

“A LIVING HISTORY”: ANCIENT ROME ON WILSON BARRETT’S STAGE

by

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Abstract

The toga dramas of late nineteenth-century British actor-manager Wilson Barrett provide important evidence on the relationship between the Classics and Victorian theater. In his depictions of ancient Rome, Barrett married the popularity of melodrama with the passion for classical antiquity, reflecting changes in the Victorian social world at the end of the nineteenth century: the increasing prominence of melodrama and the blurring of artistic genres; the increasing accessibility of classical knowledge; and obsessions with historicity. Drawing on scripts, contemporary reviews, and photographs, I investigate the ways in which Barrett's work navigates the existing social scene in both theater and society at large. By exploring the splendor of Victorian melodrama, the British tastes for the Classics, and the relationship between authenticity and theatricality, this thesis uses Wilson Barrett's work to demonstrate important features of both Victorian theater and society at large at the end of the nineteenth century.

Lay Summary

The toga dramas of late nineteenth-century British actor-manager Wilson Barrett provide important evidence on the relationship between the Classics and Victorian theater. Barrett is relatively unstudied, as compared to his contemporaries, such as Sir Henry Irving. Barrett's depictions of ancient Rome, however, reflect both Victorian attitudes towards classical history and changes in British social structure. His toga dramas provide important evidence of the relationships between Britain and ancient Rome, between theater and other artistic genres, between the Classics and class, and between historical accuracy and artistic license. By investigating Barrett's theatrical representations of ancient Rome, this thesis provides important evidence of the changes in both Victorian theater and society at large at the end of the nineteenth century.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Shoshana Hereld.

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To my Greek goddess,
who loves me even when I am lost.

Introduction

“As a work of art nothing in our time, at least, has excelled it for taste, splendor, and authenticity.”

~John Coleman on *Claudian*¹

Wilson Barrett was the perfect stage hero, if a little short.² And no other actor could wear a toga quite as well as he.³ Coming to London from the provincial theater scene, Barrett became one of the great British actor-managers of the late nineteenth century, following in the footsteps of Charles Kean and rival to Sir Henry Irving.⁴ Barrett’s productions contained all of the elements of spectacle and melodrama that epitomized the theater of the age. His toga dramas, in particular, represent the theatrical precursor to Hollywood epics like *Ben-Hur* and *Quo Vadis*. Although Barrett has been overlooked by scholars, his career and fame demonstrate the synthesis of theater, social structure, and historical knowledge. His plays came at a time of immense change in British society, in terms of class system, technological advances, and artistic

¹ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 103.

² At 5’6” he was considered a bit short for heroic roles, so he wore elevated boots on stage (Ibid., 99).

³ Clement Scott in the *Daily Telegraph* from 3 May 1886, writes “No actor on stage so well bears a toga or is so classical in outline” (Ibid., 99).

⁴ Barrett, Kean, and Irving were all known for their spectacular productions, particularly Shakespearean revivals. Kean produced some of “the outstandingly typical masterpieces of the mid-Victorian theatre” and “created a fashion in presentation that lasted till the end of the Victorian era” (Southern, *The Victorian Theatre*, 40). He was also one of “Godwin’s most immediate antiquarian predecessors,” creating stunning historically-detailed productions (Baldwin, “E. W. Godwin,” 315). For a contemporary biography originally published in 1859, see Cole, *The Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean*. Irving was remarkably successful in his management of the Lyceum Theatre, renowned in his day “as actor, as manager, as leader of his profession and more besides,” and was the first actor to be knighted (Foulkes, *Henry Irving*, 2-3). See Chapter 2 of Foulkes’ volume, by Jim Davis, for a discussion of Irving as a forerunner of modernist theater. To compare Kean’s and Irving’s depictions of classical antiquity, see chapters 2 and 5 of Richards, *The Ancient World*, respectively.

movements; rooted in this era, Barrett's productions are valuable tools with which to uncover the relationship between art, society, and history.

Barrett was born in Essex in 1846 to a church-going, middle-class family.⁵ In 1853, he experienced the theater for the first time, attending a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Despite the "stage of bare planks," the production "left an indelible mark" on Barrett.⁶ It was not until a few years later, however, that Barrett truly felt the pull of the theater. Following a production of *Oliver Twist*, he knew "he wanted to be an actor and to exercise over others the fascination he felt himself."⁷ Despite having little money and little leisure time, Barrett found ways to hire tutors in dancing, singing, and comedy to pursue his stage dreams. He worked for seven years in variety shows and other jobs before, in 1864, getting his first professional job at the Theatre Royal. Although his family would not help him in his "sinful career" he continued to seek out acting jobs, eventually establishing his own company.⁸

Barrett began his career in the provinces, launching a touring company in 1870 and traveling for the next several years.⁹ In 1879, he leased his first London theater, the Royal Court Theatre, while maintaining theatrical activities in the provinces.¹⁰ In 1881 he eventually realized his dream of leasing the Princess's Theatre; this theater had, thirty years earlier, been the famous

⁵ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 11.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 14-15.

⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

theater of Kean but had since lost most of its audience base. Barrett, however, planned to remedy this by creating high quality English drama.¹¹ Barrett produced many popular plays in this theater, including *The Silver King* (1882) and *Claudian* (1883), while successfully maintaining his provincial theaters. As his fame grew, Barrett began touring around the globe to America, Australia, and South Africa, as well as continuing to perform at home.¹²

Barrett was an actor-manager, a theatrical jack-of-all-trades. This meant that he chose the productions, leased the theaters, balanced the books, directed the shows, and generally took on the leading roles. Depending on the production, he also co- or single-authored the scripts. In all of these endeavors he had lots of help, whether from individuals like E. W. Godwin, who designed his sets and aesthetic for several historical productions, or from the army of stagehands that were part of Victorian spectacular theater.¹³ Regardless of the number of collaborators and assistants, Barrett was the big name. He did well for himself, both in England and abroad, despite financial troubles throughout his career¹⁴ and a lack of formal recognition of the kind Irving had

¹¹ Ibid., 45.

¹² See Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, chapters 4 and 5.

¹³ Born in 1883, Godwin was trained as an architect but was also passionate about the theater (Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, 62-63). He began his theatrical career as a commentator and critic, later moving into design. He was a theater reformer, whose belief “that nothing less than full scenic and costume research and realization would do was new in its comprehensiveness and rigor” (Baldwin, “E. W. Godwin,” 313). According to Finkel, “he was one of the most influential figures in stage design in the late Victorian period” (Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, 79). Godwin worked with Barrett on Shakespearean plays as well as toga dramas, including productions of *Claudian* (1883), *Hamlet* (1884), *Junius* (1885), and *Clito* (1886) (Ibid., 68-77). Godwin died a few months after working on both *Clito*, set in Athens, and his own Greek-inspired production entitled *Helena in Troas* (Ibid., 77).

¹⁴ An example of his financial misfortunes was his production of *Hamlet* (1884), which had high costs but garnered a dismal audience, losing him about 32,000 pounds (Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 79).

received.¹⁵ After a lifetime of performing plays on four continents, Barrett succumbed to heart failure following multiple intestinal cancer operations in 1904.¹⁶ Glimpses into his work survive in the forms of play texts, photographs, novels, playbills, letters, and reviews. These sources can provide a window into the tastes of late Victorian theater-makers and the cultural environment in which they worked.

Barrett specialized in the genre of melodrama. Victorian melodrama was not the overly-emotional, soap-opera-esque production of today. For Barrett, it was the “Victorians’ distinctive entertainment...melodrama [was] conventional – always moral, always hopeful, and, most importantly, always humanitarian in its viewpoint.”¹⁷ It provided a vehicle to express the triumph of virtue over vice and morality over depravity. The high drama of Barrett’s shows was accompanied by extravagant stagecraft, as the packaging of melodrama morality was spectacle, with large casts, musical accompaniment, and luxurious sets, costumes, and effects. This type of splendor will be described in Chapter 1.

A number of Barrett’s works, following the advice of his friend, critic John Ruskin, focused on the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome.¹⁸ These plays included two of Barrett’s most famous: *Claudian* (1883) and *The Sign of the Cross* (1895).¹⁹ Set in Byzantium

¹⁵ Barrett lost out on knighthood due to “opposing influences,” while Irving received knighthood during his lifetime. (Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 142).

¹⁶ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 165.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8.

¹⁸ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 67; Heinrich, “Ruskin and the National Theatre,” 100.

¹⁹ Barrett’s Greek and Roman plays were: *Claudian* (1883), *Junius* (1885), *Clito* (1886), *Virginius* (1893), *The Sign of the Cross* (1895).

and Rome, respectively, these two works fall into the category of “toga plays,” “‘educational’ melodramas set in Ancient Rome and the Roman World, characterized by their claim to archaeological accuracy and faithful reconstruction of the buildings, costumes and manners and, in stressing of the moral values of Christianity, also a powerful ideological tool in late Victorian Britain.”²⁰ Barrett’s melodramatic representations of the classical world are part and parcel of the larger British trends toward both spectacular theater and obsessions with history. Rome was a particularly important element in the British connection to the past, as the Victorians saw themselves as the cultural inheritors of that empire.

British connections to Rome, and the Classics more broadly, also shaped the larger intellectual and artistic landscape in which Barrett created his productions. Ruskin saw in Barrett the perfect vehicle for educating the masses, and he “encouraged Barrett to produce a series of classic-revival plays as educational experiences for English audiences.”²¹ Ruskin believed that the public could at least get a snapshot of ancient history, and in particular a history from which Britain claimed descent; Britain looked to Rome as its predecessor and model for maintaining a global empire. Barrett, for his part, did not let Ruskin down, for “by his scrupulous attention to settings and costumes he consistently sought to educate the taste and historical knowledge of his audiences, faithfully fulfilling Ruskin’s injunction.”²² Lacking a classical education, however, Barrett’s productions fleshed out historical images with artistic innovation. He also relied upon

²⁰ Heinrich, “Ruskin and the National Theatre,” 100.

²¹ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 67.

²² Richards, *The Ancient World*, 150.

the knowledge of others, and used art and archaeology for his source material, rather than the textual sources which were the basis for elite classical education. Thus *Claudian* and other toga dramas demonstrate not only the relationships between theater and classical history, but education and society as well.

In his review of *Claudian*, Oscar Wilde, a noted classicist and critic as well as playwright, expresses the relationship between theater and education:

The ancient world awakes from its sleep, and history moves as a pageant before our eyes, without obliging us to have recourse to a dictionary or an encyclopaedia for the perfection of our enjoyment...Mr E.W. Godwin, one of the most artistic spirits of this century in England, created the marvelous loveliness of the first act of *Claudian*, and showed us the life of Byzantium in the fourth century, not by a dreary lecture and a set of grimy casts, not by a novel which requires a glossary to explain it, but the visible presentation before us of all the glory of that great town. And while the costumes were true to the smallest points of colour and design, yet the details were not assigned that abnormal importance which they must necessarily be given in a piecemeal lecture, but were subordinated to the rules of lofty composition and the unity of artistic effect...Only the foolish called it pedantry, only those who would neither look nor listen spoke of the passion of the play being killed by its paint. It was in reality a scene not merely perfect in its picturesqueness, but also absolutely dramatic also, getting rid of any necessity for tedious descriptions, and showing us by the colour and character of Claudian's dress, and the dress of his attendants, the whole nature and life of the man, from what school of philosophy he affected, down to what horses he backed on the turf. And indeed archaeology is only really delightful when transfused into some form of art.²³

Wilde points to the spectacular aspects of the production, for which Barrett and his historical advisor and set designer Godwin were well-respected, including the “visual unity”, or perfect representation of a complete stage world, to which Godwin aspired.²⁴ The entire production is a “pageant” showing the “glory” of Byzantium; Wilde's words, however, do little justice to the

²³ Ibid., 105.

²⁴ Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, 64.

number of people on stage and stunning nature of the effects.²⁵ The spectacle of the production was just as, if not more, important than the historical accuracy. Wilde highlights, as well, the magic of seeing history and archaeology in theatrical form. The audience could see the excavations they read about in the newspaper come to life with people who looked like them, and spoke like them, inhabiting these roles. This is the magic of theater.

Along with an understanding of the workings of Victorian theater and the relationship with the classical world, Wilde's quotation also reveals the class struggles occurring at the nexus between theater and the Classics in the Victorian world. Wilde highlights the historical value of Barrett's production as a learning tool for the general public who might not have access to the "dreary lecture and a set of grimy casts" which must have epitomized Wilde's experiences in elite schools.²⁶ He implies, however, that the historical information has been manipulated for the sake of the art and spectacle to produce a pleasing piece of theater, e.g. "the details were...subordinated to the rules of lofty composition and the unity of artistic effect." And archaeology is "delightful" in this theatrical form, but this delight is not necessarily the scientific, and thus well-respected, form of understanding the past. Wilde operated within the elite world of British society, having been trained in the Classics, a field associated with the upper classes.²⁷ His years of study would therefore not be comparable in the least to an evening out at the theater, but the latter is perhaps all that the lower classes would be able to manage. From his privileged

²⁵ The spectacle of effects and people on stage will be discussed in Chapter 1.

²⁶ He attended Portora Royal School in Northern Ireland before moving on to Trinity College and then Oxford University (Bristow, *Oscar Wilde*, xxxv). For more information on Classics and the late Victorian education system, see Chapter 2.

²⁷ He won a demyship in Classics at Magdalen College, Oxford (Bristow, *Oscar Wilde*, xxxv).

position, Wilde could throw a bone to Barrett and his audience, while remaining comfortably sure that his elite position, in part shored up by his classical education, was not threatened by the access to the classical world granted to the lower classes through toga plays.

While aspects of toga plays like *Claudian* represent the status difference between those with elite educations and those without, they also represent the increasing accessibility of classical knowledge during the late nineteenth century. While the lower classes had been shut out of an education system dominated by the Classics for centuries,²⁸ various changes in technology and cultural movements allowed for the opening of this field of knowledge to the wider public. Innovations in mass printing²⁹ and transportation³⁰ all allowed for the movement of information at a much greater scale. The establishment of museums as publicly-accessible collections in the eighteenth century,³¹ in addition to expositions, also made knowledge available to a more diverse group of people. Toga plays were another form of increased accessibility, providing representations of ancient history which could be understood without a formal education. These changes in accessibility helped to shape the cultural and artistic landscape of Victorian Britain, including Barrett's choice of subject matter.

Artistic movements also influenced one another, as demonstrated by the representations of famous paintings on stage. *Claudian* provides an excellent example of this. Actor-manager

²⁸ Stray, *Classics Transformed*, 74.

²⁹ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 7.

³⁰ Withey, *The Grand Tour*, 96.

³¹ For example, the British Museum was opened to the public in 1759 (Crook, *The British Museum*, 52).

John Coleman commented on “the gorgeous magnificence of the first scene, crystallizing into one focus of the erudition of the archaeologist and the glowing sun-steeped canvases of Tadema and Long.”³² Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Edwin Long were known for their historical paintings, and there was a trend for directors to conclude acts or scenes with tableaux inspired by, or mimicking, famous paintings, often called *tableaux vivants*.³³ It is likely this trend to which Coleman is referring, but perhaps he refers simply to the painted backdrop itself. Alma-Tadema, among other well-known artists did paint theatrical backdrops.³⁴ Incidentally, critic Clement Scott also thought *Claudian* looked like Alma-Tadema’s paintings.³⁵ This intersection between fields of art is representative of a larger Victorian trend toward the blurring of genres, which will be discussed in Chapter 1.

Barrett’s most well-known toga dramas are *Claudian* (1883) and “the most profitable of all toga plays,”³⁶ *The Sign of the Cross* (1895). These plays were not only successful in their day, but also influenced later toga plays and films. Scripts for these productions have been published in David Mayer’s anthology of toga plays and films, but scripts for his other productions proved difficult to find.³⁷ For this reason, my analysis of Barrett’s work focuses heavily on these two

³² Richards, *The Ancient World*, 103-104.

³³ Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 95. See also Newey, “Speaking Pictures,” especially pg. 3-4, and Barrow, “Toga Plays.”

³⁴ Barrett worked with Alma-Tadema in the early 1890s, and the painter was frequently employed by Barrett’s rival Irving (Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 119).

³⁵ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 104.

³⁶ Barrow, “Toga Plays,” 216.

³⁷ Some scripts, including *Claudian*, were simply never published for public consumption; Mayer’s version is the

plays. Contemporary reviews of these and Barrett's other toga dramas reveal Victorian opinions on staging, content, and authenticity. In addition, photographs provide evidence of how Barrett staged certain scenes as well as the costumes of the characters.

Claudian, set in Byzantium over the 100-year period from 360-460 CE, is the story of a curse and a search for redemption. In the prologue, the eponymous character cruelly attempts to buy the beautiful slave Serena, even though her husband has finally raised enough money to buy her at auction. She runs away to the Holy Clement, but Claudian chases her. Claudian stabs the Holy Clement, who speaks a dying curse that Claudian shall remain young and any good he does will come to ill. Claudian attempts to repent, and, thinking that by freeing Serena he will redeem himself, does so, only to find that his good action kills her as well. The next act takes place 100 years later, when Claudian wanders into the province of Charydos. Here he meets the smith Agazil and his love Almida, as well as Almida's sister Edessa and her beloved Belos. The province is governed by the evil tetrarch Thariogalus, who is in love with Almida, but she will not have him. Claudian attempts to right some of the wrongs done by Thariogalus, including freeing Agazil from prison, but when he does this good deed, the curse causes Almida to fall in love with Claudian rather than Agazil; the curse also blinds Almida. By Act II, Almida has found her way to Claudian's home, but she runs into Thariogalus who attempts to rape her. Agazil and others try to help, and Thariogalus throws Agazil off the battlements into the river. When Claudian finally finds Thariogalus and attempts to stop him, he throws the tetrarch off the

licensing copy from the Lord Chamberlain's office (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 33-34). Several of Barrett's plays, including *The Sign of the Cross* were adapted and published as novels. Mayer's publication of the script of *The Sign of the Cross*, on which I based my research, uses the novel to fill out the stage directions in the play, as there was no definitive published version of the script. For Mayer's methodology, see *Playing Out the Empire*, pg. 112.

battlements to his death. At the end of Act II, Claudian accepts the love that Almida offers him, but this causes the curse to bring an earthquake, destroying the palace. In the brief final act, Claudian is confronted with the ghost of the Clement, who gives him the choice to continue living with the curse or to finally die, allowing Almida and Agazil to be together. Claudian chooses the latter, and bids the audience “Farewell!”³⁸

The Sign of the Cross follows a similar thematic trajectory as *Claudian*, charting the changes of a hero from boorish to noble. In *The Sign of the Cross*, however, Barrett structures the drama around a conflict between a Christian sect living secretly in Nero’s Rome and the pagan Romans who want to exterminate them. The heroine, Mercia, comes from the former group, and the hero, Marcus, from the latter. While breaking up a mob attack on some of the Christians, Marcus meets Mercia, who defends the Christian leader, Favius. Marcus becomes smitten with the girl, to the dismay of Berenis, a patrician lady smitten with Marcus. Act I ends with Marcus’ receipt of an edict from Nero ordering the extermination of the Christians, followed by his second meeting with Mercia, whom he protects from arrest. In Act II, Marcus comes to the house of Favius, to warn the Christians, for Mercia’s sake, that the community is being watched and will face punishment if they are found to be Christian. While he is there, a messenger arrives, proclaiming that a young boy, Stephanus, was arrested while carrying a message for Favius. The following scene depicts Stephanus’ torture in a Roman prison, during which he reveals the location of the Christian’s next meeting. The act ends with the Romans infiltrating the meeting and arresting the Christians. In Act III, several Roman nobles, including Berenis, plot to end

³⁸ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 89.

Marcus' infatuation by persuading Nero to order Mercia's killing; they succeed. Meanwhile Marcus releases Mercia from prison to bring her to a party, and she infuriates everyone by sticking to her faith rather than joining in their revelry. The act ends with Marcus attempting to rape Mercia, but he is interrupted by one of Nero's counselors who bears the order for her death. In the final act, Marcus resolves to save Mercia. He finds her in prison, rallying her fellow Christians to bravely face the horrors of the arena. He proclaims his love for her, and she for him, and he is converted to Christianity by his love and her faith. The play closes as they walk into the arena together, going at once into their marriage and their death.

This thesis focuses on Barrett's toga dramas because they provide important evidence for the relationship between the Classics and Victorian theater. Barrett married the popularity of melodrama with the passion for classical antiquity, reflecting changes in the Victorian social world at the end of the nineteenth century: the increasing prominence of melodrama and the blurring of artistic genres; the increasing accessibility of classical knowledge; and obsessions with historicity. The chapters of this thesis are organized around the epigraph from John Coleman. His quotation pinpoints three aspects of the theater that were important to the Victorian public and are useful for exploring the relationship between theater, class, and classical history: splendor, taste, and authenticity.

Chapter 1 focuses on the visual aspect of theater and explores the spectacular nature of Victorian melodrama, its relationship to other forms of art and the Classics, and its impact on audience composition. Barrett's toga dramas, which drew diverse audiences and shared many characteristics with other art forms, helped to shape the new theatrical aesthetic that was developing at the end of the nineteenth century. Much of the appeal of melodrama can be attributed to the spectacular nature of the entertainment: large scale, full musical accompaniment,

lavish sets and costumes, magnificent stage effects, and hordes of extras on stage. This splendor attracted audience members from all levels of the social scale. Barrett took advantage of the prevailing interest in the classical world to further expand his audience. With his toga dramas, Barrett was an integral part of the changing relationship between society, theater, and the Classics, while satisfying public tastes for spectacle and history in the late nineteenth century.

Chapter 2 moves from the aesthetics of Barrett's theater to its content and looks at the influence of public taste on Barrett's work. The public craved stories of foreign lands and ancient times, and Barrett's depictions of Rome fit the bill perfectly. Rome was particularly important to the British sense of identity, because the Victorians looked to that ancient civilization as both their predecessor and as a guide to ruling an empire. The Classics had for several centuries been seen as an elite subject, and the British education system and social hierarchy were centered around this knowledge. Taste for classical art and media pervaded the culture in the form of the neoclassical movement. Barrett's plays engaged with this taste for classical subject matter by providing historically-inspired popular entertainment. His work used elements of the knowledge taught in elite schools and acquired on travels abroad, but rather than relying upon the textual sources that were seen as the foundation of classical study, he instead used art and archaeology. Barrett infused his melodramas with elements of history to appeal to Victorian tastes, but the productions themselves were more akin to standard melodrama than depictions of ancient history.

The third and final chapter discusses the relationship between authenticity and artistic license. Historical accuracy in the theater was a means of legitimizing shows, and the ability to discuss history in a scientific manner was greatly influenced by new archaeological excavations and the rise of the museum. However, the need for spectacle competed with the need for

historical accuracy. Theater-makers like Barrett and his archaeological advisor Godwin struggled to satisfy the critics' demands for authentic portrayals with the need to create a visually appealing production. For Barrett, the latter was more important, and this focus on theatricality created worlds on stage that engaged audiences. Barrett's productions animated history that would otherwise be lifeless in a museum. The ability to bring a vision of the past to life, whether or not the portrayal was entirely accurate, was the key to Barrett's successful toga dramas.

Barrett's plays, in particular *Claudian* and *The Sign of the Cross*, demonstrate a pivotal moment in the history of British theater. His productions not only provide a glimpse into the Victorian taste for spectacular, historical melodrama, but also demonstrate the fraught relationship between knowledge, class, and art. Barrett's work is the epitome of spectacle for spectacle's sake, but he masterfully used the British taste for ancient history to shape his productions and appeal to a diverse audience.

Chapter 1: Splendor

“A great upheaval of the masses marked the opening night. ‘The common people’ gladly heard, swallowing with their eyes and ears the spectacle of the cross of ‘Christos’...”

~Emilia Aylmer Gowing
on *The Sign of the Cross*³⁹

1.1 Introduction

The spectacle of a Broadway musical, the glamour of a night out at the opera, the crowds of Radio City Music Hall – this type of splendor was a key feature of Victorian melodrama. Grand theaters, musical numbers, and ornately painted sets were part of the theatrical magic that drew audiences from different strata of society. A review Barrett’s *The Sign of the Cross* (1896) describes the scene:

The rushing tide fills every corner of the house night by night. In the vast audience, princes, nobles, thinkers, workers, soldiers, scholars, mix with the idlers, the triflers, the ignorant, the thoughtless, the selfish, the earnest, the mourners, and the poor...What is the secret of a common consent amounting to a portent of strange issues in our time?...The marvelous power of the drama, constructed on lines of surpassing skill, winding up the strong story from point to point with breathless interest to the end, an action that never drops for a moment; there is the stir and movement of Imperial Rome, the sharp contrast of pagan revel and Christian endurance unto death; there is the absolute human leaven pervading every word and act of all those creatures of history or imagination that move before our eyes in their habit as they lived; but above and beyond all there is the everlasting power of the Gospel itself, preached to the heart and intelligence with the thrill and conviction of a Spurgeon sermon.⁴⁰

³⁹ Gowing, “*The ‘Sign of the Cross,’*” 473.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 474.

In this review, Emilia Gowing highlights the fact that Barrett's diverse audience has been drawn in by the combination of theatricality, history, and morality. Another review of the play also focused on the stunning visuals as the key to its success, commenting, "Both as a spectacle and as a dramatic story, with its requisite point of sensationalism, *The Sign of the Cross* contains all the elements that go to the making of a great popular success...Mr Barrett knows the value of ornate treatment in romance, nobody better; and undeniably the stage pictures of this story...are extremely beautiful."⁴¹ Barrett's work fulfilled the visual expectations for melodrama: extravagance and spectacle.⁴²

Barrett skillfully combined the Victorians' love for splendor with their love of classical antiquity, creating stunning shows such as *Claudian* (1883) and *The Sign of the Cross* (1895). These shows, with their opulent and historically-inspired sets, costumes, and effects, are evidence of the Victorian love of splendor in melodrama. Splendor, as I will use the term, encapsulates the spectacle, extravagance, and grand scale of melodrama. Splendor's appeal brought in a diverse audience, which, along with a blurring of artistic genres, shaped a new theatrical aesthetic by the end of the nineteenth century. Additionally, by combining his talents for spectacular theater with others' research on Roman times, Barrett catered to the prevailing Victorian taste for classical antiquity. Barrett's focus on splendor in melodrama, including striking staging choices and spectacular classical settings, reflected the new aesthetic and

⁴¹ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 126.

⁴² A review of Barrett's *The Daughters of Babylon* describes the intense spectacle of his show, even to the point of being overdone: "So ornate is the play that as a mere succession of stage pictures and groupings it would command attention...In mise-en-scène it is magnificent almost to the point of oppressiveness, and it is acted upon what may be called a similarly lavish scale" (Richards, *The Ancient World*, 139).

changing cultural scene, while creating spaces for social transformation by drawing diverse audiences.

1.2 The Spectacle and Scale of Melodrama

During the opening moments of both *Claudian* (1883) and *The Sign of the Cross* (1895), the curtain rises on sumptuous street scenes packed with supernumeraries representing a variety of city dwellers: soldiers, slaves, people on business, dancers, and ordinary citizens pass to and fro.⁴³ Moments like these are part and parcel of the fabric of Barrett's toga dramas—these plays were dazzling, both in terms of the theater building and the production itself. Each theatrical evening was an “event,” with many hours of entertainment: a “curtain-raiser” for introduction, a main event such as melodrama, and one or possibly two concluding pieces such as farces.⁴⁴ The entire evening might start at 6 or 7 pm and run until after midnight.⁴⁵ The interiors of the theaters were sumptuously decorated with beautiful wallpaper and ornamentation, even on the ceiling.⁴⁶ Stagecraft, even in the early Victorian period, was complex, with machinery that allowed for sliding or lifting set panels, and even a rolling floor to accommodate chariot races on stage.⁴⁷

⁴³ For the opening stage directions of *Claudian*, see Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 36; for *The Sign of the Cross*, see *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁴ Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians*, 215.

⁴⁵ Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 39-40

⁴⁶ Both the Leeds Grand Theatre and Opera House and the Princess's Theatre were ornate buildings. For the former, see Glasstone, *Victorian and Edwardian Theatres*, 64-65, figs. 74 and 75. For the latter, see Southern, *The Victorian Theatre*, 78.

⁴⁷ See Southern, *The Victorian Theatre*, 24-28; and Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 60-61. For an illustration of chariot race technology, see Southern, 25.

Live animals, such as horses for the chariots or Barrett's live goats in satyr costumes for *Clito* (1886), added another level of excitement.⁴⁸ Stage technologies also facilitated the presentation of natural disasters, such as the earthquake at the end of Act II in *Claudian*.⁴⁹ The realistic nature of the scene frightened and astonished theatergoers.⁵⁰ There may have been several thousand people in the audience on each night, gasping at the horrors of the scene: Victorian theaters were large buildings, sometimes seating between 3,000 and 4,000 patrons.⁵¹ The number of people involved in the shows was also enormous. On stage, there were sometimes more than two hundred actors and extras.⁵² The staff could number into the hundreds, tending to the lights, sets,

⁴⁸ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 86.

⁴⁹ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 85.

⁵⁰ H. Barton Baker wrote in *The Theatre*, "Then all of a moment blank darkness, a vivid flash of lightning, a crash of thunder, the roll and rumble that shakes the theatre to its foundation; a few moments' deathlike silence, and the moonlight steals over the stage again and shows, where late were beautiful gardens and marble palaces, a chaotic ruin of broken walls and pillars. It was really terrifying" (Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 68). In fact, Barrett and his co-author Henry Herman chose to write *Claudian*, specifically so that they would have the opportunity to stage the earthquake (Ibid., 64). Barrett's fascination with earthquake technology was part of a movement inspired by the excavations at Pompeii throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This fascination was in part due to romanticism, which "had ensured that the tragedy and spectacle of the eruption of Vesuvius was big currency in popular culture," especially through Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Hales, "Re-Casting Antiquity", 104-105). For the general reception of Pompeii, including a chapter on Bulwer-Lytton's novel, see Hales and Paul, *Pompeii in the Public Imagination*. For the stage reception of Pompeii, see "Pompeii on Stage and Screen," Chapter 8 in Moormann, *Pompeii's Ashes*. Mayer's volume also includes a chapter on the pyrotechnic spectacle James Pain's *The Last Days of Pompeii* in New York City, an adaptation of Bulwer-Lytton's novel, with descriptions of each of the events (see pages 90-103).

⁵¹ Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 61. For visualizations, see the illustration of Covent Garden after its renovations of 1847 and the photograph of Drury Lane in the 1920s in Southern, *The Victorian Theatre*, 72-4.

⁵² E.g. William Macready's *Coriolanus* (1838) used 100-200 senators, Kean's *Richard II* (1857) used 250 citizens, and Irving's *Macbeth* (1888) used 165 soldiers (Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 34). For a visualization, see the poster for *Claudian* at the Lyceum ("Theatre Posters, 1870-1900: Lyceum/Royal Lyceum Theatre: *Claudian*," National Library of Scotland, accessed August 16, 2017, <http://digital.nls.uk/74535028>).

and effects.⁵³ A West End show might have 30 musicians as well,⁵⁴ as the orchestra was often quite large and the musical accompaniment to the show was “frequently almost continuous.”⁵⁵ The combination of music, lights, effects, crowds, detailed set dressings, and strong emotions created a visual and theatrical feast for the audience.

With his toga dramas, Barrett entered into a theatrical tradition already shaped by splendor. Charles Kean, Barrett’s idol and predecessor at the Princess’s, created historical dramas full of spectacle and beauty.⁵⁶ His 1854 production of *Sardanapalus*, for example, turned Byron’s tragedy about an Assyrian king into a lavish melodrama with moments of “full-blown Orientalist spectacle.”⁵⁷ The stage directions for the 120-actor procession that begins Act I, Scene 2 read as follows:

Music, which has increased in distinction as the procession advances, is now heard loudly. A troop of SPEARMEN enter...they file off...and discover a band of MUSICIANS playing on various instruments; they defile as before. A troop of DANCING GIRLS, who advance with joyous and characteristic movements. A troop of ARCHERS then appear; they are followed by NOBLES, OFFICERS, EUNUCHS, &c. The DANCING GIRLS run to back, clapping their hands and gesticulating joyfully. STANDARD BEARERS preceding SARDANAPALUS, who appears in a gilt chariot drawn by two cream-coloured steeds; he is attended by a CHARIOTEER and UMBRELLA BEARER, and followed by GUARDS; the chariot drives round stage to [center]. Grand Tableau.⁵⁸

⁵³ For example, Covent Garden’s 1839-40 season used 116 people in wardrobe and 199 technical staff; Irving used 284 staff members for his 1899 production of *Robespierre* (Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 34).

⁵⁴ Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 33.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 45.

⁵⁷ Malley, *From Archaeology*, 84.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 85.

The number of actors, combined with the gilded set and musical accompaniment, created a spectacular scenic picture.⁵⁹ Kean also made use of theater technology to stage the destruction of Nineveh later in the show. His earthquake included “fierce up-rushing flames—sudden explosions—falling ruins—[that] all gave reality to the picture.”⁶⁰ The production stunned and captivated his audience. The *Morning Post* wrote,

Amidst its massive glories and the luxuries, which ‘the gorgeous East, with liberal hand’ showered on her barbaric kings, the catastrophe of the first line of Assyrian monarchs, involved in the heroic death of Sardanapalus, is placed by history; and thus a spectacle is supplied, which, vivified and chastened by the fine taste which has adapted Lord Byron’s tragedy to the stage, supplies a foreground of human passion and suffering sufficiently in accordance with the august images which encircle them.⁶¹

This quotation points to the way that spectacle interacted with the other aspects of historical melodrama, including the taste for antiquity (discussed in the second chapter), questions of historical authenticity (discussed in the third chapter), and the emotional draw of the productions. Barrett followed in Kean’s footsteps at the Princess’s several decades later, bringing the past to life through extravagant depictions of the ancient world, technological marvel, sumptuous sets and melodramatic emotion.

⁵⁹ The feast scene later in the play was another moment of spectacle. For a visualization, see the illustration “Hall of Nimrod” from the London Illustrated News in Malley, *From Archaeology*, 89.

⁶⁰ *The Athanaeum*, 18 June 1853, in Malley, *From Archaeology*, 97.

⁶¹ *The Morning Post*, 18 June 1853, in Malley, *From Archaeology*, 96.

1.3 The Impact of Spectacle and Scale on Audience Composition

Part of the appeal of spectacle was simply the grandeur of that form of theatricality. *The Times* critic reporting on the opening night in London of *The Sign of the Cross* (1896) wrote, “Both as a spectacle and as a dramatic story, with its requisite point of sensationalism, *The Sign of the Cross* contains all the elements that go into the making of a great popular success.”⁶² The crowded street scenes of the first act, Nero’s glorious palace in Act III, Act II’s torture scene, and the moving music⁶³—along with the miraculous conversion at the end—appealed to a wide variety of audience members. Splendor, and its innate connection to melodrama, was good for business: lower and upper classes alike flocked to Barrett’s shows. Barrett was aware of the power of theatricality, and he made use of the innate connection between drama and emotion. He wrote:

The popularity of the Drama, its vividness, the directness of its appeal to the imagination and to the emotions will always secure for it this influence. The theatre appeals to certain aspects of human nature – to the imagination, to the instinct of curiosity about life, to the desire to have the emotions touched by actual pictures of various situations in life...it will always be popular...the Drama has under one form or another been an important factor in civilisation and human development, and has played its part in the social evolution of peoples.⁶⁴

Barrett’s productions were intended to draw the audience into his world and create emotional connections between the individuals and the action on stage. Theater in general is designed in this way: according to Karen Gaylord, “the spectator serves as a psychological participant and

⁶² Newey and Richards, *John Ruskin*, 111.

⁶³ The hymn “Shepherd of Souls,” composed by Edward Jones for the play, sold 79,000 copies (Richards, *The Ancient World*, 126).

⁶⁴ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 102.

empathetic collaborator in the maintenance and ‘truth’ of the fictive world onstage, is ‘taken out of himself’ and becomes for the time part of an ad hoc collective consciousness, ready to find meaning and significance in the events taking place on stage.”⁶⁵ The piece of theater given by the actors and received by the audience is a “synthesis they mutually achieve out of action and response.”⁶⁶ By entering the theater, Barrett’s audiences came prepared to submit to a relationship with the actors and immerse themselves in the world of the play, psychologically and emotionally.

Melodrama, in particular, relied upon the audience’s emotional response, and spectacle allowed theater “to imitate social and urban life on a size and scale appropriate to the magnitude of human emotion...and to express in striking visual terms the sensationalism inherent in its nature.”⁶⁷ According to a nineteenth-century observer, “whatever effect is to be produced, whether terror or pathos, melo-drama depends on the strength of incident. It places characters in striking situations to tell for themselves, and carefully avoids encumbering them with language.”⁶⁸ According to Elaine Hadley, “Villains, heroes, and heroines; ‘telling incident’; and exciting plot twists were all employed in an effort to elicit audience response,” and melodramas were even adapted during performance as the actors judged the audience’s responses.⁶⁹ The audience would be responding to events in the plot, impressive stagecraft, or the emotions of the

⁶⁵ Gaylord, “Theatrical Performances,” 136.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Booth *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 60.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁹ Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, 67.

characters. Caroline Radcliffe notes that “it is the witnessing of *these* passions on stage [such as love, fear, sorrow, ambition, and jealousy] that generates the visceral experience” for the audience.⁷⁰ Barrett’s plays were full of these passions, including the love between Agazil and Almida in *Claudian* and the jealousy of Berenis in *The Sign of the Cross*. Agazil and Almida, torn apart by the curse, are reunited in the last scene of the play when Claudian chooses the righteous path. Berenis’ jealousy leads her to plot against Mercia’s life, a decision which takes Marcus from her as well. These characters create tension around their relationships which helps to carry the audience’s interest. One of the darkest moments on stage, that of Stephanus’ torture in Act II, Scene 2 of *The Sign of the Cross*, also engaged the audience’s emotions. For example, in her review, Gowing describes seeing the young Stephanus “like one of our own children.”⁷¹ These dramatic moments, combined with the spectacle of the drama heightened the emotional reactions of Barrett’s audience, creating a deeper relationship between the story and the spectators.

The structure of spectacular melodrama also added to the emotional draw of the productions. Simon Lewis describes how narrative creates a connection between the audience and the characters, and event spectacle – moments that put characters at risk – amplifies that connection.⁷² *Claudian* provides example after example of event spectacle: the prologue’s separation of Serena from her beloved and the cursing of Claudian, as well as the devastating

⁷⁰ Radcliffe, “Remediation and Immediacy,” 40.

⁷¹ Gowing, “The ‘Sign of the Cross,’” 478.

⁷² Lewis, “What is Spectacle?,” 218.

earthquake in Act II, to name a few. The trend of tableaux in melodrama, as described below, also heightened the emotions of the play. According to Radcliffe, “Pictures and tableaux externalise feeling, and the suspension of time focuses the spectator, allowing her to internalise the emotional moment.”⁷³ For example, Act III, Scene 3 of *The Sign of the Cross* closes with the famous tableau of Mercia, bathed in light with a cross held aloft and Marcus kneeling before her.⁷⁴ When Barrett closed a scene with a tableau like this, he allowed the audience to pause for a moment to fully appreciate and internalize the emotions of that scene. In this case, the audience would have had a moment to dwell on the horror of Marcus’ assault and the power of Mercia’s radiance which was beginning to transform Marcus’s soul. Carefully staged moments like this were combined with the passions of the characters on stage to help the audience become emotionally invested in the production.

The lower classes were particularly drawn to melodrama, and, according to Terry Hodgson, “most nineteenth-century melodrama, written for the poor, played seriously, at first, on fear, social resentment, and the need to escape from appalling living conditions.”⁷⁵ Melodrama provided just the ticket out: “for working-class audiences [melodrama] offered characters and settings from urban working-class life and perhaps for some an escape from the mean streets and long hours of labour, a refuge, however brief, in romantic fantasy.”⁷⁶ Although *Claudian* takes

⁷³ Radcliffe, “Remediation and Immediacy,” 50.

⁷⁴ For a photograph of that tableau, see Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 122.

⁷⁵ Hodgson, “Melodrama,” 213.

⁷⁶ Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 151.

place in the country, the play features hard-working laborers, including Agazil and the farmer Belos, along with a chorus of peasants performing the “Harvest Song” at the opening of the play; the austere lives of the poor and righteous Christians are contrasted with the opulence of pagan Rome in *The Sign of the Cross*. As well, the emphasis on the visual nature of melodrama would be appealing to those with little or no formal education. Gowing, for example, explains that for *The Sign of the Cross*, “what elocution may miss is attained by speaking to the eye and by the magnetic flash of sympathy.”⁷⁷ The spectacle and heightened emotion could speak to the audience even if the words were lost. Barrett revealed that he even cut some speeches for the play because “once the public begin listening to the poetry, it is all up with the piece.”⁷⁸ Whether or not he was joking, Barrett understood that spectacle was the vehicle for reaching his audience, whether they had graduated from university or never read a book.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Gowing, “The ‘Sign of the Cross,’” 480.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 479.

⁷⁹ The development of drama for the lower classes is a symptom of the more general opening of the theater in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1843 Parliament passed legislation that “permitted all theatres to stage straight plays, hoping to civilise the audiences and to encourage more literate modern playwriting to develop” (Bratton, “Theatre in the 19th Century”). Despite the condescension, this law is one example of the development of theater for the lower classes. Other aspects the theater’s increasing accessibility came from the theater managers’ financial realization that by widening the audience base, one could raise revenues. The increasing non-elite interest in the theater, as well as the rising income of the middle class, prompted theater managers to make changes. They found that certain classes tended to prefer certain entertainments, and could thus plan their schedules accordingly (Booth *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 2). As well, between 1815 and 1860, when theaters tended to have financial difficulties, managers lowered ticket prices to encourage the lower classes to attend (Ibid., 7). Another tactic to increase revenue from the lower classes was offering half-price tickets; since theatrical events would start in the early evening, anyone who worked (i.e. those in the lower classes) could not attend the whole night. Tickets were sold at half-price starting around 9pm, so that people who worked late could still see some of the performances (Ibid., 39-40). Managers understood that a large chunk of their revenue came from the lower classes, and this meant that the middle and working class people seated in the pit and gallery had an influence on the shows performed, even though individual ticket prices were lower (Ibid., 40). As managers began catering to the middle and lower classes, melodrama and other spectacular genres, which were particularly to the tastes of the middle classes, became more popular (Ibid., 7).

1.4 Splendor and Theater Aesthetics

The fashion for splendor required spectacle and extravagance on stage, such as crowd scenes, natural disasters, and ornate settings. The stage directions for the opening of *Claudian*, for example, recall elements from Kean's procession in *Sardanapalus*: "Continual movement of citizens to and fro. As the scene opens, a patrician lady is carried past in her palanquin—a train of slaves, black and white, following—a party of Goths—soldiers—cross, entering the public baths, and half a dozen public dancers cross with their musical instruments..."⁸⁰ Stage directions from *The Sign of the Cross* also hint at the splendor of Barrett's shows: "...NERO discovered [reclining on a throne raised upon a marble platform, approached by marble steps. Over the steps and platform are flung magnificent draperies; cushions, skins of tigers, leopards, and wolves strewn everywhere..."⁸¹ These two sets of directions detail both the number of bodies on stage and the detailed extravagance of the sets. The way in which these directions were realized, however, was determined by the Victorian expectations of staging.

Prevailing trends in dramaturgy, as well as the interaction between theater and other art forms, shaped the way that splendor was presented. Victorians tended to view art, whether on the stage or on a wall, through the lens of a picture: "the essentially passive act of viewing a framed rectangular image of which the elements were colour, light, painting, the scene (moving and

⁸⁰ Mayer, *Playing out the Empire*, 36.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

stationary), and the human figure was basic to both [theater and painting].”⁸² Around the mid-1700s, dramaturgy began to incorporate this way of viewing into the shape of the drama itself, but a fully pictorial theater did not emerge until the latter half of the nineteenth century. In non-pictorial theater, the units which comprised a play were “intransitive and rhetorical,” or “unit[s] of action.”⁸³ In these dramas, there was a sense of succession or motion. The new type of pictorial dramaturgy structured a play around intransitive units, each of which was “in fact an achieved moment of stasis, a picture.”⁸⁴ The proscenium arch itself was to “be to the stage picture what the frame is to the easel picture.”⁸⁵ Barrett adopted this style of dramaturgy, and structured his plays around pictures, in particular using tableaux to conclude scenes and acts. For example, Act II of *The Sign of the Cross* ends with soldiers raiding the Christian meeting. Once Marcus has sent the troops away, the remaining characters pose; the stage directions include the instruction, “Picture.”⁸⁶

The lighting of the late-Victorian stage played a role in spectacle and the staging of pictorial theater as well. Before the first decade of the nineteenth century, theaters were dimly lit with candles, so the actors performed on an apron in front of the proscenium. The advent of gas lighting in the 1810s and 20s, limelight in 1837, electric carbon-arc in 1848, and incandescent carbon filament lighting in 1881 all dramatically changed the way that actors were lit: these

⁸² Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 8.

⁸³ Meisel, *Realizations*, 38.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸⁵ Hubert von Herkomer, in Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 8.

⁸⁶ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 152.

technologies allowed for projected light. These advances meant that actors could perform with the set behind the proscenium arch as part of the picture, rather than in front.⁸⁷ These new technologies also allowed for different effects, such as colored lighting (produced with glass or silk between the gas lights and the performers) or the focused and moveable light of limelight (from oxy-hydrogen flame on blocks of calcium oxide), creating more opportunities to enhance spectacle. Author and critic Percy Fitzgerald did not like the new electric lights, but he acknowledged that at one theater, the power of the new lighting was successfully harnessed and “a true feeling of mystery and illusion is carried out under the most poetical conditions.”⁸⁸

The pictures created on stage were also linked to the fine art displayed in museums, printed in pamphlets, or displayed at panoramas. By the late nineteenth century, the Victorians were inundated with images and illustrations. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, the establishment of public museums began in the late eighteenth century with institutions like the Royal Academy and the British Museum, allowing the public access to fine art and artifacts. Exhibitions, like the Great Exhibition of 1851, which of themselves may not have showcased paintings, were preserved in illustrations of the events.⁸⁹ Cheap printing techniques developed in the first half of the nineteenth century allowed for a wider circulation of images, including those

⁸⁷ Compare the images of the Theatre Royal, Haymarket from 1821 and 1880 in Johnson, “Tricks,” 154, fig. 1. In 1821, the theater is lit by candles, and the actors perform on the apron. In 1880, gas lighting has been installed, and the actors can perform behind the arch.

⁸⁸ Johnson, “Tricks,” 153-154.

⁸⁹ See “Dickinson’s Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851” in Liza Picard, “The Great Exhibition,” British Library, 2009, accessed July 25, 2017, <https://www.bl.uk/victorian-britain/articles/the-great-exhibition>.

of foreign and exotic places.⁹⁰ Panoramas displayed images on a large scale, akin to the splendor of the theater: a panorama “was originally a huge picture painted in special perspective on a domed cylinder in such a way that it could be viewed from the centre of a circular building, sometimes from several levels in that building.”⁹¹ In fact, the panorama was presented in much the same way as a theatrical scene, apart from its inherent stasis; the invention of the moving panorama, intending “to satisfy the spectator’s simultaneous desire for performance, scenic spectacle, and educational topography,” brought the art form even closer to the theater.⁹² Along with scenes of river travel, exotic locations, and views of London itself, panoramas also shared subject matter with toga dramas. For example, panoramas of Rome were displayed in 1817 at the Strand and 1839 at Leicester Square, Athens at the Strand in 1818 and again from 1845-7, and Pompeii at the Strand and Leicester Square from 1823-4, with a re-exhibition in 1848-50.⁹³ These exhibitions, and their printed guides, acted in a similar way to Barrett’s shows: they “were aimed at a varied audience; the guide to the 1893 ‘view of Rome, ancient and modern’ suggested that it would appeal to ‘those who have not seen Rome’ alongside ‘those who have,’ as well as ‘the classical scholar.’”⁹⁴ Like Barrett’s productions, these panoramas used a pictorial way of seeing the world to combine the Victorian obsessions with splendor and classical antiquity, creating a grand work of art viewed by a diverse audience.

⁹⁰ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 7.

⁹¹ Ibid., 6.

⁹² Ibid., 6-7.

⁹³ Nichols, *Greece and Rome*, 56-57.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 57.

The stage was one of these many spaces that facilitated visualizations in popular culture, and as such it aspired to the same level of sumptuousness as the static panorama canvases or museum paintings. The standards for set painting were high. Well-known artists would often double as scene painters, bringing the splendor of their work to the stage.⁹⁵ Critics frequently compared Barrett's plays to the work of these artists, whether or not those artists had painted the backdrops; reviewers noted "the glowing sun-steeped canvases of Tadema and Long"⁹⁶ in *Claudian*, and the set of *Junius* seemed "inspired by the sombre talents of Gérôme."⁹⁷ All three of these artists were famous for their attention to detail in historical paintings of classical and biblical subject-matter.⁹⁸ Their works also demonstrate the association of splendor—in this case luxury and decadence—with the ancient world, which was, as is evident from the stage directions above, also realized on stage. Paintings such as Alma-Tadema's, for example, feature images of leisure (*The Tepidarium*, 1881; *The Baths of Caracalla*, 1899),⁹⁹ rooms stuffed with famous works of art (*A Sculpture Gallery*, 1867),¹⁰⁰ and opulence paired with cruelty (*The Roses*

⁹⁵ For example, Barrett hired Alma-Tadema for *Virginius* (1893), and Barrett's rival Henry Irving also "worked extensively" with the artist (Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 119).

⁹⁶ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 104.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 113. For one of Godwin's illustrations of the set of *Junius*, see Baldwin, "E. W. Godwin," 339, fig. 12-44.

⁹⁸ For more information on these artists, see Wood, *Victorian Painting*. For discussions of Alma-Tadema's and Gérôme's paintings of Rome, see Liversidge and Edwards, *Imagining Rome*.

⁹⁹ "Tepidarium (In the Tepidarium)," Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema: The Complete Works, accessed June 11, 2017, <http://www.alma-tadema.org/Tepidarium-In-The-Tepidarium.html>; "The Baths of Caracalla 1899," Ibid., <http://www.alma-tadema.org/The-Baths-Of-Caracalla-1899.html>.

¹⁰⁰ "A Sculpture Gallery 1867," Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema: The Complete Works, accessed June 11, 2017, <http://www.alma-tadema.org/A-Sculpture-Gallery-1867.html>.

of *Heliogabalus*, 1888).¹⁰¹ These paintings highlight the Victorian views of a wealthy, if morally corrupt, Roman civilization, akin to that portrayed in *The Sign of the Cross*.

One way in which to emulate paintings and the stasis of a picture was through the use of tableaux, which frequently concluded scenes or acts.¹⁰² These pictures created “interest in themselves as theatrical events quite independent of the immediate action of the plot, as they produce[d] the sensation of novelty, and, in the case of the realization of already familiar images from the visual arts, introduce[d] an extra-theatrical dimension to the play.”¹⁰³ Barrett made extensive use of this practice in his conclusions to toga drama scenes. Sometimes he specifically included the direction for “picture,”¹⁰⁴ and other times the stage directions simply prompted the tableau. The conclusion of Act III of *The Sign of the Cross* provides a famous example of a tableau ending. The stage directions are quite simple, stating that Mercia “stands as if transfigured as soldiers come down to arrest her. The Christians’ Hymn is heard until the curtain falls.”¹⁰⁵ As Mayer notes, this tableau was “commemorated in numerous photographs, usually

¹⁰¹ “The Roses of Heliogabalus, 1888,” Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema: The Complete Works, accessed June 11, 2017, <http://www.alma-tadema.org/The-Roses-Of-Heliogabalus-1888.html>.

¹⁰² While tableaux often simply mimicked the stasis of a painting, others imitated specific works of art. According to Michael Booth, “from about 1830 popular paintings were ‘realised’ on stage as act-ending tableaux” (*Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 95). For example, Fitzgerald’s 1885 review of *Junius* notes that one actor vividly recalled by the shape of his head and neck the Emperor’s figure in Gérôme’s picture of the ‘Arena’ (Richards, *The Ancient World*, 113). This was quite possibly deliberate. Additionally, Long’s *Babylonian Marriage Market* was likely the inspiration for some of the staging in Barrett’s 1897 *The Daughters of Babylon* (Richards, *The Ancient World*, 143). (For the painting, see “The Babylonian Marriage Market,” Wikipedia, accessed June 11, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Babylonian_Marriage_Market.)

¹⁰³ Newey, “Speaking Pictures,” 4.

¹⁰⁴ For example, the stage direction for the conclusion of Act II in *The Sign of the Cross* (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 152).

¹⁰⁵ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 173.

show[ing] Mercia backlit by a shaft of light that forms a halo about her head. Holding aloft in her right hand a small wooden cross, she stands amid overturned vessels and other debris of Marcus' feast. Marcus is usually depicted fallen back upon one knee, his hands folded close to his abdomen, gazing at Mercia's face."¹⁰⁶ The treatment of Mercia in this tableau calls to mind paintings of other Christian martyrs, heads upraised in divine light: the woman in Long's *Diana or Christ?*, the lone martyr in Fyodor Bronnikov's *Martyr on a Circus Ring*, or the two main figures in Francois Leon Benouville's *Christian Martyrs Entering the Amphitheatre*.¹⁰⁷ These examples demonstrate the intermingling of aesthetics between visual art and theater, which allowed for the presentation of picture-like splendor on stage.

1.5 Barrett's Marriage of Spectacle and the Classics

With his toga dramas, Barrett capitalized on both the Victorian penchant for splendor and the obsession with the classical world. Although he was not educated in the Classics, Barrett brought the ancient world to life by combining his theatrical knowledge with the classical themes that were prevalent in Victorian culture.¹⁰⁸ Imperial Rome provided a useful subject to showcase

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. For image, see Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 122.

¹⁰⁷ Long: Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 21; Bronnikov: "Martyr on a Circus Ring," WikiArt, accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/fyodor-bronnikov/martyr-on-a-circus-ring-1869>; Benouville: "Martyrs chrétiens entrant à l'amphithéâtre," USEUM, accessed March 7, 2017, <https://useum.org/artwork/Untitled-Francois-Leon-Benouville-1855>.

¹⁰⁸ Barrett was formally trained in theatrical skills, such as dancing (Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 13), but he did not have a classical education. He adored classical antiquity, however, and according to James Thomas, he "loved classical painting and sculpture so much that he occasionally copied historical art too carefully in his acting and was accused of posing" (171). One of his hobbies was also Egyptology, which helped with his 1892 production of *Pharaoh* (Ibid., 115).

splendor, as it had the reputation of decadence, opulence, and luxury. Mayer describes the Rome of toga dramas:

It is an empire rich in possessions, in the arts, in luxury, in philosophy, and in remnants of austere stoic morality. It enfolds a world of available pleasure, immediate sensual gratification, and almost omnipresent vice. The Rome of toga drama is already poisoned and corrupted by its own conquests and by its all too accessible luxury. There is however, a new voice raised against vice, luxury, decadence, and the arbitrary and cruel abuse of power. This voice is Christianity in its evangelical form.¹⁰⁹

This image of Rome appealed because it was both titillating and safe. The audience could appreciate the grandeur of the architecture, the luxury of the dress, the decadence of the feasts – but they “knew Christianity would always triumph.”¹¹⁰ Barrett used spectacle as a way to highlight the contrast between Christianity and pagan Rome. For example, the beautiful palace of *Claudian*—with “vast marble columns, court and garden showing terraces after terraces of the city beyond,” bronze pots of flowers and marble statues, all having “the appearance of grandeur,”—comes literally crashing down in the earthquake of Act II.¹¹¹ *The Sign of the Cross* contrasts the austerity of the Christians with the decadence of the pagan Romans through a comparison of settings. Favius’ hut in Act II, Scene 1, is “simple and plain even to barrenness,”¹¹² and the Christians’ grove two scenes later features a simple cross “made of two

¹⁰⁹ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 2.

¹¹⁰ “Paintings and toga plays alike used spectacle to legitimize the portrayal of the cruelties (and delights) of Roman culture. These pageants of triumphs, banquets, dancing girls, and Christian martyrs were all designed to offer immediate visual pleasures. In such configurations, the Roman Empire could be enjoyed while moral etiquette was maintained, because the audience knew that Christianity would always triumph” (Barrow, “Toga Plays,” 218).

¹¹¹ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 82.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 140.

branches...and lashed together with a leathern thong...hurriedly made on the spot.”¹¹³ In the scene after the grove, the beginning of Act III, the audience is presented with the stark contrast of Berenis’ house, where “all [is] in exquisite taste and refinement.”¹¹⁴ The following scenes feature atria in the palaces of Nero, described above, and Marcus. For the final scene the play shifts away from luxury to the dungeon, and this space, “gloomy, destitute of furniture of any kind” showcases the powerful moment of Marcus’ acceptance of Christianity and love, even in the face of death.¹¹⁵

Barrett’s spectacle of action, in addition to setting, highlights the association of decadent paganism with evil and straddles the line between titillation and safety. Gowing comments that Barrett “does not shrink from a faithful picture of the horrors of heathendom as they prevailed under Nero’s sway,”¹¹⁶ in this case also justifying the “horrors” with an argument of authenticity. One of these moments is the torture of the young Stephanus by Nero’s counselor and aedile in Act II, Scene 2. This scene contrasts the innocent young Christian with two of Nero’s minions, serving to increase the audience’s hatred of the pagans while heightening the suspense of which side will be victorious; in this genre of theater, however, the audience could be certain that Christianity would prevail. Barrett also mixed cruelty with decadence, as Act III, Scene 3 demonstrates. The climax of pagan decadence is the orgy scene, with “dancers, singers, slaves

¹¹³ Ibid., 150.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 153.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 181.

¹¹⁶ Gowing, “The ‘Sign of the Cross,’” 476.

bearing wine cups and garlands. They are laughing, singing and shouting.”¹¹⁷ These extras, along with the ever-drunk Glabrio and Marcus, whose rape attempt closes the scene, are starkly contrasted with Mercia, who refuses to take part in the festivities. The famous moment where Mercia has thrown off Marcus and is transfigured by her faith makes the audience feel safe in their enjoyment of the party and Marcus’ actions. Theatergoers can appreciate the lust, revelry, and inebriation knowing that the heroine’s Christian morals will not waver. In one of the final moments of the play, the evils associated with the pagans are again contrasted with Christian integrity. Stephanus’ scream off-stage when he is thrown to the lions was one of the most famous moments of the play. Theatergoers “came to anticipate the event...one playgoer, hurrying to arrive on time for the opening curtain, asked the ticket man, “Has she shrieked yet?”¹¹⁸ The ending of the play, however, features Marcus’ redemption and the revelation that the pagan world would eventually succumb to Christianity. Inspiring faith in the audience, Marcus closes the play with the line, “There is no death for us, for Chrystos hath triumphed over death. The light hath come. Come, my bride. Come—to the light beyond.”¹¹⁹ Having titillated the audience with scenes of cruelty and decadence, Barrett sends the audience home safely with the knowledge that Christian morals prevailed.

Barrett’s classical themes played into the lower class’ interest in melodrama. As stated above on page 24, melodrama was geared towards the lower classes, who looked to these plays

¹¹⁷ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 169.

¹¹⁸ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 134. The character of Stephanus, a young boy, was played by a woman. In the first London production, this was Miss Haidee Wright (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 113).

¹¹⁹ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 187.

as an escape from reality, but one in which they could see themselves cast. *Claudian* features the poor rural workers, Almida and Agazil, as the two protagonists, and *The Sign of the Cross* portrays the Christians as much poorer than the pagans, as evidenced by the scenic differences described above.¹²⁰ The portrayal of lower-class or poor heroes on stage would have been inspiring to the patrons in the pit and galleries, who could see themselves in the characters. Toga dramas also provided more of an escape, farther from home in both time and place, than a production such as Barrett's *Lights o' London* (1881), which would have represented familiar scenes. The idea of escape appealed to other classes as well, as a *Times* reviewer of *Claudian* describes how "in truth the spectator, under the influence of the classical *milieu* of the drama, and of the melodious verse in which the dialogue is carried on, feels himself transported into a world of the imaginative where human passion and sentiment are allowed free scope, removed far above and beyond the sordid distractions of real life."¹²¹ Carried away by the sets of Byzantium and the love of Almida and Claudian, this critic describes the perfect melding of the Classics with melodrama that produced a play carrying the viewer into another world. In this way, Barrett's combination of melodrama with classical antiquity provided an evening of perfect fantasy.

Classical themes were also useful as the inspiration for large crowd scenes with bustling market places, martial processions, or palace courtiers. Crowd scenes, and the use of large

¹²⁰ Differences in costume also help to make this distinction. Compare, for example, the ornate costumes of Berenice and Poppea from Act IV, Scene 1 (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 120) with Mercia's plain white dress in Act III, Scene 3 (Ibid., 123).

¹²¹ *The Times*, "Princess's Theatre."

numbers of extras in general, were common practice in melodrama, and by the late Victorian period, they had become part and parcel of the genre. Some of the stage effects proposed by Meisel in his book *Realizations* would not have been possible without large casts.¹²² The use of so many bodies was itself often “lavish, even extravagant,”¹²³ and thus added to the productions’ sense of splendor. Barrett used the classical settings of his plays to facilitate the incorporation of supernumeraries on stage. The street scene of *Claudian*’s prologue, described above on page 26, provides a dazzling opening to the play, featuring at least six different groups of extras.¹²⁴ *The Sign of the Cross* provided even more opportunities for crowds, including the opening street scene, which “though not thronged, is busy. Porters bear burdens from the landings; women of the middle class on their road to purchase provisions; flower-sellers; a swarm of beggars; men hurrying from business. Soldiers cross...guarding two men.”¹²⁵ Later in this scene, a crowd forms around the Glabrio, Servilius, and Favius. This mass of bodies on stage expands as soldiers arrive with Marcus to settle the riled gathering. Later in the play, Barrett again uses crowds, including soldiers and courtiers, to fill out the stage in Nero’s palace (Act III, Scene 2 and Act IV, Scene 1). Through these scenes, Barrett uses the historical setting to dictate and shape his scenes of spectacle.

¹²² Mayer, “Supernumeraries,” 155.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ The groups include general citizenry, the patrician’s party, at least two groups of slaves, Goths, and dancers (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 36).

¹²⁵ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 125.

1.6 Melodrama, the Classics, and their Effect on Audience Composition

The general appeal of melodrama to all classes was heightened by the combination of splendor and classical content. The Classics were an integral part of British culture at all social levels, as shall be discussed in the next chapter, but the relationships between people and the Classics differed by class: knowledge of classical history, art, and culture was seen as a marker of status. Classical information trickled down to the lower classes in forms such as cheaply-printed translations, public museums, and the theater. Stage productions brought together themes from elite sources of knowledge with an art form geared towards the lower classes; this combination thus appealed to a wide audience base. Barrett's presentations of history were even lauded as excellent educational material (for the unschooled masses at least) by important critics such as Oscar Wilde¹²⁶ and John Ruskin.¹²⁷ The splendor of toga dramas allowed the lower classes to be both entranced by ancient history and to understand at least a fraction of what the upper classes studied.¹²⁸ The upper classes, in turn, could use their knowledge to appreciate the research put into the productions.

¹²⁶ Of *Claudian*: "Mr. E. W. Godwin [historical consultant] showed us the life of Byzantium in the fourth century, not by a dreary lecture and a set of grinning casts, not by a novel which requires a glossary to explain it, but by a visible presentation before us of all the glory of that great town...It was...a scene not merely perfect in its picturesqueness, but absolutely dramatic also, getting rid of the necessity for tedious descriptions, and showing...the whole nature and life of the times" (Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 67).

¹²⁷ Of *Claudian*: "And with scene painting like that the Princess's might do more for art teaching than all the galleries and professors in Christendom" (Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 67).

¹²⁸ The upper classes also took pride in the fact that toga dramas educated the lower classes. One example is Ruskin's encouragement of Barrett to produce classical plays. Some other examples come from the critics: the *Idler* reviewer of *The Sign of the Cross* comments, "What I then beheld was an audience, notoriously addicted to the frothiest and most frivolous forms of entertainment, hushed to silence, spell-bound, and thrilled by dramatic pictures of the gradual purification by love and faith of a licentious Pagan, and the ecstatic exaltation of the early Christian martyrs" (*The Idler*, "The History," 270). *The Times* reviewer wrote that *Claudian* "approaches still nearer the level we should desire the stage to occupy"; that level was Henry Morley's idea of the theater as "one of the strongest of

The ability to access traditionally elite content must have been a draw for the lower classes. The theater provided a perfect vehicle for understanding Rome without requiring a classical education. Melodrama was intensely visual, and the language of the Barrett's plays did not require knowledge of Latin or Greek. One critic was displeased by the actor-manager playing to the masses, writing that *The Sign of the Cross* "is introduced so manifestly with theatrical purpose that it loses much of the effect which ought to belong to it, being no more convincing than the affectation of classic learning exhibited in the occasional introduction of a few familiar Roman expressions into a dialogue otherwise intensely modern."¹²⁹ This critic did acknowledge the "elaborate and fairly accurate setting," which could be enjoyed by an uneducated audience in a way that an ancient language would not. Thus the visual nature of melodrama increased public access to antiquity.

The elite enjoyed Barrett's splendor in their own way. They could feel superior by critiquing aspects that were not accurate and applauding those that were. For example, Barrett was criticized for the accuracy of the set of *Virginius*; Barrett likely reused sets from *The Sign of the Cross*, which was set in the imperial period and would therefore "scarcely belong to Republican Rome."¹³⁰ A letter to the editor in *Musical News* found Barrett's choice of music for *The Sign of the Cross* "rather incongruous" and questioned whether it would "have been

all secular aids towards the intellectual refinement of the people" (*The Times*, "Princess's Theatre").

¹²⁹ *The Critic*, "The Sign of the Cross."

¹³⁰ *The Times* (10 May 1897) in Richards, *The Ancient World*, 125.

better...to have had the music written more according to the period.”¹³¹ Critics like that of *The Era*, however, praised the accuracy of Barrett’s historical depictions: “Such scenes...speak volumes for the archaeological research of Mr E.W. Godwin...”¹³² For satisfied critics, Barrett’s marriage of splendor and authenticity made a play successful. Gowing, in her review of *The Sign of the Cross*, writes, “The New Testament and Tacitus are opened before our eyes, under the electric flash of a rediscovered light.”¹³³ She sees the connection between history and religion enlivened by the theatricality of the production. Percy Fitzgerald writes of *Junius* that “nothing more stately, imposing, or more in the antique Roman spirit, inspiring with a sense of dread and awe has yet been attempted.”¹³⁴ These critics appreciate the animated presentation of antiquity, the ancient world that Wilde described “move[ing] as a pageant before our eyes.”¹³⁵

1.7 Splendor for All

Barrett’s work was part and parcel of a genre which made liberal use of splendor. His toga dramas married spectacle and grand scale with classical themes to produce shows that appealed to a diverse audience. Following in the footsteps of Kean, Barrett used antiquity as the inspiration for the spectacle required by melodrama. Luxurious sets, impressive stage pictures, and large groups of people were all managed within the classical framework to produce

¹³¹ “A Lover of the Play.” *Musical News*, 136.

¹³² *The Era* in Richards, *The Ancient World*, 112.

¹³³ Gowing, “The ‘Sign of the Cross,’” 474.

¹³⁴ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 113.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

sensations of terror and awe in the audience members; splendor and the pictorial style of theater, including the use of tableaux, combined to increase the drama of Barrett's productions. The classical world, well-established as a theme in many genres of art, including literature, painting, and architecture in addition to theater, was a useful vehicle for Barrett's splendor. Combined with this spectacle and grandeur, classical antiquity drew immense and diverse crowds, so that "for once, Clapham rubbed shoulders with Cadogan Square, and Palace Gardens and Belgravia took their place below South Kensington and Bloomsbury. The aristocracy of birth and the aristocracy of intellect lay jumbled hopelessly with the democracy in one friendly, admiring, and often touchingly sympathetic heap."¹³⁶

¹³⁶ *The Idler*, "The History," 276.

Chapter 2: Taste

“He who borrows an idea from an antient [sic]...and so accommodates it to his own work, that it makes a part of, with no seam or joining appearing, can hardly be charged with plagiarism...But an artist should not be contented with this only; he should enter into a competition with his original, and endeavour to improve what he is appropriating to his own work.”

~Sir Joshua Reynolds, founder of the Royal Academy¹³⁷

2.1 Introduction

The Victorians had a seemingly unquenchable taste for classical antiquity. According to Edmund Burke, a late 18th century politician and author, taste is “no more than that faculty or those faculties of the mind, which are affected with, or which form a judgment of, the works of imagination and the elegant arts.”¹³⁸ These faculties and their judgments of the Classics, however, had a profound impact on Victorian culture and art: the creation of the neoclassical movement. I consider the taste for classical antiquity in the Victorian context as a reverence for and an interest in the subject, stemming from the elite privileging of classical knowledge as a marker of status, and expressing itself aesthetically in cultural movements such as the neoclassical.

¹³⁷ Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 71.

¹³⁸ Burke, “On Taste,” 13.

Burke clarifies his definition by stating that “taste does not depend upon a superior principle in men, but upon superior knowledge.”¹³⁹ The “superior knowledge” of Greece and Rome came from an education system rooted in the Classics¹⁴⁰ and led to a Victorian obsession with classical antiquity at all social levels. Burke himself reveals his knowledge of the Classics, although he does not discuss the subject directly: he includes two Latin quotations without accompanying translations, demonstrating that he is educated and assuming his readership is the same.¹⁴¹ Classical antiquity, especially Greek and Roman texts, were an essential part of Victorian taste and the subsequent conferral of class: “Victorian classics was the possession and the symbol of the educated gentleman.”¹⁴² Because it was held in high esteem, classical antiquity became an important part of Victorian culture at all social levels.

Victorian Britain was obsessed with Rome in particular, and Barrett’s toga dramas were a product of the neoclassical movement that was an expression of this love affair. This movement sought to recreate Greek and Roman art but fitting the styles to contemporary tastes. For the British, it was an important movement not only artistically, but also politically: by tracing their roots back to the Romans, the British directly linked themselves to a powerful empire. By animating Roman culture, the British saw themselves as a part of this history, and Barrett’s toga dramas were one way that this Roman past could be brought to life in England. Despite lacking a

¹³⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴⁰ For example, in grade schools in the late 1700s, “88 percent of lesson time was allocated to the classics” (Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 12).

¹⁴¹ “On Taste,” pg. 12 and 24.

¹⁴² Stray, *Classics Transformed*, 74.

classical education, Barrett used the prevailing taste for ancient history as the backbone of his toga dramas. Elite culture, including education and the Grand Tour, which helped to fuel the neoclassical movement, influenced the types of stories Barrett told and the manner in which he told them.

Barrett took the Victorian idea of the past and created a fictional story set within that world. He did not use Greek and Latin texts—the foundations of classical education; he instead relied upon artistic and archeological information to structure his plays and appeal to the prevailing taste for the Classics. Barrett operated on a different level than elites concerned with historical detail; he produced popular theater, taking the general outline of history and shaping it to suit British interpretations of the past. His work, however, was shaped by two aspects of Victorian culture: the education system which influenced his choice of material, and cultural traditions, such as the Grand Tour, which influenced the images he portrayed. The toga plays were therefore a hybrid of classical themes and popular art, a genre of theater that fit with dominant cultural trends but did not threaten the place of elite knowledge. Barrett's toga dramas were theater, first and foremost, but their historical spin appealed to the taste for classical antiquity.

2.2 Flexibility in Neoclassicism

First used as a pejorative term during 1880s, “neoclassicism” was coined by the Victorians to describe “what they perceived as the affectations of classical taste displayed by

earlier generations.”¹⁴³ In reaction to “the frivolity of the Rococo,” the British—as well as the French, Germans, and other Europeans—developed a style “that was to be logically sound, emotionally pure and morally improving.”¹⁴⁴ To achieve this purity, artists wanted to return to what they saw as the fundamentals of western art: the art of the Greeks and Romans.¹⁴⁵ The nineteenth century Europeans, however, shaped the aesthetics of ancient Rome to suit their own.

This aspect of flexibility in interpretations of the past was important to neoclassicism. An example of this is the pottery produced by the Wedgwood company that was inspired by ancient objects and images but made to suit British tastes. One illustration is the vases commissioned by the third Marquis of Lansdowne, Lord Dartmouth. Dartmouth wanted vases that were imitations of those printed in Sir William Hamilton’s publication of ancient vases (1766-1776), which gave specific measurements of the original vessels, but resized so as to better fit on top of his bookshelves.¹⁴⁶ He wrote to Josiah Wedgwood II with his specifications: “Perhaps if you have enough, 16-22 inches will be sufficient – those (two of them) that are to stand at the corners I should wish to be rather broader than the rest...I should be glad to have as great a variety of shape as possible within the above limits.”¹⁴⁷ While inspired by ancient artifacts, these vessels

¹⁴³ Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Honour, “Neo-Classicism,” xxii.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

¹⁴⁶ Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 87-88. For images of the vases both in the library setting and up close, see *Ibid.*, 87, fig. 36 and 91, fig. 37a and b.

¹⁴⁷ Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 87-88.

were to be “absolutely new,” and resized to fit the marquis’ needs—his library, not to the facts of the archaeology.¹⁴⁸

Coltman succinctly describes process behind Dartmouth’s request:

Here again we see the deferral of antiquarianism to aestheticization, where antiquity can be cropped, shaped, and made to fit according to the specifications of the patron and the practices of the manufacturer. Dartmouth’s letter also elucidates the tension between the ancient original and the neoclassical copy. He strays from the original in his choice of decoration...and in the painting of one side only. Yet in resisting sets or pairs for his reproduction vases, Dartmouth seeks to imitate contemporary collections of ancient vases...¹⁴⁹

Dartmouth decided which parts of history were to be valued, and, through his decisions, a piece of neoclassical, rather than classical, art was designed. Dartmouth’s vases demonstrate the reality that the Victorian idea of antiquity was something much different than antiquity itself. Neoclassicism took on a life of its own, one that was inspired by but not rigidly tied to the past. The Victorians created their own mythology around the classical past, creating a taste not for life the way the Romans would have lived it, but rather as the British preferred to imagine it.

This manipulation of the past is also what Barrett was doing with his toga dramas. With his production of *Claudian*, for example, Barrett used the historical setting of Byzantium in the 4th century to provide the outline of his production, but the play itself was a fantasy. Rather than reproducing historical characters on stage, Barrett invented new ones in unrealistic situations—

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. The manipulation of the vases continued beyond the mere shape of the vessels. Dartmouth was particular about the designs on the vases, and wrote to Wedgwood II with his personal tastes: “I do not wish to have each vase painted like the originals, but request that you will select groups of figures and borders for them, and I would have them painted on one side only. I do not wish to have them in regular sets or even in pairs, as I have observed that in large collections of antique vases of this description, it rarely happens that any two are exactly alike” (Ibid., 90). Here Dartmouth is exerting his authority not only through his patronage, but through his knowledge, or purported knowledge of classical art. He does not use that knowledge, however, to request specific replicas; instead, he desires the vases to be simplified so that they will not overwhelm his library.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 90.

including the curse which causes the plot to take place over the span of 100 years. Just as Dartmouth used the ancient vases as inspiration, Barrett used ancient history as inspiration for the melodrama that appealed to his audiences. The example of one small detail in *Claudian* explains this further. In this production, Godwin drastically changed Barrett's outfit from the standard toga drama costume:¹⁵⁰

Previous stage Romans wore the toga,¹⁵¹ which restricted gesture, or a short-sleeved garment terminating in a knee-length skirt not dissimilar to a gym-slip. Godwin devised for Barrett an abbreviated Roman costume, a short, close-fitting jeweled tunic, open at the chest, worn with fleshings and high boots, which became an athletic alternative to the toga. Barrett was to wear variants of this garment for the remainder of his career.¹⁵²

Godwin's new costume was a hybrid composed of research, Barrett's preferences, and Godwin's own artistic ideas. One of the most important qualities for his *Claudian* costumes in general, it seems, was extravagance. This idea appears frequently in Godwin's pamphlet: he writes about the "extravagances of city life," including silk,¹⁵³ the tunics of "the rich man,"¹⁵⁴ "the

¹⁵⁰ For a stage example of the original costume, see the 1825 engraving of Edmund Kean as L. Junius Brutus in *Brutus; or; The Fall of Tarquin* ("Mr Kean as L Junius Brutus," Victoria and Albert Museum, last updated August 1, 2017, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1261073/mr-kean-as-l-junius-print-woolnoth-william-t/>). Romans are also depicted in togas in contemporary paintings, such as Alma-Tadema's 1867 *A Sculpture Gallery* ("A Sculpture Gallery 1867," Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema: The Complete Works, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.alma-tadema.org/A-Sculpture-Gallery-1867.html>).

¹⁵¹ Godwin had a little bit of lee-way in designing outfits for *Claudian* to fit the Victorian idea of Rome, both because the play takes place in Byzantium rather than Rome, and, in Godwin's own words, because "the extremely interesting period (A.D. 360-460)...is almost a blank in the modern history of art" (Godwin, "*Claudian*," 1).

¹⁵² Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 32. For a photograph of this costume, see *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵³ Godwin, "*Claudian*," 3.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

extravagance in jewelry,”¹⁵⁵ and “the leading rich men of the period,”¹⁵⁶ as well as Barrett’s role as “a city potentate of the first magnitude,” for which he would be dressed in red and have decoration edging his mantle.¹⁵⁷ By designing his costumes around the idea of luxury, as well as adapting Barrett’s costume, Godwin created his own image of Byzantium on stage in much the same way that Dartmouth did for the vases: both men altered historical fact to create a look that fit an idealized Rome. The classical aesthetic that pervaded British culture inspired both *Claudian* and the vases, but the Victorians shaped these representations to fit the aesthetics they desired.

2.3 A Second Rome

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British constructed and manipulated the past to claim descent from the great empires of Greece and Rome to form their own identity as an emerging empire: “Just as the discovery of new lands and cultures by eighteenth-century explorers opened up a new vision of space and spatial comparison, so the recovery of classical thought and art helped to create a new vision of time and to provoke historical comparison with the civilizations of the past.”¹⁵⁸ Philosophy and geographic expansion worked together to create the idea of a new empire, and classical thought in particular helped “to

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. Nowhere in the text itself does Godwin describe the costumes of the peasants in the village, such as Almida or Agazil. He does, however, include sketches of women in simple garb, which could have been used for the peasants’ costumes.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *National Identity*, 86.

make authoritative sense of the present.”¹⁵⁹ Connections to antiquity ideologically aided the British imperial project by giving it a sense of authority and power. Scholars, governments, and institutions such as museums “sought to control the meanings of antiquity and claim inheritance, in terms of systems of governance, the accomplishments of a civilized society, or cultural excellence.”¹⁶⁰ By aligning themselves with the great powers of antiquity, the British claimed for themselves an esteemed cultural heritage as well as a place among the great conquering powers of the world. Britain was particularly concerned with ancient Rome, and saw this empire as its immediate ancestor. By associating themselves with that great empire, the British claimed the rights to conquest and domination, cultural superiority, and a place in the history books—because the venerated Rome did it first.

This reverence for the classical past included not just history, but literature, architecture, and art, as well. Writers and artists adopted and revived classical styles in their work, giving rise to the neoclassical movement, and neoclassicism helped to solidify the connection between contemporary British society and the ancient past. Looking to Greek and Roman art as the pure, moral foundation of the western artistic tradition, neoclassical artists attempted to harness these qualities in their own work through imitation and experimentation. The toga drama was a significant part of this movement, presenting British actors as Romans – truly “Victorians in togas.” The stage enacted the ideology of the imperial project: the British embodied the identity of their desired ancestors and in doing so become the second wave of imperial Romans. Politically, socially, and artistically, the British connected themselves to the ancient empire in an

¹⁵⁹ Stray, *Classics Transformed*, 10.

¹⁶⁰ Hoock, *Empires of the Imagination*, 207.

attempt to understand and legitimize their new status as an empire.

Barrett's toga plays express two competing elements of the British relationship to Rome: the cultural connection to the ancient empire which formed the basis for British identity, and the need to explain the decline of Rome without anticipating the subsequent decline of Britain. With *Claudian*, for example, Barrett expresses the former, highlighting the connection between the Victorians and the Romans through the Englishness that permeates his historical reconstruction. Through the choice of genre and language, the play placed identifiably British people in an ancient setting. The play perfectly fits the genre of melodrama, with its exciting plot, impressive splendor, and heightened emotion. The 100-year curse, the terrible earthquake, and the dramatic love triangle all provided the requisite spectacle for an evening of conventional British melodrama. As will be discussed in the next section, Barrett uses English as the foundation of his play, without relying upon Latin. The audience could relate to the characters as English-speaking, English-sounding people, akin to themselves, thus strengthening the idea that the British descended from the Romans. The idea of blood relationship to the ancient empire was part of the British consciousness, and the Romans had indeed occupied Britain, so the idea of a genetic link to the Romans was not inconceivable.¹⁶¹ As part of the reconstruction, a bloodline

¹⁶¹ One of the most fervent believers in the British descent from Romans was Henry Charles Coote, the late Victorian author of *A Neglected Fact in English History* (1864) and *The Romans of Britain* (1878). He put forth the view that the British did not descend solely from the Teutons, but also from the Romans. He claimed that the Teutonic myth "post-dates the English origins and dries up the springs of our early history, the merits and interest of which are by this supposition lavished upon a race of strangers. It disentitles a large proportion of the Britons of Imperial Rome to the sympathies of the present race of Englishmen, between whom and the Eternal City it leaves a gap without connection or transition" (Hingley, *Roman Officers*, 69-70). Richard Hingley explains Coote's theory as the following: "the Roman population of Britain were descendants of the original Roman colonists and...they survived the Anglo-Saxon conquest in the 'ark' of their cities. The Norman, or 'Gallo-Roman', conquest in the eleventh century then relieved the 'depression that had resulted from the Anglo-Saxon and Danish conquests and subsequent periods of control. With Gallo-Roman support the Romans of England then became 'the creator, under

from the Romans to the English was established by drawing a lineage from the Roman conquest of Britain through subsequent conquests to the present day. By associating contemporary society with classical antiquity, the British attempted to give themselves the status associated with great empires and high culture. Barrett reinforced the idea of a blood connection to Rome through his presentation of British people acting in a British fashion but clothed in Roman dress, which in turn strengthened Britain's sense of Roman identity and cultural inheritance from that empire.

The British also felt themselves to be the political inheritors of Rome, but saw themselves as improving upon the Roman model;¹⁶² Barrett highlights this idea in *The Sign of the Cross* through his presentations of Roman decline. As a strong imperial power, Britain saw itself as the next Rome, the next eternal empire. Architect John Gwynn wrote in 1766,

The English are now what the Romans were of old, distinguished like them by power and opulence, and excelling all other nations in commerce and navigation. Our wisdom is respected, our laws are envied, and our dominions are spread over a large part of the globe. Let us, therefore, no longer neglect to enjoy our superiority...¹⁶³

Published in *London and Westminster Improved*, “A Discourse on Public Magnificence,” this quote demonstrates the outward claim to power and authority inherent in connections to Rome. As with the blood relationship above, by presenting obviously British people on stage in a British medium with the trappings of Rome, Barrett helped legitimize the discourse of British imperial

providence, of the medieval and modern greatness of England” (*Roman Officers*, 70). Coote's theory required that history be heavily reconstructed and reordered to support his claim.

¹⁶² In the early part of the eighteenth century, the British took as their model Republican Rome, with its democratic government, oratory, and literature. After the Seven Years War, as ideas of expansion and conquest became more popular, “the governors of the British Empire identified with the Roman imperial paradigm and adopted and adapted its material legacy” (Hooock, *Empires of the Imagination*, 215).

¹⁶³ Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved*, xv.

expansion and dominance through his portrayal of history on stage.

As a successor to this empire, however, Britain needed to deal with the fact that the Roman Empire had declined and, eventually, fallen. While the British felt “an intimacy or kinship” with the former empire, they also felt they “could be guided, and warned by the experience of imperial Rome.” They could learn how to stay in power, if they could solve the problems of “dependence on military violence and oppression (which included slavery), demoralizing luxury, and reckless and dangerous over-extension.”¹⁶⁴ Armed with this knowledge, British felt they could flourish interminably. Barrett expressed this view by contrasting depictions of Christians and pagans in *The Sign of the Cross*. Pagan violence against Christians is the opening subject of the play: the first scene features a mob attacking a defenseless Christian.¹⁶⁵ The “demoralizing luxury” appears in every depiction of the pagan Romans and is contrasted in the set changes between the humble Christian dwellings and the pagan palaces.¹⁶⁶ By portraying the Christians and the pagans as opposites, Barrett distances the moral, Christian ancestors of the British from those who could not maintain an empire.¹⁶⁷ According to Barrett’s plays, the Roman

¹⁶⁴ Vance, “Anxieties of Empire,” 255.

¹⁶⁵ The opening lines of the play feature two spies discussing “Christian-hunting” (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 125). After a musical interlude and a conversation between wealthy Romans, the action shifts to a mob attacking the elderly Favius; Mercia, who has “the face of a Madonna” (Ibid., 130) tries to protect him, and the two are eventually spared from the mob by Marcus.

¹⁶⁶ See the descriptions of the sets in section 1.5, pg. 33-34. For an example of contrasting costumes, see the photograph of the orgy scene in Act III, Scene 3, which contrasts Mercia’s simple gown with the bejeweled costumes of Marcus and Glabrio (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 121).

¹⁶⁷ In *The Sign of the Cross* Barrett does not directly show over-extension, but he hints at it in *Claudian*: since the play takes place in Byzantium, rather than Rome, the destruction of the palace and Claudian’s death could demonstrate the inability of the empire to maintain proper governance in the provinces.

empire had fallen because of the immorality associated with pagan Rome, but the British empire would continue to flourish because it was propped up with the morality of Christianity.¹⁶⁸

2.4 The Influence of Education on the Taste for Toga Drama

In addition to racial and political lineage, the British also claimed cultural ancestry from the Romans; they felt themselves the masters of the texts that formed the foundation of the British relationship to classical antiquity. The knowledge of history that formed the basis of the neoclassical movement was cultivated in an educational system that privileged the Classics. By the early eighteenth century, Britain had already absorbed Classical literature and architecture into her repertoire of the arts. People like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift wrote in the “Augustan Mode,” and architect Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington, constructed his buildings in a Roman fashion, as interpreted by the Italian architect Palladio.¹⁶⁹ However, as Vicci Coltman notes, by the second half of the eighteenth century,

Britain was no longer a peripheral European state paying lip service to ancient Rome via her literature and her architecture but instead an empire ready to take on the material legacy of that paradigm of empires. For its colonizers, the New World represented dispersed exotic cultures in a geographically distant territory. This was far from the case for neoclassicism. As a result of their educational

¹⁶⁸ Vance and Wallace, “Introduction,” 6. Besides theater, another way the neoclassical artists expressed the anxieties of imperial expansion was through the depiction of British buildings as though they were in ruins. For example, Joseph Gandy painted the rotunda of the Bank of England, designed by John Soane in 1798, as a ruined structure reminiscent of the ruinous Roman paintings of artists like Sir Charles Lock Eastlake. Compare *Bank of England Rotunda in Ruins* (“The Bank of England Rotunda in Ruins’ Print by J. M. Gandy,” Sir John Soan’s Museum London, accessed August 4, 2017, <http://www.soane.org/shop/product/bank-england-rotunda-ruins-print-j-m-gandy>) to *The Colosseum from the Campo Vaccino* (“The Colosseum from the Campo Vaccino,” Tate, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/eastlake-the-colosseum-from-the-campo-vaccino-t00665>).

¹⁶⁹ Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 11. For example, see the Chiswick House designed by Boyle (“Chiswick House,” Wikipedia, accessed June 30, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiswick_House).

system, elite British men took on a distinctly ‘Roman’ mind set. Their attitude to the spolia opima of their travels was proprietary rather than exploratory. They identified with the imperial Roman paradigm to such an extent that, rather than encountering the other, they seemed to be furnishing an indigenous tradition.¹⁷⁰

Coltman’s argument suggests that the association Gwynn claimed was in fact deeply etched into the British consciousness. The British were the new Roman empire, and the trappings of culture, literature, and the arts were part and parcel of this package. Education and culture were the keys to becoming the new Romans, and therefore to being at the top of the social hierarchy. This desire transformed itself into a general taste for all things Roman.

Within this cultural climate, Barrett’s toga dramas animated these Victorian sentiments and satisfied the desire for classically-inspired, popular drama. As a middle-class actor-manager with little schooling, Barrett presented a very different version of classical history than an elite gentleman educated at boarding school would have done. Though he was not re-creating Roman life on the site of ruins, as was done at Pompeii,¹⁷¹ or performing dramas in ancient languages as for the Cambridge Greek play,¹⁷² Barrett’s work was rooted in the same cultural tradition and was accessible to a wider audience. As evidenced by plays like *Claudian*, which features a fantastic plot within a historical world, Barrett combined themes and images from ancient history to present an idea of antiquity that was inspired by—but did not directly represent—a classical source.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ See Beard, “Taste and the Antique,” 207.

¹⁷² See Lacey, “The History of the Cambridge Greek Play.”

Barrett's plays used historical material very differently than works produced by or for those with elite educations. While the settings of the toga dramas were classical,¹⁷³ the scripts were not; *Claudian* and *The Sign of the Cross* are completely intelligible to an audience that has never learned a word of Latin. Classical education, however, was built on a foundation of the ancient languages themselves. Students learned grammar in the lower forms and composition in the upper.¹⁷⁴ In a letter from the Earl of Chesterfield to his son in 1748 he wrote, "Classical knowledge, that is, Greek and Latin, is absolutely necessary for everybody...the word *illiterate*, in its common acceptance, means a man who is ignorant of these two languages."¹⁷⁵ Edith Hall notes that this idea of class held sway for a long time, even to 200 years later, citing examples of poetry from Louis MacNeice and Tony Harrison that contemplate the relationship between classical languages and privilege.¹⁷⁶ Knowledge of classical languages provided the elite with power and prestige, and Barrett did not try to leverage this in his plays. While gentlemen demonstrated their abilities with capping quotations and composition,¹⁷⁷ neither *Claudian* nor *The Sign of the Cross* includes any Latin text beyond the occasional mention of a god or a political office.¹⁷⁸ These insertions are not integral to understanding the play, and simply add

¹⁷³ *Claudian*: Byzantium; *Junius*: Rome; *Clito*: Athens; *Virginius*: Rome; *The Sign of the Cross*: Rome

¹⁷⁴ Stray, "Culture and Discipline," 79. British education, as compared to other European countries, placed particular stress on composition (*Ibid.*, 80).

¹⁷⁵ Stanhope 1932, 3.1155 in Hall "Putting the Class," 389.

¹⁷⁶ Hall "Putting the Class," 389-390.

¹⁷⁷ Stray, "Culture and Discipline," 80.

¹⁷⁸ For example, *Claudian* mentions Hercules, Bacchus, and Apollo within a few lines of one another in the prologue (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 40-41), and *The Sign of the Cross* describes various characters as prefect, aedile,

ancient flavor to the text. Indeed, the language of the scripts feels more biblical than classical.¹⁷⁹ For example, the phrase “temple of Mammon”¹⁸⁰ in *Claudian* evokes the New Testament more than any Latin author, and critics praised Barrett’s language as like the Gospels. *The Idler*’s critic of *The Sign of the Cross*, for example, praises “the exquisite language of Holy Writ, frequently pressed into the dramatist’s service.”¹⁸¹ Also, neither *Claudian* nor *The Sign of the Cross* relies upon any works by classical authors for plot or language. Barrett’s only toga drama based on a classical story, *Junius*, was inspired by Shakespeare’s “The Rape of Lucretia,” rather than on a classical source.¹⁸² By using English-language source material, Barrett demonstrated his inability to access the knowledge taught in the education system. Relying upon artistic material, as discussed in chapter 1, and archaeological material, as discussed in chapter 3, for his historical information, Barrett ignored the ancient texts that were the foundation of elite knowledge. His lack of attention to these sources demonstrates the positioning of Barrett’s plays as popular entertainment engaging the cultural tastes for the antique rather than as portrayals of history for an elite audience.

Knowledge and literacy more generally were seen as powerful tools of the elites that should not be allowed into the hands of the lower classes. For example, George Howell, an MP

and patricians (*Ibid.*, 113).

¹⁷⁹ For example, critic William Archer in the *World* contemptuously called *The Sign of the Cross* “a combination of the penny dreadful with the Sunday-school picture-book” and “a Salvationist pantomime” (Richards, *The Ancient World*, 129-130).

¹⁸⁰ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 41.

¹⁸¹ *The Idler*, “The History,” 80.

¹⁸² Richards, *The Ancient World*, 111.

born in 1833, wrote in his autobiography, “The wealthier and employing classes thought that education would foment discontent.”¹⁸³ Although Barrett was a middle-class man producing popular productions, his use of the Classics did not threaten the upper classes’ sense of cultural superiority, as he was not using the textual sources which formed the foundation of their education-based status. Although the time period for *Claudian* was intensively studied, the research focused on material for the visual aspects of the production, resulting a play with an entirely fictional narrative, but rooted in historical imagery. This was at odds with the elite prioritization of the textual remains of antiquity. Ancient languages and literature were valued above all else, whereas archaeology and art, while still revered, held less cachet, in part because they were more accessible to the uneducated. Barrett’s productions, however, were in fact partly shaped by trends in scholarship. At the end of the nineteenth century, the field of archaeology began challenging the primacy of text as the sole window to the ancient world.¹⁸⁴ Godwin’s research for the sets and costumes therefore helped to legitimize *Claudian* through the use of historical material. Barrett might not have rooted his plays in stories pulled from classical texts, but his use of material culture helped claim a certain historical legitimacy nevertheless.¹⁸⁵

Rather than starting from the classical, like the Cambridge Greek play, for example, Barrett began from the theatrical. In *Claudian*, Barrett’s narrative had no relationship to a classical text, but it allowed him to use exciting theater technology for the earthquake and also

¹⁸³ Rose, *The Intellectual Life*, 24.

¹⁸⁴ Stray 1998, 209.

¹⁸⁵ Barrett’s use of historical material as a means of legitimizing his productions will be explored in chapter 3.

produced scenarios to highlight the spectacle and splendor of antiquity.¹⁸⁶ The classical setting merely provided the atmosphere for the spectacle. Another example of Barrett privileging the theatrical over the antique is the production of *Junius*. In his discussions with Lytton on the script, Barrett convinced him “to reduce the politics of the play and foreground the domestic drama,”¹⁸⁷ steering the production away from specific classical knowledge while taking advantage of the general appeal of the setting. The classical world, its stories and material culture were simply dressing for Barrett’s own stories. A scathing review of the novelized script of *The Sign of the Cross* describes the gulf between Barrett’s work and classical history:

The process on which the new romance-writer has worked appears to be this. You take down one or two common handbooks of Latin history, and you copy out what is said there about, let us say, Nero. You then consult an authority on Roman upholstery and dress, and take notes of some agreeable articles and garments. Then, being thus amply supplied with local colour and a few Latin words, you let the Genius of Christianity have her fling, tincturing the whole with the kind of broad, tepid sentiment which experience has taught you is most welcome on Saturday nights at the back of the pit. Before you know it, and to your equal pleasure and surprise, your romance is written ; it is ‘a story of Christian martyrdom under Nero,’ and you call upon the clergy to shudder and approve.¹⁸⁸

Despite this critic’s obvious dislike for the story, the description of the style of Barrett’s storytelling illustrates his use of educational material for flavor while relying on theatricality for the success of his show. Like Dartmouth, he walked a line between antiquity and invention. In

¹⁸⁶ Before producing *Claudian*, Barrett contemplated designing a new version of *The Last Days of Pompeii* to feature the earthquake. However, he decided to mount a new play, which became the 1883 production of *Claudian* (Richards, 104).

¹⁸⁷ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 108.

¹⁸⁸ *The Saturday Review*, “An Adelphi Romance,” 629.

this case, Barrett did indeed take Nero out of the history books and shaped him to suit the play's morals.

The inclusion of historical characters, like Nero, in *The Sign of the Cross* superficially seems to position the play firmly as a historical narrative. The play, however, focuses on the struggles between Christianity and paganism through the relationship of the invented characters Mercia and Marcus.¹⁸⁹ The plot hinges on Marcus' desire for the Christian Mercia in the midst of a Roman crackdown on the religion, and the play culminates in Marcus' conversion, union with Mercia, and the duo's impending demise in the arena.¹⁹⁰ Nero and the Romans provide the backdrop of decadence and the mechanisms by which Mercia is put in danger. None of the Romans are portrayed particularly accurately because that is not their purpose: their purpose is to represent the antithesis of Barrett's Christians. Nero, in particular, is the epitome of the dysfunction associated with the empire: "He is fat, lame, and half-drunk. His manner is nervous and shift— he has the aspect of a man who is constantly on the verge of delirium tremens. He is pompous and inflated—his eyes always shifting here and there, as if expecting some terrible apparition or fearing assassination."¹⁹¹ At his first entrance, Nero fishes for compliments about his artistic talents¹⁹² and later in the scene expresses his hatred of the Christians.¹⁹³ Poppaea

¹⁸⁹ The program for the first London production (1896) sets up the play as a battle between pagans and Christians even before a single character walks on stage: the cast list is divided between the two groups (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 113).

¹⁹⁰ These three events take place in the last two pages of the script, with Marcus' final decision to follow Mercia to their deaths coming three lines from the curtain (Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 186-187).

¹⁹¹ Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire*, 162.

¹⁹² Ibid.

seems to control Nero, as in Act IV, Scene 1, when Nero defers multiple times to her judgments. Nero twice seems about to pardon Mercia for Marcus, questioning Poppaea, but twice his wife responds firmly “No.”¹⁹⁴ Poppaea is also the one to determine that if Mercia renounces her faith, she may live; Nero then formalizes this decree.¹⁹⁵ These two characters are caricatures of their historical figures, acting as embodiments of Barrett’s idealized pagans and catalysts for the plot.

Barrett’s characterization of these roles is particularly Victorian, not Roman. Mayer explains,

Dacia’s party (Act I), which Marcus never manages to attend, Glabrio’s bemused fascination with Mercia, both in the street and at Marcus’s home (Act III, scene iii), and Berenis’s meetings with Dacia (Act III, scene i) and Poppaea (Act IV, scene i) are similar in dialogue and characterization to episodes from contemporary West End Society plays which weigh the values of worldliness, sophistication, and dissimulation against innocence, virtue, and duty. A leading term of abuse...is ‘cynicism’. To be cynical is to reject all values, and Barrett’s Romans, Marcus no less than the others, are cynics. To the religious person of the late nineteenth century, cynicism was but a step short of skepticism, and beyond skepticism lay doubt and atheism.¹⁹⁶

Rather than using models from ancient history, Barrett designed his characters from models in contemporary theater practice; their function in expressing the play’s morals was more important to Barrett than the accurate portrayal of historical figures. As quoted in *The Idler*’s review of the play, Barrett states, “My heroine is emblematic of Christianity; my hero stands for the worn out

¹⁹³ “Accursed be the whole race of Christians.—Seek our sacred life? I’ll throw them to the beasts—I’ll dress them in the skins of wolves and set the bloodhounds on them. Ha—ha—ha—that would be sport—I’ll soak them in oil and tallow, as I did before, and set them blazing—all Rome shall be flame with them...I’ll exterminate the vermin—I’ll blot them off the earth” (Ibid., 164).

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 177.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 178.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 105.

paganism of decadent Rome.”¹⁹⁷ Barrett’s pagans reject all of the values held dear by the Victorian audience, and they stand in stark contrast to the admirable Christians. Mayer’s point fits perfectly with Barrett’s Ruskinian ideas of drama. The characters and situations within *The Sign of the Cross* illustrate Barrett’s ideal that

the influence of the drama may and ought to be a *moral* influence...The business of the dramatist, and of the actor...should be to interest, to uplift, to refine, to touch the ideals...He will tell us of the evil, the sordid, the terrible...but he will never put evil for good, or mislead our judgement [sic], or confuse our moral sense, pervert our sympathies, make vice attractive.¹⁹⁸

Barrett’s Romans embody that evil, but the comparison with the good Christians and Marcus’ conversion leave no doubt as to the moral of the play. By bringing to life Victorians in togas rather than engaging with specific historical information, Barrett positioned his play as popular entertainment that engaged with the taste for classical antiquity but used contemporary British society as the model for characterization.

2.5 Barrett’s Archaeology and the Grand Tour

Another aspect of British education that shaped the tastes of Barrett’s audiences was the institution of the Grand Tour. Extended travel to the capitals of Europe, and in particular to Rome,¹⁹⁹ became an entrenched event in the lives of the British gentry.²⁰⁰ By the late 1700s, tens

¹⁹⁷ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 130.

¹⁹⁸ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 102.

¹⁹⁹ “For Western Europeans, Italy was the source of all that was important in their culture, both ancient and modern: home of the Romans, whose language formed the core of upper-class British education and whose government and art remained models for emulation, and of the great Renaissance artists, considered by the British to be the finest exemplars of modern aesthetic taste” (Withey, *Grand Tours*, 7). Over the several hundred years of the popularity of this practice, the itinerary of the trip changed, but by eighteenth century, the path of travel was relatively fixed for

of thousands of British visitors were traveling the continent of Europe to become cultured.²⁰¹ The popularity of these tours, as well as the reports and artifacts from abroad, deepened the respect and demand for classical antiquity within British culture.²⁰² As with classical education, these trips were ways in which certain sections of the population could access knowledge that was unattainable for others. Barrett's representations of history could not compete with those experienced by the Grand Tourists, who were able to see the past *in situ*, preserved in ruins; Barrett's experience, in a theater setting a thousand miles away, told a different version of history than the ruins themselves.²⁰³ In this way Barrett's work complemented tours, rather than competed with them.

most tourists (Ibid., 7).

²⁰⁰ Withey, *Grand Tours*, 5.

²⁰¹ Blanning, "The Grand Tour," 542. Until the latter part of the century when travel opened more widely to women and those of the lower classes, trips around the continent acted as finishing school for elite boys, a way to cap their classical educations (Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 28; Withey, *Grand Tours*, 3). Edward Gibbon, the famous author of *The Rise and Decline of the Roman Empire* wrote in his memoir, "My studies were chiefly preparations for my Classic tour." (Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 30). All of his preparation in Greek and Latin was intended to culminate in the experience of actually standing in the ruins of the great civilizations and understand what it meant to be a gentleman.

²⁰² The Grand Tour was not only about seeing, but also about owning. The elite travelers felt they had rights to the past, both in terms of personal identity and physical objects. Possession over artifacts and art gave the British elite an even closer connection to the ancient past than their lower-class counterparts. Whether ancient artifacts, copies, or paintings, art objects flooded back into Britain from abroad. Guides for the British tourists were often antiquities dealers as well, fulfilling British desires to take part of Italy home with them (Naddeo, *Cultural Capitals*, 193). Classical statuary, in particular, was a popular item for display (Blanning, "The Grand Tour," 545), and it complemented the neo-Classical houses that the elite built (Greene, *Archaeology*, 16). For example, the third duke of Beaufort brought a late Imperial marble sarcophagus home with him from Italy and proudly displayed it at his house in Gloucestershire (Sorabella, "The Grand Tour," n.p). This spirit of collecting – in addition to some of these personal collections – inspired some of the first museums in Britain.

²⁰³ Some dramatic performances were produced at the ancient sites themselves. For example, in 1884, reenactments were held at Pompeii over the course of three days. Participants were served wine in the preserved wine-shops, and gladiatorial games were held in the amphitheater (Beard, "Taste and the Antique," 207). Some participants like Jane Ellen Harrison, however, felt that the festivities were a little too macabre, writing "We may study the dead past to our profit, but we need not call it back to life and bid it dance for us" (Ibid.). Like Barrett's toga dramas, these

Travel in Rome brought together the two most important features of gentlemanly status that Barrett's plays could not provide at the same level as an elite experience: knowledge and taste. After an education at home in the Classics, the travelers could hone their sense of taste by immersing themselves in the history prized by the British. Samuel Johnson, the mentor of one of the most famous eighteenth-century travelers, wrote, "A Man who has not been in Italy, is always conscious of an inferiority, from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see."²⁰⁴ While the working and middle classes might see only newspaper sketches, photographs or plays, the elite could visit the ruins of Rome itself.²⁰⁵ Money and leisure time bought what was seen as an authentic experience, an ability to relate to the past in a way books could not.²⁰⁶ For those who could not travel, Barrett's plays could provide a glimpse of the ancient world, but one not associated with the money, privilege, or prestige of travels abroad.

Catherine Edwards writes, "To be present in Rome, to see the ruined monuments of the classical past, was to activate, bring to life, the classical education with which – in theory – every gentleman was equipped (conversely, Rome would naturally be incomprehensible to those

reenactments brought history to life for the modern audience. Barrett's plays, however, were produced for popular audiences, most of whom would never be able to see the ancient places where the stories were set, while the Pompeii reenactments were catering to wealthy individuals who could travel and who likely had classical educations.

²⁰⁴ Withey, *Grand Tours*, 7.

²⁰⁵ With the invention and improvement of railroads, among other technologies, travel to and across the continent became easier and more affordable. By the end of the nineteenth century, middle-class tourists swarmed the sites of Europe at the same time as the educational system was opening to the non-elite (Strain, "Exotic Bodies," 73-74).

²⁰⁶ James Boswell, for example, resolved to speak Latin on his tour, "harangu[ing] on Roman antiquities in the language of the Romans themselves" (Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 35). After visiting Cicero's house, he and his guide spoke only Latin during their visits to other sites (Withey, *Grand Tours*, 27). Boswell saw himself as Roman as his perceived ancestors, speaking to them, and even daring to mock them in their own language.

without such preparation).”²⁰⁷ Barrett’s productions did not activate the same social mechanisms as the Grand Tour; Barrett instead provided an interpretation of the past for British audiences in Britain, rather than the physical space and remains that were to be found in Rome and other sites of antiquity. This interpretation, however, allowed the audience to experience the past in a way that was more relatable than analyzing blocks of stone strewn on the ground. For example, the Domus Aurea, Nero’s palace, had been discovered in the 15th century, inspiring artists to recreate Roman styles. Even into the late nineteenth century, however, it remained a ruin, when the vineyards that had covered the site were removed to form a public park incorporating the baths.²⁰⁸ Although the lower classes would never set foot among the ruins in Rome, or have the social authority that privilege provided, members of every class could see this building in Act III, Scene 2 of *The Sign of the Cross*, where the palace appears intact. History lived again on stage. This brought the presentation into a different realm than that of education, and encouraged the audience members to feel a closer connection to the past, since they saw living people inhabiting the ancient world. Barrett’s productions were thus differentiated from education because they interpreted history for the audience rather than presenting an exact copy of the remains.

Another feature of Barrett’s plays was the presentation of Italian history as British history. The actors on stage looked and sounded British, helping to solidify the connection between British and Roman history, as discussed above, by portraying the former as the latter. Barrett’s Romans were British people dressed in the clothes of their alleged ancestors. His Nero did not look or sound foreign, so linking Roman history to contemporary England was not

²⁰⁷ Edwards, “Possessing Rome,” 346.

²⁰⁸ Gurgone, “How archaeologists are saving Nero’s fabled pleasure palace,” 2.

difficult. This process also bypassed modern Italians, a phenomenon associated with the Grand Tour, as well. To accomplish the intellectual erasure of the Italians, British tourists either transformed the local Italians into features of the landscape, rather than owners of the country, or they erased them altogether, replacing the modern landscape with one from the ancient texts. On tour, the Italians the British met were either “invisible, revolting, or – at best – picturesque.”²⁰⁹ For example, Augustus Hare, a nineteenth-century author of the guidebook *Walks in Rome* and amateur artist, painted a Rome of ruins and shrubbery, with indolent, picturesque modern Italians who were “perfectly calibrated to preserve undisturbed the crumbling charms of their setting.”²¹⁰ In addition to his art, Hare makes clear in his guidebook that “Rome’s true heirs are rather those such as [he] and other erudite visitors who truly appreciate the city’s melancholy beauty.”²¹¹ The native Italians were seen as ignorant and apathetic, unworthy of an important lineage.²¹²

²⁰⁹ Edwards, “Possessing Rome,” 348.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 356. For example, see *Near the Lateran* (Augustus Hare, “Near the Lateran, Rome,” Chris Beetles Gallery, 2010, Accessed June 28, 2017, <http://www.chrisbeetles.com/gallery/landscapes/near-lateran-rome.html>).

²¹¹ Ibid. The artist Sir Charles Lock Eastlake used the same techniques as Hare, showing the inhabitants of Rome as provincial and insignificant, having no part in the ancient history surrounding them. For example, in his painting *The Colosseum from the Campo Vaccino*, 1822, a goatherd sits with his flock in front of the imposing, though crumbling, Colosseum (“The Colosseum from the Campo Vaccino,” Tate, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/eastlake-the-colosseum-from-the-campo-vaccino-t00665>). The goatherd is merely there for scale and a picturesque atmosphere, but has no connection to the ruins of antiquity, which stand alone.

²¹² The side-lined Italian population was also seen as not being able to take care of the history – another reason for the British to lay claim to it, since they believed themselves able to appreciate and protect the past. While the Grand Tourists bewailed the decay of modern Rome, they built their own buildings in a neoclassical style. In 1740, Horace Walpole visited Rome and wrote of his experiences, “Between the ignorance and poverty of the present Romans, every thing is neglected and falling to decay; the villas are entirely out of repair, and the palaces so ill kept, that half the pictures are spoiled by damp” (Withey, *Grand Tours*, 28). Here Walpole blames the modern inhabitants of Rome for allowing their city to decay, while England had been rebuilding in neoclassical architecture. (For example, George Sampson’s Bank of England in the Palladian style, 1734, 6 years before Walpole’s comments. See the Bank of England website, “The Bank’s Buildings and Architects.”). The British visitors also blamed the Catholic Church for the decay, seeing it as a greedy institution that had sucked the country’s wealth dry for flashy displays and

Once the Italian inhabitants were removed, or at least relegated to artistic peasantry, the process of becoming Roman could begin. This was accomplished by seeing modern Italy through classical texts.²¹³ The tourist came to Rome with many years of classical education, and by experiencing Rome first hand, they activated this knowledge to fully connect with that past. Coltman describes this process:

Saturated with Roman literary culture in youth, the British pilgrim came to Rome after years of exposure to it with preconceived ideals. It is the paradox of an English public school education that its process of Romanization – “a set of the best *roman* virtues deeply engraven on your heart” – was understood to have taken place outside Rome. Indeed, the firsthand experience of Rome often became the climax of a process where the classical traveler became Roman.²¹⁴

Barrett’s actors also became Roman on stage, but this reincarnation was a very different process: he brought to life the ancient Romans in the bodies of British actors using British language. His Poppaea speaks English and acts like a Victorian woman in a society play. His Christians embody the values modern Christianity professes. His audience did not need to have studied Latin in school or have traveled across the continent; their emotional relationship with the historical representation was the one experienced by theatergoers at any number of melodramas,

useless convent work. (Withey, *Grand Tours*, 28) The Church, an important institution in Italian society, could therefore be seen as a large part of the reason why the Italians should not lay claim to their cultural heritage: they had squandered the wealth, both physical and cultural, of the ancients. Thus through physically placing themselves in the ruins of Rome and taking pieces of the city home, the British solidified their claim to the inheritance of the great empire and reinforced the importance of the Classics within their own country.

²¹³ Reverend Alison, in his *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, demonstrates this phenomenon: “It is not the scene of destruction which is before him. It is not the Tyber diminished in his imagination to a paultry stream...It is not the triumph of superstition over the wreck of human greatness...It is the country of Caesar, and Cicero, and Virgil which is before him. ...All that the labours of his youth, or the studies of his maturer age have acquired with regard to the history of this great people, open at once before his imagination, and present him with a field of high and solemn imagery which can never he [sic] exhausted” (Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 33-34). Alison has moved the landscape 2000 years back in time, seeing the past, rather than the land in front of his eyes.

²¹⁴ Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 35.

not a relationship based on years of study. Barrett's representations complemented the experiences of those who had gone abroad because the two were so different. Rather than producing an exact replica of the past based on elite knowledge, Barrett brought to life a history inspired by the classical taste of the Victorians, which had itself been shaped by the education system and international travel.

2.6 Victorians in Togas

The society in which Barrett wrote and worked was obsessed with classical history. The Victorian relationship to Rome was particularly strong, as the British saw themselves as the inheritors of the classical empire. Rome was an important part of British identity, and one way this manifested was through the education system: classical education was the mark of a gentleman. This knowledge, combined with institutions like the Grand Tour, informed the neoclassical movement. But this movement was also characterized by a sense of flexibility, where artists shaped the past to mirror current aesthetics. Within this climate, Barrett produced toga dramas inspired by history, but adapted to suit Victorian tastes. As he was not classically educated, Barrett relied upon his artistic talents to leverage the British obsession with classical history to his advantage. Despite the inclusion of antiquity, his productions maintained the class difference that existed between himself and the elite. The historical sets and costumes drew on the fashion for a classical aesthetic, but Barrett's toga dramas were popular productions that could be understood without any classical knowledge. By eschewing classical language and specific references, Barrett utilized the atmosphere and a few choice details of the past to create an environment in which to house his very Victorian characters.

Chapter 3: Authenticity

“We do not go to the theatre to hear passionate recitations and funny speeches, but to witness such a performance as will place us as nearly as possible in the position of spectators of the original scene or of the thing represented and so gain information of man, manners, customs, costumes, and countries.”
~E. W. Godwin²¹⁵

3.1 Introduction

In toga dramas, Roman subject matter alone was not enough to satisfy the classical tastes of the Victorians. The audience desired the spectacle of melodrama as well, but the norms of melodrama sometimes competed with the historical accuracy of a production. Barrett wanted to dazzle his audiences with decadent costumes and special effects, but he also took pains to highlight the historical touches he gave to his productions. His collaborations with E.W. Godwin, a well-known designer and architect, produced heavily-researched historical pieces, such as *Claudian*. By including details of the historical time period and drawing their audiences' attention to these features, Barrett and Godwin legitimized their productions in a society that put increasing value on authentic images. For these toga dramas, I define authenticity as the quality of accurately representing an aspect of history, or at least the assumption of this accuracy as endorsed by a cultural-respected authority. The public

craved concrete images of historical and contemporary reality in the book and magazine illustrations, prints, magic lantern slides, panoramas and paintings they saw. Legend and history had to be actualised and made visually familiar and accessible. The domestic feeling that permeated Victorian taste and Victorian art

²¹⁵ Baldwin, “E. W. Godwin,” 313-315.

meant that the reality of the everyday or historical environment – the streets, public buildings, taverns, restaurants, and parks of London, or the Rialto, the villa of an Ephesian courtesan, Juliet’s bedroom, and Faust’s study – were re-created in art forms for public consumption.²¹⁶

The accuracy of these images was part of a larger cultural discussion. Because of increasing accessibility to information, “differentiating lines between science and popular knowledge or between objective fact-gathering and entertainment are difficult to draw during the mid-1800s.”²¹⁷ The tension between splendor and taste resulted in a balancing of authenticity and theatricality.

The debates over authenticity in the reception of Barrett’s plays were one feature of these larger discussions. Victorian ways of viewing the past and the increasing accessibility of classical knowledge created space for debates over what constituted authentic history and the value of artistic license. Advances in science and technology allowed a greater section of society to enter into conversations about history and foreign places: for example, the proliferation of railroads by the second half of the nineteenth century made travel to other countries easier and more affordable for the middle classes²¹⁸; the stereoscope, invented in 1832 and improved in 1849 allowed people to see the places they could not visit²¹⁹; and cheap printing facilitated the spread of travel accounts and other information.²²⁰ Barrett’s productions were both part of this movement and shaped by it. By staging ancient subject matter, he brought history to a large

²¹⁶ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 14.

²¹⁷ Strain, “Exotic Bodies,” 80.

²¹⁸ Withey, *The Grand Tour*, 96.

²¹⁹ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 5.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

number of people, many of whom could not travel to see its remnants in Italy. However, some patrons were inclined to critique the shows based on their perceived historical accuracy. Barrett navigated these conversations by legitimizing his productions through the use of history and attracting viewers through a unified aesthetic, which often trumped the need for accuracy. Barrett's toga dramas were part of the multifaceted struggle between "art" and "fact," and their balance in popular theater, and his success lay in bringing the past to life for his audience.

3.2 The Power of Antiquity

As described in the previous chapter, classical antiquity was seen as the purview of the elite, slowly opening to the lower classes in the last decades of the nineteenth century. John Zoffany's painting of Charles Townley's library provides a visual example of classical antiquity as elite privilege.²²¹ The library is filled with numerous classical sculptures, but rather than providing an understanding of Greek and Roman art, the painting in fact demonstrates the way in which those artifacts were translated into a British context.²²² In this context the relics of antiquity were used to denote a combination of learning, taste, and wealth. The historical use of classical antiquity in British society meant that it became the "exemplary standard, something of permanent and general value able to resist the corrosions of change and relativity."²²³ The high

²²¹ Townley's famous collection helped to earn him status as a "Model of Taste" and was "one of the sights of late eighteenth-century London" (Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 19). For the painting, see Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, plate 2.

²²² Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 20.

²²³ Stray, "Culture and Discipline," 77.

value associated with this history meant that its presence in other contexts could determine the value of the medium in which it was used, such as art, literature, or theater. Thus history became an essential part of popular culture, and “by the end of the century, popular novelists across Britain, Europe, and America (F. W. Farrar, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Lew Wallace) and academic painters of Rome (Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Edward Poynter, Jean-Léon Gérôme) all used archaeological detail as signifiers of the real.”²²⁴

The inclusion of archaeological detail also pervaded the genre of theater. Theater was a particularly potent medium with which to illustrate history, since it “awakened” the ancient world through the bodies of actors:

Theatre proved an apt medium to present the past as not only a lived, but a living reality. Archaeological precision in literature and art translated into detailed sets and costumes that acquired the mediating function of assuring the viewer that the historical past had been resuscitated from an assemblage of the actual objects that made up the fabric of Roman life.²²⁵

By using archaeological detail, actor-managers like Barrett could present a more realistic imagining of the ancient world, and audiences would be more easily convinced to lose themselves in the setting of a play. Barrett’s most obvious attempt at legitimization, with the help of Godwin, was the publication of a pamphlet on the archaeology of *Claudian*. This document, entitled “Claudian. A few notes on the architecture and costume. A letter to Wilson Barrett, Esq. By E. W. Godwin, F.S.A.”, includes background information on the time period, sketches of the

²²⁴ Barrow, “Toga Plays,” 211-212.

²²⁵ Ibid., 212.

costumes, and details about the research involved.²²⁶ Godwin carefully notes the sources he consulted to create accurate representations. For example, he states that his “chief authority” for costume design was the “sculptured column of Theodosius,” but when he needed more information, he looked at the obelisk of Theodosius II, statues and coins of Julian, the Bassus mosaic, and various other sources, all neatly organized in the pamphlet.²²⁷ In his descriptions of the costumes, he analyzes the various details and their origins, sparing no pains to include as much detail as he can: e.g. “You will notice down the centre of your tunic is a broad purple band (purple, I may say, was of four tints, a blood-red, a violet, an amethyst, and the dark sea blue, which was the most highly prized). This purple band, I need hardly say, is the *latus clarus* of the senatorial order.”²²⁸ Godwin uses detail and origin to highlight the scholarship behind his stage designs. His post-script also includes excerpts from two classical writers, Eusebius and Apollinaris Sidonius.²²⁹ These claims to authenticity increased the value of *Claudian* in the eyes of the audience.²³⁰ The pamphlet proves to the reader that the play has been thoroughly

²²⁶ For the costume sketches, see the two plates between pages 4-5 in the pamphlet.

²²⁷ Godwin, “*Claudian*,” 3.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²³⁰ Godwin’s writing also makes clear the audience he wishes to impress: the educated elite. In the quotation above, for example, his use of Latin, as well as his interjection “I need hardly say,” both assume the reader is well-educated. Earlier in the piece he addresses the reader directly, saying, “You will doubtless remember that it was a practice of the Romans to give their bravest soldiers ‘decorations’...” (Godwin, “*Claudian*,” 4). Here he directly points out that his reader should be educated in classical history, but he proceeds to describe these decorations in lay terms before using the technical Latin term. In this way, Godwin places himself among the elite without entirely alienating the less-educated person interested in the archaeology of *Claudian*.

researched and is therefore more than just another melodrama: historicity gives the play educational and cultural value beyond that of other theatrical productions.

3.3 The Influence of Museums and Archaeology on Authenticity

In addition to color, social rank, and origin of details, Godwin's pamphlet also references the museums from which he received information, illustrations, or consultation. For example, he states, "I am indebted to Signor Felice Niccolini, of the Museo Nazionale, Naples for a series of large photographs" of a litter that would appear on stage.²³¹ Godwin remarks that a terracotta of the artifact resides in the Museo Borbonico²³²; the other museums mentioned in the pamphlet are the Bonn Museum²³³ and the British Museum²³⁴, as well as the collection of the Empress of Germany.²³⁵ Godwin's sketchbooks are full of studies copied from museums and scholarly literature, including illustrations for the costumes of the supernumeraries.²³⁶ His notebooks include details such as eleven ways to tie girdles and belts, with markings for "most common"

²³¹ Godwin, "*Claudian*," 3.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ This museum possessed "the sepulchral monument of Cneius Musius"...[which] clearly exhibit[s] the manner in which these phalaeræ were worn" (Godwin, "*Claudian*," 4). Godwin's use of the technical term for military medals also highlights both his attention to historical detail and desire to impress the classically-educated.

²³⁴ This museum possessed "the little Roman bronze warrior," which, compared with certain diptychs, illuminated "that a pattern has clearly resulted from this arrangement of phalaeræ" (Godwin, "*Claudian*," 4).

²³⁵ Godwin states that he has a set of casts of the phalaeræ, of which the originals reside in the royal collection.

²³⁶ See Fig. 12-27 in Baldwin, "E. W. Godwin," 329.

and “rare.”²³⁷ The precision of the research, combined with the reliance on scholarly institutions, helped to legitimize the historicity of the productions.

Museums represented a relatively new source of cultural authority for the Victorians, for whom, at least among the elite, collecting was second-nature.²³⁸ By making history and art accessible to the public, museums were part of the changing status of classical knowledge. Museums, a product of the 18th century based on classical institutions,²³⁹ represented knowledge accumulated by the elite made public. With the development of museums and professional archaeology, “no longer would knowledge of antiquity be the province of elite aristocrats who were able to explore the centres of European culture on the Grand Tour. No longer would the results of those travels, antiquities from Italy, be kept in the private collections of their vast houses back in Britain. Now, with the development of the public museum, the remains of the past were available to all.”²⁴⁰ Although private collections did—and still do—exist, the museum evolved into an institution for public use from the collections of wealthy individuals, both cabinets and galleries, which were used for the storage and display of books, art, and collected objects.²⁴¹ Even after museums began to offer public access to collections of art and artifacts,²⁴²

²³⁷ See Fig. 12-28 in Baldwin, E. W. Godwin, 330.

²³⁸ For an exploration of Victorian collecting, see Yallop, *Magpies, Squirrels & Thieves*.

²³⁹ The idea of museums can be traced back to fifth-century BCE Greece, with the Athenian Treasury at Delphi, as well as to the libraries of Rome, such as those created by Augustus at the Temple of Octavia in the Campus Martius and the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine which were made accessible to the public (Crook, *The British Museum*, 19-21).

²⁴⁰ Vance and Wallace, “Introduction,” 17.

²⁴¹ Crook, *The British Museum*, 24-26.

the upper classes continued to be the curators and interpreters of these objects, thus maintaining a hold on the wider public's understanding of the world.²⁴³ Since the history of these collections was so saturated in elite and scholarly knowledge, institutions like the British Museum became a new source of cultural authority which interacted with theater and other artistic movements.

The museum, like the theater was a place to spend one's leisure time.²⁴⁴ The museum, however, had a very different reputation than the theater: drama was intended for entertainment, while the museum was a place of knowledge in addition to diversion. While theater was often associated with boorish behavior and loose women, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century,²⁴⁵ the museum was a more refined place, at least according to the middle class. Reformers encouraged museum attendance, "hop[ing] that rational recreation would lead

²⁴² The British Museum was established by an act of parliament in 1753, and this act intended to make the collections free to "all studious and curious Persons." This goal, however, took at least 50 years to accomplish (Crook, *The British Museum*, 53). The trustees of the museum, all high-ranking individuals, did not trust the populace with this information, as is evident from their statement in 1759: "a general liberty to ordinary people of all ranks and denomination, is not to be kept within bounds. Many irregularities will be committed that cannot be prevented by a few librarians who will soon be insulted by such people, if they offer to control or contradict them" (Ibid.). The trustees put into place restrictions on visiting days and hours, as well as establishing a system of admission involving applications and formally issued tickets which could take a few weeks with several visits to the museum. To all of these restrictions, Crook adds, "the armed sentries at the entrance – not removed until 1863 – must have reinforced the impression that Britain's Temple of the Arts was indeed a citadel of culture" (Ibid., 53-54). In the early 1800s, however, admission tickets were eliminated and people were allowed to freely roam through the galleries (Ibid., 65).

²⁴³ "Although most collections were open to the public, collection curators came from the ranks of the academy and were responsible for devising, in Susan Stewart's words, 'the classification schemes which will define space and time'" (Strain, "Exotic Bodies," 79). Museums were also symptomatic of larger trends in anthropology, and played into the mindset that certain white Europeans were superior to others, just as the British claimed superiority over Italians in their consumption of classical culture: "nineteenth-century collections of primitive artifacts and racial types were used in the construction of a racial and cultural hierarchy which placed 'civilized' Western nations at the pinnacle of progress and evolution" (Ibid.).

²⁴⁴ For a discussion on the growth of leisure for the working class, see Chapter 4 in Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, particularly pages 80-81.

²⁴⁵ Delgado, *Victorian Entertainment*, 93.

workers to value thrift, temperance, religiosity, and respectability.”²⁴⁶ While visitors could, and did, use the museum simply as a place for entertainment,²⁴⁷ the environment was also structured as a place of learning. Depending on the particular collections of a museum, “the world expansiveness could be represented by the ordered collection with individual items metonymically standing in for a larger context.”²⁴⁸ Thus the museum had a scientific association, which the theater did not. As well, the history of knowledge as an elite possession, compared to theater’s accessibility to the lower classes, likely influenced the reputation of the museum. For example, the idea of the museum as place of entertainment was derided by the Trustees of the British Museum, who declared that “their chief aim was to further ‘Science and the Arts’, not to gratify ‘the curiosity of...multitudes...in quest of amusement.’”²⁴⁹ The museum was seen as a more serious institution, and so collections of artifacts and displays of ancient history in museum settings were seen as more authoritative and of more cultural value than those displayed on stage.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ Woodson-Boulton, “Victorian Museums,” 111.

²⁴⁷ This use of the museum space was particularly associated with the working class: “In contrast to the middle-class view of the special nature of the museum or gallery space, deserving of a particular type of behaviour, appropriate dress, and so on, the working class tended not to distinguish such space from the rest of the city, carrying over activities, such as eating and socialising, that were practised in other spaces” (Hill, *Culture and Class*, 134).

²⁴⁸ Strain, “Exotic Bodies,” 78.

²⁴⁹ Crook, *The British Museum*, 65. Both the museum and the theater, however, seek to educate, and both do so through visual presentation. The design of a museum itself is theatrical, where patrons entering a space come into contact with a visual story strung together by a curator, or a director.

²⁵⁰ Victorian archaeology fueled both the taste for antiquity and the growth of museum collections. Some of the most famous archaeological excavations in history occurred during this period and helped to put objects in these new museums. Excavations abroad captured the attention of the people at home, and the material culture being brought back helped fuel the obsession with the past. Various archaeological excavations around the world excited the British, including those of Nimrud, Nineveh, Pompeii, Ephesus, Troy, and Mycenae. Artifacts from these

The authenticity and authority associated with museums and artifacts was harnessed by directors and designers, such as Barrett and Godwin, as described above; their work built on the foundation of artists such as Kean. Kean's *Sardanapalus* production was constructed around Austen Henry Layard's archeology in Nineveh, and the artifacts that had been sent back to the British Museum. Like Godwin with his pamphlet, Kean makes clear to the public the accuracy of his production through the playbill for the show. It advertised, "[N]o pains have been spared to present to the eye the gorgeous and striking scenery, that has been so unexpectedly dug from the very bowels of the earth."²⁵¹ Kean also quotes extensively from Egyptologist Joseph Bonomi's 1852 publication on Assyrian archaeology, using this work to give authority to his production in much the same way that Godwin quoted from Eusebius and discussed correspondence with Niccolini from the Museo Nazionale. By referencing specific scholarship or esteemed authors, Kean and Godwin increased the cultural value associated with their productions through historical accuracy.²⁵²

The historicity of productions was also perfectly compatible with the need for splendor. Michael Booth writes,

excavations flowed back into museums and collections in Britain, affecting the way that the British viewed history and art: "Archaeological investigation and the display of the objects it unearthed in museums led to an increased value being placed upon the original work of art, which replicated the interest in the authentic intentions of the writer or the artist" (Vance and Wallace, "Introduction," 18). Viewers and audiences now began to pressure artists to consider the historicity of their work, and increased access to historical information shaped the way art was produced.

²⁵¹ Malley, *From Archaeology*, 81.

²⁵² Another example of historical allusion on stage occurred in Irving's production of *The Cup*. Set designer James Knowles built his sets with the advice of archaeologist Alexander Murray. The reconstruction of the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus which appeared on stage was "based on recent publications and fragments housed in the British Museum" (Barrow, "Toga Plays," 212). Irving's production took advantage of the academic presentation of history in other cultural venues to legitimize his production.

The archaeologising of spectacle, at least in serious drama with historical settings, became *de rigueur*, but archaeology on the Victorian stage was in any case, from the time of Charles Kean, closely akin to display, a visual flourish of scholarship and resources combined. It was the outward show of things that tended to be most archaeological: the elaborate procession, the crowded market-place, the banquet in the palace. The authentic hut, little shop, or mean street did not win such favour. Thus a taste for archaeology was entirely compatible with a taste for spectacle.²⁵³

When Kean, Barrett, or Godwin designed a historical production, they utilized the most glamorous aspects of the history to present their versions of the past. The grand processions of *Sardanapalus* and crowd scenes of *Claudian* brought together history and spectacle. By producing historically accurate plays, actor-managers could satisfy two needs at once: authenticity and splendor.

3.4 Bringing the Museum to Life

Theater is more than a sum of its parts: splendor, taste, and authenticity alone could be had in expositions, panoramas, or galleries. Theater's power is to animate the past through the living bodies of actors. On stage Godwin, wrote his grandson, "could see the past recreated, and that fascinated him."²⁵⁴ This recreation involved both attention to historical detail and the addition of artistic vision through the medium of the human body.²⁵⁵ The balance between these two forces, however, was up for debate. Critics complained that when productions were not

²⁵³ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 22.

²⁵⁴ Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, 62.

²⁵⁵ Questions of bringing life to the past also occurred in the realm of fine arts, such as with Alma-Tadema who wrote, "If I am to revive ancient life, if I am to make it relive on canvas, I can do so only by transporting my mind into the far off ages, which deeply interest me, but I must do it with the aid of archaeology. I must not only create the mise-en-scène that is possible but probable" (Richards, "John Ruskin," 24).

authentic, but Godwin, renowned for his research and attention to detail, in fact prized visual unity above accuracy. In an article on *Henry V* for the *Architect*, Godwin wrote that theatrical requirements were “superior to *strict* archaeological accuracy.”²⁵⁶ Wilde acknowledged Godwin’s effort when, in his review of *Claudian*, he praised the fact that the historical details “were subordinated to the rules of lofty composition and the unity of artistic effect.”²⁵⁷ Toga dramas like *Claudian* required a delicate balance between accuracy and visual appeal, and the latter often won.

Critics like Gowing and Fitzgerald appreciated the classical content. For people like Fitzgerald, however, the look of the show was as, if not more, important than accuracy. In his 1885 review of Barrett’s *Junius*, Fitzgerald writes,

Nothing more stately, imposing, or more in the antique Roman spirit, inspiring with a sense of dread and awe has yet been attempted. The ‘Princess’s’ has now taken first rank in these daring efforts, which are directed by the profound archaeological gifts of Mr Godwin, inspired by the somber talent of Gérôme. Nor was there any of that petty archaeological detail which your Dry-as-dust conceives, imparts a dramatic flavour borrowing from the Museum; but all was ‘large’ and conceived in a perfect dramatic spirit. Grand, solemn masses of colour and shadow, stately columns, ‘built-up’ pediments, gorgeous, lustrous furniture, succeeded each other, scene after scene, and most effective was the mysterious fashion in which one melted, as it were, into the other...²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ One example of practicing his preaching was his work on Barrett’s production of *Hamlet* (1884). One critic criticized the depiction of Elsinore, rendered by various scenic artists under Godwin’s direction. The critic writes, “It so happens that Elsinore itself is flat, while the neighboring coast is rocky and precipitous. Mr. Godwin, therefore, to do a great right, did little wrong, and enabled us to enjoy the highly picturesque view presented at the Princess’s by sacrificing geographical accuracy to the demands of scenic effect” (Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, 70-71). Unfortunately it is difficult to know exactly what elements of a final production were contributed by Godwin himself or to find evidence of places in Godwin and Barrett’s toga drama collaborations where Godwin admits to sacrificing accuracy for unity.

²⁵⁷ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 105.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

Fitzgerald, while keen on the classical content of the play, as a critic obviously appreciated the theatricality of drama. He did not want to see a museum gallery exhibited on stage; he preferred instead to enjoy the depiction of the past with all of the splendor and magic of theater technology and art. This tension, however, between historical accuracy and theatrical effect was a constant balancing act. A critic for *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* writing on *Clito* a year later complained, “Mr E. W. Godwin has looked carefully after the archaeology of the dresses, which, however are not in all cases as becoming as they are correct.”²⁵⁹ According to this critic, Godwin did not properly balance theatricality and history, erring on the side of historicity to the detriment of the aesthetics of the production.

Godwin did believe that historical accuracy was important on stage. As cited at the beginning of this chapter, Godwin said, “We do not go to the theatre to hear passionate recitations and funny speeches, but to witness such a performance as will place us as nearly as possible in the position of spectators of the original scene or of the thing represented and so gain information of man, manners, customs, and countries.”²⁶⁰ To Godwin’s mind patrons came to the theater to see the past brought to life with all of the exact details required to resurrect it. Indeed, in “On Taste,” Burke writes that “a pleasure is perceived from the resemblance which the imitation has to the original.”²⁶¹ Victorian society looked for accuracy in representation as a mark of good taste. Godwin harshly criticized contemporary productions that

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 119.

²⁶⁰ Baldwin, “E. W. Godwin,” 313-315.

²⁶¹ Burke, “On Taste,” 17.

pretended to be historically correct but that in reality suffered from the introduction of anachronistic elements, resulting in a pastiche of periods and styles that jeopardized the visual unity of the presentation, for it was visual unity that would become Godwin's lifelong quest. In spite of his reputation for uncompromising devotion to historical research, Godwin was willing to subordinate faithful historical reproduction in design to achieve visual unity and considered the requirements of the stage to be 'superior to *strict* archaeological accuracy.' His purpose was to persuade theatre practitioners to use historical research in the service of dramatic presentations, as a means to interpret the periods to be portrayed, and not to become mere slaves to accuracy.²⁶²

While Godwin believed historical accuracy to be important, he was, however, attuned to the importance of stage aesthetics, and these often trumped accuracy. Godwin strove for uniformity of appearance, because that way the audience members would be able to lose themselves in the production and fully immerse themselves in the stories of the past. Accuracy was therefore sacrificed for the unity of the show as a whole.²⁶³ Wilde describes Godwin as

something more than an antiquarian. He takes the facts of archaeology but converts them into artistic and dramatic effects, and the historical accuracy, that underlies the visible shapes of beauty that he presents to us, is not by any means the distinguishing quality of the complete work of art. This quality is the absolute unity and harmony of the entire presentation, the presence of one mind controlling the most minute details, and revealing itself only in that true perfection that hides personality.²⁶⁴

²⁶² Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, 64. Godwin also used his review column in the *Bristol Western Daily Press*, "Theatrical Jottings," as "a pulpit to chastise theatrical managers for allowing a lack of accuracy and inconsistencies in scenery, properties, and costumes to debase their productions" (Ibid., 63).

²⁶³ Wilde's description of Godwin's *Helena in Troas* (1886) describes Godwin's techniques and artistic license: "The performance was not intended to be an absolute reproduction of the Greek theatre in the fifth century before Christ: it was simply the presentation in Greek form of a poem conceived in the Greek spirit; and the secret of its beauty was the perfect correspondence of form and matter, the delicate equilibrium of spirit and sense" (Ibid., 78).

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 78.

This review of Godwin's last play, *Helena of Troas*, may take into account some of the set and costume changes that Godwin made. He chose to ignore *cothurni* and masks in his costume choices, and his design of the royal door featured lions and leopards, "symbols more closely identified with the Royal Arms of England than with the Royal House of Troy."²⁶⁵ While Godwin wanted to create a Greek aesthetic for the play, he also tailored his production to a British audience. Thus accuracy was subordinated to Godwin's idea of the play as a piece of theater. He succeeded at creating beautiful shows that appealed to the public because of the unity on stage, even though the productions may not have been entirely accurate.²⁶⁶

When working with Barrett, Godwin also needed to shape his vision of the past to Barrett's tastes as well. Barrett has his own ideas about how the production should look, although he gave Godwin a lot of freedom "to explore ideas concerning the relationship between historical accuracy and the unity of the stage picture."²⁶⁷ However, in two cases at least, Barrett's vanity

²⁶⁵ Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, 78.

²⁶⁶ I have been unable to find specific evidence of Godwin adjusting the authenticity of the archaeology for one of Barrett's toga dramas. For the play of *Claudian*, at least, Godwin left himself room for flexibility by declaring in his pamphlet that the period of the play was "almost a blank in the modern history of art"; he relied instead on the evidence that did exist in museums from "heathen times" and "the matured Byzantine style" (Godwin, "*Claudian*," 1). According to one critic, "the dressing of the play is accordingly somewhat lavish in colour and ornament—barbaric rather than classical, but most effective nevertheless for stage purposes, especially as in the crowds an attempt is made to exhibit also the diversity of nationality then to be found on the Bosphorus" (*The Times*, "Princess's Theatre," n.p.). Godwin may have increased the glamour of the show for theatricality's sake. This could easily have been the case, as Booth states, "The general sumptuousness of stage setting could easily overwhelm archaeological detail, and audiences cared more for the former than the latter in any case. Splendour of mounting could be grossly inappropriate to the content and actual setting of a play. Drawing-rooms looked like state reception-rooms in palaces; a garden scene opened into visions of park-like beauty" (Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 24). However, many elements of Godwin's extensive research did make it on stage, including details as small as decorated sandals, confirmed by W. H. Davis in the *Stage* (Baldwin, *E. W. Godwin*, 329). For illustrations of Godwin's sandals, see Baldwin, "E. W. Godwin," 330, fig. 12-29.

²⁶⁷ Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, 69.

trumped Godwin's research. The first instance was Claudian's costume, as discussed on page 47.²⁶⁸ Barrett refused to wear a toga, and Godwin instead dressed him in a short tunic. Godwin replaced the toga with another look that fit the aesthetic of the show, even if it was not strictly accurate. The new look was so popular that it became the model for subsequent toga plays and films.²⁶⁹ The second instance was Claudian's entrance in the prologue: Godwin wanted Barrett to enter in the sedan chair he had designed based on "the only known portraiture of a Roman litter in existence—a terra-cotta now in the Museo Borbonico."²⁷⁰ "For reasons of personal dramatic effect," Barrett preferred to enter without this litter.²⁷¹ In the cases of both the costume and the sedan chair, Barrett chose to privilege the needs of the theater—whether dramatic flair or the ability to move easily on stage—over the research done by Godwin.

In his quest for a balance between theatricality and authenticity, Barrett relied upon many people to help construct each show; he particularly required the historical knowledge of others to complement his artistic talent. Godwin, for example, provided the classical material for *Claudian*. Academic painters like Alma-Tadema used their expertise to create backdrops both stunning and historically-inspired. For *Junius*, Barrett's co-author also provided classical knowledge. During correspondence with Lord Lytton, with whom he was adapting the script, Barrett expressed his desire for a vaulted ceiling in a banquet scene. Lytton refused, quoting

²⁶⁸ See Barrow, "Toga Plays," 214-215.

²⁶⁹ See, for example, Charleton Heston's costume for his meeting with Messala in the 1959 film *Ben-Hur* (Lily Rothman and Liz Ronk, "Literally Epic Photos From the Making of the Classic *Ben-Hur*," *Time*, August 18, 2016, <http://time.com/4430862/ben-hur-original-photos/>).

²⁷⁰ Godwin, "*Claudian*," 3. For an illustration, see Baldwin, "E. W. Godwin," 328, fig. 12-24.

²⁷¹ Baldwin, "E. W. Godwin," 329.

“from such classical authorities as Cicero, Tibullus and Vitruvius that this would not have been possible at the time of the play...[and] suggests consulting Alma-Tadema for an authoritative ruling.”²⁷² Barrett did not have the knowledge of the classical texts with which to ground his productions in historical fact. His request and acquiescence to Lytton seem to suggest both an eye for theatrical—as opposed to historical—design, and his respect for classical knowledge, even if he did not follow advice in every situation. Barrett adored classical antiquity, at least for its artistic and aesthetic qualities, for he “loved classical painting and sculpture so much that he occasionally copied historical art too carefully in his acting and was accused of posing.”²⁷³ His historical knowledge, however, appears to have been lacking, so he relied upon others to produce the desired authenticity for his pieces.

3.5 “A Living Interest”

After seeing a production of *Claudian*, Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), wrote to Barrett: “I thought it would be difficult to give anything like a *living* interest to such ancient history: but I think Mr Wills and you have done it to a marvellous extent.”²⁷⁴ The idea of bringing ancient history to life was the key to the success of toga dramas, and this “living” past represents the crucial junction between authenticity and theatricality. In an age of increasing access to knowledge and representations of the past, Barrett created neoclassical

²⁷² Richards, *The Ancient World*, 109. It is interesting to note that Lytton suggests consulting a painter, rather than an academic; this points to the overlaps not only between genres of art, but between other types of knowledge as well.

²⁷³ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 171.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

images infused with his own dramatic spirit. By balancing accuracy with theatricality, he created a world in which the audience could easily immerse themselves. Historical detail provided the authenticity needed to anchor the presentation in reality, and artistic license on the part of the writer, director, and designers shaped the production into the story of human life.

Barrett's productions operated in a cultural space between frivolous entertainment and the educational experience of a museum. By incorporating the historical information from his advisors and collaborators with his own artistic vision, Barrett was able to create the sense of an authentic past on stage. While this image may not have in fact been accurate, the often-seamless incorporation of historical detail into Barrett's toga dramas legitimized the productions as something more educational or culturally significant than other types of theater. The dramatic elements in turn sparked the audience's interest in that history. The *Theatre's* review of Barrett's *Pharaoh* (1892) sums up the relationship between history and theatricality in actor-manager's historical plays:

True, the background is romantic enough. Strangely-clad people flit in and out of the massive palaces of Ancient Thebes. The semi-barbaric Egypt of four thousand years ago lives again, in dazzling splendour...Real, however, are the men and women so curiously garbed, and real are their passions, aspirations and ambitions; real with the realism of the present day. And this it is, this grafting of familiar types, human with an everyday humanity, upon an unfamiliar period of the world's history, which constitutes the play's chief charm.²⁷⁵

For this reviewer, the past has come alive through the medium of theater, and his connection to history is made possible through theatricality—in this case the bodies of live actors. Barrett, with

²⁷⁵ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 123. Although not strictly a toga drama, this production of Barrett's satisfied the same desire of the public to consume ancient history; this play simply takes place in Egypt, rather than in Greece or Rome.

the help of partners like Godwin, found a balance between theatricality and authenticity that helped to create a unified and pleasing, if not entirely accurate, reconstruction of the past.

Conclusion

Wilson Barrett was “the undisputed master of the toga play.”²⁷⁶ His spectacular melodramas attracted everyone from trade workers, to clergy, to college-educated gentlemen. By combining the traditional Victorian entertainment of melodrama with classical subject matter, his toga dramas, representative of great artistic and social changes in the late nineteenth century, provided the foundation for the sword-and-sandal Hollywood epics that were to follow in the twentieth century. His production of *Claudian*, for example, is “one of the best examples in the century of the combination of spectacle, archaeology, and pictorialism in melodrama.”²⁷⁷ Barrett leveraged the splendor of melodrama, satisfied the taste for classical history, and balanced authenticity with theatricality in his productions. His toga dramas represent the interconnections between different genres of art and the expansion of classical knowledge to the lower classes of society, as Victorian society adapted to new information and new ways of viewing the past. Barrett’s work represents the British exploration of identity through art and the establishment of an important theatrical genre.

Barrett was committed to producing “English plays on English themes by English authors”²⁷⁸—and even his toga plays fit that bill. Filled with spectacle and splendor, the productions perfectly represent the Victorian genre of melodrama. The historical settings were shaped by the neoclassical movement and the British taste for the Classics; the public saw the

²⁷⁶ Richards, *The Ancient World*, 99.

²⁷⁷ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 65.

²⁷⁸ Thomas, *The Art of the Actor-Manager*, 45.

Romans as part of the British past in terms of culture, politics, and even blood relations. Barrett used the research of Godwin and others to provide an air of authenticity and to legitimize his productions, but Barrett's own theatrical genius made his shows a success. Despite images on stage drawn both from historical artifacts and imagination, the plays were really English plays dressed in Roman garb that satisfied the desire for classically-inspired popular entertainment.

Although melodrama was extremely popular in the late Victorian period, the glamour gave way to less spectacular genres. Barrett, however, helped to lay the groundwork for popular presentations of the past which would continue with the advent of film. Through the medium of spectacle, Barrett brought to life the Victorian idea of ancient Rome. Barrett's work provides a theatrical model for looking at history, making that history accessible, and at the same time producing popular entertainments. In his own words, Barrett produced "old-fashioned melodramas, which, though possibly quite despised by the modern critic, do nevertheless touch the heart's truest and most human chords."²⁷⁹

²⁷⁹ Barrett quoted in Richards, *The Ancient World*, 102-103.

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