

Classical Mythology in the Victorian Popular Theatre

Edith Hall

Introduction: *Classics and Class*

Several important books published over the last few decades have illuminated the diversity of ways in which educated nineteenth-century Britons used ancient Greece and Rome in their art, architecture, philosophy, political theory, poetry, and fiction. The picture has been augmented by Christopher Stray's study of the history of classical education in Britain, in which he systematically demonstrates that however diverse the elite's responses to the Greeks and Romans during this period, knowledge of the classical languages served to create and maintain class divisions and effectively to exclude women and working-class men from access to the professions and the upper levels of the civil service. This opens up the question of the extent to which people with little or no education in the classical languages knew about the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome.

One of the most important aspects of the burlesques of Greek drama to which the argument turned towards the end of the previous chapter is their evidential value in terms of the access to classical culture available in the mid-nineteenth century to working- and lower-middle-class people, of both sexes, who had little or no formal training in Latin or Greek. For the burlesque theatre offered an exciting medium through which Londoners—and the large proportion of the audiences at London theatres who travelled in from the provinces—could appreciate classical material. Burlesque was a distinctive theatrical genre which provided entertaining semi-musical travesties of well-known texts and stories, from Greek tragedy and Ovid to Shakespeare and the *Arabian Nights*, between approximately the 1830s and the 1870s. With the important but rare exceptions, during these decades neither ancient drama

nor serious drama on ancient Greek and Roman themes was much performed in Britain. This was noticed with some pleasure by Charles Dickens, himself praised by Karl Marx for ousting the hoary nobility from their centre place in imaginative literature, and substituting impoverished working people. Dickens's antipathy to the Greek and Roman classics was connected both with his particular model of indigenous radicalism and with his conventional mid-nineteenth-century taste for farce, sentimentality, and melodrama. He wrote to Bulwer-Lytton in 1867 that the public of their day could only be induced to go and see a Greek play in the form of burlesque: moreover, 'a Greek name and breakdown nigger-dance [the (to us shocking) term for a type of musical frolic characteristic of the mid-nineteenth-century popular theatre] have become inseparable'. Dickens was scarcely exaggerating: classical burlesques were so popular that in some years several new examples came before the public. In 1865, for example, the London playhouses offered no fewer than five new classical burlesques: these featured Pirithous, the ancient mariner Glaucus, and Echo and Narcissus, along with the *Odyssey* and the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound*.

Burlesques often opened at holiday times, when they reached large audiences: in the 1850s it was estimated that over 60,000 people visited the London theatres and places of amusement each Boxing Night alone. In this era, which invented the traditional British pantomime, it was unremarkable for at least one Christmas entertainment in any year to have a classical setting. In 1859 the theatregoer could choose to watch a treatment of one of the pantomime themes still familiar today, such as Robin Hood (Drury Lane) or Little Red Riding Hood (Covent Garden), but at least one reviewer regarded them as outclassed by Robert Brough's 'ambitious' burlesque of the *Iliad* (Lyceum), entitled *The Siege of Troy*.

The burlesque theatre transcended class barriers. Unlike virtually all other professionals, actors were recruited from across the class spectrum. Theatre audiences also included the proletariat: in 1859 as many as 60,000 individuals attended the plebeian

Standard Theatre in the East End of London—at the time the largest theatre in Britain—to witness John Heraud’s tragedy *Medea in Corinth*. One censorious commentator describes the audience of burlesque as a mixture of ‘vapid groundlings who take stalls, and, with vacant mind, “guffaw” over the poor antics they come to see’ and the fashionable ‘swell of our day’. The Adelphi Theatre was associated with raucous burlesques, popularly known as ‘Adelphi Screammers’, and with the unruly fans of Mr Edward Wright, a drag actor specializing in transvestite roles such as Medea in Mark Lemon’s *Medea; or a Libel on the Lady of Colchis* (1856). The Grecian Saloon in Shepherdess Walk, off what is now the City Road, which could seat 700 members of the urban and suburban working and lower middle classes, specialized in firework displays, cosmoramas, grotto scenes, statuary, and colonnades. It was home to John Wooler’s *Jason and Medea* (1851), which was held to have been ‘nicely got up, but very vulgar in dialogue’.

Henry Morley, Professor of English Literature at University College, London, wrote in the early 1850s:

There is a large half-intelligent population in London that by bold puffing can be got into a theatre. It numbers golden lads and lasses as well as chimney sweeps.

Yet the audience also often included this worthy academic. For at the other end of the spectrum the big West End theatres attracted spectators including people of much higher social class and education, and burlesque in such contexts could be extremely sophisticated. George Henry Lewes (George Eliot’s partner) recalled the performances of the suave public-school-educated Charles Mathews, at the time of his famous realization of The Chorus in James Robinson Planché’s *The Golden Fleece* (1845), as characterized by grace, elegance,

and ‘delightful airiness’. Mathews had been ‘the beau-ideal of elegance’ whose costumes were studied by young men of the town ‘with ardent devotion’. An engraving by ‘Phiz’ beautifully captures the mixed constituents of the audience in the 1850s: in the stalls sit the middle classes, in the boxes the most affluent of families, and in the gallery the standing hordes of the working classes. At the end of the period for classical burlesque, when it was partly replaced by a taste for light opera and Gilbert and Sullivan, the singer Emily Soldene recalled with pleasure that it had been her privilege ‘to earn the applause of all ranks’, from members of the royal family ‘to the coster and his wife of Whitechapel’. Most classical burlesques would have found their ideal spectator in the man who enjoyed the topical satire and cartoons in the magazine *Punch* (founded in 1841), which was ostensibly aimed at the educated bourgeoisie, but was particularly appealing to the more aspirational members of the lower middle class; his education in the Classics would have been similar to that inflicted on one theatregoer during his childhood in the 1840s, when a governess made him merely learn ‘parrot-wise’ from the old Eton Latin grammar and from a couple of books on ancient myth and history. Those who loved the theatre for the most part simply accepted burlesque as one of the range of entertainments on offer: theatre-going diarists tend to record accounts of serious performances of Shakespeare alongside those of burlesque without any sign that one was inherently superior to the other.

Despite its wide appeal, classical burlesque has been almost completely neglected by scholars since William Davenport Adams’s important study of burlesque, written at the end of the nineteenth century. There are at least three reasons for the lack of research. First, written sources are sparse: with the significant exception of Dickens, the famous works of the great Victorian writers usually ignore the entertainments offered to the urban masses, whose social stratification lay between solid middle-class prosperity and hopeless poverty. Secondly, classical burlesques have slipped through a chasm yawning at the place where academic

disciplines fail to meet. For modern students of the Victorian theatre, with little education in Classics, burlesques of Ovid or Homer are uninviting. Scholars of English literature, on the other hand, have regarded all burlesque as inferior and ephemeral, significant only as a symptom of the decadence of Victorian theatre. As for classicists, even those interested in nineteenth-century reception, few have even been aware of the existence of the genre, except possibly in one of its last manifestations, *Thespis, or the Gods Grown Old*, the first work on which W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan collaborated (see below). Thirdly, the problem has been exacerbated by the inaccessibility of many of the mid-Victorian burlesques, which were either published in (now) rare series such as *The Acting National Drama* or *Lacy's Acting Edition*, or not published at all. The unpublished burlesques discussed below (there are others) have been consulted in the Lord Chamberlain's collection of manuscript plays, housed in the British Library. The creation of this important research resource was one of the few positive by-products of censorship in the British theatre.

Yet the dozens of theatrical entertainments on Graeco-Roman themes produced in the mid-nineteenth century demand attention, since they show that knowledge of Classics was more widely disseminated across all social strata than has been recognized. For the sake of simplicity this discussion includes in the category 'burlesque'—also known as 'burletta'—many pieces which styled themselves 'extravanzas'. The founding father of the genre, James Robinson Planché, saw 'burlesque' as the systematic comic rewriting of a particular work of literature, to be distinguished from the 'extravanza', which was a theatrical spectacular only *based* on a familiar story. But in practice the boundaries are impossible to maintain: self-styled extravaganzas included extended parodies of familiar texts, while self-styled burlesques, which often contained lavish spectacle, could depart considerably from their textual archetype. By 1870 a comic theorist remarked that nobody—managers, authors, actors, or audience—could define burlesque, much less describe it: if pressed, they would say

it used ‘low dresses’ (i.e. lower-class clothing), and was ‘a thing made up of dancing and jokes and an old story’.

The Origins of Classical Burlesque

To the long tradition of burlesque of elevated texts in English belonged such important dramas as Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1611), which burlesqued chivalric themes in the theatre, and Henry Fielding’s burlesque of the high tragic style, *Tom Thumb* (1730), subsequently renamed *The Tragedy of Tragedies; or, The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (1731). The musical component of burlesque, however, owed more to eighteenth-century ballad opera, which featured proletarian characters, breakneck comic routines, and the wealth of traditional British popular song. The earliest of these was John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, first produced at Lincoln’s Inn Fields in 1728. The element of spectacle in Victorian classical burlesque was in turn related to the fairground entertainment of the eighteenth century, which had included spectacular enactments of scenes deriving from classical mythology, such as *Hero and Leander*, with scenery and machinery representing ‘the sea, Leander and Hero, Tritons, Neptunes, and mermaids’, a standard entertainment at St Bartholomew’s Fair in the East End of London. There was one attempt to perform a musical, spectacular, and also parodic version of a particular Greek tragedy in the eighteenth century—Lewis Theobald’s *Orestes* of 1731. The more influential eighteenth-century antecedents of the Victorians’ distinctive classical burlesques were undoubtedly the classical ‘burlettas’ of the Irish playwright Kane O’Hara, whose *Midas* was still known and admired by nineteenth-century writers including Planché and his successor W. S. Gilbert: as late as 1870 *Midas* was held to be universally familiar.

The authors of mid-Victorian classical burlesque also share a debt to the irreverent rhyming subversion of classical themes favoured by Lord Byron. He had written a parodic

six-line translation of the opening of Euripides' *Medea* (June 1810), beginning: 'Oh how I wish that an embargo | Had kept in port the good ship Argo!'; in *Don Juan* he had further explored the rhyming potential of the name *Argo* by rhyming it with *cargo* and even with *supercargo*. The identical rhyme occurs in the nurse's 'prologue' to Part II of Planché's seminal *The Golden Fleece* (1845), which fundamentally influenced the direction taken by its genre:

O, that the hull of that fifty oared cutter, the Argo,
Between the Symplegades never had passed with its cargo!

Moreover, Byron had translated a popular modern Greek ballad, *Maid of Athens*, to which the refrain was *Zōsē mou, sas agapō* ('My Life, I love you'); Planché used this refrain in a duet in the *The Golden Fleece*. The continuing influence of Lord Byron's works is reflected in the self-conscious quotation from *Don Juan* (canto 1, st. 201) which opens the preface to Francis Burnand's *Venus and Adonis; or, the Two Rivals & the Small Boar* (Haymarket 1864):

I've got new mythological machinery
And very handsome supernatural scenery.

These lines both define classical burlesque and exemplify its style. It incorporated mythical themes, elaborate theatrical machinery, stunning visual effects (often set in supernatural contexts such as Olympus or Hades), and was written virtually throughout in brazenly doggerel rhyming verse.

Planché had been writing burlesques since 1818, but had to wait until 1831 to succeed with a burlesque upon a classical theme, his *Olympic Revels*, the foundation text of the mid-

nineteenth-century classical burlesque. Loosely related to Hesiod, it was inspired by George Colman's story *The Sun-Poker*, and, under its original title *Prometheus and Pandora*, had been rejected by different theatres. But when the indomitable actress-manager Madame Vestris took over the Olympic Theatre, intending to attract the *beau monde* with a new kind of elegant burletta similar to French vaudeville, she turned to Planché. His innovative piece, with its locally allusive new title, assured her success. The effects were charming (the exquisitely pretty Vestris as Pandora emerged from a trap door), and the music eclectic but elegant. While Pandora sang songs based on Swiss yodelling melodies, in order best to display her coloratura, Jupiter and the other gods sang to rousing music from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, Weber's *Der Freischütz*, Auber's *Masaniello*, and Rossini's *William Tell*.³⁸ Planché also attributed the success enjoyed by *Olympic Revels* to the decision to costume it in elegant recreations of ancient clothing—a decision which was to affect the whole future of the genre—rather than in the absurd clown-like uniform previously conventional in burlesque. Prometheus, for example, was dressed in a 'Phrygian' cap, tunic, and trousers, instead of the traditional 'red jacket and nankeens, with a pinafore all besmeared with lollipop.' The next piece on which Planché and Vestris collaborated, *Olympic Devils* (Christmas 1831), was even more successful, especially the elaborate special effect which concluded in the Bacchantes' *sparagmos* of Orpheus' body, and the floating of his head down the river Hebrus.

Greek Tragedy in a New Electric Light

Over the next forty-five years dozens of burlesques on classical themes were performed on the London stage. They drew on ancient sources—especially epic and tragedy—which would have been encountered by the authors at school or university. But many filled out their storylines from Lemprière's famous classical dictionary, a book to which the scripts often

make explicit reference. Burnand's *Venus and Adonis*, for example, recommends that fuller information on the *dramatis personae* can be found in the 'celebrated dictionary of Dr. Lemprière'.

The *Odyssey* was a staple of the genre, and the *Iliad* was the source of Brough's *The Siege of Troy*, whose huge cast of Greeks, Trojans, and Immortals was supplemented by 'Camp Followers, Policemen, Thieves, Philosophers and Poets'. This burlesque also draws on Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, but much of it requires familiarity with the *Iliad*; even the cast list includes Homeric epithets in both Greek and English for characters including Nestor and Hector. The action includes parodies of famous Iliadic scenes, such as Achilles' argument with Agamemnon from book 1, Hector, Andromache, and Astyanax (in a perambulator) from book 6, Achilles' arming scene, and the death of Hector, upon which Achilles typically comments,

I'll for my chariot run,
And drag him, tied behind it, round the city.
'Twill be effective, though perhaps not pretty!

It is highly likely that Brough was inspired to send up the *Iliad* by the earnestness of William Gladstone's massive three-volume *Studies on Homer and the Heroic Age*, published earlier in 1858 and widely discussed.

Epics from later antiquity were also burlesqued: it was the third and fourth books of Apollonius' *Argonautica* that inspired the first half of Planché's *The Golden Fleece*; the witty playbill claimed that Part I was

founded on the third and fourth books of “the Argonautics”, a poem by the late Apollonius Rhodius Esq., principal Librarian to his Egyptian Majesty, Ptolemy Evergetes, professor of Greek poetry in the Royal College of Alexandria.

The attention to Apollonius is particularly strict in Æetes’ instructions concerning the yoking of the bulls and the sown men, and in Medea’s speech to Jason about the magic salve. Part II, however, was a parody of Euripides’ *Medea*. Planché’s brilliant burlesque, as will be seen in the next chapter, was to inspire several imitations throughout the history of the genre. The popularity of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* will also become apparent. Two examples are Francis Talfourd’s *Atalanta, or the Three Golden Apples, an Original Classical Extravaganza* (Haymarket 1857) which drew on books 8 and 9, and *Pluto and Proserpine; or the Belle and the Pomegranate. An Entirely New and Original Mythological Extravaganza of the 0th Century* (Haymarket 1858), inspired by book 6. The *Aeneid* also produced a famous burlesque, Burnand’s *Dido* (St James’s Theatre, 1860).

Although only one burlesque of an Aristophanic comedy seems to have been attempted in performance, Planché’s *The Birds of Aristophanes* (1846), the works of all three Greek tragedians were regularly burlesqued. Aeschylus was favoured by Robert Reece in *Agamemnon and Cassandra; or, The Prophet and Loss of Troy* (Liverpool, Dublin, and Portsmouth 1868), which featured a witty encounter in Agamemnon’s bathroom, and in *Prometheus; or, the Man on the Rock!* (New Royalty Theatre, London, 1865). Some of the other tragedies burlesqued during this period were Euripides’ *Medea*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Bacchae* and *Alcestis*, and Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and *Antigone*. In order to acquire a true flavour of the burlesque approach to Greek tragedy, it may be useful to dwell briefly upon a particularly clever example, Frank Talfourd’s popular *Electra in a New Electric Light* (1859). This was one of the Easter entertainments offered to London theatre-goers in 1859. Talfourd,

despite deeply upsetting his father by failing to graduate from Christ Church, Oxford as a result of debt and debauchery, was a student of Classics in possession of a ‘gay and brilliant intellect’.

During the 1850s the electric carbon-arc, which delivered an unprecedentedly brilliant light, began to be installed in London theatres. Talfourd’s title refers to the first occasion on which the carbon-arc was used in a sustained manner in a British theatre, in Paul Taglioni’s ballet *Electra* at Her Majesty’s Theatre on 17 April 1849. The ballet was subtitled *The Lost Pleiade*, for Taglioni’s electric Electra was unconnected with Sophocles: she was the Electra of ancient cosmology, the Pleiad and mother of Dardanus, whose frequent invisibility as a star is explained by her concealment of her eyes at the sight of the ruins of Troy (Ovid, *Fasti* 4. 31–2, 174, 177–8). Taglioni’s ballet culminated in Electra’s ascent as a star, ‘so brilliant and far-piercing’ that it stunned the audience, completely eclipsing the effect of gas. But despite this reference to a previous theatrical hit, Talfourd’s new electrified Electra was indeed the Sophoclean heroine.

The burlesqued *Electra* was ‘really a magnificent affair’, as the *Illustrated London News* opined. It required at least a rudimentary knowledge of Sophocles’ tragedy in order to understand the jokes. The famous scenes are humorously recreated: Electra’s dialogues with Chrysothemis, her conflict with her mother, the news that Orestes has died after falling from his curricle, the urn scene (comically substituting a tea-urn), and Electra’s recognition of her brother. But love interests supplement the plot, along with a wrestling match, a balletic *divertissement*, and star musical turns including that staple of the popular theatre, the ‘laughing song’, delivered as a trio to the tune *Rose of Castile* by Ægisthus, Orestes, and Pylades.

The scenery commissioned by the manager of the Haymarket, John Buckstone, outstripped all opposition: ‘Palatial chambers, sacred groves, curtained galleries, city squares,

banqueting halls, are all finely painted and admirably set.' The costumes, according the droll playbill, were 'derived from most Authentic sources'. The stage directions to the eye-catching fifth act illustrate the updated classicism typical of the mid-Victorian Greek tragic burlesque:

The Stage is crowded with PEOPLE engaged in various pursuits--Some are looking at the exhibition of a classical 'Punch and Judy'. . . others are engaged witnessing the performance of a Strolling Company of ACTORS on a Thespian cart.

This play-within-a-play is symptomatic of the burlesque stage's tendency to provide a self-conscious commentary upon the very genre which it is subverting. When Nemesis rises in the final scene, she delivers a lecture on ancient theatrical practice:

I really cannot tell if all of you
Recall the old Greek rule of stage propriety—
Which was—the audience having had satiety
Of crime displayed and vengeance on it willed,
Upon the stage the actors were *not* killed,
But by some fanciful poetic means
Were decently disposed of—off the scenes.

The middle and lower-class audience, even if it knew nothing about Greek tragedy at the beginning of Talfourd's *Electra*, certainly knew something by its end.

The theatre of burlesque warmed to the heroines of Greek tragedy: Talfourd's *Electra*, played by Miss Eliza Weekes, is central to this play, just as *Alcestis* had dominated Talfourd's other burlesque of Greek tragedy, *Alcestis* (Strand Theatre, 1850). The burlesque

audiences relished transvestism, and three other appealing young women played Chrysothemis, Orestes, and Pylades. This ‘constellation of beauty and vivacity . . . could not fail of extraordinary effect’. But the burlesque actresses needed to be more than pretty faces. The play involves a breathtaking acceleration of punning lines. When Electra enters in scene 1, ‘*her hair dishevelled, her dress torn and disarranged, shoes unsandaled and down at heel*’, she begins to lament,

Another day has passed, and yet another
Brings with its light no tidings of my brother.

Remarking self-consciously that she resembles a ‘classic heroine’, she turns to the subject of her unkempt hair in a manner only the industrial revolution can illuminate:

These locks of gold, when servants on me waited,
Used to be carefully *electra-plaited*,
Now all dis-*sheffield* down my shoulders flow.

Electra’s prominence is not due to any deeper understanding of our tragic heroine. Talfourd’s uncritical adoption of the burlesque genre’s stereotypical caricature of the henpecking wife in his characterization of Clytemnestra suggests that he was no feminist. But in Weekes he had an actress of virtuoso verbal agility, and it was her skill in singing, dancing and delivering the fast-falling puns beneath the electric carbon-arc which his audience prized.

Long ago the ancient dramatist Aristophanes used father–son conflicts to symbolize the contemporary struggles between traditional and iconoclastic ideologies. The nineteenth century offers us a real father–son relationship encapsulating the difference between the old

and new ways of putting ancient Greek tragedies on the stage. The young Frank Talfourd was magnetically attracted to Greek tragic burlesque: he was a close friend of its inventor, Blanchard, and became one of its best exponents. The attraction must have been partly Oedipal: we recall that Frank Talfourd's father Thomas, a radical MP, had been author of the important 1836 tragedy *Ion*, a serious political appropriation of ancient drama in the theatre of reform. But his dissolute son Frank, sent down from Oxford to a bohemian lifestyle in London, produced some of the most irreverent of all the Victorian burlesques of Greek tragedy, thus saucily knocking the ancient Greek theatre from the very pedestal onto which his public-spirited Georgian father had elevated it.

Classics and Popular Culture

A reviewer of Talfourd Junior's *Electra in a New Electric Light* felt it was unnecessary to recount the plot, for 'the classical story is, we may take for granted, well known.' Another noticed that the audience of Henry Byron's *Orpheus and Eurydice* (Strand Theatre, 1864) 'readily appreciated his classical allusions as well as the more direct fun with which his scenes abounded'. These sources suggest that a regular spectator of any social class, even if he or she had never read a book, could theoretically have been acquainted with the contents of the major ancient epics, with at least some Greek tragedies, and with perhaps a dozen stories out of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. But there were limits: when F. T. Trail attempted a burlesque of Ovid's unfamiliar account of the ancient marine-dwelling Glaucus in *Metamorphoses* 13–14, a reviewer said it would not succeed, 'being a burlesque of the classic story, which is not so well known as many of the subjects caricatured by modern playwrights.'

A standard feature of burlesque was the display of Greek lettering, usually in the form of a placard or inscription bearing an English phrase simply transliterated into the Greek alphabet. This was presumably intended to tempt the spectators into practising their skill in

deciphering it. Thus in Burnand's *Venus and Adonis* Mercury waved a placard at Paphos railway station, reading:

PAFOS AND BAC FOR ARF A KROUN

A little knowledge of Homeric Greek also enhanced the pleasure in attending. In Burnand's *Ixion; or, the Man at the Wheel* (Royalty Theatre, 1863), three Thessalian revolutionaries are called *Tondapameibomenos* ('Answering him') *Prosephe* ('he addressed'), and *Podasokus* ('swift-footed') respectively, between them comprising one of the more famous of all Iliadic formulae. The programme to Burnand's *Patient Penelope; or, The Return of Ulysses* (Strand Theatre, 1863) reproduced quotations from the *Odyssey* (the set, representing Penelope's room, was also decorated with various scenes from Greek myth to be serially identified by the audience).

A few Greek tag phrases are part of the genre's poetic repertoire: in *The Golden Fleece* Planché punctuated one quartet with such lexical items as *To kalon*, *Eureka!*, and *pros Theōn*. But puns in Latin, requiring only the most elementary knowledge and no formal schooling in the language, are more frequent. A typical example is Pluto's self-admonition during a quarrel with Persephone in Byron's *Orpheus*: 'The *suaviter in modo* dropped must be | In favour of the *fortiter in re*'. Burnand's *Venus and Adonis* plays on the words *non est*, on *unus* for 'one', on *os* for 'countenance', and, more adventurously, in one dialogue:

Venus Oh, lost Adonis! he for whom I pant, is . . .

Jupiter . . . *confessio amantis?*

Venus Yes! *a man 'tis!*

Occasionally much more elaborate quotations from Latin occur, which can only have spoken to those who had actually studied Latin at school. When Theseus confronts the minotaur in Planché's *The Marriage of Bacchus* (Lyceum, 1848), he addresses him thus:

Monstrum horrendum et informe ingens,

Prepare to get the soundest of all swingeings!

But even the quotations from classical authors tend to be part of a small repertoire of phrases from from Horace, Ovid, or Virgil, similar to that deployed in parliamentary debate at the time. In the burlesque theatre the effect was to debunk the practice, which was in fact already waning: Gladstone was considered old-fashioned because of his predilection for quoting Latin.

Doggerel rhyming verse was burlesque's chosen poetic medium: Planché self-deprecatingly described the hilarious effect of his classical burlesques as attributable to 'persons picturesquely attired speaking absurd doggerel'. Puns were essential. Even the stage directions, some of which were reproduced in the programmes, strove for punning effect; scene 1 of B.J. Spedding's *Ino; or, The Theban Twins* (Strand Theatre, 1869) was set in 'The Gardens of Athamas at Thebes. Showing the Haughty-Culture of the Greeks'. Amongst the favoured verbal tricks was alliteration, evident in the title of Edward Nolan's *Iphigenia; or, The Sail!! The Seer!! And the Sacrifice!!* (1866). The genre is marked by an arch self-consciousness of its own conventions and enjoys disrupting the dramatic illusion it half-heartedly creates: in Brough's *The Siege of Troy* Homer is the war correspondent of *The Times* newspaper, discovered spying in the Greek camp. He is armed with a telescope, a notebook, and a pencil, in order to record proceedings for his forthcoming epic.⁷⁴ The ghost of Euripides, similarly, engaged in a dialogue with the ghost of Polydorus in Cranstoun

Metcalfe's *Hecuba à la Mode; or, The Wily Greek and the Modest Maid*, to lament 'the way my plays | Are murdered by these actors nowadays'.

Song and Spectacle

Song was central to burlesque, which drew not only on favourite tunes from familiar operas, but also on the vast repertoire of ballads, nursery rhymes, and formulaic genres of popular song in the English language. The last group (later to be plundered by Gilbert and Sullivan) included the 'laughing song', the catalogue or 'patter' song, the 'swagger' where a (male) character introduced himself, and songs about stock subject-matter such as drinking, the weather, or nostalgia. The classical burlesques simply adapted their material to this conventional music: in Burnand's *Arion; or, The Story of a Lyre* (Strand Theatre, 1872), the mythical singer's presence on the pirate boat inspires a breathtaking series of parodies from opera, including a chorus 'We've come to kill Arion', sung to a famous tune from Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836). In Brough's *The Siege of Troy* Ulysses, in a Scottish accent, sings a formulaic catalogue-song about piling up chariots with loot, to the well-known Scottish tune of *Bonny Dundee*. The tone of the musical dimension of the genre is beautifully exemplified by Planché's *The Deep Deep Sea; or, Perseus and Andromeda; an Original Mythological, Aquatic, Equestrian Burletta* (Olympic Theatre, 1833), which used book 4 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Handel's appropriately titled *Water Music* was used throughout, but at the climactic moment where Perseus (Madame Vestris) entered *ex machina* on Pegasus, clutching Medusa's head, the tune to which (s)he sang the following ditty was the universally familiar *Ride a Cock Horse*, a famous English nursery rhyme:

Ride a wing'd horse,

The country across.

I've killed an old woman,
Both ugly and cross;
Ringlets of vipers hung down to her toes.
Her name was Medusa, as all the world knows.

The equally important dance routines were a central part of burlesque. One reviewer of Planché's 1832 Olympic extravaganza *The Paphian Bower; or, Venus and Adonis* was so struck by the brevity of some of the female costumes that he recommended, only half-facetiously, that the Bishop of London intervene. The prominent female legs of burlesque were connected with the convention of transvestism. It became customary in burlesques, classical or otherwise, to use an attractive actress as a mythical hero or fairy-tale prince (Vestris as Orpheus), and the Queen's Theatre production of Fredrick Fox Cooper's burlesque of Talfourd's *Ion* in 1836 used actresses for all the male roles, while a man played the heroine, Clemanthe. Thenceforward the female breeches role became a standard feature. It was the burlesque (and pantomime) theatre's analogue of the *danseuse en travesti*, the ballerina who began to usurp the male romantic lead in the *corps de ballet* in both Paris and London from 1830 onwards. It has been argued that this development reflected the transformation of ballet from a courtly entertainment to fit the tastes of the market-place and a new bourgeois and sub-bourgeois public—broadly the same public who enjoyed burlesque.

Some burlesques were more marked by mildly naughty jokes than others; Reece's *Prometheus*, for example, described Jove as 'erratically erotic', and apparently encouraged its leading actress to assume sexually suggestive poses from her 'bondage' on the rock. But some of the women who played male parts in burlesque were considerable performers. Two of the most famous legs of all belonged to Priscilla Horton, but she had performed in reputable productions of Shakespeare (she was the definitive Ariel of her day), and possessed a

remarkable contralto capable of the most difficult opera, heard to great advantage as the nightingale in Planché's *The Birds of Aristophanes*. She took numerous male roles in classical burlesque, from Jason in *The Golden Fleece* to Oedipus in the Brough brothers' 'wildly inventive' *Sphinx* (Haymarket, 1849). Indeed, by the 1850s, both female-to-male and male-to-female transvestism was routine in burlesque. Older female roles, such as Clytemnestra or Medea, began systematically to be taken by men. The male impersonation of women had emerged from an the even lowlier subculture of the public houses, the circus, and the transvestite demi-monde around the fringes of popular culture associated with sexual relations between men.

Henry Morley gave a revealing account of the success of the female breeches roles when recording his response (or that which he thought would be expected of him) to Burnand's *Ixion*:

The whole success of the piece was made by dressing up good-looking girls as immortals lavish in display of leg, and setting them up to sing and dance, or rather kick wretched burlesque capers.

This distinguished professor also professed revulsion at the effect of burlesque transvestism: Miss Pelham in *Ixion*, he writes, looks hideous with beard and moustache, and 'the woman in her [should] rise in rebellion', while the Hon. Lewis Wingfield, who dressed 'in petticoats and spoke falsetto as Minerva', was guilty of conduct unbecoming in a gentleman. But Morley's professed revulsion did not prevent him from attending burlesques, for his diaries record his reactions to them alongside his records of evenings spent watching the works of Shakespeare and Racine.

Dancing and transvestite costumes contributed to one of the most important dimensions of this type of theatre—as of all Victorian entertainment—the element of spectacle. The ancient myths provided numerous opportunities for extravagant visual stunts. Writers and scenery designers of burlesque competed with their rivals at other theatres for the biggest gasp of wonder and approval at their lavish scenery: a reviewer notes that in Byron's *Orpheus* (Fig. 13.5), for which Mr Fenton had created the scenery:

At the sound of his [Orpheus'] lyre all obstacles vanish, rocks part, and a temple appears, the beauty of which caused Mr Fenton to have an ovation...

This classical burlesque cannot fail of being a great success.

At the end of Spedding's *Ino* the heroine appears from the sea, mounted on a dolphin, and announces she is now a goddess; this conclusion was imitated by Burnand in his *Arion*, when the hero ascended to the Milky Way on a dolphin while strumming his lyre.

A manager famous for lavish spectacle was John Buckstone, incumbent of the Haymarket theatre from 1853, when Planché wrote *Mr Buckstone's Ascent of Parnassus* to celebrate his appointment. This piece featured nine muses and puns on the 'Hellenic' names of the London theatres (the Olympic, the Grecian, the Lyceum, etc.) The frequent changes of spectacular scenery (for which research in Pausanias was conducted) included representations of Mount Parnassus from a distance, Delphi, the Castalian Spring, the haunt of Pan, and the summit of Parnassus itself. Physical routines borrowed from the circus and sporting competitions were also regularly featured. In Lemon's *Medea* Jason has a boxing match with Orpheus, and is also a skilled acrobat and knife-swallower; in Talfourd's *Electra* Orestes, played by a young woman, has a wrestling match with Lycus much praised by the press. Burnand's *Pirithoüs, the Son of Ixion* (New Royalty Theatre, 1865), included a

centauromachy performed by a horseback circus troupe; the Hades tableau in the final scene displayed Tantalus in a bath, Sisyphus as an acrobat, kicking a large ball uphill, and Ixion turning his wheel.

The Insouciance of Classical Burlesque

An important factor in the ideological workings of classical burlesque is the social and educational background of the genre's authors. The majority were somewhat rebellious or disaffected members of the middle class, and the term 'bohemian' is regularly found in the description of their lifestyles by contemporaries, notably in the cases of Talfourd, Burnand, and Blanchard. The 'decadent' authors of classical burlesque however fall into two identifiable groups. Some of them are from relatively prosperous families, and had nominally studied Classics at university. At Balliol College, Oxford, in the 1850s, Robert Reece had produced two farces 'to the horror of the authorities'. Frances Burnand, the son of a well-to-do London stockbroker, was educated at Eton and Cambridge (where he was much involved in comic theatricals), and flirted with a career in the church or the law. But when he fell out with his father and left university, a career in the popular theatre became an economic necessity. As we have already seen, 'Bohemian' Frank Talfourd failed to graduate from Christ Church, Oxford after running up huge debts.

The scholarly antiquarian Planché, who had not attended university, was decidedly conventional and by no means disaffected. But among the burlesque writers there were other, more rebellious non-university men, who must have encountered Classics at school. Henry Byron, although the son of the British consul in Haiti, became an actor before he was twenty after failing in the middle-class professions of medicine and law. The brothers William and Robert Brough (like Thomas Talfourd) were the offspring of a provincial brewer. Although they were educated at a private school in Newport, Wales, their fortunes were blighted when their

father's business failed through his enthusiasm for radical causes. Robert, the more talented writer, worked as a clerk before finding success in the theatre. But he had apparently inherited his father's politics, publishing in 1859 the satirical *Songs of the Governing Classes*, written from a radical perspective.

Yet the mildly rebellious authors of classical burlesque did not use it as a platform for radical politics. The truth is that the social ferment and reforming zeal of the theatre of the 1830s, which, in the wake of the Great Reform Act of 1832 had permitted experimentation even with republican ideas, was replaced soon after the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837 with a much more conservative stance, apparently unquestioned in burlesque. Nolan's *Agamemnon at Home; or, The Latest Particulars of that Little Affair at Mycenae* (1867) actually goes out of its way to criticize political radicals currently demonstrating for parliamentary reform. In addition, this piece is even more unpleasantly racist than most burlesques, although jokes about 'niggers' were part of the genre's standard repertoire. It is of course significant that *Agamemnon at Home* was performed not in the popular theatre of London or Liverpool but on the amateur stage of the ever-conservative Oxford University. But a similar conservatism marks some of the great hits of the London stage, including Burnand's *Ixion*, in which much humour is created at the expense of the 'radicals' of ancient Thessaly, loosely modelled on French revolutionaries. Ixion's anti-monarchical wife is followed by a 'Crowd of Red Republicans, Unread Republicans . . . appropriately crowned with mob caps'. One of the revolutionaries, Tondapameibomenos, suggests some revolutionary violence against King Ixion:

Let us break all the windows, and make plain

The "Rights of Man," by reference to *Paine*.

Yet the red revolutionaries of ancient Thessaly come to an ineffectual end, casually struck motionless by Mercury when their humorous potential has been exhausted. The burlesque theatre may have had its subversive dimension, but *explicit* political radicalism was alien to it.

Nevertheless, burlesque occasionally implies a mild sympathy for reform in its audience, especially in the works of Frank Talfourd (the son of Thomas Talfourd, a radical MP and supporter of universal male suffrage). Apollo laments in the prologue to his burlesque of Euripides' *Alcestis* that people do not believe in the gods any more, or worship at Delphi's altars: all they can talk about these days is 'the Rights of Persons'. There is a vaguely cynical attitude towards politicians, apparent in, for example, Talfourd's burlesque of Sophocles' *Electra*. Here the corrupt tyrant Ægisthus is characterized as a cynical manipulator of the people of Argos. He explicitly makes fun of monarchs' tendency to use speeches composed by their ministers. Burlesque's position on women is also ambivalent. Domineering wives are stock characters (usually played by men). The most terrifying is Ino in Spedding's *Ino*, who batters her husband Athamas, 'a wretched hen-pecked member of the matrimonial band'. He confides to his guest Æetes that

A week or two of our connubial fights

Would teach you what is meant by women's rights.

Yet several burlesques do take the side of women in ancient myth—even of Medea—and this must, at least in part, be a response to the female component of the audience.

The subversiveness of the genre, however, was expressed more by its tone and stance than by its explicit content. To burlesque any 'classic' text is of course slightly subversive. But to travesty the very content of the education which divided the classes and fostered the elite, in front of a distinctively cross-class audience, was a complex procedure of some

ideological potency. The insouciant attitude of the generation of burlesque writers in the 1850s and 1860s is clear from their subtitles, which self-consciously indicate disrespect for their sources: Talfourd's *Alcestis; the Original Strong-Minded Woman: a Classical Burlesque in One Act* (Strand Theatre, 1850) was further brazenly subtitled *a most shameless misinterpretation of the Greek Drama of Euripides*. Classical burlesque is thus related to the serious critiques of classical education which serious-minded intellectuals were publishing at the time,¹¹² and to the humorous accounts to be found in the works of the comic prose writers. When Charles Dickens, for example, read his novels aloud in public recitations, he slightly adapted them to heighten their dramatic effect. In the eighth chapter of *Nicholas Nickleby*, the schoolmaster Squeers tells the pupils to whom he teaches English spelling and philosophy, that a horse is 'a quadruped; and quadruped's Latin'. But in the performance version, Dickens added to this speech of Squeers a denunciation of training in the ancient tongues: '. . . or Greek, or Hebrew, or some other language that's dead and deserves to be'. Thackeray, in the persona of M. A. Titmarsh, describes a journey to Athens, and includes a hilarious attack on conventional adulation of antiquity. Titmarsh regards the ten years of Classics he endured as 'ten years' banishment of infernal misery, tyranny, arrogance'. In Attica he was visited by the Greek muse, and explains that he could not effect any reconciliation with her because he read her poets 'in fear and trembling; and a cold sweat is but an ill accompaniment to poetry'. Ancient History was 'so dull . . . that when the brutal dulness of a schoolmaster is superadded to her own slow conversation, the union becomes intolerable'. People only 'say they are enthusiastic about the Greek and Roman authors and history, because it is considered proper and respectable'.

There was a particularly strong opposition perceived between Classics as it was experienced in schools and universities, and the delights of the popular theatre. Renton Nicholson (see further below) composed a song in 1853 to advertise the Drury Lane

Pantomime, whose words are supposed to be sung by young men released from the classroom and lecture hall:

Let Homer be banished, and Virgil laid down,
Academics be blowed,—we have come up to town . . .
The schoolmaster's at home, his pupils abroad;
Who cares for his cane? And who cares for his Rod?

Burnand, similarly, records a conversation with the ‘short, wizened, dried-up elderly’ Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, from whom he asked permission to stage three burlesques at Cambridge in the 1850s. The Vice-Chancellor misunderstood his request, assuming that by ‘staging a play’ the young undergraduate before him must have meant a Greek or Latin drama. The account implies that serious ancient theatre represents the establishment, while burlesque is the medium of smart young rebels—even though they were officially students of Classics.

The classical burlesques often make explicit their authors’ own resentment about their pedantic education: in Vincent Amcotts’ *Ariadne: or, The Bull! The Bully!! And The Bullion!!* (1870), Theseus’ studious friend Mentor loses his treatise on Greek verbal roots, which has fallen ‘overboard’. Theseus suggests that *all* ‘classic authors’ be thrown overboard:

Away with Latin, Greek, and all such stuff,
For I’ve been *over bored* with them enough.

In a similarly satirical vein, Minerva in Burnand's *Ixion* wants to reject Ganymede's application for the post of Olympian butler on the ground of his poor classical education:

For his situation

We want competitive examination;

How can he hand about the drinks that *we* brew

Unless he knows his Latin, Greek, and Hebrew?

Perhaps the most powerful example is constituted by the finale of Burnand's *Venus and Adonis*. Adonis sings a 'spelling' song about the burlesqued ancient poet, Ovid:

Adonis (spelling): O, V, *ov*; I, D, *id* -

OVID was his name!

To which the ensemble (Pluto, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Vulcan, Adonis) respond:

Marked by cane

Very plain,

Each young swain

Laughs again,

When he sees

METAMORPHOSES

Right in the middle of the play bill, oh!

The burlesque thus reminds its audience of the corporal punishment attendant in schools upon the deciphering of Ovid, and points up the pleasure to be derived from revisiting the text of the Latin epic in the theatre of burlesque laughter. For Burnand, who at Eton had been made truly miserable by Greek and Latin, later recalled the great popularity of his burlesque *Dido*, which in 1860 ran for no fewer than eighty nights. He meditated that in conceiving this assault on the *Aeneid*, ‘perhaps I was taking revenge on the Classics’.

Classical Burlesque as Cultural Appropriation

It is possible to see in the complex ideology of classical burlesque a witty subversion of classical education, with all that might imply for an audience including many people who had no access to the privileges such an education conferred. Yet even if they were ostensibly repudiating Classics, burlesques were simultaneously *appropriating* the subject for their audience. nineteenth-century classical burlesque belongs to that sub-category of burlesque literature which comic theorists identify with travesty—the ‘low burlesque’ of a particular work or story achieved by treating it ‘in an aggressively familiar style’. Such a ‘familiar’ treatment paradoxically implies a form of cultural ownership. The authors of classical burlesque liked to display their knowledge of Classics to their audiences, but it seems that these audiences enjoyed the sense of cultural possession which their own familiarity with some aspects of Classics, derived from or affirmed in burlesque, then bestowed upon them. Victorians of all classes were, as Pearsall has put it, sentimental and aesthetically conservative, but there were also sharp, cynical, and knowing; the subversively ‘knowing’—even conspiratorial—tone of burlesque was similar to that of the slightly later Victorian phenomenon of the music hall. There is an emphasis in classical burlesque on ‘knowing’ the details about ancient culture, distinguishing Greek from Latin names, and pointing out anachronisms. In *The Golden Fleece* Medea complains that Eros is ‘vulgarly called Cupid’;

in Lemon's *Medea* Creon says that Medea cannot follow a new career as a Vestal Virgin, as Glauce suggests, because Vestals 'will be Roman institutions, | Not Grecian'.

The mock-erudite tone of classical burlesque is also apparent in its semi-serious instruction in details of ancient mythology, which often takes the form of a rhyming, punning, adaptation of an article in Lemprière's 1788 dictionary. In Planché's *The Marriage of Bacchus* (Lyceum 1848), Daedalus sang a 'patter song' which escorted the audience on a breakneck journey through classical history and myth, with lines about Homer, Hannibal, Cato, Plato, Aeneas, Sardanapalus, Dido, Caesar, and Priam. In Burnand's *Venus and Adonis* Vulcan sings a 'catalogue' song enumerating Jove's love affairs, 'There's Semele, Leda, Europa, Callisto,' etc.

Several classical burlesques mused knowingly upon ancient stage conventions. Planché's 1845 *The Golden Fleece* was prompted by the important production of Sophocles' *Antigone*, accompanied by Mendelssohn's music and a sixty-strong male chorus, which had been a huge success at Covent Garden that season. Charles Matthews, Planché's 'Chorus', explained:

Friends, countrymen, lovers, first listen to me;
I'm the Chorus: Whatever you hear or see
That you don't understand, I shall rise to explain—
It's a famous old fashion that's come up again.

By twenty years later, in December 1865, when Planché's adaptation of Offenbach, *Orpheus in the Haymarket*, played at the Haymarket, the figure of Public Opinion could affirm in the prologue that everyone, whatever their social background, now knew what a Greek chorus did:

On this occasion I enact the Chorus.
There's not an urchin in this learned age,
But knows that on the old Hellenic stage
The Chorus told the audience all the plot,
Whether there was one in the play, or not.

Similarly, in Talfourd's *Electra* the audience heard about the Greeks' preference for keeping violence off stage. This brilliant burlesque also featured a play-within-a-play, 'the performance of a Strolling Company of ACTORS on a Thespian cart', thus confirming in Talfourd's audience their knowledge about the origins of Greek tragedy in the pre-classical era.

Classical Burlesque as Self-Definition

Yet alongside such passages, which reinforce a sense of familiarity with pleasurable aspects of ancient culture, one of the most distinctive features of classical burlesque was its creation of humour out of anachronistic references to the contemporary world of the audience. In the eighteenth century comic writing for the stage had ridiculed its characters; Victorian comedy, on the other hand, deliberately avoided overt malice, and emphasized amiability and fellow feeling between writer and character. From the 1840s onwards the primary source of wit and humour was regarded as incongruity—the arbitrary juxtaposition of dissimilar ideas and material—which was seen as giving rise not to an 'insolent' but to a 'congenial' sense of superiority. There was a beautifully stark incongruity in juxtaposing classical myths with references to hailing cabs, or making Admetus smoke the cigars to which he is addicted in Talfourd's burlesque *Alcestis*. Indeed, in 1870 Percy Fitzgerald argued that in mythological

burlesque of the type pioneered by Planché, mirth is produced precisely by ‘a transposition of the subject matter into, or its contrast with, some inappropriate time or condition’. The successful burlesque humorist would to try to

reproduce his old Romans and Greeks as nearly as possible with the weaknesses and conditions of our everyday life . . . knowing how inconsistent such old manners and customs are with present habits, he will exaggerate the former so as to make the discordance more startling’.

Reviewers therefore often compliment authors who write burlesques in which ‘the theme is classical, but scarcely the spirit of the piece’, an approving contemporary description of Byron’s clever *Pan; or, the Loves of Echo and Narcissus* (Adelphi Theatre, 1865, see fig. 13.6); the outstanding success of the Brough brothers’ *The Sphinx* was a result precisely of its contrast of ‘authentic’ classical scenery and costumes with the smart, contemporary, updated riddles which Œdipus had to solve.¹³⁴ Examples could be multiplied. A highlight of Wooler’s *Jason and Medea* was Chiron’s song about the Great Exhibition of that year; in the second scene of Frank Sikes’s *Hypermnestra* (Lyceum Theatre 1869), the Danaids play croquet in the Argive palace garden; a woman in Burnand’s *Arion* walks strangely because of her ‘Grecian bend’—an allusion to a shape of profoundly *un*-Greek corsetted female costume fashionable at the time.

The presence in London of the Metropolitan Police Force, established as recently as 1829, features prominently in burlesque: in Talfourd’s *Alcestis* the imported figure of Polax the Policeman, lover of Alcestis’ nurse, ‘is habited in a classic dress, with the exception of his hat, cape, and staff, which are those of a modern policeman’. In Sikes’s *Hypermnestra* Danaus is arrested by Mercury and an attendant policeman. Other modern social

developments were deliberately inserted into the classical milieu; in Amcotts's *Pentheus* (1866), inspired by Euripides' *Bacchae*, Pentheus threatens Bacchus with compulsory membership of the temperance movement, and a vow of abstinence; in Brough's *The Siege of Troy* Helen is 'the divorced wife of Menelaus, married, under the new act, to Paris', a reference to the great Divorce Act of 1857 .

There was a particularly pervasive tendency to refer to modern technology. In Amcotts's *Pentheus* Bacchus, when asked during the earthquake if the gas is exploding, observes:

To talk of gas so long before its age
Is really *making light* of history's page.

The Theseus of the same author's *Ariadne* points out that diving-bells 'aren't yet invented'. The audiences seem to have found intrusive references to modern forms of vehicular transport quite hilarious. In Spedding's *Ino* the Greek heroine pushes her twins in a perambulator; in a burlesque *Jason and Medea* Jason's war-chariot is drawn by Theseus and Pirithous riding bicycles instead of horses; in Amcotts's *Ariadne* Theseus arrives in Crete by steamboat. Burlesque betrays a particularly strong obsession with railways: in Blanchard's *Antigone Travestie* of 1845, Creon's response to his problems is to imagine taking the next train out of Thebes and emigrating to New South Wales; Planché's *The Birds of Aristophanes* (1846) satirizes plans to build a cross-Channel railway tunnel; Lemon's *Medea* features a scene at Corinth Railway Station.

So why did the Victorians conjure up this bizarre theatrical world where mythical Greeks and Romans mingled with policemen and modern railway stations? They were of course interested in all previous periods of history—in the medieval era, the Renaissance, and

the epoch of revolution—as much as in Graeco-Roman antiquity. Yet it was as no simple ‘mirror’ that they used any period of the past. Their historical consciousness was a mode of *self-consciousness* involving a complex dialectical process by which analogy became awareness of *difference*. As Culler concludes, when the Victorian Age looked into the mirror of history,

it saw not merely itself reflected but also the whole panorama of the past . . .

Indeed, in the course of looking to the past it became conscious of the distinctive characteristics of the present.

For the newly ‘historicist’ outlook of the Victorian era gave rise to the idea of ‘modernity’ as it is now understood. It was through thinking with history and ‘classic’ authors that the Victorians became conscious of the meaning of their own modernity, the characteristics of their age. The conscious modernization involved in burlesque helped audiences to conceive what made them different from people of the past. The newly created image of the scientifically advanced, modern, urban society was constructed out of symbols of what the Greeks and Romans did *not* share with modernity—the policemen and steam engines central to the Victorians’ metropolitan self-image.

The Victorians and Comic Expression

The burlesque of classical texts and myths must ultimately be placed in the context of the Victorians’ profound taste for comedy, to which their dominant sense of affluence and progress seems to have provided a special backdrop: it was during the nineteenth century that it became socially unacceptable to be thought lacking a sense of humour, and the English sense of humour became an important part of English self-definition. Indeed, with the

exceptions of the Irish and the Americans, all other nations were regarded as existing in a state of humourless darkness. Gilbert Abbott à Beckett took pains to defend the contemporary taste for comic expression, even in works of instruction, in his *The Comic History of Rome* (1852), although he is aware that ‘Comic Literature’ is still despised in certain quarters, ‘since that class of writing obtained the popularity which as especially attended it within the last few years’. This entertaining volume is enhanced by the engraved illustrations by John Leech, which express perfectly the spirit—and probably the direct influence of the scenic design—of theatrical classical burlesque).

The taste for humorous rewriting of classical stories penetrated middle-class private theatricals. In 1865 two famous writers of burlesque co-published a collection ‘Specifically Written for Performance in the Theatre-Royal Back Drawing-Room’. Only one, William Brough’s *Robin Hood*, has a non-classical theme. The others are his *Phaeton; or, Pride Must Have a Fall*, and Burnand’s *Orpheus; or, the Magic Lyre*, *Sappho; or, Look Before You Leap!*, and *Boadicea the Beautiful; or, Harlequin Julius Caesar and the Delightful Druid*. The book contains amusing instructions for the achievement of special effects: the sound of Phaeton’s chariot crashing could be created by throwing flat-irons, bootjacks, candlesticks, kitchen poker, and a full coal-scuttle from a tea-tray to the floor; Charon in *Orpheus* would look good in a sou’-wester; there are suggestions for how to paint a scene-cloth depicting the Leucadian Rock from which Sappho can leap.

Staged burlesque was also popular in elitist contexts. St John’s College, Oxford, staged several classical burlesques in the 1860s with an all-male cast, including Nolan’s infantile send-up of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, entitled *Agamemnon at Home*. Meanwhile, at Balliol College, a much funnier undergraduate reading Classical Moderations followed by Modern History was writing a burlesque of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, an adaptation of Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène*, and an Ovid-inspired burlesque *Ariadne*. The ban on theatrical

performances at Oxford University at this time meant that these classical burlesques had to be staged ‘more or less surreptitiously’.

Yet the spirit of classical burlesque was omnipresent: undergraduates and even their superiors were using varieties of parody and burlesque in privately circulated texts which, paradoxically, were *confirming* their membership of their elite. This practice can be dated to at least as early as a puerile 1816 burlesqued translation of Euripides’ *Alcestis*, done line-by-line, as its author explains, with numerals printed to ‘help’ its readers through the Greek of Gaisford. Its comic rhymes and scatological humour are plainly aimed at teenage boys seeking to alleviate the boredom of ploughing through the original tragedy. In 1843 an undergraduate at Oxford published a self-styled burlesque of Aeschylus’ *Persians* entitled *The Chinaid*, in which his stated object was ‘to invest with absurdity’ his classical model. The recent Opium Wars suggested replacing Xerxes with Chinyang, the Emperor of China, and his chorus with opium-addicted court mandarins. About fifty percent of the text is fairly accurate translation of the original. Similar in spirit is Trevelyan’s updated version of Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, which is replete with esoteric references to fellow members of his Cambridge university clique, their alcoholic japes, and confrontations with the police. Even the Very Reverend Henry Longueville Mansel, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, chose classical burlesque in a parody of Aristophanes’ *Clouds* when he wanted to satirize the political and religious controversies afflicting Oxford University.

In an important study of the all-pervasiveness of the comic spirit in Victorian culture, Roger Henkle defines the Victorians’ ‘comic attitude’ as the avoidance of the upsetting aspects of a subject, or a reduction in the consumers’ confrontation with its social implications. This is exactly what the burlesques of ancient myth and literature did with their harsher aspects. The ‘moral distancing’ in the burlesque theatre was partly made possible by the impersonation of young men by women, which allowed the audience to recognize and

empathize with the (often famous) player, and thus to distance themselves from the fictitious character she was impersonating. Orestes the murderer and vindictive Olympian rapists are rendered innocuous, even charming, by being played by exaggeratedly 'feminine' women. But more importantly, the incest, death, murder, rapine, and deviation from socially acceptable forms of behaviour so fundamental to classical mythology are ruthlessly censored in burlesque. In those dealing with Medea, her children are either not killed at all, or are revived by her magic. In *The Siege of Troy* even Hector comes back to life after his duel with Achilles. In Talfourd's *Electra* the hero Orestes is spared the guilt of actually killing his mother and uncle. Sappho burlesques always followed the pattern set by the ancient variant of her tale in which she was infatuated with a man, named Phaon (see above all Ovid, *Her.* 15), by 'correcting' her sexuality. In Burnand's *Dido*, the unbearable emotional pain of *Aeneid* book 4 is transformed into an undignified squabble between a male drag actor as Dido and Anna over Eneas, their Trojan beau, played by an attractive young woman.

The writers of comedy and comic theorists were aware that their era was inimical to tragic drama. Some even blamed burlesque for the dearth of serious drama during this period, arguing that it was precisely the taste for burlesque of highbrow works which had led to the blurring of the line between true drama and low entertainment. Some killjoy members of the literary and intellectual elite despised and avoided burlesque altogether. An obituary of Frank Talfourd in *The Athenaeum* regrets that he 'left the world with little or no adequate witness of his powers—the travestie and burlesque in which he revelled showing but one, and that the poorer, side of his gay and brilliant intellect.' In 1870 a writer who dreamed of a superior type of comedy disdains the intellects of the spectators of burlesque, lamenting that the genre now failed to tickle the brain, for the actresses 'acting Hector and Achilles only delight the eye'.

In the late 1860s and early 1870s commentators became increasingly restive about the state of comic writing, especially writing for the stage. They yearned for more intellectual wit and less amiable sentimentality in their humour. The more perspicacious of them could see that the burlesque seam was exhausted, and the well of inventiveness, especially when it came to puns, had been drained dry. Burlesque's death knell is sounded by a reviewer of Burnand's burlesque of *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1873, who describes the performance as thoroughly inane:

The fact is that burlesque has been done to death, and the attempt to raise it from an occasional entertainment into a permanent institution must ultimately fail.

The public agreed, for burlesques—certainly classical burlesques—die out at this time, except, indeed, for the 'occasional entertainment' at small or private theatres, such as Metcalfe's clever burlesque of Euripides' *Hecuba*, performed privately as late as 1893.

The pivotal moment was the first work on which Gilbert and Sullivan collaborated, *Thespis, or the Gods Grown Old* (1871). It includes numerous features typical of the classical burlesque: the pseudo-Greek comic names (Thespis' travelling players include Timidion, Tipseion, Preposterous, and Stupidas), young women in tights impersonating Olympian gods, Thespis' enumeration in Act I of Jove's sexual scandals with Danaë, Leda, and Europa, and his recitation of the entry under 'Apollo' in Lemprière's classical dictionary. Indeed, it is possible to read the libretto of *Thespis* as a self-conscious satire on the conventions of the genre of the classical burlesque. Thespis, for example, is aware that the Victorian theatre had preferred its classics in burlesque form, declaring that as an actor he is rarely called upon to act the role of Jupiter these days, for 'In fact we don't use you

much out of burlesque.’ *Thespis* was unsuccessful—too clever, it seems for its audience, who failed to understand either the more obscure classical allusions or the self-conscious commentary on the genre intended by its authors. It was to be with *Trial by Jury*, which had a contemporary setting, that they were to make their name. Although they adopted various settings for the subsequent works, from the Japan of *Mikado* to the Venice of *Gondoliers*, they never again put the Graeco-Roman world before their audience. Other authors simultaneously abandoned the rhyming, punning subversion of classical mythology which had entertained London audiences for several decades: by 1888, and George Hawtrey’s *Atalanta* (Strand Theatre), even the hallmark rhyming couplets of traditional burlesque had been abandoned in favour of up-to-date idiomatic prose dialogue.

Such ‘Hellenism’ as did appear in Gilbert and Sullivan’s subsequent operettas was totally different from that of the burlesque theatre—it was the pretentious Hellenism of the Aesthetic movement, which they mocked in *Patience* in 1881. The Aesthetes were by the late 1870s turning for inspiration less to medieval sources and more to Graeco-Roman statuary and the paintings of Alma-Tadema, which certainly contributed to the death of classical burlesque. Watching popular entertainers dressed up as ancient Greeks perhaps seemed less hilarious than watching progressive members of the educated classes doing so in all seriousness.

A related development was the new fashion for academic Greek plays, beginning with the *Agamemnon* performed in Greek at Oxford in 1880. By the 1890s ‘Classical theatricals’ indubitably meant academic Greek plays; an anonymous comedy *Our Greek Play*, performed in 1892, sends up an erudite curate who organizes a ‘Greek play’ at his local stately home. The fun in this piece is no longer at the expense of the conventions of classical literature, as in the burlesque theatre, but of a new convention—the contemporary fashion for serious performances of classical tragedies.

Classics Beyond the Elite

Burlesque was by no means the only medium of entertainment through which uneducated people had access to classical culture in the nineteenth century. There were other types of popular diversion which treated the classics with more or less insouciance. Extensive use of a kind of Latin, for example, characterized the famous 'Judge and Jury Society' run at the Garrick's Head Hotel in Bow Street, London, by the publican, Renton Nicholson. This society conducted subversive mock trials based on celebrated cases of the day. The half-educated Nicholson had himself spent time in gaol, and was thus familiar with judicial Latin. The trials had a working-class tenor, for Nicholson liked trials involving the private lives of aristocrats, bestowing upon them new titles such as the Hon. Viscount Limpus versus the Hon. Priapus Pulverton. The female parts were acted by male transvestites, and Nicholson, who always acted the judge, entertained his demotic audience by extemporizing in streams of amateur Latin, especially when summarizing what an observer denounced as the 'filthy particulars' of the cases.

Working-class access to classical myth and history included the entertainments offered by travelling showmen. The famous Billy Purvis took his booth theatre around the circuit of northern racetracks, in which he displayed phantasmagorias illustrating scenes from classical mythology, such as Neptune in his car with Amphitrite and Tritons; Purvis's troupe of actors also performed paraphrases of plays on classical themes, including *The Death of Alexander the Great*, which had been the sub-title of Nathaniel Lee's famous *The Rival Queens* of 1677. The most famous of all early circus performers, Andrew Ducrow, specialized in 'hippodramatic' enactments of Hercules' labours, of Alexander the Great taming Bucephalus, of the rape of the Sabine women, and Roman gladiators in combat.

Most of these were performed at Astley's Theatre in London, which was heterogeneous in its clientele: it had a large working-class audience, and yet middle-class families also took their children. In the unlikely event of any of the audience becoming bored during the action, they could raise their eyes to the ceiling (renovated in 1858), adorned with pictures of Neptune, Diana, Cybele, Apollo, Dawn, and Venus, all riding chariots drawn by appropriate animals (peacocks for Venus, deer for Diana).

A telling source for the variety of avenues by which the Londoner in the 1840s had access to classical mythology is the diary of Charles Rice, by day a lowly porter at the British Museum, guardian of celebrated Graeco-Roman antiquities for the middle and upper classes, but by night a tavern singer in the public houses of central London. On 19 February 1840, at the Adam & Eve in St Pancras Road, he was engaged to put his knowledge of ancient sculpture to profitable use by delivering notices accompanying Mr Lufkeen's delineation of *The Grecian Statues*, a series of acrobatic poses based on classical statuary (a routine originally popularized by Ducrow), including 'Hercules wrestling with the Nemean Lion'. Lufkeen and Rice were entertaining people from the lowest income bracket, but the work of the more famous Ducrow was also acceptable to middle-class taste: one educated reviewer could compare his athletic poses with the work of ancient Greek sculptors:

What god-like grace in that volant movement, fresh from Olympus . . . to convert his frame into such forms . . . as the Greek imagination moulded into perfect expression of the highest state of the soul, *that* shows that Ducrow has a spirit kindred to those who in marble made their mythology immortal.

Yet this form of entertainment, in other contexts, soon developed pornographic associations. From the 1840s onwards well-developed female models in skin-tight 'fleshings' could be

seen in the popular *poses plastiques*, in which they imitated naked classical statues for the delectation of audiences which contemporary critics regarded as including the ‘worst sort’ of person. *Tableaux vivants* such as *Diana Preparing for the Chase*, at Liverpool’s Parthenon Rooms in 1850, provided a narrative of eroticized female beauty in which proletarian sexual voyeurism was legitimized by the use of classical mythology. One of the more important directors of such events was the same enterprising Renton Nicholson of the ‘Judge and Jury’ society, who hired working-class girls to enact scenes from classical myth which he accompanied with mock-learned ‘lectures’. A contemporary critic regarded Renton’s *poses plastiques* as morally reprehensible, and was displeased that women were allowed to join the audience.

Public house entertainment, circuses, hippodrama, fairground theatre, and *poses plastiques* would all, therefore, bear further investigation to see what they can tell us about the uses of classical culture by the population beyond the educated elite in nineteenth-century Britain. But none of these diversions was as ideologically complex, as rich, and as challenging to the modern interpreter as the charming, cheeky, and surprisingly erudite phenomenon of the mid-Victorian classical burlesque. For this important genre of popular theatre transcended narrow class interests, repudiated classical education and yet at the same time appropriated the more pleasurable parts of its contents for ordinary people, and helped them define their modernity. Our picture of nineteenth-century classicism in Britain will therefore surely remain incomplete until the burlesque theatre takes its place as a serious subject of study alongside the canon of great literary responses to the Greeks and Romans produced by and for the classically educated elite.