Melodrama and Metatheatre: Theatricality in the Nineteenth Century Theatre

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Metatheatricality has always been an important feature of the English theatre.[1] In the case of melodrama on the nineteenth century popular stage, the genre as a whole is strongly marked by a metatheatrical awareness, and the self-referential nature of melodrama is one of its key modes of communication. The highly coded conventions of melodrama performance, with its over-determined practices of characterisation, acting, and staging, constitute a self-referential sign system which exploits the playfulness and artfulness of the theatre to a high degree. Such artfulness assumes that the spectator understands and accepts these codes and conventions, not simply as theatrical ploys, but as an approach to theatrical representation which is deliberately self-conscious and self-reflexive. Clearly, these theatrical practices extend the significance of metatheatricality beyond just those plays which fit easily into the obvious metatheatrical categories such as the play within the play, the framed play, or the play about the theatrical profession.[2] It is the argument of this essay that what is melodramatic is also metatheatrical; that metatheatricality in melodrama is a result of the extremity of expression in character and structure which is established by nineteenth century melodrama.

Metatheatrical plays of the popular stage challenge the usual distinctions made between high and popular culture, both in the nineteenth century and now. Metatheatrical theatre has generally been seen as a part of high culture, not popular culture. Discussions of metatheatricality in nineteenth century popular theatre either express surprise at its 'modernity,'[3] or dismiss its existence at all.[4] The self-consciousness and self-reflexivity of theatre which refers to itself, to its making or performing, or to its dramatic and theatrical illusions, is regarded as essentially literary: complex, and aesthetically informed. These qualities are usually denied to popular culture, and particularly to the popular theatre of the nineteenth century, and are generally attributed to the 'stage play world' of the Renaissance theatre, or the Modernist avant garde. However, an understanding of the metatheatricality of melodrama provides a special insight into the self-image of the nineteenth century English theatrical profession, its codes and

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eccentricities, as well as suggesting the degree of complicity with which the audience viewed the whole theatrical enterprise. For the modern reader and critic, the self-image of the Victorian theatrical profession is illuminating, revealing a sophistication and self-awareness not usually ceded to popular culture in general, nor to the Victorian audience in particular.

The issue of theatricality in the popular theatre of the nineteenth century is an important one. The theatre of this period is remarkable for its employment of illusionary techniques which draw attention to the play's existence as *play*: that is, as a game of apprehension in which both performers and spectators participate. The metatheatrical nature of the nineteenth century stage drew on this general acknowledgement of the artificiality of the stage and a sophisticated knowledge of its conventions. While many staging practices were instituted in order to enhance the 'realism' of stage representations, such devices often worked to increase the spectator's awareness of the artifice, and thus the process of the creation of the performance itself. The introduction of 'real' extra-theatrical objects, characters, or scenes, for example, had a sensational impact on the stage. This was also the case in the realisation of well-known paintings in three-dimensional pictures on stage. Managers and writers were well aware of this method of creating a 'telling' effect, as were members of the audience, like Sir David Wilkie, who, on seeing the recreation of his painting 'The Rent Day' on stage at Drury Lane in Douglas Jerrold's play of the same name, wrote to a friend commenting that the scene had "all the surprise of an expected event."[5]

The paradox expressed by Wilkie is a common one for the popular stage in the nineteenth century, and one which metatheatrical plays often exploit for comic or satiric purposes. In plays about the theatre, the playful possibilities of the popular stage are used to their full extent. However, such conventions of representation also dramatise a deep-seated ambivalence about stage representation, particularly its representation of character. While melodrama establishes the primacy of the feeling individual as a defence against the depersonalising forces of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century, it also stages Victorian anxieties about the existence of the individual, and the innate theatricality involved in the performance of the self. However, despite the deep suspicion of the theatre and theatricality in Victorian culture, the evidence of plays about the theatre in the nineteenth century suggests that such anxieties were mixed with delight in the power of the theatre and theatricality, and use of its performance energy to counter anxieties about identity and its representation. In this process, melodrama is significant in the extremity of its self-consciousness, and the extent to which it foregrounds the theatricalisation of identity, and the battle against outside forces to establish and maintain a unified and righteous concept of the self.

If metatheatre is defined broadly as "theatre about the theatre," then the play within the play, the rehearsal play, the play set backstage, and the play about actors, managers or writers are all clearly and obviously metatheatrical. Not only do these plays have for their subject matter the theatre and the theatrical profession, but, and more importantly, they also rely on the spectators' knowledge of current theatrical practices for the full impact of the humour, satire, or pathos. Such plays also construct and define an audience which is local and intimate, confident in its local knowledge of the management of the theatre, its acting company, and its production history. Metatheatre should also be seen to include the many burlesques of well known plays which were popular throughout the century.[6] In these plays the same metatheatrical elements of recognition and complicity between performers and spectators are important for a full appreciation of the plays' satirical natures. Such pieces assume a familiarity with the original play, and are also a useful indication of the popularity of the original piece. The concept of metatheatricality in the nineteenth century, however, should be extended to recognise the metatheatrical nature of characterisation (particularly of character types) and plot in melodrama, where playwrights' and actors' use of strongly marked convention again require the audience to exercise a sophisticated theatrical knowledge of those visual and verbal codes, and to recognise the simultaneously fantastical and naturalistic nature of melodrama—to recognise melodrama as *"the Naturalism of the dream world,"* as Eric Bentley so aptly describes it.[7]

Before discussing the metatheatricality of melodrama, I want to look briefly at metatheatrical comedy. Some of the most clearly metatheatrical plays of the nineteenth century stage were comedies, which, typically, included a satirised or burlesqued melodrama as a play within a play. These comedies establish the principal metatheatrical conventions of nineteenth century, and represent the ludic impulse of the stage at its most expansive and jovial. These apparently naïve comedies rely on a knowledgeable audience, confident in its understanding of and participation in theatrical conventions, and able to recognise the comic disruptions to performance and its medium.

Metatheatrical comedies on the nineteenth century stage generally use two devices: the play within the play, or the interrupted performance, and the entry into the world behind the curtain, which may include a play within a play. As representative examples of these styles, I will look at *True Love, or, The Interlude Interrupted*,[8] an Australian play by convict author Edward Geoghegan, and Charles Selby's *Behind the Scenes, Or, Actors by Lamplight*.[9] The comic effects of both these plays depends on the ability of a knowledgeable audience to appreciate the difference between the world on-stage, and what I will call the extra-theatrical world. The plays also exploit the complexities of theatrical

representation which we tend to take for granted now when working in the performance tradition of Naturalism.

   The plot of *True Love* is a straightforward example of a play within a play: Mr Brown is a Sydney tailor, violently opposed to theatricals on moral and economic grounds. A self-made and self-important man, he has made a success of tailoring through hard work and bluster, and he sees the theatre as a waste of time, and actors as lazy idlers. He goes away from Sydney on a business journey, and while he is gone, his wife is asked to step in at the last moment to perform in a new interlude, called *True Love*, to be performed that night at the Royal Victoria Theatre. She accepts, thinking that her husband will be away. Mr Brown returns unexpectedly, and hearing that his wife is at the theatre, but not realizing that she is actually performing, rushes there to drag her away. At the theatre Mrs Brown is on the stage as 'Agnes Somerville,' playing a scene of reunion with her long-lost father, in a melodrama of the most sentimental kind. Seeing his wife embrace a strange man on stage, Mr Brown interrupts the performance. He jumps on to the stage, and knocks out the leading actor. It is only when threatened with the watch-house that Mr Brown allows the performance to proceed.

   The central gag of *True Love* involves the audience's knowledge of theatrical conventions, calling on its ability to differentiate between the theatrical and extra-theatrical worlds. The audience is placed in a position of superior knowledge, and able to appreciate the metatheatrical absurdity of, for example, an actor playing a character who rants about the foolishness and wastefulness of actors and the theatre, and threatens that "If I knew any man in my employment who wasted his time and money in that way— . . . I'd discharge him" (2). The audience is expected to laugh at Mr. Brown's "ignorance of the general tenor of stage business" (17) and his confusion of stage behaviour with 'real' behaviour in finding the stage embraces of his wife and the actor, Mr Griffiths, offensive. Mr Griffiths' pride is deeply wounded: not only is Mr. Brown insulting his personal honour in suggesting misbehaviour with Mrs Brown, but Mr Brown is also interfering with Mr Griffith's proper pursuit of his profession; Mr Griffiths is perfectly aware of the difference between 'stage business' and off-stage behaviour, and he assumes that his audience is too. The humour at this point comes from transgression, from Mr Brown's invasion of the picture frame stage, and his violent physical interaction with the performers. In the nineteenth century, this frame set limits round the stage as a world into which the audience "was not supposed to stray," but conversely the picture frame stage "also presented this world as a contrary or alternative reality."[10] Metatheatrical excursions into this proscribed space, however comic, maintain an important alternative to the growing and finally dominant hegemony of naturalism or

mimetic realism on the stage: a popular tradition which provided a rich source of material and technique for so-called 'experimental' metatheatrical playwrights such as Luigi Pirandello and Samuel Beckett.

This comic plot is not the only way in which *True Love* plays with the dividing line between theatrical and extra-theatrical reality. In its references to the resident acting company at the Royal Victoria in Sydney in 1845, *True Love* provides another level of comedy for a knowledgeable local audience. In the elaborate metatheatrical joke of the original production, the lead role of Mr Brown was played by the manager of the Victoria, Thomas Simes. So that when Mr Brown calls for the manager, who is reported as "not in the house at the present time," he was in fact very much in the theatre—playing Mr Brown! Mrs Brown was played by Eliza Winstanley, the first of Australia's home-grown stars and the sister of the actress, Mrs Ximenes, mentioned in the play as the actress who was to have played Agnes Somerville in the interlude, and whom Mrs Brown replaces. Actors Mrs Gibbs and Mr Griffiths play themselves—but again we encounter some blurring of theatrical and extra-theatrical worlds. Playing Mrs Brown, Eliza Winstanley has a very friendly scene with Mrs Gibbs, whose husband is leader of the Royal Victoria's orchestra. In her off-stage life, Eliza Winstanley was married to H.C.O'Flaherty, a violinist in the Royal Victoria's orchestra. So, in the off-stage world, the Gibbs and the O'Flahertys were the working colleagues, and friends that Mrs Gibbs and Mrs Brown represent on-stage. These are good examples of the way metatheatre blurs the distinctions between theatrical and extra-theatrical realities, and also show the ways in which a local knowledgeable audience is specially involved in the metatheatrical play.

The situations and in-jokes of the play are comic not only in their fictional dramatic context, but also in their focus on some of the fundamental assumptions and paradoxes of theatrical communication. *True Love* draws attention to the artifice and illusion of the theatre by short circuiting dramatic convention. The audience is led to consider the extra-theatrical identities of the actors on stage, as well as the characters they are playing. The stage world is made continuous with the world outside the theatre through reference to items of local interest such as Mr Brown's topical quotations from the *Sydney Morning Herald*. When Eliza Winstanley as Mrs Brown reads the announcement of the new interlude, *True Love*, to be performed that night at the Royal Victoria, while eating her (stage) breakfast, the play resembles a series of self-reflecting mirrors, presenting a teasing conundrum to its audience, who probably had read just such an announcement over their own breakfast cups that morning.

In a similar exploitation of dramatic convention, much of the comedy of *Behind the Scenes, Or, Actors by Lamplight* is predicated on the contrast between the ideal of theatrical representation and its reality. The play opens with a very

unglamorous view of a supposedly glamorous profession, with a scene at the stage door between Mrs Wuggins, and her son, Tommy, who plays a very unangelic cockney Cupid in the 'Mythological Ballet' each night. Other business occurs at the Stage Door, that symbolic and actual entrance to this world, much as the portrayal of the Green Room in *True Love* treats the audience to a privileged view of the usually hidden life of the theatre.

The second scene of the play moves further behind the scenes to reveal the workings of back stage. We are given a familiar back-stage view of Mr Wowbow, who plays the 'Melo-dramatic tyrant,' Manslaughtricular, and Mrs Abingdon Woffington St Clair, who plays the 'Melo-dramatic Heroine,' Esmerelda the Murderous Mother. They are appearing in the "Heroic BLANK VERSE TRAGEDY entitled, *MANSLAUGHTRICULAR! or, THE SUICIDAL SON, THE MURDEROUS MOTHER, AND THE FRATRICIDICAL FATHER*" (4). The play is performed on the fictional stage, which, by the playful paradox of this comedy, is situated behind the actual scenery. The action of the scene is set against the exits and entrances of actors onto this fictional stage, and the stage directions require occasional sound effects from the direction of the fictional stage, where *Manslaughtricular* is in progress. Much of the play's comedy springs from the contrast between the high melodrama occurring on the imaginary stage and the behaviour of the actors revealed as themselves off-stage. The leading actors are represented as most unheroic off-stage, as Mr Wowbow wears reading spectacles and Mrs St. Clair orders "a shillings worth of oysters" to be ready for her when she comes off from being executed (18).

As in most nineteenth century comedies, the action relies on a compound of slapstick, parody, and punning humour. However, in *Behind the Scenes*, the comedy is more complex because of the double reality which the play presents. The audience is privileged to be allowed back-stage, and everything about the setting contributes towards showing a truthful and knowing view of "behind the scenes." Yet such scenes are themselves theatrical representations: this is particularly noticeable in the exaggeration of contemporary melodramatic styles, and the comic exploitation of the disparity between the actors' on-stage and off-stage behaviour. Recognition of this involves the complicity of the audience with the performers, in the same way as the laughter at Mr Brown unites audience and actors in *True Love*.

These comic reversals of theatrical conventions rely for their effect on a knowledgeable audience, who are, if not regular theatre goers, at least familiar with current theatrical practices, and familiar also with the identities of local performers. This suggests a high level of theatrical sophistication in the popular audience, and an appreciation of the ambiguities of the medium; expectations of audience comprehension which tend to be assigned to the avant garde, rather than

to the popular audience. Victorian dramatists and actors, secure in the basic assumptions of their dramaturgy, played with it, exploiting its possibilities, and so present the sort of fun and games of *True Love*, and *Behind the Scenes*, where complicated viewing tasks are set the audience within conventional comic forms. Such confidence in the conventional dramaturgy and performance practices of the time offers an important counter-argument to the declarations of the intellectual clerisy about the decline of the drama. Furthermore, the role played by popular drama in the maintenance of the theatre as an important national cultural institution must not be forgotten. While managers of the patent theatres, and writers and critics of high culture bemoan the state of the drama and the untheatrical character of the British public, those whose professional careers catered to the popular audience at the minor houses had no such doubts.

While melodrama provided many comedies of the nineteenth century with rich fodder for metatheatrical parody, it too developed significant metatheatrical strategies, and ones which did not rely only on the conspicuously metatheatrical devices of comedy discussed above. While comedy employs these relatively simple metatheatrical devices, which emphasise the disjunctions between on- and off-stage behaviour and the frames of theatrical performance, melodrama about the theatre or the lives of performers uses a more complicated realisation of the theatrical world and the processes of performance. In melodrama, the frames separating the theatre and the extra-theatrical worlds are removed, and the continuity between the life of the performer on-stage and off is stressed. From this continuity comes a melodramatic struggle: the attempt to articulate the independent feeling Self against the overwhelming pressure of the evil Other which threatens to consume the virtuous individual.[11] The struggle is all the more severe when it is the struggle against an aspect of the self so privileged as artistic talent and expression. For the nineteenth century, an age when stability of identity—and particularly respectable, bourgeois identity—was felt to be crucial but elusive, the dramatisation of the fight for identity was a powerful one. This anxiety about identity and resistance against a volatile, theatricalised existence, is displaced into melodrama, and particularly those metatheatrical melodramas which dramatise lives of performers.

Robert J. Nelson recognises an important change in the metatheatrical drama of the nineteenth century, when he argues that:

> In the nineteenth century, as a consequence of the increased interest in the personality of the artist, . . . [the] two realms [on-stage and off-stage] meet each other not at the conclusion of the play within a play but at its beginning, as the man and the artist, the player and the role become one. The play is

> intended not to effect but to affect, not to implement an action
> but to express a being. The play becomes a confessional.[12]

And it is in the plays about actresses where the confessional aspect of metatheatrical melodrama is strongest and also dramatises most interestingly the Victorian ambivalence about the performance and theatricality of the self.

As melodrama can be seen to be inherently metatheatrical, so too can the female performer (or, for want of a better term, the actress) be regarded as a necessarily metatheatrical performer. She is metatheatrical in the way she is constructed by the theatrical profession and the viewing strategies and customs of her audience, as her presence on stage is seen implicitly to refer to an extra-theatrical existence which is compromised or corrupted by her on-stage life. That this was a common view of all actors is a commonplace of the nineteenth century: a particularly strong expression of such a view is given in D.—G.'s 'Remarks' to Joseph Lunn's *Management; Or, The Prompter Puzzled*, an otherwise lighthearted metatheatrical comedy, about the arrangements for a prompter's benefit night at the theatre. The play, as George Daniels somewhat redundantly tells us, is about actors,

> who, probably, from being obliged to counterfeit every passion,
> become at last callous to all, but Vanity, their ruling one![13]

The actress was subject not only to the sort of cynical comment quoted above, but was consistently assumed to be guilty of passions and behaviour even more reprehensible than vanity. As Tracy Davis so compellingly argues, the female performer was sexualised by the sign system of the popular stage and the viewing pratices of the male spectator in a way that was beyond her control.[14] Metatheatrical melodramas recognise this predicament of the actress—although not in terms so explicitly sexual—and dramatise her situation through the construction of a vulnerable heroine, mid-way between innocent virtue and worldly knowledge. She is a "*falling* woman," whose public appearance inevitably leads to conflict, with an outcome usually cast in the mode of the "melodrama of defeat."[15]

In melodramas which deal with the lives of performers, the 'confessional' of the actress is a chorus explaining the misunderstanding of the actress and articulating her loss of control over self-determination and individual action. The dramatised actress articulates the social prejudice, overt or covert, against not just her choice of career, but her character. In a representative speech, the central character of *World and Stage*,[16] actress Kate Robertson,

protests against the world's prejudice about the actress, now apparently shared by her childhood friend:

> You worship the art, but you despise its ministers. Why?
> (*proudly*) You do not speak. I say in turn—is it possible? Can
> the youth I have known, so full of truth, of honour, of
> straightforwardness, have become a mere babbling echo of the
> world's prejudice—an unjust judge who condemns on hearsay
> and without evidence? It is for me to cry, 'Fie! this is
> calumny.' You are silent still. (3)

This declaration immediately reverses the usual platitudes about the corrupting effect of acting, of impersonating falsehoods on stage each night, of the sort that George Daniels repeats above. The actress uses her skills and independence derived from the practice of her profession to speak out against the confusion of the person with the role. In an argument which is common in both comedies and melodramas about the theatre, Kate Robertson presents acting as an honourable profession, and for her, one which was the only refuge from dishonour and dependence when her family had lost its fortune.

> The spirit of independence stirred within me; that spirit was
> my blessing or my bane, as the world may judge it. Another
> spirit too was restless within me—the love of art. (4)

The love of art is seen as a perilous desire for the actress in the nineteenth century, as many plays about the theatre attest. It leads to her exile and rejection, as Kate Robertson experiences, or to her suffocation in marriage and respectability, or to her death. In *Art and Love*, "A Sketch of Artist Life" by A. W. Dubourg,[17] Lucy, the discontented young wife of the younger son of a Marquis, complains of the sacrifice she made in marrying: "But I am an artist as well as a woman, two natures dwell in me" (224-5). In the course of the play she is cajoled out of her discontent, but her two natures are the engine of the slim plot. Dubourg's piece is a short sketch, and unperformed at that, but it reflects a common conception of the mutually exclusive existence of femininity and art in the character of a woman. W. S. Gilbert rings interesting changes on this theme in *Comedy and Tragedy*,[18] a short drama in which Mary Anderson played the role of the actress, Clarice, with great success.

Set in France of the eighteenth century, *Comedy and Tragedy* centers on an actress who has married a man of blood, who gave up his commission in the Royal Body Guard and became an actor. In a very unusual twist, it is the

husband who forgoes "rank, wealth, friends, everything—that he might marry her" (3). The plot concerns Clarice and her husband's attempts to release Clarice from the "accumulation of intolerable insult" (7) from the Prince Regent, who besieges her in order to make her his mistress. The play requires a virtuoso performance from the performer playing Clarice the actress, in which she moves quickly from comedy to tragedy, and then to 'real' tragic despair, and 'real' triumph. Mary Anderson was thought to have "courage and perseverance" in playing such a role,[19] which requires her to make the standard speech about the exile of the actress from the social world:

> I am an actress—by law proscribed, by the Church excommunicated! While I live women gather their skirts about them as I pass; when I die I am to be buried, as dogs are buried, in unholy ground. . . . In the mean time, I am the recognized prey of the spoiler—the traditional property of him who will best pay me: an actress, with a body, God help her! but without a soul: unrecognized by the State, abjured by the Church, and utterly despised of all! (5)

Even the reviewer here blurs the distinction between actress and role in his attribution of 'courage' to Anderson; presumably hers was the courage to perform in a play which deals so explicitly with the shameful aspects of an actress' working life.

The plot makes sensational use of Clarice's ability to fool her stage 'audience,' and furthermore, works to confuse even the actual audience into uncertainty about when she is 'acting' as part of the trap set for the Regent, and when she is reacting 'naturally' to unforeseen circumstances. These are the moments which are for the audience the points of heightened melodramatic tension. Gilbert utilises the slippage between the frames of performance and reality, between the theatrical and the natural representations of the self, in order to celebrate the actress as a triumphant figure, who is able, through her art, to save her reputation, and reconstitute her marriage as an exemplary union of romantic love. Gilbert's sleight of hand here enables him to present acting and subterfuge as the necessary avenues to respectability and harmony, thus diffusing (and defusing) the theatrical into the realm of the domestic.

Clarice's speech, like Kate Robertson's, articulates the physical and metaphysical vulnerability and exile of the actress. In plays about the theatre this is another standard element of the metatheatrical strategy. Even in comedy, the vulnerability and apparent acessibility of the actress' body is a topic of discussion.

In Dion Boucicault's melodramatic comedy, *The Prima Donna*,[20] Stella, the aptly named title character, expresses this vulnerability explicitly:

> I am an actress—as such, I know I am defenceless, and the
> offer you would blush to make another you deem an honour to
> me;   but I appeal to your generosity—this is my father's
> house—my home. (5)

Although this sounds like the beginning of a melodrama, with the conventionally virtuous heroine at risk from the conventionally rapacious villain, the play soon proceeds in the lighter pattern of nineteenth century comedy. However, the mixture of modes when introducing the Stella into the play is perhaps neither accidental nor clumsy. The actress in love, as Stella is, is always vulnerable in the melodramatic mode. Even in the melodrama of triumph, such as Gilbert's *Comedy and Tragedy*, she is beset by a conflict of an extreme kind. She is a character defined by her oppositional relationship to her society, and must struggle against its hostile force in order to assert her innocence and virtue. In comedy, she may, like Stella in *The Prima Donna* and Lucy in *Art and Love*, be joked or tricked out of her existential dilemma, but in melodrama, too often she is only portrayed as escaping through death.

The death of the actress as a consequence of the pursuit of her art is a depressingly frequent occurence in metatheatrical melodrama. In two important plays about actresses, *Adrienne Lecouvreur* and *Angelo; or, The Actress of Padua*,[21] actual or threatened death is represented as the only solution to the actress's situation. Adrienne's death comes as the pinnacle of her performing career, when, in one version of the play, her last speech is an hallucination in which Adrienne repeats fragments from her famous roles (Oxenford 29). Even in death, the actress must perform a role, so corrupted is she seen to be by the practice of her profession. The irony of this view of the actress is developed throughout the play, in which Adrienne, although an actress, is revealed to be the most truthful character in her world. As Michonnet assures her, before she recites from *Phèdre*, "there are greater actors than you in this room" (Oxenford 24).

Thisbe, the "actress of Padua" is a prey to powerful men such as Angelo, the ruler of Padua:

> You know what I am—an actress—a thing caressed to-day, and
> cast away in scorn to-morrow—one whose destiny is to act, and
> therefore supposed to be always acting a part. The daughter of
> poor people, I live for the fame I have made;—but I have had

> something better to live for—a mother! Know you what it is to
> have had a good mother? (11)

The dramatisation of Thisbe is a focus for the expression of ideas about the public
and private presentation of character. Thisbe is martyred: she is pursued by men
she does not love, who see her as public property, but not loved by Rodolfo, the
man she loves. Rodolfo loves Catherine, Angelo's pure wife, and Thisbe is
prevailed upon to become an intermediary between Rodolfo and Catherine.
Furthermore, because of her public character, Thisbe is manipulated into
becoming the vehicle of the villain's revenge on Angelo and Catherine. Thus
Thisbe is forced to act out roles in her private as well as her public life, with no
recognition of her integrity as an individual. In the presentation of the actress
Thisbe, theatricality is represented as highly problematic, creating instability and
fluidity of character, culminating in the negation of the individual.

　　　　While metatheatrical plays serve to emphasise the problem of
theatricality in the nineteenth century, simultaneously assuming that the audience
is theatrically knowledgeable and sophisticated, metatheatrical techniques are also
used to expose, re-present and re-create other problematic fields in the nineteenth
century.   The 'problem' of the position of women is one with which
metatheatrical melodrama is particularly concerned, and class, race, and nation
are other topics interestingly approached through metatheatrical strategies. The
localisation of stage reference and the audience in *True Love* is an example I have
already discussed;   other Australian plays employ explicit and implicit
metatheatrical techniques to claim a national difference from the metropolitan
centre. In the Australian melodramas of George Darrell for example, Australian
character types are presented and defined against the usual English melodramatic
stage stereotypes. These characters, especially the women, are clearly different
from their English originals and meant to be recognised as different by their
Australian audience. The heroine of George Darrell's *The Sunny South*, Bubs
Berkley, is described as "Bred in the Bush" and is the visual and linguistic
opposite of the usual melodramatic heroine—a point which is made obvious by the
introduction of Clarice Chester, an English woman "Born in the Purple"[22]:
Bubs'*colonial* identity is established in a self-conscious manner by her *difference*
from the identifiably English heroine of the play, as well as by her difference
from the general *type* of the English heroine. Bubs, like Clarice, is also a
theatrical type, and her creation is metatheatrical in its self-conscious reference
to the existing system of melodramatic signs of character. The differences
between Bubs and Clarice are emphasised from Clarice's shocked reaction to the
irregularity of Bubs' antecedents—as a baby, Bubs was left in a tin dish to the
care of the hero Matt Morley-Chester (17)—to their manners in the stately English

home of the Chesters, where the play opens. Clarice declares her heroic nature in submitting to her father's plan to force her to marry for money, in the high-flown language of the conventional melodramatic heroine refusing the temptations of Vice:

> Stay, Father. I am a Chester, and loyal and leal, and will try
> to obey your wishes, but I cannot insult myself or my kin by
> even the profession of an affection for that man. (11)

Bubs' entrance in this scene is deliberately unconventional, disrupting the familiar English country house setting of the first two acts of the play. She bursts in, pushing past the comic butler, and demands to see "the boss of the shanty" (27), energetically interrupting the conversation with slang phrases usually forbidden to virtuous female characters on the stage.

The distinction between Bubs and Clarice is mirrored by the distinctions drawn between Matt Morley-Chester, the Australian hero, and Ivo Carne, the Englishman. Matt is the man of action, blunt and open. His response to the loss of the Chester family's money is to work hard at gold mining in Australia: "I never cared for gold before—now there's not an ounce but shall be hoarded, not a grain but shall be saved." (30) Ivo, on the other hand, can only see his way out of his financial difficulties by marrying an heiress or emigrating, either to Australia or the North Pole: "I prefer the former—I may marry a black woman with lots of land and an inexpensive wardrobe" (9). The original melodramatic type from which Matt Morley is drawn is the working class hero of the early nineteenth century stage, represented most popularly by William in *Black-Ey'd Susan*. However, Matt is not of the working class by birth—he is the heir to the Chester family house and name, "the property of the Chesters since the days of the Conquest" (18). His characterisation draws from established types to develop a new characterisation of the Australian hero: egalitarian, unpretentious, without the restrictions of English class-consciousness on his behaviour. Such distinctions in the characterisation of heroic figures in *The Sunny South* are not simply extra-theatrical in reference, but are metatheatrical in their reference to previously established and recognisable theatrical types.

In *The Currency Lass; or, My Native Girl*[23] Edward Geoghegan also involves his local audience's knowledge and recognition of theatrical convention. Again, he does this to establish the typical *Australian* heroine and to make fun of English misconceptions of the term "native girl." This play is perhaps more remarkable than *The Sunny South* for its early representation of identifiably Australian theatrical characterisations: its first performance was in 1844, and was not a play designed for Anglo-Australian consumption as was *The Sunny South*,

forty years later.[24] In *The Currency Lass*, Geoghegan makes use of his audience's knowledge and recognition of theatrical conventions, and particularly theatrical character stereotypes. The plot centres on Samuel Simile, an English gentleman "much devoted to dramatic composition" (3), who believes his nephew to be marrying a "native girl"— a phrase Simile mistakenly understands to mean an Australian Aborigine—and storms out to the colony of New South Wales in order to stop his nephew from "engrafting a slip of ebony on the British oak of our family" (25).[25] In order to reveal to Simile his mistake, Susan Hearty, the heroine and "currency lass" of the title, performs in a series of characters in order to confuse and confound her lover's uncle. Not only does Susan prove to Samuel Simile that "a native girl" is not an Aborigine but one whose "proudest boast is to be privileged to claim [her] birthright as 'native' of the soil—and [a child] of Australia!" (66), but she also shows him her skill at performance, establishing the colonial heroine as one who is in command of representation and characterisation and can use it for her purposes.

     The pervasiveness of melodrama's metatheatrical codes of representation is emphasised by the ease with which they can be transported to the other side of the world. The use of such dramaturgical principles in the Australian context suggests the extent of their durability and familiarity, and the flexibility which comes from deeply entrenched conventions. They also suggest, for historians of Australian theatre and popular culture, how early a distinct Australian identity was assumed as a matter of national and personal pride. Such plays, written in the Antipodes for both English and Australian audiences, are prime examples of the assumptions made about the theatrical sophistication of the popular audience, their enjoyment of the paradoxical games of theatricality, and their recognition of the political meanings of those games.

     The political nature of metheatricality is foregrounded in melodrama. The heightened world of melodrama reveals itself through self-referential conventions of characterisation and setting, so that certain character types are recognisable by reference to metatheatrical codes as well as extra-theatrical allusions. This world is a defence of the heroic feeling individual against the encroachments of industrialisation and urbanisation.   The principle of metatheatricality is central here, as such a theatrical defence of the heroic might otherwise be undermined by Victorian anti-theatrical suspicion of the fluidity and malleability of the theatrical character. If character can be established in theatrical, performative terms, so too can it be perverted or destroyed—a deep ambivalence dramatised most clearly through representations of the actress. However, the structure of melodrama, and its moral imperatives, work to counter the fluidity of character, through the opposition of good and evil, and the battle of virtue against vice, in social settings. In metatheatrical plays showing the

triumph of the actress (or conversely, her failure), melodramatic dramaturgy establishes a single truth with which to control the perilous slipperiness of theatricality. Ultimately, the movement between representational frames is controlled by this dramaturgical structure, as the melodramatic and the metatheatrical work together to expose Victorian anxieties about identity, and then force closure through the triumph of virtue. In this ability to force closure lies the power of melodramatic theatricality, and also the seeds of its decline in the face of the Modernist avant garde, where metatheatricality comes to represent the breakdown of common conventions of communication.

Notes

1. See Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1963), Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life* (London: Longman, 1972), James Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1971), Sidney Homan, *When the Theatre Turns to Itself: the Aesthetic Metaphor in Shakespeare* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1981), Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1986), and Anne Barton (neè Righter), *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962). Discussions of self-reflexivity as a predominantly modern phenomenon include Elaine Aston & George Savona, *Theatre as a Sign System* (London: Routledge, 1991), June Schlueter, *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia UP, 1979), and Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*, (London: Methuen, 1984).

2. Hornby defines six categories of 'metadrama': the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role playing within the role, literary and real-life reference, and self-reference, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* 32.

3. Patricia D. Denison, "Drama in Rehearsal: Arthur W. Pinero's *Trelawney of the 'Wells,'*" *Modern Drama*, 31 (2), June 1988.

4. Hornby 39-40.

5. Quoted in Martin Meisel, *Realizations. Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 150.

6. The many burlesques of Douglas Jerrold's *Black-Ey'd Susan* provide good examples of the satires of contemporary melodrama, while Shakespearean parody was the century's most enduring and numerous form of burlesque.

7. Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965) 205, his italics.

8. Edward Geoghegan, *True Love, or The Interlude Interrupted*, (unpublished manuscript in the N.S.W. Government Archives); first performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney, 1845. Page references are to an unpublished typescript by Ron Blair.

9. Charles Selby, *Behind the Scenes, or, Actors by Lamplight, A Serio Comic Burlesque Burletta in One Act*, (London: Duncombe's Acting Edition of the British Theatre, n.d.); first performed at the Strand Theatre, 1839. All further references are to this edition.

10. Burns, *Theatricality* 75.

11. I am adapting the psychological model of melodrama which Peter Brooks develops in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976).

12. Robert J. Nelson, *Play Within a Play* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1958) 90.

13. D.—G., "Remarks," Joseph Lunn, *Management; Or, The Prompter Puzzled* (London: John Cumberland, n.d.) 3.

14. Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women* (London: Routledge, 1991).

15. As formulated by James L. Smith, *Melodrama* (London: Methuen, The Critical Idiom Series, 1973) 56.

16. John Palgrave Simpson, *World and Stage* (London & New York: Samuel French, n.d.); first performed at the Haymarket Theatre, 12th March 1859. All further references are to this edition.

17. A.W. Dubourg, *Art and Love* in *Four Original Plays (Unacted)* (London: Richard Bentley, 1883); as the title indicates, there is no evidence of performance. All further references are to this edition.

18. W.S. Gilbert, *Comedy and Tragedy*, in *Original Plays, Third Series* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1913); first performed at the Lyceum Theatre, 26th January 1884. All further references are to this edition.

19. Austin Brereton (ed), *Dramatic Notes, 1883*, quoted in Donald Mullin (comp. & ed.), *Victorian Actors and Actresses in Review* (Westport & London: Greenwood P, 1983) 24.

20. Dion Boucicault, *The Prima Donna* (London: T. H. Lacy, n.d.); first performed at the Royal Princess's Theatre, 18th September 1852. All further references are to this edition.

21. H. Herman, *Adrienne Lecouvreur* (London & New York: Samuel French, n.d.), adapted from the play of the same name by Eugène Scribe and Ernest Legouvé; Herman's version first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, 11th December 1880. Also referred to is John Oxenford, *Adrienne Lecouvreur, The Reigning Favourite* (London: T.H. Lacy, n.d.); this version first performed at the New Strand Theatre, 9th October 1849. Gilbert A'Beckett, *Angelo; or, The Actress of Padua* (New York: Samuel French, n.d.), translated and altered from the French of Victor Hugo; A'Beckett's version first performed at the Haymarket Theatre, no date is given in script. All further references are to this version.

22. George Darrell, *The Sunny South* (Sydney: Currency P, 1975), edited by Margaret Williams; first performed at the Opera House, Melbourne, 31st March 1883. All further references are to this edition.

23. Edward Geoghegan, *The Currency Lass; or, My Native Girl* (Sydney: Currency P, 1976), edited by Roger Covell; first performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney, 27th May 1844. All further references are to this edition.

24. *The Sunny South* was performed first in Australia in 1883, but was transported in 1884 to play in London for a successful season (76). The play's use of Australian and English settings and characters seems designed to appeal to both Australian and English audiences.

25. In a modern response to the play's mid-nineteenth century assumptions about the superiority of the British race, a production was mounted in 1988 by the Q Theatre (Penrith, NSW) with Justine Saunders, a leading Australian Aboriginal actress, cross-dressing to play Samuel Simile.