but the others serve largely as a standard of comparison for his supposed villainy:

Yield not to Joseph's knavish tricks,
Iwit his paltry rags and sticks,
Leave him to his Hods and Bricks,
  For if ye stay ye'll die!

The writer notes that Smithson 'was a Bricklayer before he embark'd Theatrical Manager'. Various other shortcomings are ascribed to him – 'rude austerity', 'ferocity', 'cursed malignity'; 'There's no one can dissemble more, Iago none resemble more' – before the actor concludes with a pious hope:

May I my once bless'd country see
From Managerial Tyranny,
From *Swadlers* and from Smithson free,
  and then I'll die content.

It is clearly impossible to assess the justice of these complaints, though the general background seems authentic. Managerial failures were becoming a common occurrence now that the tide of public enthusiasm for theatre was perceptibly receding, as Harriet would have frequent cause to know. Mr and Mrs Smithson were in Plymouth in 1813, which may have marked a tactical withdrawal. The following

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year they returned to Ireland and decided to launch Harriet upon the world. Among those who had taken a kindly interest in Harriet as a child was Lady Castle Coote. Lady Castle Coote spoke to Lord Castle Coote, and Lord Castle Coote spoke to Frederick Jones, patentee of the Theatre Royal, Dublin. On Friday 27 May 1814, as Albina Mandeville in Reynolds's sentimental comedy *The Will*, Harriet made her début.[15]

The Theatre Royal, Dublin, was a favourable setting for the start of an acting career. The resident company was of good quality and Jones, a 'gentleman by birth and education', had the reputation of a thoughtful manager with firm views about the conduct of his actors – to encourage them to behave like gentry he paid at rates appreciably higher than the normal provincial scale. He had less control over his audiences. The Crow Street building was to suffer badly in December 1814 when the public rioted because the advertised afterpiece was withdrawn. This was to have been *The Forest of Bondy*, an adaptation from Pixérécourt, starring a trained Newfoundland dog; when the animal's owner demanded what Jones considered to be exorbitant terms in the form of a perpetual free pass, the manager countered with an unannounced substitution: the outraged audience broke up the seats and benches, wrecked the chandelier, and was narrowly prevented from setting fire to the place.[16] Dublin audiences, apart from being volatile, were perceptive and outspoken. They were used to seeing the best-known performers from Drury Lane and Covent Garden: a visit to Dublin became established as part of the regular summer pattern for actors like the Kembles, Liston, Kean and Macready. The audience acquired the habit of forming, and voicing, independent judgments: Elliston found his Hamlet compared unkindly to that of the regular interpreter, Holman, and Charles Kemble was left in no doubt that he could not match Talbot in the latter's best comic roles.

There was no shortage of girls eager to try to make a name for themselves on stage. The theatre was one of the very few occupations open to women of wit and ambition but with limited means and influence, and even there influence of some kind was almost essential initially. As late as 1840 Tomlins, in his *Brief View of the English Drama*, described the profession of actor as the worst an 'intellectual man' could at that time select. 'Its requisites are more various, its difficulties greater, its remuneration (except to an exorbitantly paid few) worse, and more uncertain, and its duties more harassing, than those of any other.'[17] Macready, for one, would have agreed with that assessment. But for a woman, intellectual or not, the question of selection of career barely

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arose. The actor Walter Donaldson, who abandoned piano making for the Dublin stage and was later a member of the English theatre in Paris with Harriet Smithson, considered that no occupation, such as governess or lady's maid, could equal the stage when a female 'was thrown on the world to gain a living'. It was 'the only position where woman is perfectly independent of man, and where, by her talent and conduct, she obtains the favour of the public. She then enters the theatre emancipated and disenthralled from the fears and heartburning too often felt by those forced into a life of tuition and servitude.'[18] A succession of talented actresses had launched their careers in Dublin. Three years or so before, in the same theatre, Miss Eliza O'Neill had made her first appearance; in October 1814 at Covent Garden, she would create an outstanding impression as Juliet, and overnight become the undisputed successor to Mrs Siddons in tragedy. She was still a member of the Crow Street company, and acted in another part of the bill on the evening of Harriet's début.

Harriet's part as Albina Mandeville was described as 'her first appearance here' rather than 'her first appearance on any stage'. It may well be that she had in fact acted for her father elsewhere in Ireland, but chose later to suppress so humdrum an initiation. Certainly the tone of the *Freeman's Journal* the next day implies no particular surprise at her accomplishment, and, strangely, makes no reference to her extreme youth:

> Miss Smithson met a most warm reception last night, and it is only justice to say that she did not receive one plaudit which she did not eminently deserve. She certainly is a most interesting and promising young actress, and there is no doubt she will prove a great acquisition to Crow-street, in the line of performance which her taste, as well as her talents, incline her to pursue. In the last scene she was particularly successful in hitting off all the peculiarities of the gay, the volatile, and amiable *Albina Mandeville*. During the entire performance she was cheered with the most flattering testimonies of approbation, and at the fall of the curtain she received the compliment of three distinct peals of applause.[19]

She was granted a benefit, and chose to play Lady Teazle on 1 July.

Her father and mother now joined Talbot's company in Belfast. For their début there Smithson played Flutter and Mrs Smithson Letitia Hardy in Mrs Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem*; the gentleman's flippancy and 'light neat figure' called to mind Richard Jones of the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden; the lady, commented the *Belfast Newsletter*, 'is a fine woman, both in face and figure, but as she does not possess that airyness of proportion which implies if it does not denote extreme youth, we think her choice of character was rather injudicious'. This

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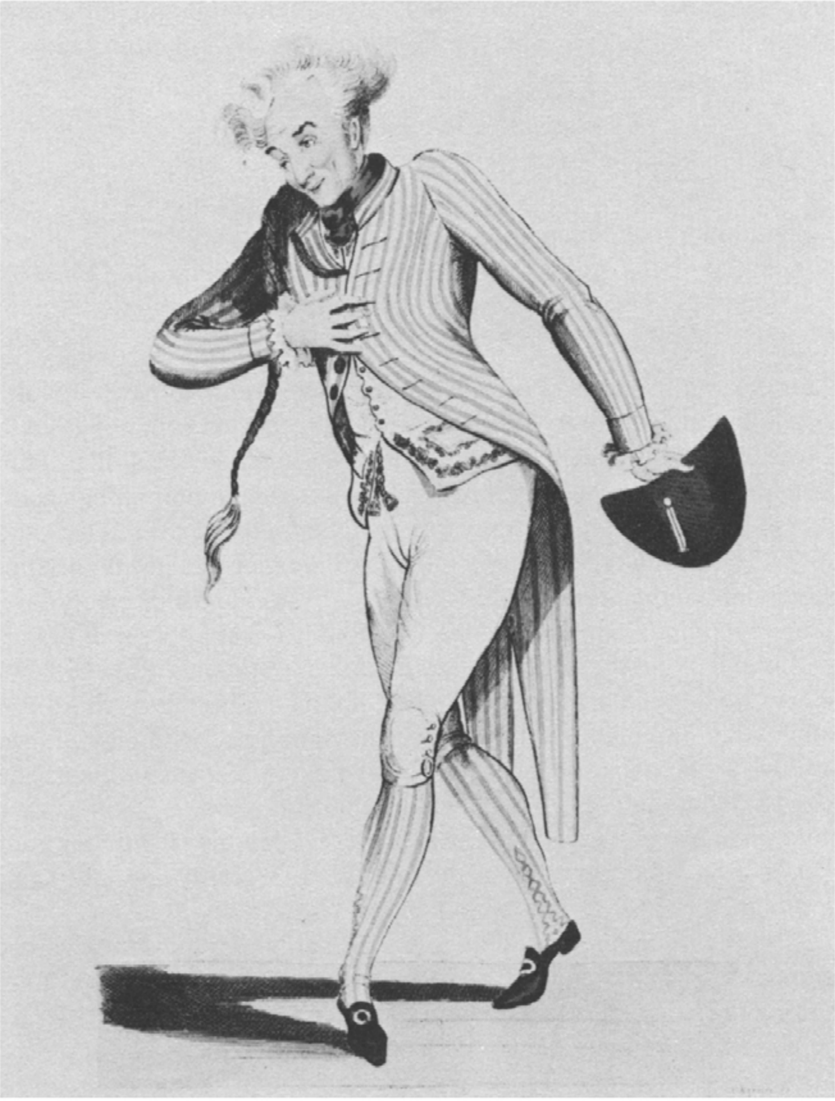

1. Montague Talbot as M. Morbleau in *Monsieur Tonson*. Etching, *c*. 1821.

tendency to stoutness, along with the role of Letitia Hardy, was passed down to Harriet. At the close of 1815 Mr and Mrs Smithson returned to Dublin while Harriet took their place in Montague Talbot's company.[20]

Talbot, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin and excessively proud of his aristocratic ancestry, had abandoned the law for the stage and had taken charge of the Belfast theatre in 1809 after making a reputation in

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Dublin as an actor of refined comedy. Mrs Jordan thought him the best Mirabel of his time; and in the *Familiar Epistles* Croker evaluates his qualities:

> A baby face, that sometimes shows
> Alike in transports as in woes,
> Will ne'er permit him to resemble
> Or soar the tragic heights of Kemble;
> Yet in some scenes, together placed,
> With *greater* feeling – *equal* taste
> From a judicious audience draws
> As *much* and as deserved applause.[21]

Talbot was a robust and eccentric figure who seems to have provoked mildly uncomplimentary anecdotes – he was reported to have played the Ghost in *Hamlet* with a pair of tin eyes fastened over his own. However, he was a polished actor to have as a model, and as a manager he gave Harriet ample opportunity to extend her range of roles. The season opened on Monday, 1 January 1816, and Harriet was given parts in a succession of comedies: Mrs Mortimer in another Reynolds piece, *Laugh When You Can*; Amelia in Mrs Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows;* Floranthe in Colman's *Mountaineers*. The *Belfast Newsletter* enthused about her appearance in a melodrama, *The Magpie*: 'There is in this young lady's beauty so much of innocent softness, mingled with playful, even childish archness, a sort of rustic shyness of countenance which seems to stamp her the very *Annette* who the author drew.'[22] She was more child than woman. For her benefit on 1 April she filled, far more appropriately than her mother, the role of Letitia Hardy opposite Talbot in one of the most effective characters, Doricourt.

After the Belfast season there was a spell at Newry, and then Harriet accompanied Talbot to Cork and Limerick before returning to Dublin. Among the parts she added to her repertoire was that of Mrs Haller in a version of Kotzebue's *The Stranger*. This, for a sixteen-year-old, was a more demanding and slightly incongruous role. Created originally in England by Mrs Siddons, Mrs Haller is a disguised countess who has fallen in love with another man and run away from the count and her children when the affair comes to an end; remarkably for the age, the countess's adultery does not sentence her to a dramatic death, and she is eventually reconciled with her forgiving husband. It was a role which Miss O'Neill had inherited, and marks Harriet's first attempt at a character of greater weight and seriousness.

Harriet was now thought to have enjoyed sufficient success and