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"A Blaze of Light and Finery": The Victorian Theater and the Victorian Theatrical Novel

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“A Blaze of Light and Finery”:
The Victorian Theater and the Victorian Theatrical Novel

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, who gave me the encouragement to start my life anew, and who has always offered moral support when the things of the world began to seem too much to bear. Your patience in the face of my self-absorption over the past two years has been truly saintly, and your companionship has been a warm and constant light.

I am particularly indebted to my sisters, who have proven to me that I don't have to "go it alone." Your willingness to listen during my panic attacks has been instrumental in calming the crazy floods that have threatened to wash me away. I would be remiss if I did not also thank Dr. Ray Wonder, who made me realize that my dreams were still, and always, within reach. I must also give special mention to my friends at eternallee.com, who have shown endless indulgence and understanding, and at guitarandpen.com, whose fiery political opinions have kept me centered on my other passion, allowing me to keep my foci in perspective. Finally, I want to mention Lee Ingleby, whose nuanced and sensitive portrayal of Charles Dickens's Smike was what brought the novel *Nicholas Nickleby* to my attention in the first place.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the Victorian antitheatrical prejudice is both well-established and well-respected. This paper, however, examining the Victorian theatrical novel and the Victorian theater in terms of that prejudice, finds the ready assumption of the prejudice to be problematic at best. A close look at three novels that together span the early to mid-nineteenth century shows that, far from being ubiquitous and unilateral, antitheatricality was in many cases an anomaly; indeed, many of those novelistic elements that have long been assumed to be antitheatrical address different issues altogether. Employing close readings of the novels—Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, Charles Dickens’s *Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, and Geraldine Endors Jewsbury’s *The Half-Sisters*—along with an examination of historical documents, and utilizing as well current scholarship in Victorian theater and theatrical novels, I demonstrate that the Victorians were instead keen appreciators of theater, and that the Victorian “antitheatrical novel” was in many cases far more interested in the authenticity of human interplay than in the inauthenticity of staged role-play.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the nineteenth century British actors and actresses negotiated the thin, unsteady bridge that separated the shores of respectability from the banks of ill repute. Clearly there were many reasons, whether real or perceived, for the populace to distrust the theater, from the shadowy situation of the female performers, to the scarcity of proper training venues, which resulted in a lack of credentials, to the generally poor remuneration of the actors and their consequent lowered social status, to the Victorians' own valuations of authenticity, sincerity, and honesty. In the following chapter I briefly summarize the thinking behind the antitheatrical prejudice, and then redefine the concept, situating much of the prejudice as being, not antitheatrical per se, but anti-deception. The ensuing chapters examine the emphasis on authenticity in terms of one early Victorian theatrical novel (Charles Dickens's *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*) and another from somewhat later in the period (Geraldine Endor Jewsbury's *The Half-Sisters*); meanwhile, through an exploration of Jane Austen's pre-Victorian *Mansfield Park*, I fix the concern for human authenticity far in advance of the Victorian period. These three vastly different novels, broadly separated by time and by their writers' apparent concerns, would appear on surface all to adopt the antitheatrical prejudice to one degree or another. On closer examination, however, it can be shown that all three authors have very different purposes in mind.

Mid-nineteenth century ambivalence about the value and use of acting and actors is reflected in much of the fiction and non-fiction of the age. Victorian entertainers such as William Charles Macready and Fanny Kemble, in their journals and memoirs, frequently admit to an intense revulsion of their crafts and social statuses, dissatisfied with the very visible nature of their lives and with their treatment at the hands of the public, especially when they contrasted their treatment with that of actors on the continent.¹ While often enough it must be imagined that even such “private” writings were set down with a future reader in mind, the possibility must also be conceded that the writers were perfectly sincere. Even sincerity, however, is not always what we imagine it to be for, as Lionel Trilling points out, sincerity requires a certain amount of self-awareness and, as “self-awareness and public duty are inextricably linked” (Voskuil 5), sincerity to some degree itself requires theatricality.

Nineteenth-century attitudes toward the theater as an entertainment institution were, we are told, at best equivocal; attitudes toward the actors who appeared therein were often overridingly negative. While in 1846 Dickens claimed for the actor an almost universal popularity,² Jeffrey Richards makes the counterclaim that “[t]he actor in 1830 was a social and artistic outcast, a rogue and vagabond” (66). Although the Theatres Act of 1843 effectively abolished the patent theaters, it should be remembered that even prior to this act the lines that separated the legitimate theaters from the illegitimate were muddy at best. The Theatres Act of 1843 was much like the 21st Amendment to the

¹ Deirdre David records that Kemble’s 1834 marriage was induced by her desperation “to leave a profession she found utterly degrading to women” (76).

² “There is no class of society,” he said, “[...] whom so many people regard with affection as actors” (qtd. in Baker 77).

United States Constitution, which repealed Prohibition: it simply took a step back from a law that had long since ceased working. Meanwhile, if some middle-class Englishmen and women had been persuaded by the legitimacy and standing of individual theaters before the Theatres Act of 1843, we should not accept that a mere three years could have made such a difference in the popularity and social acceptability of actors. Clearly tastes were changing, and had been changing for some time.

Yet, although many people idolized actors from a distance, often going so far as to invite them to dinners and balls, their company was otherwise—with the exception of those few lionized “stars” who were singled out to be particularly courted—generally eschewed in polite circles.³ Meanwhile, even idolatry had its drawbacks; in his correspondence, Charles Mathews, one of those lionized exceptions, “often records invitations to the social occasions of the great—but also notes that he was usually required to ‘tumble’ for his dinner” (Bratton 98). While some actors no doubt enjoyed the acclaim, willing enough to engage in the sort of trade-off that Mathews describes, there were those who resented their odd social twilight; Bratton cites Edmund Kean as “the obvious example [of performers who] refused to go into the society that they felt only wanted them as playthings, inviting them into their houses but maintaining an invisible class barrier around the performer even as they satisfied their curiosity about him” (98). Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half-Sisters* includes a disturbing chapter concerning just such an event, during the course of which the widely-acclaimed and presumably respected actress Bianca, attending a social function, is appalled to overhear a cruelly dismissive

³ While George Vandenhoff’s memoirs contain a short list of actresses who gained titles through marriage to the nobility (86), the opposite—a “decent” middle- or upper-class woman marrying an actor—was much less common.

analysis of herself, including, even though she has lived a blameless life, callous estimations of her sexual activity. Tracy Davis expands on the idea of the anathematized actor in her discussion of the 1845 novel *Pomfret*, wherein

Henry F. Chorley's . . . English characters reveal their stock of prejudices when an eminent opera singer, Helena Porzheim, comes within their sphere. Although Chorley exaggerates for a slightly comic effect, the assumptions and rumours that he details about Porzheim are a checklist of upper-middle class Anglo-Saxons' social anxieties. (70)

These rumors include assault/murder of a lover, base birth, duels fought for her, forced emigration, embezzlement, gambling addictions, bizarre eccentricities, and “slapping his Majesty of Wurtemberg in the face”.

Readers embraced such characterizations whether or not they actually believed them and novelists, or those novelists with a good understanding of the market at least, were happy to oblige. Because of this, for generations the accepted wisdom has been that the Victorians, especially in the early part of the century, were suspicious of the theater in all its aspects. Warnings against the theater show up in novels, journals, sermons, letters, memoirs, and newspaper ads, and have been consistently, even persistently, chronicled in scholarly books and articles, to such a degree that the concept of the antitheatrical prejudice in the Victorian age has become a commonplace. But did it really exist and, if so, to what extent? If the “typical” Victorian was truly opposed to the theater, after all, what need would there have been for the impassioned warnings against it? Rather, such anxious, even paranoid, tracts would seem to suggest that theater was wildly popular, and

widely accepted, among the average citizens of early Victorian England.⁴ Meanwhile, if these warnings against the theater were truly necessary, what hypocrisy drove the authenticity-minded, yet antitheatrical, Victorians to the theaters in such numbers?

Emily Allen makes the very logical claim that the antitheatrical prejudice is a “master narrative” created by those who argue for the supremacy of the novel during the period. “Our investment in the antitheatrical argument,” she stresses, rests in “our overinvestment in notions of the novel’s complete and monolithic dominance of the period” (5). Additionally she suggests that novels themselves nourished the antitheatrical prejudice, protecting and sustaining themselves by convincing their predominantly middle-class readership that books were “safe” and theaters were not. This may indeed be true but, if so, it was not always necessarily the principle intent. The ensuing examination into the early nineteenth century theater-going, and theatrical-novel-reading, public, in which I explore several of the biases said to drive the antitheatrical prejudice, is an attempt to unravel the perceived antitheatrical elements in select novels, using the constantly shifting ambivalence of the times as a guidepost. In the following chapters I reconsider this antitheatrical prejudice, examining it in its historical and social context and then applying it to three, on the surface, vastly dissimilar “theatrical” novels of the first half of the century. In Chapter One I provide an overview of the prejudice itself, looking at it briefly through the eyes of religious writers of the late eighteenth century before turning to the impressions of the performers and audiences of the early nineteenth century. Chapter Two considers the popularity of the novel itself within a nineteenth-century construct, before turning to a brief discussion of theatrical novels in general. In

⁴ Strong box office returns for the period support this reading.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five, meanwhile, I consider Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Dickens's *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, and Jewsbury's *The Half-Sisters* in terms of secrecy, honesty, and authorial intent, examining the ways in which all three ostensibly "antitheatrical" novels in fact use the theater to level distinct criticisms against the antitheatrical prejudice itself.

CHAPTER ONE
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: the basis for the
“antitheatrical prejudice”

The dubious reputations of performers began long before the Victorian Era: theater’s sordid reputation is centuries-old. As early as the fourth century St. John Chrysostom, a father of the early Church, warned against the iniquities of such “pagan” entertainments as playgoing and horseracing, and of the repercussions faced by Christians who participated in such abominations. In part, the assumed danger of the theater revolved around the sheer idleness of a pastime that took one’s eyes off God, or that encouraged delight in the exercise of vain and worldly considerations; partly too, though, was the association, however minimal, with people who were generally understood, whether rightly or not, to be of distinctly low moral character.

By 1642 pietistic Puritans, reacting against theater’s perceived threat, forced the closure of all England’s performance halls. It should have come as a surprise to no one that this resulted in a violently determined swing of the pendulum. When those halls finally reopened for business in 1660, playwrights seemed fully resolved to deserve the appellations of wicked bawdiness that the Cromwellians had placed on them. Plays were naughty, playwrights naughtier still, and those Englishmen and women who were paying attention were either scandalized or titillated, and sometimes both.

Mere attendance at a play was enough to invite censure, although for many this was no deterrent. In fact there seemed to be no stopping the spectators: as the century progressed, the mores of its people, in the estimation of many, continued to regress. Although Cromwell and his followers were long gone, the antitheatrical prejudice, as Jonas A. Barish terms it, lived on: in the following century William Wilberforce, a philanthropist, politician, and abolitionist, was only one of many speaking out fiercely against the idle nature of theatrical entertainments. The theater itself he described as “that place which the debauchee, inflamed with wine, or bent on the gratification of other licentious appetites, finds most congenial to his state and temper of mind” (317). Indeed, Wilberforce argued that, if one truly loved God, the question of whether or not one should go to the theater would never be raised in the first place.⁵

By the early nineteenth century, as theaters proliferated, Wilberforce’s “debauchees” could slake their “licentious appetites” in any theater in England, if rumor were to be believed. At the dawn of the Victorian Era the drama, writes Tracy C. Davis, “was thought of as debased, with theatres and audiences correspondingly low in taste and decorum” (*Actresses* 81). Meanwhile, according to Davis, “[n]o theatre, however lofty in patronage or repertoire, was free of prostitutes in the auditorium.” This is a bold statement and, like most generalizations, requires a somewhat cautious approach. The issue of prostitution in the Victorian theaters is a critical one: Davis stresses that, in 1843, “the Surrey, Astley’s, and Drury Lane all were known to admit prostitutes as lures to

⁵ While attitudes such as these might on surface appear to speak exclusively to the dangers of the theater, it must be pointed out that, to some, all public amusements were equally suspect, particularly if they took place on Sundays; for working-class Englishmen and women, this was often the only day of the week they had for entertainment. Paul Schlicke quotes from the writings of the Rev. Baptist Noel who, in 1835, asserted that even taking a walk, reading the newspaper, or writing a letter on Sunday was “contrary to the Christian’s duty of the Lord’s-day” (10).

young men” (*Economics* 50). This was a sound, well-considered business decision, made by theater management in a deliberate attempt to entice patrons away from the neighboring saloons and public houses. Meanwhile, the female theatrical performer was, and always had been, suspected of being sexually obtainable for a price. In fact, the Victorian age was “a period which habitually used the word ‘actress’ as a facetious synonym for ‘prostitute’” (Bratton 15). Yet in many cases the concept of the actress as prostitute could not have been farther from the truth; while it may be true that some theater managers actively encouraged prostitutes, others, desirous of a more respectable audience, were just as active in discouraging them. Davis argues that many managers would instantly dismiss an actress discovered to be selling sexual favors (*Actresses* 78), yet, once again, public perception was more powerful than simple facts, and salacious details more enticing than demure ones. Thus Jewsbury could include in *The Half-Sisters* a theater manager who demanded of his actresses that they satisfy him sexually, and the public would find these novelistic characters powerfully compelling, supplying potent and lasting mental images. Yet this again seemed to be no real deterrent to the general populace; more and more theaters continued to be built, accommodating increasingly larger audiences.

Proximity to prostitutes was only one of the many proffered objections to the theater. Theaters were regarded by many as dangerous places, crawling with objectionable people of every sort: pickpockets and drunkards, and also, whether it was admitted openly or not, simple working class Englishmen and women. Servants, factory workers, clerks—these too could be considered objectionable to the more decorous middle classes. Meanwhile, the venue itself had its dangers, as F. J. Harvey Darton

explains in his discussion of strolling players such as the Vincent Crummles troupe in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*:

It was an advantage to play on a moonlight night (frequently announced on the bills[...]), because of the dark alleys down which the house often lay. There might be wax candles for lighting, and three or four circular luster chandeliers above the stage itself—no tallow, because of its smell; or there might even be oil lamps, but they also stank: lighting was a difficult problem. (*Crummles* lxvi)

Biases against the theater held firm well into the nineteenth century and beyond. “Decent” people exhorted their children not to enter the theatrical professions; this was due in large part to the perceived class status of actors themselves. Nevertheless, equally “decent” people, flocked to theater managers in the hopes of entering the profession. William Charles Macready's journals frequently treat, with scorn only lightly mingled with distress, the talentless but financially desperate masses who came to audition for him with stars in their eyes, seeing the theater as a step up in social and financial status rather than the step down that Macready himself perceived. Macready's exasperation with what he considered their severely limited theatrical abilities (albeit he seldom praised any acting other than his own) blends with a dislike of the theater that often approaches shamed self-loathing; indeed, he writes unhappily, in 1845, that “[drama critic and Dickens biographer John] Forster came to dinner; he urged upon me giving permission to my family to see me act. I do not know; I have a feeling about their seeing me as a player. Perhaps I am wrong” (227).

Part of Macready's anxiety concerning his vocation had to do with the way players were accepted in England, as opposed to on the continent. In an 1837 journal entry he records falling into conversation with a Frenchman:

[W]e talked on various subjects, and at last the theatre was mentioned by him, and shortly after my name. I told him I was the person he was speaking of—his surprise and pleasure were extreme. His enthusiasm broke forth...and again made me lament that the destiny which made me a player, had not made me a French one. (102)

Indeed, he frequently laments that his chosen career “should entitle me to the lavish expression of public praise, and exclude me from distinctions which all my compeers enjoy” (140). His fear, then, was that his children should witness their father so traduced. This may have had as much to do with pecuniary considerations as with social stigma: while a “star” might draw a very good salary, the rank-and-file theater professionals often lived on the very brink of poverty, experiencing long periods of unemployment and, not infrequently, illnesses brought about by hunger and exhaustion (Booth).

While many actors were, like Macready, ambivalent about their profession, many non-actors were decidedly fascinated by it. Dickens's own theatrical aspirations were mirrored throughout England, and not only by the financially desperate such as those auditioning for Macready: in 1856, at the age of twenty-five, Helen Taylor, daughter of Harriet Taylor Mill and step-daughter of John Stuart Mill, felt herself called to the stage. Taylor's parents, though they clearly disapproved of the venture (Tracy Davis claims they “were horrified lest someone of ‘their set’ should see Helen on the stage” [*Actresses* 73]), were sympathetic to the point of arranging acting lessons, paying her travel and

costume expenses, providing her with servants, engaging her brother as traveling companion and chaperone, and in all ways seeming to be supportive. Yet it must be noted that behind this support was the expectation that Taylor's stage appearances would be anywhere but London, so that friends of the Mills would not learn of her odd and embarrassing venture. Changing her name, so that the respected family names would not be tarnished, she "travelled to the nether regions of England" (*Actresses* 73) to begin her training. Unfortunately, her

class values instilled in her a fear and loathing of contact with her colleagues (the under classes) and in treating them like untouchables she behaved like a counterspy in buskins. With all the comfort and privilege her money gave her, Helen's experience was far from typical, peppered with tedium and disappointment rather than excitement, and completely devoid of the artistic fulfillment she sought. With the secret intact, she returned home to assist Mill in a secretarial capacity. (*Actresses* 73)

Helen's undertaking highlights the ambivalence with which middle-class Victorians in particular approached the theater—she was both drawn to it and suspicious of it. Indeed, class consciousness informed much of the Victorian attitude towards performers. Although Davis tells us that "[b]y the 1860s . . . the prominent theatrical families had been prosperous long enough to be accepted as middle-class" (*Actresses* 77), a certain stigma still attached to the profession, and while by 1895 the profession had advanced to such a degree that Henry Irving could receive a knighthood, seemingly a stamp of approval for the profession, only a few years before, in 1870, an aged and ailing

Charles Dickens, in his last week of life, was advising his adult daughter Katie against going on the stage: “The life would be too difficult, too crass” (Kaplan 553).

It should not be surprising to realize that the performers themselves often articulated an uneasy ambivalence about their own roles in the theatrical world, sometimes going so far as to despise not only their professions but, apparently, themselves as well. Indeed, many of the journals, letters, and memoirs of nineteenth-century theater celebrities appear to be drenched in self-loathing. William Charles Macready details throughout his journals slight after slight received at the hands of theater “outsiders,” such as the insult from a landlady who implied that, had she been aware of his profession in advance, she might not have let her flat to him (38); in an 1839 journal entry he achingly refers to the stage as “my pariah profession” (140). Fanny Kemble (1809-1893) was similarly discomfited by her vocation; her memoir *Record of a Girlhood* is “the story of a girl caught up, more or less against her will, in the Regency theaters” (Bratton 97).

George Vandenhoff recollects the shame, both to himself and to his family, of his terrible lapse in abandoning a promising career to pursue acting. Even though by doing so he was following in the footsteps of his father, Vandenhoff claims that when his plans became known “[t]he mildest judgment passed on me was that I was *mad*; the gentlest sentence, that I was *ruined*” (9). One might have supposed his father would be honored, proud to be joined by his son onstage. But, as Vandenhoff puts it, “Actors, in general, especially those who have attained eminence, have a dread, amounting almost to horror, of their young ones following in the same career” (28). He continues,

I recollect, as a boy with my father, meeting old BRAHAM in Covent Garden market, London; and *ápropos* of my future destination, the law, my ‘governor’ asked Braham, then a rich and prosperous gentleman, living *en prince* almost, if either of his boys would be on the stage; to which the great tenor, with emphatic earnestness replied, “God forbid! One is for the church, the other for the army.”

In other words, not just actors but other performers as well, even highly-respected stars of the opera such as Braham, wanted to place their children in dignified, more seemly positions. The stage, according to Vandenhoff, was anything but seemly.⁶

Comedian Charles Mathews’s father was equally disapproving of a theatrical life for his son, not, as with Vandenhoff and Braham, because he himself had suffered public condemnation as a performer, but because his religious views forbade it. Similarly, William Charles Macready’s journal documents his fears that his children might wish to follow in his footsteps. His entry of April 26, 1843, states, “The darling children acted *Comus* in the drawing-room after dinner, interesting and amusing me very much; they recited the poetry very well indeed, and only gave me a fear lest they should imbibe a liking for the wretched art which I have been *wasting my life upon*. God forbid!” (195, my emphasis).⁷ Charles Dickens, too, though he eagerly sought out acting opportunities for himself, was adamant that the female members of his family should not appear onstage except in strictly amateur productions; when he and Wilkie Collins elected to upgrade their play *The Frozen Deep* to more professional status, he removed his daughter

⁶ Braham’s children, incidentally, did not suffer by being the offspring of a famous tenor; indeed, his daughter and granddaughter both eventually married into the aristocracy.

⁷ His children were, however, permitted to attend his farewell performances in 1851.

and his sister-in-law from their roles, replacing them with seasoned actresses (including, of course, Ellen Ternan, his consequent, and as yet unexplained, relationship with whom still prompts frustrated curiosity).

Yet nineteenth-century theater had its morally and socially instructive aspects as well, to the degree that Charles Dibdin could recount being asked by the local police to include in a play a scene of a burglary, so that the audience might be instructed in how to respond appropriately in the event that their own homes were burglarized (Davis and Emeljanow *RTA* 5). Meanwhile, recent scholarship suggests that the Victorian theater was not nearly so dangerous, the audiences not nearly so unruly, perhaps even the performers not nearly so despised, as popular belief even now paints them. Davis and Emeljanow cite an 1857 article in *The Examiner* in which a primarily working-class *Twelfth Night* audience at Sadler's Wells is described as "a happy crowd, as orderly and reverent as if they were at church" (118). There is, in other words, evidence for a well-behaved audience, despite popular opinion. Voskuil, citing Barish's seminal treatment of the antitheatrical prejudice in the Victorian age, reminds us that "negative attitudes toward theatricality circulated in a variety of rhetorical forms in Elizabethan England, and we have never used them to construct an entire edifice of antitheatricality for that era as a whole" (15). Barish in fact points out that "[o]ne recurrent feature of the history of the theater is the fact that outbursts of antitheatrical sentiment tend to coincide with the flourishing of the theater itself" (60). In all likelihood, then, there would be no valid reason for antitheatrical rhetoric if no one were going to the theater in the first place.

While it seems clear that the theater was in some ways every bit as wicked as it was painted, it seems equally clear that in other ways its evils were strongly exaggerated,

whether for effect or simply out of ignorance. “The assumption that popular audiences were rowdy and unmanageable is [...] flawed,” according to Davis and Emeljanow:

Drunkenness, for instance, was rarely a major problem in the theatres: even when beer and spirits were available, the theatres did not turn into surrogate public houses. Offensive behavior was usually condemned by the audience itself and troublemakers ejected by the theatres’ own officers.

Police were in attendance at most theatres. (“Audiences” 95)

This, conjoined with Davis’s claims about chaste actresses, makes for a relatively demure theater experience, greatly in contrast with the prevailing notions of riot and sexual excess. In fact it is abundantly clear that theater in the nineteenth century was a vibrant and thriving mode of entertainment, attended by tens of thousands of avid, energetic patrons nightly. Playhouses were being rebuilt to seat more and more people: Covent Garden, rebuilt after the fire of 1808, was a grandiose project—much larger, both in terms of stage-space and seating capacity, than it had been before. In 1812 the Drury Lane theater seated some 3000 paying guests (Cox viii). Cary M. Mazer asserts: “[I]n the nineteenth century, theatre was—despite the prevailing antitheatricalism of official high culture—perhaps the most widespread arena of popular culture” (210).

Clearly, the louder and more strident the warnings against theater, the more popular the Victorian theater must be imagined to have been. And strident the warnings were, as indicated above. Yet if we are to accept these antitheatrical writings as a reaction to a powerfully pro-theatrical reality, we need to reexamine certain of the apparent antitheatrical writings themselves: while some are clearly strongly prejudicial, in many

cases what appear to be warnings against the theater might prove, on closer examination, to have some other purpose altogether.

Although recent examinations have begun to unsettle prevailing opinions, the scholarship on the Victorian audience is still relatively sparse. Many scholars construct their typical audiences in the same way that they construct Victorian attitudes to the theater: by basing them on newspaper articles, journals, and the observations of writers such as Dickens and Hazlitt. Yet as Lynne M. Voskuil demonstrates, these opinions are selectively plucked from a larger supply of often conflicting opinions; with confirmations gathered in this way, it is little wonder that the preponderance of the evidence appears to argue for the antitheatrical prejudice. The apparent hostility being accepted as widespread, many reasons have been put forth to explain it, and most of them are no doubt, at least to some degree, correct. But the assumption of the unilateral nature of that prejudice must, I think, be challenged. As Davis and Emeljanow point out, the typical audience for the theater was large and varied, and immensely hungry for entertainment. While George Rowell paints a portrait of an upper-class audience which “when it patronized the theatre at all, favored the opera [or] shunned the theatre altogether and sought entertainment from the circulating library” (1)⁸ the theater in fact attracted all social classes. Michael Booth, quoting theater manager George Davidge, records that the working classes tended to patronize the theater on Mondays, while “in the middle of the week we have the better classes” (2). Although Charles Kemble, in 1832, “complained that the late dinner hour took away the upper classes from the theatre” (Booth 2), and

⁸ Charles Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* briskly satirizes Rowell’s characterization by showing the jaded and debauched Sir Mulberry Hawk using a private box at the theater as a venue to make humiliating sexual advances upon the innocent Kate Nickleby.

although the opera may indeed have siphoned off a proportion of theater's upper class audience, Queen Victoria was herself in frequent attendance, both before and after her coronation, enjoying pantomime, farce, opera, melodrama, and other popular entertainments of the day.

As the century wore on, theaters proliferated and their audiences become all the more enthusiastic. The plays were affordable too: as early as 1827 a fifteen-year old Dickens could gain "[a]dmission to the galleries at Covent Garden, Drury Lane, and the Haymarket [for] only a shilling, and after nine o'clock prices were reduced to half. Since, in addition to the main attraction, an evening's bill usually included a farce and an interlude, a wealth of entertainment could be had at small expense" (Johnson 9). While it was standard practice for audiences to interact with the performers to some extent, this does not necessarily imply obstruction or obstreperousness, Wopsle's audience notwithstanding. And while, again, patrons could buy oranges during the show and hurl peelings at sloppy performers, this was not necessarily the norm. Davis and Emeljanow contest the popular opinion that audiences themselves were "rowdy and unmanageable," offering the simple logic that theaters would have lost their licenses had they not maintained a "reasonable standard of behavior both within the theatre and immediately outside it" (94). Yet the audience's bad reputation continued, as noted by Bracebridge Hemyng, one of Henry Mayhew's co-writers who, in 1861-62, "commented that it was high time the west-end prejudice that east-end theatres were filled with 'a rough, noisy set of thieves and prostitutes' was exploded" (qtd. in Davis and Emeljanow, VEA 98).

It can be seen that the concept of the antitheatrical prejudice extended to the audience as well as to the performers, the management, and the buildings themselves.

Meanwhile, although certainly the demographic makeup of an audience can change from year to year, and even from night to night, conflicting anecdotes suggest that a journalist might be as likely to create, from whole cloth, an ideally “bad” audience as an ideally “good” one.⁹ In fact, not much is known about the “typical” Victorian audience.

Similarly, even though such newspapers and magazines as *The London Chronicle*, *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Whitehall Evening Post*, and *The Examiner* reviewed theatrical performances on a regular basis, Voskuil notes that “we [still] lack a large body of reliable evidence that documents how early [19th Century] performances were received” (25). Voskuil nevertheless makes good use of reviews from *The London Times* and *The Illustrated London News* as well as the writings of William Hazlitt, George Henry Lewes.

Voskuil, though she advocates for a more nuanced understanding of nineteenth-century theater, acknowledges that the negative perception was widespread; she discusses the fashion of *tableaux vivants*, for instance, as “popular entertainments in the drawing rooms of the respectable English throughout the nineteenth century [because they offered] a mode of domesticated theater that allowed its genteel participants and spectators to play at theater and *to avoid sullyng contact with the demimonde* in the professional theater world” (108, my emphasis). Voskuil’s phrasing underscores the public’s sense that performers held themselves to a looser sexual standard than did “proper” people, and lends emphasis to the scenes of predatory stage managers and Bianca’s humiliation in *The Half-Sisters*, as well as the uneasy questioning of the private theatricals in *Mansfield Park*.

⁹ Davis and Emeljanow include Dickens’s 1851 *Household Words* account of Samuel Phelps taming an unruly mob at Sadler’s Wells, an incident Phelps himself disputed (VEA 97-98).

Assumptions about the sexuality of actresses were predicated on Victorian notions of sincerity and authenticity. As actresses often performed scenes of passion, it was assumed that either they actually felt this passion (this was unsavory, and especially so for married actresses) and were displaying it publicly—a lack of decorum that was entirely unacceptable—or that they were simply lying about it. Acting, in other words, required deception. We accept it today as a commonplace that the Victorians, in their quest to define themselves and their era, considered authenticity one of the most important of their traits—it was popularly understood that a performer, in taking on a role and making it believable, was engaging in inauthenticity and deceit. “Reverent Victorians,” according to Nina Auerbach, “shunned theatricality as the ultimate, deceitful mobility. It connotes not only lies, but a fluidity of character that decomposes the uniform integrity of the self” (*Private 2*).¹⁰

The worry, according to the long-accepted theory, seemed to have something to do with the question of where, if an actor subjugated his or her real self beneath a role, that real self went. To some degree, it no doubt brought up the question of whether there was a real self at all, or whether, at the very least, the real self was the one that was being projected to the audience. This was especially problematic with female performers, and with fictional accounts of female performers in the popular novels of the day. “Victorian writers,” as John Kucich explains, “regularly characterized some social groups as outside the pale of honesty. Women, non-English races, and the working class were all obvious targets for scapegoating in terms of their dishonesty” (33). In the honesty/dishonesty binary, women were perceived as fundamentally deceitful. This perception is important

¹⁰ Auerbach’s assessment has been challenged by Voskuil and others, and will be challenged in this paper as well.

to my discussion of select nineteenth-century theatrical novels. At the same time, Kucich also makes the claim that “[o]ne hallmark of Victorian fiction is its exploration of the conditions in which finessing the truth could be regarded as a sign of collective social skill and authority. In fact, from one point of view, fiction could be seen as a kind of conduct literature defining exactly how one might achieve an aura of shared sophistication through deceit” (34). Kucich’s theory of finessing the truth—in effect creating, through elegant manipulation, a falsity that excels reality—also will be addressed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

THEATER AND THE NOVEL

If, in the eighteenth century, theater was the dominant form of entertainment in England, by the middle of the nineteenth century the novel was king. Catherine Burroughs, referencing Professor J. Paul Hunter, places this “shift in generic dominance . . . in the 1740s,” citing “the Puritan fear of theatre as a force of immoral infection” (221). In addition, still quoting Hunter, she notes “the growing cultural distrust of village festivals, the proscription of the telling of traditional tales, the court terror of nonconformist assemblies . . . and the political fears that produced the Licensing Act of 1737.” This suggests that the political establishment’s fear of theater led it to endorse the novel as a safer form of entertainment, a means of policing the public by moving them towards a more sanctioned outlet.¹¹ As already discussed, however, the novel, in its own self-interest, may have begun claiming supremacy long before supremacy was conferred.

Novels are often perceived as the milieu of the middle classes: their expense precluded wider dispersal among the lower classes. While an 1849 Select Committee on Public Libraries made it England’s mission to provide appropriate reading materials for everyone, regardless of their ability to pay (Roberts 105), making books were available to

¹¹ Although it has been argued that the shift from theater attendance to novel-reading illustrates a binary shift from public to private activities, it must be noted that reading was still frequently a social activity, entailing one reader and an avidly attentive group of listeners.

the lower classes whether they could read them or not,¹² widespread illiteracy remained an issue in the Victorian period. Literacy rates, based on “signature literacy” (the ability to sign one’s name), were at only about 58 percent in the England of 1840 (Stephens 555): this percentage at first glance seems high enough, but we must consider that more people could sign their names than could read and write with ease. Kate McNally asserts that “even by 1851 [school] attendance was in fact only five years on average . . . with children typically leaving school at around ten years of age” (44) While many Victorians learned to pen a passable signature in order to marry, sign a baptismal record, or engage in other legal or church matters, they often went no further towards achieving true literacy. Thus while many of the most ardent theatergoers, we may suppose, were wholly illiterate, the book culture was effectively geared towards a higher class.

But even that part of the audience that left the physical theater did not leave the conceptual theater. Theatrical novels, and theatrical scenes within non-theatrical novels, provided a taste of theater without the concomitant dangers so vociferously warned about in the actual playhouse environment. Readers, many of whom were regular theater-goers themselves, were fascinated by tales of actors and their lives. We might then hypothesize the nineteenth-century theatrical novel, in some respects, as a subversive literary form which brought theatrical entertainments to the people without the potential moral encumbrances of actual theater. Providing an insider’s view (or what purported to be an insider’s view) of the backstage world, yet without the risk of moral taint, the theatrical novel could unfold to the reader salacious details in the guise of principled advice, or comforting assurances that the theater was no different from any other milieu or vocation,

¹² Darton makes the very reasonable suggestion that the theater functioned as books for the illiterate masses (xxx).

or something in between. Reader fascination with theatrical themes and characters suggests that then, as now, the draw of the exotic acted as a sauce to the mundane, everyday world of the middle-class reader. Too, as the theater was a constant in the lives of many Victorian readers, it stands to reason that it should have been treated as such in novels that addressed Victorian life. Meanwhile, the novels raised and wrestled with philosophical questions of import to the Victorian reader: questions of honesty, sincerity, and what it meant to self-identify as a Victorian man or woman in the changing social environment of the nineteenth century.

Many of the theatrically-themed novels of the Victorian age, articulating certain commonly-held social attitudes of the era, treat actors with the same uneasy disrespect and suspicion that their real-life counterparts frequently faced. It will be remembered that when Mr. Wopsle, in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), leaves the Church to become an actor, it is received by Joe as a move downward on the social scale—a shameful loss of face. “[H]e’s had a drop,” he tells Pip in lowered tones of embarrassment, referring to a drop in fortunes. “[H]e’s left the Church and went into the playacting” (213). Not only has Wopsle become an actor, he has turned to drink; further, as mentioned in Chapter One, he has changed his name, both to save his family from the disgrace of his profession and, no doubt, to assume a sort of mystery and status with a high-sounding name that he hopes will fascinate people.¹³ Far from being fascinated, however, his audience abuses

¹³ In *Sketches by Boz* (“Private Theatres”) Dickens explains the habit of changing one’s name as being “[w]ith the double view of guarding against the discovery of friends or employers, and enhancing the interest of an assumed character, by attaching a high-sounding name to its representatives” (121).

him mightily, pelting him with orange-peel and interrupting his scenes with exuberant catcalls.¹⁴

John Glavin's contention that Dickens's great loathing for the theater far surpassed his love of it is meeting with greater and greater approval; indeed, in the eyes of many current scholars, Dickens, like Wopsle, "has had a drop." His arguably passive-aggressive treatment of characters such as Wopsle and the Crummles troupe may well situate his own ambivalence about the theater.¹⁵ Dickens, whether he realized it or not, was, like Macready, torn between his disapproval of the theater and an ardent, almost romantic, love for it. From a professional standpoint he could approach the theater from nearly any angle—he wrote at least three pieces (*The Strange Gentleman*, a play; *The Village Coquettes*, an operetta; and *Is She His Wife?*, a burletta) for the theater even before he began publishing his novels. Additionally, he published theater reviews in *Household Words*, and he delighted in both amateur and, later, professional forays onstage, not only as actor and playwright but as stage manager as well.¹⁶ His endorsement of Sleary and the circus "family" in *Hard Times* cannot be questioned. Yet it will be recalled that, just before his own decisive audition at Covent Garden, he came down with a suspicious sore throat and canceled, never resetting the appointment (Kaplan 55): whether this cancelation was indicative of stage-fright, a sudden reawakening of

¹⁴ Wopsle's rude and boisterous audience is foregrounded in the characters of Thomas Potter and Robert Smithers from Dickens's "Making a Night of It," a chapter in *Sketches by Boz*.

¹⁵ Glavin claims Dickens found the theater "shame-inducing" (AD 83).

¹⁶ William Macready, in his journal, discusses Dickens's play *The Lamplighter*, "which he read to me. The dialogue is very good, full of point, [although] I am not sure about the meagerness of the plot. He reads as well as an experienced actor would—he is a surprising man" (127)

class consciousness, or an actual ailment followed by quick success and steady work as a writer, we cannot know.

Meanwhile, in *Great Expectations*, the overdramatic church clerk Mr. Wopsle provides a steady source of high levity for the narrator. Early in the novel Dickens shows Wopsle to have a histrionic bent: when he says grace at dinner it is “with theatrical declamation . . . something like a religious cross of the Ghost in Hamlet with Richard the Third” (32). Dickens’s tone is indulgent enough here; it could almost be characterized as avuncular. Yet when Wopsle leaves the Church to pursue a theatrical career he is much abused by the rowdy revelers in his audience. They supply spurious lines, respond vociferously to his rhetorical questions, discuss the state of his stockings, and “call unanimously for Rule Britannia,” all the while laughing uproariously (245). Dickens’s delight in charting Wopsle’s embarrassing slide (his Hamlet “die[s] by inches from the ankles upwards [246]) is matched only by his glee in describing the rough-and-tumble audience members.

Glavin aside, Dickens’s keen sense of the ridiculous here can hardly be ascribed to an antitheatrical prejudice; Wopsle is the principal recipient of the author’s heckling, and indeed we may even feel somewhat sympathetic toward him on that account. *Great Expectations* is, furthermore, to a large degree a novel about role-playing. Pip, of course, is the ultimate role-player, uneasy pretender to a social station to which he finds himself unequal, but Estella, Magwich, and many other characters also assume roles throughout the novel. It is, indeed, Joe Gargery’s unwillingness, and perhaps even moral inability,¹⁷

¹⁷ This moral inability is a crucial point: the acting in *Great Expectations* is, for Dickens, only acceptable when done for an audience which recognizes and expects it; Pip’s role-playing is false and hints of low character.

to pretend that makes the adult Pip so uncomfortable in his presence, ashamed both of Joe and of himself for being ashamed. Wopsle's onstage acting is contrasted with Pip's and others' offstage acting in much the same way that the actors in Dickens's third novel, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, are contrasted with the non-theatrical characters. Yet, if Dickens's attitude does not suggest an antitheatrical prejudice, it certainly displays ambivalence, an ambivalence which is more noticeable in the earlier *Nickleby*. Here, when Nicholas and Smike first enter the house the Crummles troupe is performing in, they are immediately robbed of any sense of magic they might have brought to it. They find themselves "among bare walls, dusty scenes, mildewed clothes, heavily daubed draperies, and dirty floors" (280) and, as they take in the depressing sight, "all look[s] coarse, cold, gloomy, and wretched." Even Smike is struck by its grime and dullness. Brought up in misery and want at the wretched Dotheboys Hall (described by Forster as "like a piece by Hogarth, both ludicrous and terrible" [109]), living a life we can only assume is leached of all imagination and playfulness, Smike nevertheless has heard enough about theaters—perhaps from the other boys at the school—to have an expectation of something extraordinary, an expectation that is imploded by the dull and sparse backstage reality that meets his gaze. "Is this a theater?" he asks in shattered disbelief. "I thought [a theater] was a blaze of light and finery" (281). Thus, as he will do again in *Great Expectations*, Dickens plays assumptions against reality, keeping both his characters and his readers at all times slightly off-balance.

In the following chapters, I examine *Nicholas Nickleby*, along with two more fairly representative episodes from popular theatrical novels of the early- to middle-nineteenth century—Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, and Geraldine Endors Jewsbury's

The Half-Sisters—in an attempt to illuminate the deeper purposes for their apparent antitheatrical rhetoric.

CHAPTER THREE

MANSFIELD PARK

While Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* predates the Victorian period, it can be viewed within the spectrum of this conversation as bridging the social values of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and serving as an early indicator of where those values were heading. Considered by many to be antitheatrical in nature and scope, it appears to me to have a much different agenda.

The 1814 novel is perhaps Austen's most-discussed work; this is not, however, necessarily because scholars consider it her best, or because readers find it the most easily accessible. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. It is far more often characterized in such terms as "problematic," and its heroine, Fanny Price, frequently vilified as "dull" and "mousey,"¹⁸ "unlikeable,"¹⁹ "a failure,"²⁰ "stuffy" and "mediocre,"²¹ and even, in the rather startling opinion of Nina Auerbach, "a monster." In fact, Amy J. Pawl reminds us that Austen's own mother considered Fanny insipid (287). Much of this disdain is

¹⁸ Potter 617.

¹⁹ Lionel Trilling's exact quote, as provided by Nina Auerbach ("Feeling As One Ought to Feel"), is "Nobody, I believe, has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*" (104).

²⁰ Marilyn Butler, qtd. by Amy J. Pawl.

²¹ Fleishman.

predicated on the episode of the amateur theatricals in Chapters 13-19, and Fanny's surprising reaction to them.

Many readers find Fanny's disapproval of the supposedly harmless playacting to be priggish and sanctimonious, the overreaction of a backwards, pietistic moralizer, and wonder why Austen has made such a creature the centerpiece of her novel. Although there are those who interpret Fanny as Austen's satirical poke at the typical "conduct-novel girl" of the era, still others, suspecting Austen to be as anti-theatrical as Fanny appears, see the character as herself a conduct-book heroine. This latter view has brought great consternation to readers and scholars alike.

"The thing that has puzzled readers of the novel," as Jonas A. Barish points out, "is the intensity of the disapproval visited on the acting scheme, and the shadowiness of the objections against it" (300). As Barish interprets it,

[t]he point of the episode lies in the fact that all the right-thinking characters in the story regard the project as self-evidently immoral from the outset. This applies to Sir Thomas's younger and more responsible son, Edmund, and above all to his niece, Fanny Price, the heroine. On the other hand, it is the fatuous aristocrat Mr. Yates who proposes the theatricals in the first place, and the idler Henry Crawford who becomes their most enthusiastic promoter. (300)

Although the fatuousness of the aristocrat comes into play (this is very much a novel about class and social station), the "shadowiness of the objections" is the sticking point. There is all too often, among critics, an underlying assumption that, as we are not told why the theatricals are wrong, their impropriety must be abundantly clear to all "right-

thinking” individuals. We must therefore not need to be supplied with a reason: the reason, Barish suggests, is obvious—the theatricals are simply wrong, in and of themselves. In his view, the problem with the theatricals is that they “represent an ‘untasted pleasure’ in ‘all the riot of his gratifications.’ Crawford,” to Barish, “proves to be the one talented actor of the group, and also, at the climax of the story, the blackguard who runs off in an adulterous elopement with Maria Bertram, after having flirted with her during the rehearsals of the play” (300). Critics often take Crawford’s subsequent ill behavior as a comment on acting in and of itself, as well as a suggestion that his skill in acting is part of what marks him as a scoundrel. Thus the easiest conclusion (albeit not necessarily the right one) would be that it is the acting scheme itself to which Austen, her narrator, and Fanny Price all object, rather than to the actual subject matter of the chosen play.

Alternatively, we can look beyond the playacting, focusing instead on the play itself. David Monaghan tells us that the piece, adapted by Elizabeth Inchbald from a German original, “combines political radicalism with sexual permissiveness (91), while William Reitzel notes that “[i]t is possible to show that the choice of *Lovers’ Vows*, as a piece to be performed in the house of a country gentleman in the year 18---, was meant to be singularly inept; in fact, to go far beyond any general question of the doubtful taste of private theatricals” (452). While characterizing private theatricals in general as being in “doubtful taste,” Reitzel nevertheless singles out this particular play as being an exceedingly poor choice, adding the argument that Austen’s public was already familiar enough with the piece that no narrative synopsis would be necessary: “She makes no coherent statement of its plot, gives no more than a brief reminder of its unsuitability, and

picks at random such of its details as suit her convenience,” (455) he explains. By this we can take for granted that Austen assumed her own audience to be composed of theatergoers, seemingly negating the argument that the episode is antitheatrical. Supplying only the pieces she absolutely needed to, Austen trusted her reading audience’s memory to do the rest. Thus when Edmund, who seems at first to object only vaguely to the thought of amateur theatrics, discovers that *Lovers’ Vows* has been selected, his dismay will be shared by the readers themselves without the author having to press the matter.

Quoting from a contemporary newspaper review of Inchbald’s play,²² Reitzel tells us: “The fall of Agatha, in this play, is effected too easily; and her restoration to happiness, notwithstanding her repentance, forms too much of an apology for error. Such things may be admitted in real life; but, on the stage, a seduced female should never be suffered to appear but as an object of terror” (453). We may wonder then if the play is meant not as a comment on the young amateurs of Mansfield Theater, but as a foreshadowing of the later elopements of Maria and Crawford, and Julia and Mr. Yates. In this way Austen explains in advance why Maria and Julia can never come home to Mansfield Park or be welcomed by their family, and why Fanny’s surrogacy is at last sanctified by the Bertrams.

Even this, however, appears to me to fall short. I would suggest that the private theatricals episode in *Mansfield Park* has been examined out of context far oftener than in. Far from being a searing denunciation of acting, in fact, on closer view the novel can be interpreted as anything but. Indeed, as Lady Bertram remarks to Mrs. Norris, “[Y]ou and I used to be very fond of a play ourselves—and so am I still” (145). While it must be

²² *The Porcupine*, 7 September 1801

noted that the indolent Lady Bertram can hardly be considered a suitable role-model, much less mentor, for the young people, we must also acknowledge that Sir Thomas, upon his return from Antigua, voices no real objections to the thought of his sons and daughters play-acting either. Instead, “Indeed!” he exclaims, seeming far more interested than upset; “and what have you been acting?” (156)

Sir Thomas of all people has a right to be annoyed—if not by the theatrics themselves, than by the upheaval in his home. His private space—“his own dear room” (157)—has been reordered as thoroughly as Compton, Sotherton Court, and Mansfield Park’s own parsonage have been by recent modernizing “improvements.” Austen’s narrator has already held these architectural and landscaping updates to the mirror of the past and, in true romantic fashion, shown them to be wanting.²³ Now, in Sir Thomas’s home, to make way for the theatrics, furniture has been removed, candles left burning, a stage constructed, and a “ranting young man” is found in the billiard room, declaiming at the top of his voice. Even at this, though, we are told merely that Sir Thomas’s expression is one of “solemnity and amazement” (158).

We must therefore at least explore the idea of the theater as condoned rather than condemned. It seems likely that, at least in some respects, the theatrical episode in *Mansfield Park* is utilized to introduce a comparison prevalent throughout the novel, that of the old with the new, the settled and comfortable with the novel and exotic, country life with city life. To Alistair M. Duckworth the theme of modernization—the contrast of the old with the new—is crucial to the story, as it is to most of Austen’s novels; he states

²³ While Fanny often aligns herself with conservative values, her love of nature and “unimproved” vistas places her equally in the Romantic camp, and contrasts her with the London ethic espoused by the Crawfords and aspired to by her female cousins. For a more thorough discussion of Fanny as a Romantic heroine, see Fleishman’s Chapter Three, “The Novel in its Time.”

that here “Austen is using the technical vocabulary of improvements in a symbolic way” (24). Through this symbolism the Crawfords can be seen to inject into Mansfield Park all the ills of modern life, becoming accountable for the troubles that encompass the Bertram family. To them can be leveled the blame for exploiting Sir Thomas’s absence by bringing Yates (the “ranting young man” who later elopes with Julia) into the family circle, for introducing the casuist philosophies that threaten to undermine Edmund’s vocation, for encouraging sexual license, and for all the ensuing dissatisfactions that rock the stability of the quiet estate. In general, yes, they bring the theater itself, but in particular they bring the specific play *Lovers’ Vows*, which not only represents the turbulent energy of city life, but which, through their own machinations, becomes what it did not need to be: an opportunity for the young people to slide into immoral temptations.

Edmund disapproves of the undertaking from the first, even if his mother does not (109). “In a *general* light,” he stresses to his brother,

private theatricals are open to some objections, but as *we* are circumstanced, I must think it would be highly injudicious, and more than injudicious to attempt anything of the kind. It would shew great want of feeling on my father’s account, absent as he is, and in some degree of constant danger; and it would be imprudent, I think, with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering everything, extremely delicate. (110)

Edmund’s point is not that the private theatrical is immoral, but that present circumstances argue against frivolity. Their father is abroad, attempting to salvage what remains of the family fortunes, their sister is newly engaged to be advantageously

married and consequently has her reputation to protect, their mother (though he does not mention this) is hardly an effective chaperone. Building a theater will require an expenditure they can ill afford, but, until the title of the play is agreed upon, the expenditure of performing in that theater, albeit an expenditure of another sort, is not a real consideration for him. Still, we may wonder why Edmund objects at all. As already mentioned, Lady Bertram and, later, Sir Thomas, find nothing distasteful in the thought of their children acting.

Austen herself is clearly no more against the theater than is Sir Thomas; her narrator explicitly and acceptingly states, “a love of theater is so general, an itch for acting so strong, among young people, that [Yates can] hardly out-talk the interest of his hearers” (106). This can scarcely be accounted disapprobation. Similarly, Edmund freely acknowledges his own love of theater—“real acting, good hardened real acting” (109)—while Fanny herself, though she doubts the propriety of this venture, finds herself longing to see a play. Thus we still must address the problem of why Austen specifically uses the private theatrical to develop her characters’ psychomachia. David Lodge brings a convincing theological approach to the question of the play, finding in it a “proximate occasion of sin” (279). In fact, he states,

as Walter Allen points out in *The English Novel*, the decision to stage the play sets in progress the series of events that culminate in Maria's disgrace and the narrow escape of Julia from a similar fate. Tom Bertram, one of the prime instigators of the theatricals later feels “self-reproach arising from the deplorable event in Wimpole Street [Maria's adulterous escapade

with Crawford], to which he felt himself accessory by all the dangerous intimacy of his unjustifiable theatre.”

Fanny’s despairing reaction to the play supports this reading: “Agatha and Amelia appeared to her in their different ways so totally improper for home representation,” Austen writes, “—the situation of one, and the language of the other, so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty, that she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in; and longed to have them roused as soon as possible by the remonstrance which Edmund would certainly make. (120)

Lodge’s “proximate occasion of sin” is too delicious for most of Austen’s characters to resist. Maria, Julia, Henry, and Mary, already morally weak, are drawn into temptation through the roles that they enact and, once they enter into the action of the play, they become essentially blameless, for at this point their fall is nearly unavoidable. Just as we speak of “mob mentality” today, in the nineteenth century there was a concept of the “contagious sympathy of a crowd” which “had the effect of multiplying the emotional reaction of the spectator to dangerous proportions” (Baker 46). In effect, watching the performance of lust, wrath, indolence, and similar cardinal sins could weaken the individual’s resistance to them, making him or her susceptible to those same sins. This is believed to some extent even today: the concept that playing violent video games inspires children to violent thoughts—that exposure to negative influences desensitizes us to them—draws from the same theory. This ideology was behind the clergy’s distrust of theater, and explains why civilians were exhorted not to attend plays; to act in them would surely then have been that much more dangerous an invitation to sin. It also explains how the Bertram sisters are tempted into their separate falls.

Barish, in analyzing the characters of the Crawford siblings, makes the claim that the real issue is “not so much that [they] will mar their integrity by taking roles in the play” but that, through their easy adoption of such roles, they demonstrate that they have no integrity to mar: “[o]nly because they already suffer from a ‘disintegrated’ personality in the first place do they throw themselves with such furious gusto into the theatricals” (305). Thus, carrying David Lodge’s theological interpretation to its logical conclusion, Mary and Henry Crawford can be interpreted as representative of the Serpent in the Garden, taking on a pleasing shape in order to offer something charming, exotic, and forbidden, for the sole purpose of achieving the ruination of the souls of the Bertram family.²⁴ They succeed fully in their aims with Maria and Julia, and partially with Tom. The only reason they fail with Edmund is his dedication to his career path (I would say his faith, but overt conversations about religion are for the most part avoided in *Mansfield Park*). Only Fanny, who wrestles daily and palpably with her soul in an effort to become a better person—to improve her *self* rather than gardens, grounds, or hallways—sees clearly enough to avoid the damage the Crawfords bestow in pretty packages.

Still, once more we must ask: why specifically a private theatrical? A simplistic answer is found in the phrase itself—the very privacy of the “private theatrical” locates in it an element of danger. As public performance intrudes into the private sphere, it taints the sanctity and the security of the home space. Meanwhile, secrecy abets risk-taking behaviors: Tom Bertram even uses the element of secrecy, somewhat cynically, to exculpate the play, protesting that they are not considering playing before an audience;

²⁴ Henry Crawford in particular warrants this reading; the pleasure he takes in mischief and misfortune is powerfully illustrated when, at the sudden appearance of Sir Thomas, he urges Rushford to “pay his respects to Sir Thomas without delay [and sends] him after the others *with delighted haste*” (152, my emphasis).

they mean only to amuse themselves. “We want no audience, no publicity,” he reassures his brother (110), yet, as Edmund understands, it is this very privacy that cements the danger. “To think only of the licence which every rehearsal must tend to create,” he frets (135). We might think Edmund an insufferable prig, but that Austen makes it clear he is her hero in the piece; while she may gently tease him from time to time, his opinions (save for his unfortunate fascination with Mary Crawford) are preferenced. Meanwhile, the characters who argue in favor of the play are seen to be overwhelmingly foolish (Lady Bertram, Mr. Rushworth, Yates), self-centered (the Misses Bertrams, Mrs. Norris), or utterly, perilously, careless of reputation (Tom, Mary, Henry).

Their recognition of the very inappropriateness of their actions is underlined by their horror at the sudden, unexpected return of Sir Thomas, and their various reactions—their hearts “sinking under some degree of self-condemnation or undefined alarm” (151)—point up all too clearly just how unsupportable they know their actions to be, and how necessary secrecy has been to all their behaviors. Thomas R. Edwards tells us they “respond like children who have been caught at some nasty, secret indulgence, and they know it and can only unite in their guilt. The horror is quite real and, from their viewpoint, quite justified” (16). Mary and Henry slip away in secret, the Bertrams attempt to isolate their father in another room of the house; only Yates, oblivious, continues his solitary rehearsal. With this approach, we might contend that it is the privacy Austen objects to, rather than the theatrical, and that the episode is included as an exhortation to her readers to live their lives *as if* they were on stage, the suggestion being that a life lived in the public eye—in the light—is lived more carefully than one lived in secrecy and darkness.

I have already identified deception as one of the principle arguments against acting in the nineteenth century. “Mary and Henry,” in Edwards’s view,

use the play to approach closer to their objects, and those objects, Maria consciously and Edmund unconsciously, understand this and accept it.

They are not acting but disguising emotional reality in art; but in another sense the Crawfords are always acting—life and art are for them not distinct, and to draw Maria and Edmund into their impersonations . . . is to threaten their living identities without exposing their own in return. (16)

Meanwhile, Fanny’s inability to act is (as Voskuil shows us with Mirah in *Daniel Deronda*) “a mark of her genuineness . . . of her persistent hold on an authentic sense of self that remains untainted by the duplicity of performance” (119). Authenticity is key to Fanny’s sense of self; we find her throughout the novel questioning her own actions and her own emotions, seizing every occasion as an opportunity to fully explore her personal moral code. Fanny, whose continual soul-searching often results in a self-knowledge that serves only to lower her already-low self-esteem, wonders if her refusal to act in the play is based in honorable decorum or in her own fear—in other words, whether or not she can feel satisfied in her motivations. The real moral question in this scenario becomes not so much whether theater is good or bad, but whether the soul benefits from a “right” action when that action is undertaken for a “wrong” reason. If Fanny’s refusal is based in self-consciousness rather than morality, she gains nothing. “Was she right in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for?” Austen asks (133).

What might be so essential to a scheme on which some of those to whom she owed the greatest complaisance had set their hearts? Was it not ill-

nature, selfishness, and a fear of exposing herself? And would Edmund's judgement, would his persuasion of Sir Thomas' disapprobation of the whole, be enough to justify her in a determined denial in spite of all the rest? It would be so horrible to her to act, that she was inclined to suspect the truth and purity of her own scruples. (133-134)

All of these readings convincingly supply a moral, if not a religious, approach to the novel. One final consideration, however, is to interpret the episode as one of several comic scenes in which Edmund is consistently shown to be nearly as oblivious as Yates. His horror of seeing his sisters play-acting is expressed in the shocked claim that Sir Thomas "would never wish his grown up daughters to be acting plays. His sense of decorum is strict" (111). Edmund, as we have seen, is as fully mistaken in his evaluation of his father's character as he is in that of the shallow Mary Crawford and, indeed, in nearly everything else. Kind-hearted though he is, he nevertheless is utterly blind to nearly everything that transpires at Mansfield Park, from Mary's commandeering of Fanny's mount and Fanny's subsequent ill-health at the lack of exercise; to the romantic entanglements of his sisters and Mary's fortune-hunting interest in Tom's illness; and finally, and most egregiously of all, to Fanny's all-absorbing, self-abnegating adoration of him. What we might take away from this discussion, then, is Austen's satirically-edged comment, put into Edmund's mouth at the beginning of the argument about the play: "Family squabbling is the greatest evil of all" (112-113). This, as Austen spends the next three hundred pages demonstrating, is a typical, and amusing, "Edmundian" misfire. In no way, however, is the novel an indictment of the theater. Instead, throughout, we are

given the sense that secrecy and duplicity are the real evils in Mansfield Park, as well as in *Mansfield Park*.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

While the theatrical elements in *Mansfield Park* address domesticity and privacy issues, those in Charles Dickens's *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* concern themselves primarily with class and social standing. Meanwhile, whereas Austen perceives the theater and its actors as fraught with complexity, Dickens seems to characterize them as generally amusing and, at first glance, at least, more or less harmless. His 1838-39 *Nickleby* serial, a cheerful mélange of novelistic styles that borrow equally from the picaresque romp through comic misadventures, the romance, and the melodrama, depicts the backstage world not as something strange and exotic, certainly not as something perilous, but as the comfortable home of an extended family whose various members, throughout all their bickering and sibling rivalry, nevertheless can do no real damage to one another. A Lenville might offer to pull one's nose, or threaten to "play Tybalt with a real sword, and pink you" during a performance (362), but any resulting damage would ultimately be "not [dangerous], but just enough to lay you up for a month or two." Actresses are not sexually threatened in Dickens's world, as both of his "good girl" heroines are, and as they will be in Jewsbury's *The Half-Sisters*. Nor are they sexually threatening; indeed, women of the theater, while flirtatious and available, are not injuriously predatory, although they are nevertheless quite bold enough to invite a man up

to their rooms, leaving tantalizing little parcels of stockings and similar personal items out in full view.

The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby has not received the same level of critical attention as many of Charles Dickens's later novels. Indeed, it is one of the least written about. Perhaps this is because, as only the third of his published novels, it was written before his writing style matured to the level of *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend*; frankly melodramatic, and in many ways simplistic, the plot may not suggest to scholars the many avenues of investigation of some of his later works. Consequently the story has been comparatively neglected. Yet if it has not weathered well into the critically-minded twenty-first century, it was immensely popular when it first appeared—so much so that it spawned, at minimum, twenty-five stage plays even before the final installment was published (Vlock 30); indeed, Phillip H. Bolton contends that “[b]y 1850 . . . at least eighty-eight dramas had been taken from the book to the boards” (qtd. in Millard-Anderson 15). That number seems excessive, and we must bear in mind that several productions of the same play may have been counted separately; nevertheless, enough unique scripts and mentions of unique titles survive to give credence to the claim.²⁵ Dickens in fact alludes scathingly to this plagiarism in the second Crummles episode, wherein he introduces a “literary gentleman . . . who had dramatized in his time two hundred and forty-seven novels as fast as they had come out—some of them faster

²⁵ Forster describes an “indecent assault . . . committed on [*Nickleby*] by a theatrical adapter named Stirling, who seized upon it without leave while yet only a third of it was written; hacked, cut, and garbled its dialogue to the shape of one or two favourite actors; invented for it a plot and an ending of his own, and produced it at the Adelphi; where the outraged author, hard pressed as he was with an unfinished number, had seen it” (114). Forster concludes by telling us that Dickens “properly punishes” the playwright “by introducing and denouncing him at Mr. Crummles’s farewell supper” (115). According to Mark Ford, however, Dickens approved of the Stirling version, “apart from some ‘rubbish regarding the little robins in the fields which have been put into the boy’s [Smike’s] mouth’” (813).

than they had come out—and *was* a literary gentleman in consequence” (597).²⁶ *Nickleby* spawned, in addition, at least one plagiarized novel, *The Life and Adventures of Nickelas Nickelbery*, written by penny-dreadful author Thomas P. Prest of *Sweeney Todd* fame. Edited by “Bos,” this particular novel’s date of publication is so close to that of the original, and its ending such a departure, that it is questionable as to whether Prest waited for the final volume of *Nickleby* to appear before penning his own version (Millard-Anderson 85). This in itself attests to the eagerness with which Dickens’s public greeted all things *Nickleby* in 1838-39.

The Crummles episodes themselves have garnered significant attention, with critics being fairly evenly divided in their assessment of Dickens’s opinion of his characters. Glavin, Auerbach, and others find his approach hostile, even poisonously antitheatrical while, on the other side, critics such as Darton and Rem discern genuine affection for the traveling performers.²⁷ Both points of view are defensible. Apart from Dickens’s occasional stab at plagiarism the episodes may seem, on one level, nothing more than a lighthearted interlude during which the novel’s hero is afforded a brief respite from his worldly trials. In Chapter 22, at the beginning of the middle third of the novel, young Nicholas, a victim of fortune, and his disabled friend Smike are forced to join a theater company in order to survive. Nicholas’s initial reluctance to join the Crummles troupe contrasts ironically with his eager willingness of only an hour before to try for some ambiguous position “on board of some ship [where he] could be useful in

²⁶ Ford, in his notes to the Penguin edition, claims that Dickens based his literary gentleman on “hack dramatist W.T. Moncrieff” rather than on Stirling (813).

²⁷ Glavin suggests that *Nicholas Nickleby* can be read as “a kind of formal renunciation of professional theatre. At a pivotal moment in the novel Nicholas sternly denounces the theater, fleeing Portsmouth and the Crummles Company for London” (CC 192).

many ways” (266). Dickens may use this contrast to acknowledge the prevailing theatrical stigma of the era, comparing it with his own more modern and very sensible viewpoint; he was, after all, given to didacticism, particularly in his earlier novels, and made no secret of the fact that he intended his books to affect social change.²⁸

Crummles, upon learning that Nicholas is intent upon becoming a sailor, helpfully informs him that a shipboard life will be arduous—“Salt meat and new rum; pease-pudding and chaff-biscuits,” he cautions (277)—but Nicholas shrugs the warning off. “One may do worse than that,” he replies sagely. “I can rough it.” Yet when Crummles, assuring him that no sea captain will hire two inexperienced youths, offers him a job performing with the Crummles troupe, Nicholas is apparently horrified. The “worse” that one may do is suddenly before him; “roughing it” at sea is clearly distinctly preferable to “roughing it” on stage; “roughing it” with rowdy sailors of the lower classes at least one and perhaps several steps up from “roughing it” with a troupe of itinerant performers. “I don’t know anything about [acting]” he protests breathlessly, instantly losing sight of the fact that he knows equally little about seamanship. “I never acted a part in my life, except at school.” We are left in no doubt that Nicholas finds the very thought of acting disturbing.

Nicholas’s unease here can be compared with that of Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*: when Tom reminds Edmund that as boys they “mourned over the dead body of Caesar, and *to be ’d* and not *to be ’d*” for their father’s amusement, Edmund

²⁸ While *Nickleby* was written in 1838-39, it is generally perceived to be set in the generation immediately preceding—the 18-teens or -twenties—when the antitheatrical prejudice was perhaps stronger. Thus, even if Dickens were using his own era’s increasingly liberal sensibilities to comment on those of a prior generation, the prejudice was still strong enough to bear commenting on. In either era, in other words, if Nicholas’s story were reality, he might have suffered socially from his sojourn with the Crummles troupe.

differentiates childhood declamations from adult acting. “It was a very different thing,” he insists. “My father wished us, as school-boys, to speak well, but he would never wish his grown up daughters to be acting plays. His sense of decorum is strict” (111).

Nicholas’s sense of decorum is equally strict; he continues to resist until Crummles at last resorts to flattery. Commenting on the young man’s looks, his manner, his voice, he finishes grandly: “You’ll do as well as if you had thought of nothing else but the lamps, from your birth downwards” (277). Note that Crummles says “downwards,” not “onwards,” subliminally implying the social fall that a life in the theater will entail. While Crummles’s mention of “a pound a week” is tempting, it is not until he begins to offer Nicholas tasks instead of, or along with, roles—designing handbills, writing scenes—that Nicholas begin to seriously consider his offer, and then only because “sheer destitution [is] before him” (278). These are real jobs, jobs in which something tangible is produced, rather than regularly scheduled forays onto the stage. Nicholas himself can be seen to embody the antitheatrical sentiment here.

Crummles’s assessment of Nicholas’s suitability is worth examining. One very solid reason for the public to be uneasy regarding the acting profession, as mentioned briefly above, was the problem of training: there was no particular means by which to accredit an actor in order to give him or her professional standing. Anyone could be an actor, as is demonstrated in Crummles’s recruiting speeches to the two travelers, offering work to the mentally incapacitated Smike purely on the basis of his starved and haggard physical appearance, and to Nicholas himself because “[t]here’s genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go-farce in your laugh” (277). To Crummles, apparently, this is all that is required.

Barish firmly contradicts Crummles's appraisal here, pointing out that "nothing in Nicholas' behavior has given us any reason to believe that he will pass muster, let alone excel, behind the footlights. Apart from having enough presence of mind to hold his tongue under trying conditions, he has been more remarkable for his forthrightness than for his capacity to conceal or counterfeit his feelings" (374).²⁹ While this speaks to the Victorian sense of authenticity, Barish may be oversimplifying here for oddly, in "real life," Nicholas, like Fanny Price, is a fairly convincing actor. Although far from "having enough presence of mind to hold his tongue under trying conditions" (he is in fact wholly unable to hide his indignation in the face of such social ills as Squeers's cruelty towards Smike, and Hawk's and Verisopht's improprieties toward his sister), he nevertheless shows over and over again that he is fully capable of acting gallantly towards females in whom he has no interest (LaCreevy, Snevellicci), and equally capable of hiding his true feelings about Madeline Bray, both to her and to her benefactors. Similarly, he has no problems maintaining constant deference to his mother, even in the face of his weary annoyance with her inane prattle. We might therefore question Barish's evaluation of Nicholas's acting skills.

Certainly Nicholas's audiences seem to consider him a fine actor. On the other hand, it should be pointed out that they also embrace Smike, Folair, the Infant Phenomenon, and the rest of a troupe which must be understood to be of mixed capability at best. Dickens, in inviting us to laugh at these histrionic strolling players, might be suggesting that the appraisal of the audiences cannot be fully trusted (which may indicate

²⁹ Crummles in fact corroborates Barish's assessment later in the text, when Nicholas, having received a cryptic message from Newman Noggs, arranges a hasty departure. Bidding a heartfelt farewell while first crushing the manager's hand, then "stamp[ing] upon the ground, [tearing] himself from the manager's detaining grasp, and darting rapidly down the street" (380), Nicholas disappears. Crummles, looking after him, says wistfully, "[I]f he only acted like that, what a deal of money he'd draw" (381).

a veiled classism on his part—an evaluation that a rural audience possesses lower tastes than a London audience). Nor can any of the other performers’ estimations of Nicholas; it is in fact abundantly clear from the text that none of them are particular judges of acting ability: the London manager who comes to witness the performances, after all, falls asleep. However when, with time, even Smike is able to rise to the task of learning lines, we must reevaluate our own reaction to Crummles’s assessment. Meanwhile, one way or another, the audience is entertained, and no one is throwing orange peel at these actors.³⁰

Dickens’s teasing of Mr. and Mrs. Crummles is sly. Upon arrival at Portsmouth, while their sons, with Smike, take the shortest route to their lodgings, these two make their way along the city streets much as a circus parade would, stately, dignified, and intensely aware of the impact they have on the citizens, and “when they heard a whisper of ‘Mr and Mrs Crummles!’ or saw a little boy run back to stare them in the face, the severe expression of their countenances relaxed, for they thought it was popularity” (288). Dickens’s wording suggests, of course, that it is *not* popularity; indeed, when Nicholas asks “Are they very theatrical people here?” (289) Crummles replies glumly, “[F]ar from it—far from it.” This leaves us to wonder what, if not popularity, the attraction might be.

If Dickens enjoys his theatrical characters, it is also fair to say that he enjoys teasing them. All of them are shown to be, in one way or another, unabashedly hypocritical, and so used to declaiming that they can no longer speak or move naturally. Mrs Crummles, at dinner time, rings for the servant and calls out majestically, “Let the

³⁰ The Crummles troupe, it must be pointed out, are not circuit players. Though they follow the Portsmouth circuit, they do so “in the course of a wandering speculation” (NN 274); in other words, they are strolling players. While this does not necessarily constitute from Dickens a comment on their acting skills, it does place them in a lower tier professionally.

mutton and onion sauce appear” (289); Lenville, jealous of Nicholas’s theatrical success, accosts him with “Object of my scorn and hatred! . . . I hold ye in contempt!” (363); while Mr. Crummles, after having already taken private leave of Nicholas, feels compelled to follow him to the station in order to take a more public one:

and to render it the more imposing, he was now, to that young gentleman's most profound annoyance, inflicting upon him a rapid succession of stage embraces, which, as everybody knows, are performed by the embracer's laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection, and looking over it. This Mr Crummles did in the highest style of melodrama, pouring forth at the same time all the most dismal forms of farewell he could think of, out of the stock pieces. (381)

Completely unaware of, or perhaps ignoring, Nicholas’s perceptible cringing, the actor takes his leave. “Farewell, my noble, my lion-hearted boy!” he cries, with one eye constantly toward his inadvertent audience. We wince along with Nicholas.

Phrases such as “highest style of melodrama” and “out of the stock pieces” align Crummles with Miss La Creevy, the miniature portraitist who “paints portraits, not of people exactly as they are, but of them as they wish to be or of persons imaged as a presenting a type” (Patten 29). La Creevy’s portraits are themselves “out of the stock pieces,” her art one of “bringing out eyes . . . keeping down noses . . . adding to heads, and taking away teeth altogether” (121). When Kate comments on the number of military men she paints, La Creevy answers with aplomb, “[T]hey’re not real military men, you know . . . only clerks and that, who hire a uniform coat to be painted in and send it here in a carpet bag” (121-22). If we remember Kucich’s claim about “finessing the truth,” we

can see that this applies equally to La Creevy who, in presenting people as they wish to see themselves rather than as they are, produces a deception that is, while recognized as falsity, nevertheless preferenced over reality, and to the Crummles performers who, in their unstated common agreement to live their lives as if perpetually onstage, comfortably unite in a lifestyle that transcends garden variety “honesty.”

It seems evident that Dickens’s feelings toward the theater were mixed at best. While Michael Baker charts his “champion[ing of] theatre-going, proclaiming the benefits of ‘sound, rational amusement’ as an escape from the business of life” (23), he also contends that this championing was, at least in part, based in class condescension, “a paternalist scheme in which the theatre would canalise and tame the ignorance, violence and depravity of the urban working masses” (45). We can locate a distinct double standard, for instance, in Dickens’s treatment of celebrated London actress Mrs. Lillyvick, née Petowker (“of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane” [168]), who defiantly flirts with other men in front of her new husband and who runs off with a “half-pay captain” shortly after the marriage; far from judging her or visiting any sort of novelistic punishment on her, Dickens takes her behavior completely in stride in a way that he might not for a woman of another class. Her quick dispatch may be indicative of the lower standards he found acceptable for women of her class; on the other hand, her lower class may simply free him to deal with her in a more humorous manner. Amused tolerance, after all, marks Dickens’s attitude to the troupe throughout the novel. Each of the actors receives his or her share of lighthearted ridicule, though Crummles frankly receives far more satirical punishment than the rest of the actors. Although Tracy C. Davis asserts that Dickens admired Crummles’s business sense, citing the manager’s

“[e]bullience, efficiency, motivational charisma, concern for employee development, shrewdness at advertising, and keen judgement of character,” regardless of “whatever degree of vanity and self-deception went along with it” (*Economics* 160), Crummles’s “keen judgement” seems very much in dispute. Meanwhile, his “motivational charisma [and] concern for employee development,” primarily manifested in his giving his daughter all the best roles and the finest advertising, have left the other actors bitterly resentful.

The entire troupe, in fact, is consistently shown to be hypocritical, ambitious, back-biting, and vain.³¹ This might seem an indictment of theater people, but it must be stressed that the aristocratic Hawke and Verisopht are far more cruel, Miss Knag far more devious, and Mrs. Witterly far more false and dangerous, than any of Crummles’s troupe; they are, in other words, entirely human and, with the exception of being far more amusing, not noticeably different from the other characters in the novel.³² Meanwhile the Crummeles, though their entire lives are spent acting, whether onstage or off, are never inauthentic: they are always authentically performers, always authentically engaged in performance, always “pretending” to be precisely what they are. This Dickens contrasts with the devious falsity of his higher classes, from Mrs. Witterly, who is “always ill

³¹ Examination of actors’ journals of the era, as discussed in Chapter One, reinforce the authenticity of Dickens’s characterizations. This too may support Dickens’s view of actors as shallow and self-serving; however, it must be remembered that Dickens dedicated this novel to Macready, apparently considering him a worthy exemplar.

³² Glavin, whose opinion of Dickens is perceptibly harsh, nevertheless asserts that the actors in *Nickleby* are “significantly less false and betraying than virtually everybody else” (*After Dickens* 100). He invites us to consider the novel’s non-theater world, by comparison, as “dependent on servitude, corrupting sympathy in order to service solecism. Squeers’ portrayal of the benevolent schoolmaster. Miss Knag’s vaporous exploitation of the milliners. Lillyvick’s complacent manipulation of the Kenwigs. All these self-conscious appropriations and approximations of theatre function to debase the already hapless or to deprive the subjugated.”

after Shakespeare” (340) to the aristocrats whose chief delight seems to be in accumulating embarrassing debt they have no intentions of paying off.

Life in a theater troupe, as already shown, could be socially damning—an action “hedged with guilt and deep heart-searching” (Baker 52). This is amply demonstrated in the text when, immediately upon joining the troupe, Nickleby and Smike change their names. As Johnson and Digby, respectively, they remain safely anonymous, the Nickleby name untainted. Throughout the brief course of their sojourn with the theater troupe they maintain their disguises, acting the “roles” of Johnson and Digby while still objecting to acting as a vocation.³³

The practice of changing one’s name was a common one: as already noted. George Taylor lists “E. A. Sothern . . . Henry Irving, Squire Bancroft, William Kendal, Charles Wyndham, John Hare, Charles Kelly, William Terriss and Arthur Cecil” among the actors who adopted stage names for their theater debuts. “If this indicates there was still social stigma attached to their choice of career,” he posits, “then it also explains the increasing preoccupation in plays of the second half of the century with questions of social respectability and class” (96). Nevertheless, the Mantalinis have also changed their names, “the lady rightly considering that an English appellation would be of serious injury to the business” (130). This speaks not only to inauthenticity but to a certain class consciousness or nationalism—a belief that an English dressmaker will not draw as much business as an Italian one—and echoes Nicholas’s class-consciousness as he begins his duties with the Crummles troupe. Here, even in disguise, Nicholas is averse to

³³ As Robert L. Patten puts it, “‘shame’ attends performance; Nicholas plays under an assumed name and quickly exits the company” (29). His and Smike’s “false” acting (pretending to be Johnson and Digby) contrasts with their “true” or “honest” acting onstage, and uncomfortably aligns them here with the Mantalinis, the Wittitterlys, the Curdles, and the other false actors of the novel.

accompany Miss Snevellicci on her subscription quest in order to fund her bespeak, consenting only after assuring himself that no one will recognize him. Clearly he finds the life beneath him. When finally he does agree to accompany Miss Snevellicci, he does so with the grudging admission that “beyond a feeling of pride, I know nothing which should prevent my doing this. I know nobody here either, and nobody knows me” (297). His later reluctance to reveal to his mother or even to Newman Noggs the details of his sojourn with the Crummles troupe points to embarrassment if not outright shame: this speaks bluntly to the awkward social divisions between actors and people of higher (if only by perception) social class.

Dickens addresses class politics throughout the novel, not only with the theatrical elements but with the Madeline Bray plotline, the aristocratic bounders Hawk and Verisopht, the social-climbing Mrs. Nickleby, and others. Tore Rem in fact makes the argument that the Crummles episodes can be read as a retelling of the larger plot in parodic microcosm. The perceptual disconnect between the theater as entertainment and the theater as social, political, and physical structure can be summed up fairly succinctly in Smike’s disillusioned comment on entering the grimy backstage world of Vincent Crummles’s parvenu. “I *thought* it was a blaze of light and finery” (emphasis mine.) We know from the text that Smike has no memories of his life before his arrival at Dotheboys; his impressions of the theater have been imparted to him by others—but only the joyous aspects. Dickens uses Smike’s expectations to contrast “reality” and to undermine our own impressions. Nicholas, himself surprised and disappointed by the tatty world that confronts him (as will become a recurring theme in many of Dickens’s novels), comforts his friend with words that seem a little forced, a little uncertain. In this

way the author invites us to see the theater first through the eyes of the neglected and desperately longing children of Dotheboys Hall—as a magical place of wonder and enchantment—only to immediately contrast it with an apparent grim reality. At the same time, he also contrasts the legitimate, self-conscious role-playing of the actors with the deceitful and self-deceiving role-playing of characters such as Squeers, the Mantalins, the Kenwigses, the Witterlys, the Curdles, and Miss Knags. Nicholas himself cannot be truly comfortable within his own skin until he leaves the Crummleses, regains his true name, and faces his heartfelt desires. Even while “acting” the part of the art agent on behalf of the Cheerybles, he must dissemble, disavowing his love for Madeline Bray. Even now, as long as he continues to act, he undermines his own chances for happiness.

“Throughout his life,” as Barish contends, “Dickens in his own person espoused the cause of actors, whom he saw as victims of prejudice, bound to a harsh profession to begin with, and then reviled for it by the legions of the respectable” (370). Indeed Barish goes so far as to assert that Dickens “applaud[s] the actors as pillars of the community, who respond to one of its deepest and most blameless needs [e.g., entertainment]” (371). While Baker’s charge of “paternalism” cannot be overlooked; and even Glavin’s more serious accusations hold weight, while, indeed it strikes many readers odd that Dickens’s tone is so often patronizing, even condescending, this novel has far more to say about posturing than it does about acting. Meanwhile, by painting his actor characters as far more authentic than the non-actors, he makes an entertaining but cogent point about humanity in general. Here, as with *Mansfield Park*, we see that actors and acting are not the authors’ main concerns; rather, Austen and Dickens contrast the theater with

theatricality, addressing an intrinsic honesty—a private honesty, a truth to self—that has more to do with the way one lives one’s life than with what one says or does.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE HALF-SISTERS

As already stated, “[w]omen, non-English races, and the working class were all obvious targets for scapegoating in terms of their dishonesty” (Kucich). Thus when, for instance, Fanny Price, in *Mansfield Park*, is the one person to refuse to take part in the amateur theatricals, it upends gender expectations, situating her as more honest, and therefore more inherently masculine, than Edmund. Fanny is, in addition, of a lower class than the Bertrams, adding to her potential for targeting. *Nickleby* cheerfully picks apart this stereotype as well, with Dickens eschewing gender and racial formulae to focus primarily on dishonesty in the upper classes. Geraldine Endorsor Jewsbury however, in her sympathetically-drawn Bianca Pazzi, boldly attacks all three stereotypes. In Bianca Jewsbury first presents us with a half-Italian woman who turns to acting only as a way to stave off abject poverty, and then neatly turns expectations on their head, giving us, in her consummate actress, the most honest character in the novel. Sarah Bilston has noted the defensive nature of so many novels’ “lengthy discursive passages [which] adjure the reader to re-evaluate” commonly-held notions about the theater and its performers, and to separate “the true artist from the shallow actress of popular imagination” (48-49). Though her subject is fiction of the 1870s, and though she touches only briefly on the 1848 *The Half-Sisters*, the defensive attitude can be seen here as well: Bianca is contrasted not only

with her shallow and easily-led half-sister Alice, but with other actresses who are, in the main, content to rely upon standardized performance conventions rather than aspire to true art.

In her introduction to the novel Joanna Wilkes tells us that though its “treatment of the issues it raises is ambiguous . . . the author’s dissatisfaction with her society’s assumptions about her sex is very clear” (xiii). This would seem to situate the novel as an interrogation of “the woman question” rather than a theatrical novel, and in fact at this point we should be questioning our assumptions as to whether there is really any such thing as a Victorian theatrical novel at all. As we have seen with *Mansfield Park* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, the theater is really more frequently used as a framework upon which to hang critical social issues of the period. Jewsbury’s primary theme in this novel is the need for useful purposes for women.³⁴ Yet much of the story concerns Bianca’s acting, especially as it contrasts with role-playing by the non-theatrical characters. Alice, for instance, is strongly advised by her mother to “play hard to get,” not to be too emotionally available to her fiancé, and to subjugate her true desires in order to settle into a comfortable position in society; because she accedes to her mother’s wishes her ambitions are compressed and manipulated “to fit a preconceived feminine ideal, much as the feet of Chinese women are bound into their tiny and artificial shapes, an image referenced several times by Lord Melton, as well as other, more minor characters” (Prichard 124).

³⁴ Karen M. Carney claims that “[t]oday’s critics are often surprised to compare Jewsbury the literary reader, whose work was considered at best conservative and at worst a hack-job to the novelist and essayist who took up the “Woman Question” with vigor and passion. “(147)

Bianca, characteristically, is shown to be a paragon of feminine virtues in every way, self-sacrificial, nurturing, and ethically far removed from the other, more typical, actresses of the novel. Lauren Chattman points out that, “[w]hile secondary actresses in these novels are almost always corrupt, selfish, and vulgar exhibitionists, the ‘best’ actresses . . . transcend the stage stereotype” (72). Further, “[t]he actress heroine is always the woman who winds up on stage by accident rather than design, [and the one] who acts unselfconsciously with no view toward the audience” (72). Jewsbury’s illegitimate heroine is no exception; like Chattman’s other actress heroines and, not-so-coincidentally, also like Nicholas Nickleby, she has no desire for a life on stage, and takes no joy in the color and flash of costumes and lights. It is only because her mother is ailing and poverty stalks them that she takes the one choice offered her, becoming a performer in a traveling circus in order to buy food and medicine for her only known relative. Again, this begs a comparison with Nicholas, whose concern for Smike (“for what had he rescued his helpless charge if it were only to bear as hard a fate as that from which he had wrested him?” [278-79]) is a more compelling argument than his own impending poverty. “[Bianca] had no idea of vanity, or of getting admiration,” Jewsbury stresses, “or of displaying herself in any way; her sole idea of the circus was that it was a means of earning a certain number of shillings on which she might support her mother” (23). This heavily underscores her feminine modesty; in a sense, it is partly her desire not to go onstage that fits her for the life. Appropriately, Bianca initially finds it shameful to be displayed to an audience, even though by so doing she is able to put food in her mother’s mouth. She performs in expediency only, and suffers for that expediency as only an intensely moral young woman can. Still, as Jewsbury’s ironic narrative points

out, “[t]he respectable public who went to see [the circus performers], considered them *en masse* as dissipated disorderly vagabonds, whom it would not have been creditable to know, or altogether safe to admit to the neighbourhood of their silver spoons” (34). This situates the “respectable public” itself as far below Bianca on the moral scale. It also situates them as role-players, pretending to a respectability that they have no moral right to claim.

Bianca’s reticence to engage in public display is contrasted with the romantic daydreams of her legitimate half-sister Alice Bryant, and throughout the novel their two natures are played against one another. As a child Alice, though dismissive of theater itself, nevertheless longs for a life in the public eye—as a famous authoress perhaps or, at the very least, a fashionable lady of high society. Meanwhile Alice’s mother, and later her sister-in-law, both advocate duplicity in the domestic space, advising her to seem to be what her husband wants, and to hide from him her true feelings. Thus the focus of the story always remains its interest in performance, in theatricality, and in the awkward nature of a public life.

Throughout, the novel returns again and again to an examination of the social hypocrisy that would condemn a working woman merely for working, without any other cause. When the wealthy Alice first sees Bianca, for instance, not knowing they are related, she develops an acutely sympathetic interest in the “noble expression” of the struggling young woman with the dying mother, and determines to help her. Yet, “I could do more if she were any thing else [but an actress],” she tells a store proprietor, “but [my husband] Mr Bryant has a great objection to those sort of people. She is starving, you say? How came she to lose her situation in the theatre?” (124). Jewsbury’s indignation

seems palpable, and when Alice inquires as to where Bianca lives and determines to pay her a visit, we feel all too sharply the unfairness of society's, and Alice's, unquestioning bigotry, for "[o]n the way she began to feel rather nervous at the strong step she was taking in going to see an ACTRESS" (125). In this way Alice performs the role of a decent, respectable woman, in contrast to Bianca; she is titillated by Bianca's situation, yet for a woman such as herself to associate with one like Bianca is comparable, at least in her mind, to an association with a prostitute.

Prichard reads the comparison between the two women more as a commentary on Victorian attitudes to gender norms than a critique of role-playing per se: "Through her contrast of an actress who manifests openness and self-revelation with an ideal domestic woman who constantly performs, Jewsbury provided her readers with a critique of Victorian society's destructive gender constructions" (151) Yet the dual themes of acting and of role-playing are very important to an understanding of this story. It is especially significant that Jewsbury spends so much of the novel portraying society's reaction to women in the theater. When Conrad Percy falls in love with Bianca, for instance, his father is appalled. "I am not going to have the family disgraced" he states flatly (151), and threatens to cut his son off without a penny if they marry. Later (and we can hardly fail to hear distant echoes of *Mansfield Park*), it will be Conrad, not Bianca, who disgraces the family, seducing Alice Bryant, who literally dies of shame when her husband discovers her indiscretion. Bianca meanwhile, at all times shown to be the most ethical character in the novel, quietly agrees that Mr. Percy has "a right to object to his son's throwing away all his prospects for the sake of an obscure country actress" (154). Society's insistence on a pretense of dignity thus becomes a foil to Bianca's true dignity.

Bianca will not always be an “obscure country actress,” of course, but even when she becomes a celebrated star of the theater, wealthy and courted by the masses, it counts for very little with society. In fact, Alice’s husband finds himself objecting to her all the more. “I should much more dislike your knowing her now that she is become a noted person, than when she was struggling in obscurity,” he informs his wife bluntly:

Professional people live in a world of their own and it is very undesirable that they should be introduced into the private circles of the middle classes: it tends to destroy that sobriety and balance of conduct which makes their peculiar virtue, without introducing at the same time the abilities, and powers of pleasing, which are the redeeming qualities of the other class. (262)

He finishes with the bald and blanket statement, “Men cannot feel reverence or respect for those who aspire to amuse them” (263). These sentiments are voiced by Lady Vernon, the sister of the man Bianca will eventually marry, as well. “[W]hen one thinks of the *sort* of work it is on which you have spent your life,” she remarks, “one can feel no respect for it. I am not speaking of you individually, but of your way of life, which is altogether worthless, and unworthy of any immortal being. Your whole life is spent in dressing yourself up, and pretending to be that which you are not” (253).

That, of course, is the crux of the problem, as it was with *Mansfield Park* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. And yet, as shown, it is Alice who “dresses herself up” and pretends to be something other than what she is; Bianca throughout the course of the novel is always frank and open about who and what she is. This would seem to illustrate that actresses are no worse than any other women but for the fact that Bianca is at all times

shown to be exemplary. Here again the prosaic furnishings and petty squabbling of the backstage world bear little resemblance to the “blaze of light and finery” seen by those in the pit and the boxes. Jewsbury’s backstage scenes depict the other actresses as vain and worldly, backbiting, and succumbing (some more willingly than others) to the sexual advances of stage managers who wield financial power over them. One actress in particular, La Fornasari, even looks like Bianca, the more powerfully to draw attention to Jewsbury’s comparison. La Fornasari is, plausibly, a bit of a scapegoat: Jewsbury allows her readers’ reservations about actresses in general to pour onto this one in particular—licentious, ambitious, sexually irresponsible, she abandons her child, secretly adopting it out in order to pursue fame and adulation. Bianca meanwhile remains a figure whose public self matches her private self, an odd paragon of virtue and honesty, an actress who disdains to act, except on stage, surrounded by women who do nothing but act.

Jewsbury consistently and very obviously contrasts Bianca’s public acting with other women’s private acting, always to Bianca’s favor. The married Alice enters into an affair with her husband’s friend Conrad Percy, a cynical womanizer who has earlier had relationships with both Bianca and La Fornasari. Discovered at the very brink of her shame, Alice’s heart breaks in agony and she collapses and, ultimately, dies of her shame. As Prichard describes it, “when [Alice’s] deception is discovered and her husband confronts her with her planned infidelity, the physically, mentally and morally weak woman that Alice had worked so hard to conceal is unable to endure the confrontation, and so she dies” (152).

Thus it is Alice’s chronic and deceptive role-playing that has led to her ruin. Had she, from the beginning, been true to her desires and ambitions, been honest about them,

even to the point of rebelling against her mother's fatuous class-conscious advice, she would have known, if not necessarily physical comfort, at the very least spiritual happiness and self-respect. Had she been more like Bianca, in other words, she would have achieved success as a successful human being. Instead, she has practiced an invidious deception, and that has been the ruin of her. As Prichard explains it, "the 'play' of the professional performing woman, in part because it is openly acknowledged as such, and in part because when such a woman [as Bianca] leaves the stage, the playing stops, is far less dangerous and damaging than the constant and more deadly cat-and-mouse 'play' into which woman are forced if they endeavor to fulfill the ideal role which society mandates" (151). The "blaze of light and finery," which Smike so desperately longed to see, is the brittle, dishonest world of people like Conrad and Alice, a world of false smiles sticking to false faces, of deceived men and deceiving women.

Jewsbury was herself what might be termed, anachronistically, a liberated woman. While Elizabeth Barrett Browning described her, as a young woman, as "quiet and simple," Virginia Woolf claimed for the older Jewsbury that she was a "clever, witty woman who thought for herself;" her biographer, Norma Clarke, meanwhile, describes her as someone who "smoked cigars, swore with relish, and offered her hand in marriage to at least three men" (qtd. in Prichard 130). This bold unconventionality makes Bianca's seeming capitulation to dull, middle-class standards at the end of the novel all the more surprising. We must ask ourselves, what was Jewsbury really trying to say? Lauren Chattman believes that "[a]lthough her impulse was toward liberal reform, in her fiction she defined femininity well within the bounds of Victorian propriety," writing *The Half Sisters* as a sort of manifesto whose purpose is "to salvage the actress's reputation by

demonstrating that professional acting is perfect training for marriage” (76). Rather than training for wifehood, however, Bianca’s acting career seems, if anything, to be training for motherhood. Bianca in fact is not an actress at all in her own mind, has never been an actress; she is, and always has been, an artist. She has not found her identity through work in the Victorian construct but through creation. Seen from the first as a uniquely nurturing woman, Bianca creates art the way other women create life—her art is, to her, child, husband, family. Thus, when she gives it up, it is not to settle into comfortable domesticity but to begin shaping a new creation, one that will take years of dedication, even obsession, to craft to perfection.

Joanne Wilkes claims that, in its attention to *La Fornasari*, “the novel seems at least partly to endorse contemporary fears that, if permitted careers outside the home, women could selfishly neglect what were considered their primary and indeed ‘natural’ duties” (xxiii). Yet if Wilkes’s point is that readers could be convinced that working could breed a monstrous woman, a *La Fornasari* of enormous self-serving ambition and callous disregard for life, those same highly-susceptible readers must surely also have been convinced of the opposite: that working could produce a kind, generous, self-abnegating genius of Bianca’s stature. Karen M. Carney’s contention is that the novel’s theme is the transformative power of work (147), without admitting that Bianca is the only employed woman in the novel whose transformation could be said to be a positive one. Indeed, it must be remembered that at no time does Bianca want to *work* as such; rather, she wants to create art. The other actresses in the novel “work.” This is what distinguishes them from her—her belief in the transformative power, not of work, but of art. Meanwhile, at the novel’s debut in 1848, a review in “[t]he *Spectator* objected, ‘The

English mind cannot turn an . . . actress into the heroine of a love romance” (qtd. in Chattman 76).

I propose that Jewsbury was not writing about the theater at all, nor about love (at least not romantic love), nor woman’s right or need to work, but about art and honesty. In the end Bianca marries Lord Melton and is subsumed into the aristocratic world of her new husband. Melton is in fact “wonder-struck” by how easily she rises to the task of running a household, and Prichard alerts us to the fact that this may be Bianca’s greatest performance yet. This “success at role-playing does not, however, imply the same falsehood and weakness as did Alice’s theatricality: Bianca—a true artist-performer—never pretends to something she is not, but becomes the role she assumes” (163). While Prichard suggests that Bianca may be acting here as much as she did while she was in the theater, I believe it far more likely that her “acting” is only possible because she truly believes in the role she is portraying; indeed, she may not “become the role she assumes” so much as she assumes the role she has already become. This aligns her with the Crummleses, and with Kucich’s idea of “finessing the truth,” and may mark the difference between a charlatan and an artist: one merely performs the character; the other becomes it.

CONCLUSION

As Voskuil points out, the antitheatricality posited by Barish and embraced by so many other theorists and historians was far from universal and fixed. This seems abundantly evident when we look at the number of novels that take a sympathetic approach to actors and actresses. While many of the actual theatrical performers of the early- to mid-Victorian age appeared to denigrate their professions and their peers, in private journals as well as more public writings such as letters and memoirs, it must always be understood that the Victorians were an extremely self-conscious generation—their carefully thought out writings cannot automatically be received at face value. Meanwhile, complaints about the “decline of the drama” (Edwin Mayhew, qtd. in Voskuil 24) were hardly more current then than they are today, and might perhaps be approached in the same light. However much our own cinema, for instance, is denounced by the public and the critics alike, it nevertheless continues to flourish; we hear about the drug addictions and the sex scandals of those select few who publicize, whether purposely or not, their private chaos, and never hear about the many who work diligently at perfecting their art. Nor do we assume, on the basis of those few, that the entire field is in decline; indeed, we look to Hollywood as a glittering capital of art, sophistication, and glamour, a “blaze of light and finery” whose underskirts may be a bit dingy but are not necessarily sordid. Meanwhile, however much certain segments of the population decry

the fall of social and moral values, blaming that fall on current standards in entertainment, the world has not yet ended.

It has long been held as a fundamental truth that Victorians in general were a sober generation, too earnest to be comfortable with the thought of people making their living by acting. This discomfort, we are told, stemmed from several competing impulses: for instance, the apparent ease with which an actor assumes false characteristics, which made him or her morally suspect in the eyes of the general public. Bratton tells us that this facility “makes the actor a threatening figure, for she or he may assume voices not indicative of real standing” (165). In other words, to Bratton’s mind, the Victorian felt that people who made their living by lying were, intrinsically, liars. Yet Kucich makes, and supports, the claim that “Victorian earnestness has long been a critical cliché” (4).

Kucich tells us that “it was not just outsiders, but the English themselves who celebrated the uniqueness of their honesty and the swollen moral pride played an important role in related domains of culture like nationalist ideology” (6) His claim that the English saw honesty as fundamentally English underscores the importance of literary investigations into honesty, both within and without the world of the theater. If Kucich is correct in his explanation of “finessing the truth,” the Crawfords (*Mansfield Park*) fail while Fanny Price, the Crummleses (*Nicholas Nickleby*), and Bianca (*The Half-Sisters*) succeed. Henry and Mary, while they attempt skilled deception, lack both the talent and the aplomb to succeed; Henry’s adulterous elopement, revealed, results in scandal for both families, the Bertram sisters are disgraced, and Mary’s cavalier attitude at last un.masks her categorically to Edmund. Fanny, meanwhile, acting the role of sister to a

man she loves, shows that deception, engaged in for the “right” reasons, can be both noble and self-affirming, while Mr. and Mrs. Crummles and Bianca, embracing theatricality openly and “honestly,” are revealed as far more “real” than their counterparts in the nontheatrical world.

Though we are told that the antitheatrical prejudice began to dissipate in about 1860, these theater-sympathetic novels from the first half of the century would seem to prove that it was never all that strong to begin with. All three of the novels discussed here present antitheatrical characters—those who, like Alice’s husband and, presumably, Mrs. Nickleby, disapprove of actors and of making a living through performance and deceit. That however does not make these antitheatrical novels. In fact, in all three cases, the antitheatrical characters are proven wrong; we are shown rather that active, open performance, entered into with enthusiasm instead of deceit or bravado, is more intrinsically honest than dissembling hypocrisy. Although a certain ambivalence toward acting can at times be detected in the tones and word choices of the narrators, the love of the theater is also there in abundance, making these three stories, in fact, distinctly pro-theatrical.

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