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**NOT TO BE  
TAKEN AWAY**

**SATIRE AND PARODY IN THE FICTION  
OF THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK  
AND THE EARLY WRITINGS OF  
WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY**

**1815-1850**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the works of Peacock and the early periodical contributions of Thackeray in the light of recent twentieth-century critical interpretations of satire. In particular, attention to Peacock's use of elements of the Menippean sub-genre in his satirical fiction offers a reassessment of his place in the literary tradition. While Thackeray's early writings demonstrate some characteristics of Menippean satire, a review of his work from the broader perspective of Bakhtin's exposition of carnival influences in serio-comic literature provides a new understanding of the origins and uses of his narratorial devices.

A comparison of the work of the two authors, within the time constraint of the first half of the nineteenth century, illustrates how nineteenth-century publishing innovations shaped literary perceptions of satire. Although the high status of the genre in the predominant culture of the previous century was challenged by the growth of the reading public, satire found new energy and modes of expression in the popular magazines of the period. In addition, writers facing the increasing heterogeneity of new reading audiences, were forced to reconsider their personal ideals of authorship and literature, while renegotiating their position in the literary marketplace.

Organized in six chapters, the discussion opens with an account of traditional interpretations of satire, and goes on to examine recent analyses of the genre. The second chapter focuses on the relevance of these new interpretations to the work of Peacock and Thackeray and the extent to which the use of Menippean forms of satire enabled each to challenge the established opinions of their period. Changes in concepts of reading and writing and innovations in modes of publication form the substance of the third chapter and this is followed by an analysis of the work of both writers, using Bakhtin's interpretation of the Menippean sub-genre in the broader context of serio-comic discourse and the carnival tradition. Chapter five is a comparative study of the attitudes of both writers towards contemporary literature and the final section places their work in the political context of the period.

Both Peacock and Thackeray made extensive use of elements of Menippean satire in their fiction. The content of their work, however, and their modes of writing were highly individual, to some extent shaped by the different markets they supplied. Collectively, their writings illustrate two aspects of the cultural watershed of the early nineteenth century, Peacock reflecting traditional notions of authorship and Thackeray representing a new industry, regulated by the commercial considerations of supply and demand. As satirists, each succeeded in adapting the genre to satisfy both his own authorial integrity and the expectations of his readers.

## DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of this thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

**Signed**

..... **Date:** 16 May 2005



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## **Introduction.**

The position of satire in the literary tradition during the first half of the nineteenth century has received little critical attention and remains unclear. Contemporary discussion has focused on the Augustan period as the great age of satire, an era during which writers explored the aesthetic principles and critical precepts of classical authors, consciously accepting these as models for their own work. What they produced was openly imitative of their literary predecessors and rigorously circumscribed by the cultural assimilation of these earlier modes of writing. Critical opinion has, until recently, suffered from similar constraints, with the result that during the early years of the nineteenth century, satire, which ceased to match the demanding criteria of the formal style, attracted little attention, and the genre was assumed to be in a state of degeneration and decline.

This thesis explores the possibility that satire, at this time, was not only still very much in evidence, but also gaining in energy and momentum, as it survived a period of rapid cultural change. Central to this argument is a contextual evaluation of new market forces operating within the publishing industry. Changes in methods of publication and alterations in the constitution of reading audiences brought up fundamental questions concerning the nature of authorship, causing divisions within the profession itself. This process also exposed hierarchical tensions between the predominant culture of the period and a growing popular culture within the literary marketplace. For the first time, the established notion of the pursuit of literature as a prerogative of the privileged classes came under a serious challenge and experienced authors as well as emerging writers were obliged to adapt to new artistic and commercial demands.

At the same time, satire had encountered a direct challenge from the Romantic writers, and the form began to break free from the constraints of the formal satirists of the previous century. Less familiar modes of the genre, which had remained dormant, were stimulated into use. Although Menippean satire has been identified in ancient classical literature and in some Renaissance seriocomic fiction, the sub-genre has, until recently, received little attention. An investigation into the ways in which elements of the mode surfaced in some forms of nineteenth-century writing will broaden the focus of critical conceptions of satire, and offer new interpretations of work that has been previously neglected.

The following chapters examine, in some detail, the political context of the period and cultural changes in concepts of publishing and readership. However, this investigation is primarily intended to analyse, in the light of recent twentieth-century literary criticism, the methods by which Peacock and Thackeray accommodated satire into their work. Reference to recent twentieth-century discussions of Menippean satire, Frye (1957), Bakhtin (1984), Relihan (1993) and Kaplan (2000), suggests a context Peacock's satirical fiction and Thackeray's early periodical work and indicates that elements of the mode may have survived during the first half of the nineteenth century, as it acquired new audiences in an increasingly heterogeneous literary marketplace.

Peacock made use of the dialogic characteristics of Menippean satire as a tool of ideological enquiry, challenging the established opinions of a largely intellectual readership. Thackeray employed carnivalesque modes of discourse in his periodical work, as he attacked contemporary values. Finally, this analysis will justify the application of recent criticism to nineteenth-century writing, and offer a

re-appraisal of the respective positions of Peacock and Thackeray in the literary tradition.



## Chapter One: A Further Progress of Satire

Satire, as a literary genre, is resistant to any single definition. Early European attempts at clarification were confused by uncertainties concerning the etymological origins of the word. Elizabethan commentary is largely based on the theory that the form derived from the satyr-gods of Greek drama, who employed harsh invective to rebuke fellow citizens for their follies and vices. Renaissance theory, in particular Casaubon's *De Satyrica Graecorum Poesi et Romanorum Satira* (1605), refuted the 'satyr' connection and presented a broader, more comprehensive perspective of the genre. However, the acceptance of Casaubon's thesis was hampered by scholarly disputants, who defended one or another of the Roman satirists, each distorting theories of satire to fit the style of his preferred champion. The importance of Casaubon's contribution was taken up and developed by Dryden, whose *Discourse on the Origin and Progress of Satire* (1693), is recognised as the most prominent and influential work on English satire. Griffin writes that: 'Our reigning notion of satire as a moral art and as a carefully constructed and unified contrast between vice and virtue finds its fullest and most influential presentation in Dryden's essay.'<sup>1</sup>

The *Discourse* owes its lasting prominence to two factors: in the first instance, the status of Dryden's own work as a satirist earned him a secure place in literary history; secondly, he pulled together the disparate factions of seventeenth-century theory, producing a unified paradigm that could be used to restore satire to the cultural eminence of its classical origins. Derived from the work of Horace, Persius and Juvenal, his prescriptive criteria of thematic unity and

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<sup>1</sup> D. Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reconsideration* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p.15.

epigrammatic structure, aesthetic considerations and moral purpose, became not only a major influence on the conventions and forms of eighteenth-century satire, but also provided a significant core of the critical consensus until, at least, the middle of the twentieth century. It is only comparatively recently that Dryden's authority has been seriously challenged. As Griffin points out, the *Discourse* was built on a 'selective history of satire', which placed the emphasis 'on satire as a form of "art".'<sup>2</sup>

Successive attempts to categorize satire have succeeded only in establishing principles applicable to specific areas of satirical writing and, for the most part, these analyses have been coloured by the cultural hierarchy of the era in which they were written. Critical investigations into satire, restricted by the dominant values and attitudes of a given period, have resulted in the cursory dismissal of work that remained outside these consensual concepts of the genre. During the last three decades, however, investigations into the traditions and forms of satire have resulted in a broader interpretation of satiric modes. This not only enriches the understanding of satires already acknowledged as part of the established canon, but also invites consideration of a large quantity of satirical work which has so far remained outside critical recognition. Until comparatively recently, nineteenth-century satirical writing has been evaluated according to the benchmark of its cultural antecedents and these have been limited to its classical originators and the work of Dryden and the Augustan poets. One particular effect of this predisposition towards a constrained set of cultural ideals has meant that the extent to which satire was used by nineteenth-century writers has been underestimated and the development of the genre has continued to be presented as

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<sup>2</sup> Griffin, p.17.



a fundamentally finalized form of monologic moral discourse. This circumscribed interpretation overlooked or misunderstood satirical work not seen as appropriate to the established paradigm and has left large tracts of literature outside the boundaries of critical attention.

A very large number of these neglected texts can be seen to have emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century, a period when it has been generally believed that satire was in decline. Dyer (1997) has produced a bibliography of over seven hundred volumes of satirical verse, published between 1789 and 1832.<sup>3</sup> A few titles are instantly familiar, like Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), *The Curse of Minerva* (1812), *Waltz* (1813), *Beppo* (1818) and *Don Juan* (1819-24). In addition, he includes the less well known work of Peacock, *Sir Proteus* (1814), and Thomas Moore's *Fudge Family in Paris* (1818). However, these, together with new translations of the classical satirists, are heavily outnumbered by numerous anonymous satires. A cross-section of these titles shows a varied collection of imitative odes, parodic paraphrases and comic quatrains, some written in the eighteenth-century satiric tradition for serious corrective purposes, while others could be more accurately described as comic light verse, penned for pure entertainment. There is a marked decline in the recorded number of these publications from the mid-1820s, and Dyer makes a case that satire was mellowing at this time in favour of subtler forms of wit.<sup>4</sup> However, there are other explanations for this apparent decline in satirical writing during this period. In the first instance, allowance has to be made for the 1825-6 financial crisis which put most of the small publishing houses out of

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<sup>3</sup> G. Dyer, *British Satire and the Politics of Style, 1789-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 210-250.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143-53.

business, drastically curtailing the production of new volumes, satirical or otherwise, which were unlikely to generate sales. Secondly, it is relevant at this stage to take a look at some of changes that had already taken place in the literary marketplace.

Dyer comments that his bibliography is limited to book publications only and there is still a lot of work to do in identifying the extent to which satiric verse and prose had begun to appear in the newspapers and magazines of the period.<sup>5</sup> There are strong indications that, even before the production of volumes of satirical verse became financially unviable, satire was not so much in decline as in a process of migration towards other modes of publication. A new generation of writers was already looking towards the periodical market, not merely as an alternative outlet for their work, but as a means of communicating the social unrest and political dissension that emerged in the aftermath of the French Wars. Radical journalists, working against the established press and the oppressive legislation of Lord Liverpool's government, were discovering the effectiveness of both satire and parody in the cause of political provocation. They wrote, for the most part, with the specific purpose of promoting political disaffection and undermining governmental authority. This subversive new style of journalism juxtaposed satire, parody and overstated rhetoric with factual reporting and paid little attention to the established constraints of news coverage. Provocative and inflammatory, the work of the radical journalists offered few rational solutions to the political injustices it was designed to expose. However, for editors and writers who were faced with prosecution for seditious libel, satire was a godsend. It provided them with the means to take a stand against views that were resistant to

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<sup>5</sup> Dyer, p.10.



the established political ideology while, at the same time, offering them the means of attracting new reading audiences outside the margins of the established press.

The radical press of this period has already been the subject of recent critical attention. Klancher (1987) observes that: 'Radical writers turned restive artisans from machine wreckers into Luddites of language, savage parodists of the dominant culture's ideological texts.'<sup>6</sup> Gilmartin (1997) points out that Wooler's four-penny weekly *Black Dwarf* (1817-24) parodied and distorted 'almost every element of a respectable newspaper: there were mock news items, dedications, speeches, advertisements, market prices, court and parliamentary reports, transcriptions of meetings and trials, accounts of crimes, notices of marriages and deaths and literary and theatrical reviews.'<sup>7</sup> Jones (2000) describes the *Black Dwarf* as a publication 'produced and received outside the margins of "literature" proper', and identifies in Wooler's writing a counterpoint of satire and exaggerated sentiment, not unlike that used by Cobbett, which 'played against one another for their incendiary effect.'<sup>8</sup> In addition, it has to be pointed out here that it was not only the politically radical papers that employed satire in attacks on their opponents. 'Respectable' newspapers and established magazines, most of which were, in reality, the organs of the leading political parties, were themselves not above satirical attacks designed to provoke an argument with their ideological opponents.

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<sup>6</sup> J. P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p.100.

<sup>7</sup> K. Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.94.

<sup>8</sup> S. E. Jones, *Satire and Romanticism* (Basingstoke: London: Macmillan, 2000), p.77. Further references to this source are given after quotations in the text.

Recent investigations into the relationship between satire and the early commercial press support the argument that the genre had a substantial role to play in the journalism of the period. Jones writes that 'popular print culture, from prints to broadsides to newspapers, has traditionally made use of medleys and combinations of satiric and burlesque forms'.<sup>9</sup> Justman (1999), investigating the tradition of free speech in the context of eighteenth and nineteenth-century journalism, writes: 'Indeed, not just the exploitation of scandal on the one hand and the decrying of abuses on the other, but freedom of speech itself took satiric form before being committed to the press and recognized by law'.<sup>10</sup>

The migration of satire into the radical press of the post-Waterloo period is a significant factor in the early growth of popular reading audiences. This transition served to remove the genre from its earlier eighteenth-century status as a canonical literary form, and to realign it as, at worst, a propaganda tool of the post-Waterloo revolutionary subculture or, less controversially, a form of light entertainment outside the parameters of the established culture. As a literary genre, satire was, of course, no stranger to periodical publications. The varied writings of Swift, Addison and Steele during the early part of the eighteenth century, when satire still occupied an important position in the literary tradition, testify to the popularity of the mode among the limited reading audiences of the pre-modern periodical. The resurgence of satire in the radical press, until repressive legislation forced much of it out of production by the early 1820s, also attracted reading audiences, but these were increasingly numerous and heterogeneous, now composed of sections of the population not previously

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<sup>9</sup> Jones, p.78.

<sup>10</sup>S. Justman, *The Springs of Liberty: The Satiric Tradition and Freedom of Speech* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 2.



considered as a potential readership. The demand for popular periodicals, despite some negative connotations on account of their association with radical factions, became firmly established. A popular reading culture was now developing and the extent to which satire formed a part of this culture may be assessed from an early anthology of journal contributions. The next section examines some examples of satirical writing that reached publication in the periodicals of the early 1820s.



*The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1824*, published for the Christmas market, is a compilation of extracts from over thirty periodicals, a range which includes established magazines and daily newspapers, together with provincial weeklies and other publications which have long since disappeared from circulation into obscurity.<sup>11</sup> Contributions from the *Examiner* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Times* appear side by side with articles from the *News of Literature and Fashion* and the *Annals of Sporting*. The second volume in a series of annual publications, it is a farrago of comic writing, prose and verse, light-hearted, topical humour, satire, parody and brief extracts from serious essays. The eclecticism of this collection demonstrates not only the extent to which satire retained its popular appeal, but also the cross-cultural appeal of periodical publications during the 1820-30 period. The annual appears to have been aimed at an affluent, educated and literate audience, sufficiently privileged to be able to buy books, but who were, nevertheless, browsers rather than scholars, neither seriously academic nor intellectual in their approach to literature. An introductory address by the editor clearly states his intention of 'contributing more

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<sup>11</sup> *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1824*, ed. by C. M.W. (London: Sherwood, Jones, & Co., 1825).

to the increase of mirth, and the amalgamation of good fellowship, than to perpetuate rancorous feeling arising out of political controversy'.<sup>12</sup> He also offers a glimpse of the bustle and disorder of the early nineteenth-century periodical market. Extracts were reprinted, wherever possible, from their original sources, although the accuracy of the acknowledgements could not be guaranteed, 'considering how the daily and weekly papers borrow from one another'.<sup>13</sup>

There is a high proportion of satire and parody among this collection of reprints. Although the distance of time reduces the impact of some of the satire, some inferences are immediately recognizable. An explanatory paragraph, presumably written by the editor, introduces the first of several spurious 'Cockney Sonnets', originally published in *John Bull*. He comments that: 'The Cocknies heretofore have devoted their time to sonnetizing each other ... ', and goes on to explain that, now tired of these activities, they have turned their attention to celebrating the achievements of Robert Waithman, erstwhile liberal MP and Lord Mayor of London, 'King of all the Cocknies for the time being'.<sup>14</sup> Regular readers of *Blackwood's* would no doubt recall the magazine's earlier designation of Leigh Hunt in the same role, and the periodical's prolonged attacks on the collaborative poetry of those who surrounded him.<sup>15</sup>

'Sketches at Bow Street' make mockeries of court appearances and the petty criminal. Mischance in marriage proves to be a popular subject for satire, appearing as the theme of a number of short verses, and a nineteenth-century

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<sup>12</sup> *Spirit of the Public Journals*, p. vi.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 25.



Hamlet muses 'Marry, or not to marry? That is the question --'.<sup>16</sup> Parodies of Shakespeare occasionally take on a political connotation: Prospero's speech, from Act IV Scene 1 of *The Tempest*, is adapted to provide a commentary on public spending: 'The fairy halls, the lofty pinnacles, / The spreading woodlands, the great purse itself, / Yes, all that it containeth, shall be spent, / And, like the leanness of a spendthrift's wallet, / Leave not a rap behind' (296). Travel satire is popular. 'Mrs. Ramsbottom's Tour', originally printed in *John Bull*, presents a comic view of the inexperienced, middle-aged traveller abroad (12-34). Another contribution from the *New Monthly Magazine* informs the reader: 'Going abroad is now so common and so vulgar that it is almost more genteel to stay at home' (42).

Not all the work included is satirical, however, and there are a few verses of a sentimental nature and some straightforward reports of significant events. A few authors whose writings appear in this miscellany, had already attained literary prominence; Scott contributes a 'Character of Lord Byron' (365), and he is also the author of a comic verse, reprinted from the *Examiner*, 'Impromptu, on Witnessing the Deceptions of M. Alexandre, the Celebrated Ventriloquist' (229). Some of the contributors have since achieved literary recognition; there is a series of extracts from Hazlitt's 'Spirit of the Age' (referred to in this publication as 'Spirits of the Age') as yet anonymous and uncollected, and randomly slipped between pages of contributions from writers who will forever remain unidentified.

While it has to be allowed that the range of work collected here is selective, satire is well represented in the public journals of 1824, and the columns

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<sup>16</sup>*The Spirit of the Public Journals*, pp.297. Further references to this source are given after quotations in the text.

of periodicals, with their limited space and strong focus on opinion, provided the ideal outlet for this kind of work. In addition, there are indications that writers were beginning to adapt the genre to journalistic modes of publication and, in particular, to new kinds of reading audiences. The satire that began to migrate into newspapers and magazines at this time reflected a shift from the monologic, morally didactic mode of the genre, as it was represented during the eighteenth century, into a form that was essentially geared towards light-hearted humour and entertainment.

There is one notable exception among the miscellaneous contributions reprinted in *The Spirit of the Public Journals*. Cobbett's 'Letter to the Manchester Gentlemen who petitioned Parliament to acknowledge the Freedom and Independence of South America', originally published in the *Political Register* in July 1824, appears with an acknowledgement to *Bell's Life in London*. Cobbett attacks the arrogance and hypocrisy of industrialists who dare to meddle in international affairs before they have put their own house in order:

My Lords - Seigneurs of the Twist, Sovereigns of the Spinning-Jenny, great Yeomen of the Yarn ... You see the state in which Ireland is, yet you say nothing about Ireland, while you cross the equinoctial line in search of objects of your tenderness. You must think the people of Ireland free enough, or your conduct is very inconsistent. However, there are your own poor creatures, who work in your factories, where you keep the heat at eighty-four degrees. You can look with an eye perfectly calm on the poor souls who are toiling for you. You can see the poor children pining away their lives in these hells on earth; you can see them actually gaping for breath, swallowing the hot and foul air, and sucking the deadly cotton-fuz into their lungs: you can, with all the delight of greediness gratified, behold scenes like these in your own country, under your own roofs; aye, and invented and put into practice by yourselves; and, at the very moment, when you are thus engaged, you are pouring forth your souls in the cause of Spanish-American 'freedom' ... You must naturally have a contempt for men who seek profit, generous souls! if we are to judge by your tenderness for the little creatures that swallow the cotton-fuz ... What is oppression? What is tyranny? ... [they] bring whole parishes to the verge of starvation.



They compel kind and tender parents to drive their children to live in heat of eighty-four degrees, and to swallow cotton-fuz.<sup>17</sup>

This is the satire of the Radical journalist, vigorous, pungent and provocatively written. Taking the form of a diatribe, Cobbett makes his political comment using a forceful combination of satire, sentiment and rhetoric. The mode of writing is undoubtedly corrective in intent and Juvenalian in its harshness of tone. The letter is a public denouncement of the condition of child labourers in the northern cotton mills, and attacks the Manchester 'cotton-lords' for their hypocrisy, plainly spelling out that they should put their own businesses in order before taking issue with international affairs. Direct language and straightforward syntax avoid the classical allusions and explanatory footnotes employed by the formal satirists of the previous century, who sought to convince a scholarly audience of their erudition. Cobbett's satire is emphasized by the use of alliteration; the 'cotton-fuz creatures' are 'poor children pining away their lives' in contrast to the 'greediness gratified' of the 'Yeomen of the Yarn'. He plays with the sensibilities of his readers, referring to 'kind and tender parents' who avoid starvation only by forcing their children to work in such conditions. The case against child labour is presented in a sequence of repetitions, with an emphasis on crucial phrases, 'cotton-fuz' and 'eighty-four degrees', building up to two stark, rhetorical questions: 'What is Oppression? What is Tyranny?' Cobbett is asking the 'Manchester Gentlemen' directly, since they evidently fail to recognize these characteristics in their own industrial practices.

The inclusion of Cobbett in this anthology gives some indication of the difficulties confronted by an editor who tried to remain outside the field of political

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<sup>17</sup>W. Cobbett, from the *Political Register*, 7 July 1824, reprinted from *Bell's Life in London* in *The Spirit of the Public Journals*, pp.352-4.

dissension. In fact, a further perusal of the selected material reveals that this aim was never fully achieved. From time to time, short verse satires, sometimes only a couple of quatrains of political comment, have crept into the collection, but these are mainly mild in tone. Some, like the parody of *The Tempest* mentioned above, target the government's handling of finances. 'A Political Epigram' exclaims: 'The Nation is *pawn'd!* we shall find to our cost, / And the Minister since has the *duplicate* lost. / We shall all be undone by this politic Schemer, / Who though "*Heav'n-born*" -- will not prove a *Redeemer*' (382). Individuals are lampooned with eighteenth-century vigour. George Colman, former dramatist and currently an over-enthusiastic Licensor of Plays, is targeted for 'uncalled-for *officious* hypercritical [sic] zeal and contemptible conduct' in suppressing new work (177). Peel's handling of the Irish question and the illicit drinking activities of two members of the House also receive satirical thrusts. Although periodical writers were able to choose their subject matter from a broad canvas of contemporary human activity, the topical actions of government could not be totally avoided.

Cobbett's letter to the 'cotton-lords' was originally intended for the Radical press of the period and his contentious mood seems to be oddly out of place in this miscellany. His obviously corrective stance and sharp tone provide a sharp contrast to the stated editorial intentions of furnishing readers with some light-hearted amusement. What is interesting, however, is that this piece of work had already been reprinted in *Bell's Life in London* and, possibly, in other publications as well. Cobbett styled his rhetoric to have an impact on a particular group of readers, tailoring his discourse to the expectations of a circumscribed audience of radical sympathisers, artisans and members of the working classes. To present it elsewhere, outside any specific compact forged between author and



reader, was to confront a faceless new audience, whose own expectations and perceptions of reading were not yet clearly defined. The discourse of the periodical press was, at this time, still at an experimental stage, offering an inexperienced readership a multitude of styles and genres which had yet to be culturally institutionalized. It was, however, through the compilations, collective miscellanies and the unqualified exchange of material between publications, that newly formed reading audiences gained access to a diversity of material and the concept of a popular literary culture began to emerge.



Cultural divisions, which had begun to appear at the end of the eighteenth century, became even more clearly defined during the 1820s. Critics and some authors saw literature as a stylized art form, a scholarly pursuit which transcended the babble of the marketplace to generate an elevated response from a receptive reading audience. These writers engaged in a heightened cultural discourse that stripped away the harsh realities of a common, classless, human experience. However, in creating a form of discourse that satisfied the exponents of 'literature proper', they also succeeded in alienating large groups of new readers, who regarded printed material as a transitory commodity to be bought and sold, read and discarded. For this section of the population, literature was fundamentally functional, a means of seeking information or providing a few moments' entertainment. Satire, in the previous century a mode formerly approved by the established literary hierarchy, came to be assimilated by the latter, and the genre had its prominent status further diminished by the appearance of its literary antithesis, in the form of what is now known as the Romantic movement.

The work of the early Romantic phase, with its emphasis on the subjective and personal experiences of humanity, was in direct conflict with the ironic tones and sometimes audacious realism portrayed by the eighteenth-century satirist. The contrast between the two modes of literary expression is so marked as to suggest that Romanticism may have come about as a direct reaction to the preponderance of satire during the previous century. Jones substantiates this view by arguing that 'Wordsworth's pro-pastoral stance is at bottom frequently antisatire' (43).

However, some members of the second generation of Romantic writers were fully aware of the cultural dichotomy that existed between those readers who continued to join the ranks of mass audiences and others who saw literature as the prerogative of the privileged and educated. Jones discusses tensions in Shelley's work between the satiric radicalism of some of his broadsheets and pamphlets and the 'other-worldliness' of his romantic writing, reiterating that he made a conscious effort 'to write for both a "high" and "low" readership in pursuit of universal social ideals' (105). He cites, in particular, *Oedipus Tyrannus; or, Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820), a 'theatrical satire', as evidence that 'Shelley had been reading the work of men like Wooler and Hone, and even that he aspired to address their popular audience' (105).

The concept of the popular reading audience which existed outside the constraints of established literary hierarchy was not new. Counter- or anti-pastoral modes of writing had already been in existence during the eighteenth century and preceded the work of the first generation Romantic poets. Crabbe's *The Village* (1784) most immediately springs to mind, but before this, there were realistic representations of the rural scene that had their roots in first-hand



experiences of the peasant culture. Duck, who wrote *The Thresher's Labour* (1736), was a farm labourer; *The Woman's Labour* (1739) was the work of Collier, a washerwoman. Jones emphasizes the contrast between Crabbe's counter-pastoral of *Peter Grimes* (1810) and the idealism of Wordsworth's *Peter Bell* (1819) and goes on to cite Shelley's satirical *Peter Bell the Third* (1819), which followed John Hamilton Reynolds's parody of the same year, as a fundamental polarization of the conflicting ideals of the earlier and later Romantic schools (35-6). These tensions between the successive generations of Romantic writers later manifested themselves in the subversion of the work of the Lake poets by their near contemporaries, Byron, Shelley and Peacock, who used satire and parody to undermine not only the work of their primary targets, but also the credibility of any reviewers and publications that continued to support them.

A small group of contemporary authors came to see the heightened sensibilities and subjective idealism of Romanticism as an aesthetic rather than realistic representation of the human predicament. Byron, in particular, wrote his mock-heroic romance, *Beppo* (1818), and *Don Juan* (1819-24) in satirical response to this. However, it was the Romantic mode that came to be favoured in literary circles and which was later accepted as the established critical standard throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. The popular culture at this time had no spokesman to promote it and define its own set of literary criteria. Largely because of this, satirical writing, especially that which contained political comment, gradually ceased to merit serious critical attention. Jones points out that the later 'revisionist canonization' of Shelley, and the belated recognition of the work of Ebenezer Elliott, suppressed the politically questionable satirical



comment in their work in favour of its Romantic elements (212-3).



More will be said of the effects of changing modes of publication in chapter three, but it needs to be emphasized here that established authors as well as new writers were operating in a very unstable climate during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. As Klancher points out, writers as far apart as Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Crabbe, Cobbett and Wooler, the editor of the radical *Black Dwarf*, were struggling to 'forge readerships in what now appears to have been a transitory world of reading and writing far removed from the mass audiences and institutionalized discourses of the modern "consciousness industry" and its ideologies'.<sup>18</sup> In addition to industrial changes in the modes of print production and subsequent increase in periodical publication, reading audiences were affected by the inevitable demographic shifts that accompanied the change from a predominantly rural economy to modern industrialization. This, in turn, served to emphasize the intensifying social stratification, which came about as a result of urban commercial prosperity.

Cultural myths surround early rural literacy, but there is evidence of popular reading audiences among the peasant communities that existed in the countryside, in parallel to the 'high' culture of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Klancher's research into Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and the poet's private papers (1800-12) has identified evidence of a 'peasant's written culture' in the ' "half-penny Ballads, and penny and two-penny histories" ', that peddlers hawked around the countryside during the final decades

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<sup>18</sup>Klancher, p.172.

of the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> He identifies this type of literature as springing straight from those sections of the population who were also intended to be its readers, 'the indigenous product of the peasant culture itself', rather than material which had been produced, for their consumption, by class outsiders. A couple of decades or so later, following a period of intense agricultural depression, Klancher posits that the 'indigenous' peasant reader of the chapbook and half-penny ballad sheets was to be found among the urban artisan reading audiences of the 1820s and the 1830s. A logical extension to this argument is that the integrity of a culture, which had previously produced reading material from within its own ranks, would not have been permanently destroyed by urban migration. As urban reading audiences were increased by an influx of first and second generation agricultural workers, writing gradually ceased to be the prerogative of the educated, leisured classes and authors began to emerge from among the cultural *milieux* from which they were themselves descended.

The idea that authors could emerge from the public readership itself was a by-product of the increase in periodical publications and other cheap methods of printing during the 1820s and 1830s. Ebenezer Elliott, son of a Rotherham foundry worker, had a minimal early education and began by writing unexceptional poetry in the Romantic tradition, before financial misfortunes turned him into a passionate lifelong campaigner against the bread tax. Although ultimately financially successful in the Sheffield iron trade, he turned to writing satirical verse to draw attention to the poverty of the working man. Carlyle's *Edinburgh* review of Elliott's *Corn Law Rhymes* (1831) is written in generous praise of the cheap, nine-penny pamphlet edition of the work, although he displays

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<sup>19</sup>Klancher, p.145.



a patronizing tone of assumed social superiority. Of greater importance than Carlyle's condescending approval of Elliott's work, however, is his implicit acknowledgement that the widespread increase of cheap printed material was having an impact on hierarchical attitudes towards literature. He acknowledges that the concept of poetry, as an elevated mode of discourse, was in decline and writes that the early nineteenth-century schools had 'burnt or smouldered themselves out'; the 'dying embers' of Romantic poetry were being 'kicked to and fro under the feet of innumerable women and children in the Magazines'. 'What', he asks, 'remains but to adjust ourselves to circumstances?'<sup>20</sup>

The 'circumstances', to which Carlyle suggested his readers should adjust, were the changes in cultural standards which emerged as a new, open literary marketplace embraced an increasingly heterogeneous authorship, as well as wider public readership. The growing market for magazines may have been perceived as having a detrimental effect on the literary standards of high culture, but it was also providing opportunities for new groups of writers, all of whom were struggling to get their work into print. Jones points out that Elliott was 'writing a poetry of experience'<sup>21</sup>. This movement towards the literature of experience and satirical realism was in direct contrast to the idealized vision of Romanticism. For the first time, popular demand was in competition with the literature of an established cultural hierarchy.

The transition of satire into the popular reading culture of the magazines, during this period, subjected the mode to criticism, which judged a work less by its intrinsic merit than by the type of reading audiences it attracted.

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<sup>20</sup>T. Carlyle, *Edinburgh Review*, July 1832, 110, from Jones, p. 213.

<sup>21</sup>Jones, p.214.



Earlier associations of the genre with the radical press and the undermining of its impact, as writers began to adapt satire as a medium for light, comic entertainment, reduced its former status as serious literature. Critics, unable to break free from Dryden's prescriptive criteria, relics of an age when literature had been viewed as a private transaction between author and reader, became alarmed by the association of satire with political comment, and dismissive of the genre's new appeal to a mass readership. Prejudicial misapprehensions arose at this time which were to inhibit subsequent analyses of satirical work until the latter decades of the twentieth century, when new research into investigative modes of the genre opened up a wider arena of debate.

It was at this time that one of the most damaging of these nineteenth-century prejudices came about. Both writers and critics began to use sarcasm as a synonym for satire. Sarcasm is a form of wit which serves a profoundly limited and negative function in human discourse. Like satire, it can employ wit to ridicule and wound its target and it may provoke disgust, or even raise a smile, but there it ends, always reductive, offering no alternative viewpoint in place of that which it has destroyed. In contrast to this, whether written in the spirit of correction, or in a more relaxed, comic mode, the ridicule of satire serves to enlighten the reader to the possibilities of new ways of thinking. Sarcasm, on the other hand, can rarely be seen as productive in outcome. Peacock, writing *Melincourt* (1817), when the gradual transition of satire into the popular press had barely begun, had no problems with this differentiation. Mr. Sarcastic, parliamentary candidate for the Borough of Onevote, having convinced himself of the 'inefficacy of moral theory with respect to producing a practical change in the mass of mankind', appreciates the need for reform, but sees little point in

attempting to bring this about.<sup>22</sup> His customary course of action is, therefore, to reflect back to his interlocutors their erroneous practices, exactly as he perceives them, without any expectation of change and with no intention other than that of satisfying his own amusement and self-interest. Peacock uses Mr. Sarcastic's one-sided, negative attack on the perpetrators of corruption as a contrast to Forester's more optimistic viewpoint that: 'If the philosopher cannot reform his own times, he may lay the foundations of amendment in those that follow'.<sup>23</sup>

Other writers appear to have been less clear about this distinction. The substitution of 'sarcasm' for 'satire' appears in Carlyle's review of Elliott, chiding the poet when his radical passion overcomes his sense of social place: 'In his vituperative Notes, he seems embarrassed; and all but hides his embarrassment, under an air of predetermined sarcasm; of knowing briskness, almost of vulgar pertness'.<sup>24</sup> The accusation of sarcasm was one sometimes thrown at Thackeray by his contemporaries. An anonymous reviewer of his *Comic Tales and Sketches* (1841), writing for the *Atlas*, says: 'The author is a humorist, but, unhappily, his humour lies on the ill-natured side of things and he can hardly ever say a funny thing without blending it with a sarcasm' which 'changes the sparkling relish to a bitter flavour'.<sup>25</sup> Writing on *Vanity Fair* in the *Examiner* (1848), Forster was to complain that the book suffered from a 'taunting, cynical, sarcastic tone that too much pervades the work'.<sup>26</sup> Thackeray understood the distinction clearly enough, but it was not easy for him to come to terms with it. Demonstrating clearly the

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<sup>22</sup>*The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by D. Garnett (London: Hart-Davis, 1948), p. 224.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p.226.

<sup>24</sup>Carlyle, *Edinburgh Review*, from Jones, p.216.

<sup>25</sup>G. Tillotson and D. Hawes, eds., *Thackeray: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 18.

<sup>26</sup>J. Forster, *Examiner*, 22 July 1848, from Tillotson and Hawes, p. 57.



inner struggle he faced over his literary ideals and the reality of commercial authorship, he wrote to FitzGerald in 1836: 'I am sorry to say that I like this newspaper work very much, it is a continual excitement, and I fancy I do it very well, that is very sarcastically ... though as we agreed about literature, sarcasm does no good either to reader or writer'; its use could be likened to 'quitting a beautiful, innocent wife (like Mrs. T. for instance) to take up with a tawdry brazen whore'.<sup>27</sup>

A critical tendency to emphasize the negative rather than the positive attributes of satire marked a growing hostility towards a genre which had become commonplace in the popular culture and, in so doing, had acquired something of a roguish reputation. However, some satirists, writing in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have made clear their intentions to avoid negativity and scurrility in their attacks. A reflection on the difference in tone between the work of Swift and Addison, for example, will reveal how a satirist may attack his targets with virulence, or the mildest remonstrance, depending on his intentions. Addison set out a policy of impartiality for the *Spectator*, which aimed to expose vice or folly, but in the 'spirit of benevolence' and without shaming any one individual.<sup>28</sup> As Griffin points out, Pope acknowledged the contrasting view that his pen could be capable of harm: 'O sacred weapon! left for Truth's defence,/ Sole Dread of Folly, Vice and Insolence!'<sup>29</sup> Byron's attitude to personal censure was more ambivalent. He writes, in the Preface to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*: 'I can safely say that I have attacked none personally, who did not commence on the

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<sup>27</sup>G. N. Ray, Ed., *The Letters of William Makepeace Thackeray*, Vol. 1, 1817-1840 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1946), pp.322-3.

<sup>28</sup>Justman, p.38.

<sup>29</sup>Griffin, p. 27.



offensive', but in the poem itself, the tone is milder.<sup>30</sup> He exhorts the reader to 'Laugh when I laugh, I seek no other fame;/ The cry is up, and scribblers are my game.'<sup>31</sup> Peacock's *Palmyra*, one of his earliest poems, published in 1806, opens with a message to this effect, a 'Cento', 'To The Reviewers', written in Shakespearian style, which he hopes will exonerate him from any negative intent. He addresses his audience directly, asking that, despite the apparent acerbity of some of the work, he hopes that they will see how 'my good intent/ May carry through itself: no levell'd malice/ Infects one comma in the course I hold.'<sup>32</sup> In the 1856 preface to *Melincourt*, he states categorically that, although he 'shadowed' the opinions and public characters in the book, he 'never trespassed on private life'.<sup>33</sup>

However, the reputation of satire continued to suffer throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, in some ways a victim of its popular success. Later, there is evidence that satire was being groomed to suit the sensibilities of middle-class readers. In 1854, Thackeray wrote a highly ironic contribution to the *Quarterly Review*, which effectively summarizes the progress of satire during this period. Reviewing the work of one of his contemporaries, illustrator and caricaturist John Leech, he says: 'We cannot afford to lose Satyr with his pipe and dances and gambols. But we have washed, combed, clothed and taught the rogue good manners.'<sup>34</sup> In the same article, he singles out Mr. Punch himself, now a

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<sup>30</sup>Lord Byron, *Selected Poems*, ed. by S. J. Wolfson and P. L. Manning (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p.6.

<sup>31</sup>Wolfson and Manning, eds., p.9.

<sup>32</sup>*The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones, Halliford Edition Vol. 6, (New York: AMS Press, 1967), p.4.

<sup>33</sup>Garnett, ed., p.102.

<sup>34</sup>*The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, Biographical Edition, Vol.13 (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1899), p.484.

'portly, well-dressed, middle-aged, respectable gentleman, in a white neckcloth and a polite evening costume', but the reader is reminded: 'Time was if we remember Mr. P's history rightly, that he did not wear silk stockings nor well-made clothes ... He was of humble beginnings.'<sup>35</sup> It becomes clear that Punch himself 'is the Satyric genius we spoke of anon; he cracks his jokes still for satire must live; but he is combed, washed, neatly clothed, and perfectly presentable.'<sup>36</sup> The review ends on an ambivalent note; Thackeray concludes with a rhetorical question which addresses both the position of satire in literature by the middle of the century, as well as a possible outcome should it become absent altogether: 'Can we have too much of truth, and fun, and beauty, and kindness?'<sup>37</sup>

More positively, the migration of the genre from 'literature proper' to the commercial press resulted in a relaxation of the formal conventions and constraints which had previously defined its usage as an artistically conceived mode of moral discourse. Satire, in the periodicals, particularly as it began to invade short, prose fictions, was now free to develop those variant strains which have ultimately come to provide a much more comprehensive demonstration of its functions.

Prose satires, particularly when novelistic in structure, have, until very recently, been subjected to confused analyses. Peacock's work, in particular, has presented problems to both contemporary reviewers and twentieth-century critics, who have erroneously seen his books as novels. An anonymous reviewer of *Nightmare Abbey*, writing in the *Literary Gazette* in 1818, recognized the problem more accurately than some later commentators: 'It would be difficult to say what

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<sup>35</sup>*Biographical Edition*, pp.485-6.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p.486.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p.490.



his [Peacock's] books are, for they are neither romances, novels, tales, nor treatises, but a mixture of these combined.<sup>38</sup> This review misses one vital ingredient from the 'mixture': satire is not mentioned, and Peacock's books are, whatever other trace elements they may possess, unequivocally prose satires. Rarely commenting on his own work, he refers to only one of his own books as a 'Novel', a work which, calculated from the date of this letter to Shelley, was destined to be published as *Maid Marian*.<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, when he was actually engaged in writing the book, he referred to it as 'a comic Romance'.<sup>40</sup> In the 1837 Preface to the Bentley's 'Standard Novels' edition of *Headlong Hall*, *Nightmare Abbey*, *Maid Marian* and *Crotchet Castle*, he refers to 'these little publications'.<sup>41</sup> The 1856 preface to *Melincourt* speaks of a 'story'.<sup>42</sup> The categorization of 'novel' as a generic description of his work has come from the hands of critics, editors and publishers, rather than from the author himself, and chapter two will discuss some of the misunderstandings that this misapprehension has imposed on interpretations of his work.

The existence of satire, in any literary form other than verse, is a notion that critics have been reluctant to discuss, until comparatively recently. Much of this difficulty may be attributed to the prescriptive criteria for formal verse satire, which still lingered on into the early years of the nineteenth century and effectively ossified new interpretations of the genre. Even as alternative concepts of satire began to multiply during the twentieth century, its release from former hierarchical critical constraints was slow to take effect. The situation was further complicated,

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<sup>38</sup>Dyer, p.94.

<sup>39</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, p.202.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>41</sup>Garnett, ed., p.xxi.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p.102.



in the nineteenth century, by the growth of the novel and, during the latter half of the period, the absorption of Romantic themes into this particular form of prose fiction. Hodgart, writing in 1969, adheres to the traditional interpretation of satire when he writes that: 'The demands of the novel, realism, symbolism and meaning are not consistent with the demands of satire. Satire needs a tightly closed form to make its point effectively ... no full length novel is likely to be satirical throughout.'<sup>43</sup> Satire, in the novel, may appear as a boost to one of its themes, or become evident within the dialogue of the characters. There are, however, prose modes of the genre, novelistic in style, that have existed in parallel to verse forms from the classical era and which have, only recently, become the focus of critical attention. The next section attempts to consolidate and extend various late twentieth-century examinations of these forms of the genre as they have appeared, outside the novel, yet in novelistic forms, in seriocomic prose writing.



The New Critical theories of satire, which dominated Yale during the 1950s and early '60s, helped to restore the genre to critical attention after a long period of nineteenth-century hostility. However, these tended to separate a literary work, as a work of art, from the context in which it was written, 'from the author who produced it, the world out of which it grew, and the audience to which it was directed', thereby focusing on the existing conventions of the genre, while reducing any sense of its potential energy.<sup>44</sup> Further critical research throughout the 1960s and '70s acted in the same way, acknowledging satire as a literary genre, but doing so by the application of predetermined paradigms, in particular those of

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<sup>43</sup>Matthew Hodgart, *Satire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), p. 214.

<sup>44</sup>Griffin, p.29.

an artistically contrived, bipolar moral structure which, at the same time, restricted any understanding of the full breadth and depth of the functions of the genre.

Reference has already been made to Dryden's *Discourse* and his broad categorizations of satire, identifying the Horatian and Juvenalian strands by the names of the classical authors in whose work they are most apparent. These two models attracted innovative writers as well as imitators during the eighteenth century and beyond; and, just as prescriptive authorial conventions came to govern the forms that various modes of satire were to take, these rigid categorizations have inhibited critical investigations. Dyer, with reference to satirical verse publications during the 1789-1830 period, has interpreted these modes politically and asserts: 'In general terms, satire in its Juvenalian forms was dominated by conservative ideology, whereas in its more Horatian forms it tended toward a benign, noncommittal tolerance that, nevertheless, made it effectively as conservative as texts like Mathias's [*The Pursuits of Literature* 1794, 1797].'<sup>45</sup> Although the model employed may be seen to bear a relationship to the ideologies of the individual writer, ultimately the impact and relevance of the two styles is lessened, as each emerges merely as a different mode of expressing fundamentally similar points of view. More recently, new appraisals of classical as well as European literature have drawn attention to a tradition of satirical writing that has appeared in both verse and prose forms and which has, in turn, contributed to a new understanding of the diverse functions that satire may perform.

In addition to the strands of satire that came to be identified with Horace and Juvenal, Dryden also writes of 'Varronian' satire, a strain of the genre named after Varro, Caesar's librarian, with origins that may be traced back some

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<sup>45</sup>Dyer, pp.40-1.



three hundred centuries B.C. to the lost writings of Menippus of Gadara. Subsequent references to the salient characteristics of the works of Menippus were reflected in the writings of Varro and Lucian, but it is interesting to note that, although Dryden distinguished Varronian or Menippean satire as a separate sub-genre of satirical writing, he afforded it little consideration beyond citing a few examples, which include selections from the works of Lucian, Apuleius, Erasmus and his own *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681-2) and *MacFlecknoe* (1682). It was the Horatian and Juvenalian modes of the genre which occupied his attention, and these interpretations, variously recycled, were to monopolize literary commentaries on satire throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the last half-century, however, critical discussion has focused on the Menippean sub-genre, opening up the possibility of new interpretations of existing texts and a reappraisal of the mode itself.

Frye (1957) identifies three traditions of prose fiction, the novel, the romance and the confession, and explores Menippean satire as a means of categorizing a fourth fictional form, which manifests itself as a seriocomic medium, with a literary ancestry traceable from Erasmus, Lucian and Varro to Swift, Voltaire and Rabelais. Frye defines Menippean satire by its counter-novelistic characteristics and its lack of naturalism, which distinguish it from other forms of social satire that have been more readily assimilated into the novel:

The Menippean satire deals less with people as such as with mental attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their approach to life as distinct from their social behaviour. The Menippean satire thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as the mouthpieces of the ideas

they represent ... The novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolizes and defines. <sup>46</sup>

According to Frye, therefore, the Menippean satirist's targets are abstract and intellectual. He ridicules ideologies and philosophies themselves, not the customs or behaviour of the individual. The Menippean satirist is not interested in social phenomena or human relationships. His fictional characters are created to represent the ideas they propound, so that he is not obliged to place them in a naturalistic context, or within the action of a plot. Such a writer does not expect his reader to be carried along on a stream of suspense or mystery. Instead, he 'shows his exuberance in intellectual ways by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme, or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon'. <sup>47</sup> Frye identifies Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* as a remarkable example of English Menippean satire and adopts the word 'anatomy' as used by Burton, in the sense of 'dissection' or 'analysis', as a more convenient term. The counter-novelistic characteristics of the genre emphasize the intellectual focus of the writing, abstract ideas and theories which, although they may be represented by fictional people, bear little resemblance to any normal experience of human interaction.

Bakhtin provides an analysis of Menippean satire with a broader application. In common with Frye, he sees the subgenre as being concerned with philosophical or topical intellectual opinion and recognizes that the mode has a kind of built-in affinity with contemporary cultural issues in the public sphere:

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<sup>46</sup>Northrop Frye, *An Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1957), p.309.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p.311.



'This is, in its own way, the "journalistic" genre of antiquity, acutely echoing the ideological issues of the day.'<sup>48</sup> He emphasizes, in particular, the Menippean satirist's use of plot, and the narratorial role as an ingenuous narrator facing a convoluted action and counteraction of impossible situations. Sometimes overtaken by dreams or insanity, possibilities of another life are revealed to him. Philosophical dialogue and established opinion are juxtaposed with vulgar realism and inappropriate discourse. The freedom of plot allows the narrator to test the validity of commonplace opinion by presenting it in unexpected situations. Prose is interspersed with verse, and other literary genres are absorbed in an illogical confusion of parody and allusion: 'We emphasize that the fantastic here serves not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode of searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important, *testing* it.'<sup>49</sup> Bakhtin's 'menippea' is an organic and heterogeneous hybrid, with a carnivalesque propensity to overturn other literary genres and subvert serious attempts to establish ultimate truths. In the Bakhtinian sense, Menippean satire has much in common with the etymological Latin root of the word, *satura*.

Livy defines *satura*, in theatrical terms, as *saturae*, or performances of a burlesque nature, incorporating songs written to the accompaniment of a pipe: Varro, on whose work Livy's account is based, supplies the additional information that *saturae*, in a theatrical sense, were *impletae modis*, or 'full of tunes'. According to Rudd (1973, 1997), *per satiram* came to mean 'by a medley', or, more literally 'confusingly'; the term later acquired political and legal

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<sup>48</sup>Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 118.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 114.

connotations.<sup>50</sup> Griffin also explores the term as it was formerly used in worship, the *lanx satura*, a dish of first fruits offered to the gods, 'a "mixed" or "full" platter', which suggests that 'satire is a formless miscellany and food for thought'.<sup>51</sup> A more literal sense of the word comes from the Latin verb, *saturare*, which translates as 'to fill, glut or satisfy' and, interestingly, 'to disgust'.

A common strand, which runs through these varied interpretations, is a sense of miscellaneous literary genres which serve to confuse the reader; Menippean satire appears to be a medley of themes and styles, open to a diverse interpretations. Furthermore, the sub-genre shows a closer relationship to the notion of *satira*, than either the Horatian or Juvenalian modes. It is dialogic as opposed to monologic, in that it explores a diversity of topics and opinions; the form itself echoes its own *modus operandi*, which is to resist dogmatic definition. Bakhtin extends the understanding of the role of Menippean satire, as elements of the mode emerged in nineteenth-century prose, by identifying a relationship between the sub-genre and the carnivalesque traditions of seriocomic discourse:

Carnivalization even penetrates the deepest philosophical and dialogic core of the menippea. Characteristic for the genre, as we have seen, is the naked posing of ultimate questions on life and death, a universalism of the most extreme sort (personal problems and elaborate philosophical argumentation are unknown to it). Carnivalistic thought also lives in the realm of ultimate questions, but it gives them no abstractly philosophical or religiously dogmatic resolution; it plays them out in the concretely sensuous form of carnivalistic acts and images.<sup>52</sup>

This is an exploration of images of medieval carnival, as they have appeared as recurrent motifs in seriocomic literature. Bakhtin depicts carnival in concrete terms, a finite period of time during which the social divisions and the rituals of the

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<sup>50</sup>Horace, *Satires and Epistles*, ed. by D. Rudd ( London: Penguin, 1973, 1977), p.10.

<sup>51</sup>Griffin, p.6.

<sup>52</sup>Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* , p.134.



official world of the Middle Ages, constructed out of the laws of feudalism and ecclesiastical dogma, were parodied, subverted and renewed. He then transfers this image to forms of seriocomic literature, which mock the human preoccupation with seeking philosophical or religious resolutions to unanswerable, universal questions. Carnival literature generates mirth and liberates the reader from hierarchical, authoritarian ideologies; it can reduce the exalted while elevating the humble; it explores questions, but provides no 'dogmatic resolution'. The laughter it provokes is ambivalent and full of contradictions: 'it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, buries and revives'.<sup>53</sup> This ambivalence towards dogmatic resolution is the key to the relationship between carnivalesque literature and Menippean satire, as outlined above, and is particularly relevant to investigations into nineteenth-century satire. Recent critical appraisals of Menippean satire, while acknowledging Bakhtin's contribution, distinguish the genre from the context of carnivalesque writing by its topicality. Menippean satire is immediate, its relevance bound by temporal constraints, whereas the carnival and its 'realm of ultimate questions' exist outside time and secular authority. The two strands, however, have a clear point of intersection. They converge in their opposition to 'dogmatic resolution'.

It is not difficult to see parallels between Bakhtin's depiction of carnival and the periodical market-place of the early nineteenth century. Always a vehicle of opinion rather than systematic scholarship, the newspapers and magazines opened up reading audiences to include an increasingly diverse cross-section of the general public. Like the carnival crowds of folklore, these readers could dispute,

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<sup>53</sup>M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Trans. by H. Iswolsky, First Midland Book Edition (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 11-12.

deride, humiliate, or accept established authority. Throughout the pages of the periodicals, satire, in a variety of modes, was to become an essential discourse in a new pluralist culture that was developing outside the previously established hierarchies of the privileged and intellectual classes.

Bakhtin's frequently cited list of fourteen characteristics common to Menippean satire have proved helpful in drawing critical attention to the mode. However, there has been a tendency to use this formulation as a definitive paradigm in order to provide, as Frye suggested earlier, a convenient label for works of fiction, like those of Peacock, which have previously proved difficult to categorize. Relihan (1993) argues against a too prescriptive use of the mode in isolation from the main body of the genre, cautioning that the terms 'anatomy' and the 'menippea', have dropped 'satire', thus avoiding 'the glib associations of social criticism that the word normally entails', and narrowing their relevance.<sup>54</sup> During the last decade, however, new research has explored functions of Menippean satire based on the dialogic nature of the mode, in contrast to earlier monologic and morally didactic interpretations of the genre, which presupposed a superior understanding on the part of the author.

Relihan, writing from a classicist's perspective, examines Menippean satire as a distinct sub-genre and produces an historicized account, which returns to the ancient texts of its origin for clarification. He questions the validity of its application to modern literature, challenging Frye's inference that it could be used to 'categorize forms of prose fiction which are not essentially novelistic'.<sup>55</sup>

Referring to the work of both Frye and Bakhtin, Relihan points out that the term

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<sup>54</sup>Joel C. Relihan, *Ancient Menippean Satire*, (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 8.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, p.3.



'Menippean satire' was not used during the classical period, but emerged during the sixteenth century. He views Frye's 'anatomy' as misleading in that the elements it catalogues -- dialogue, stylized characters, fantasy and the satire of ideas -- can be too loosely applied to many seriocomic forms of literature. He also indicates that some of these features, either in isolation or in certain combinations, can be accurately applied to other related genres. While accepting, in principle, Bakhtin's analysis of the fundamental elements of Menippean satire, Relihan argues that Bakhtin 'casts his net very wide' and offers an epochal explanation of the form, as an antithesis to the traditions of tragedy and epic, without sufficient evidence for such a unified view of the genre.<sup>56</sup> In presenting Menippean satire as a critical theory relevant to the study of modern literature, Relihan posits that Bakhtin has deprived the ancient texts of their history. His own approach to a definition of Menippean satire is to restrict his analysis to texts of the late classical and early Christian era. Within this period, he further separates the form from the traditions of classical verse satire with which it has become intermingled, and augments the interpretations of Frye and Bakhtin by identifying within Menippean satire a self-parodic strain of writing, which not only debunks philosophical thought, but also burlesques the literary forms it embodies:

We shall see that we have to deal with an intellectual joke, which in its origins is not concerned with finding new ways to truth but only in making fun of those who would claim to have found it, or who would try to preach it. Mennipus is a mocker, and those who follow in his steps mock themselves and their own works: the creation of a work of literature is itself a violation of the cardinal principle that there can be no authoritative point of view about anything important.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Relihan, p.6.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p.17.

Relihan also emphasises the self-parodic nature of the form by further seeking to define *satura* in its relationship to Menippean satire. Using, as an example, Capella's *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, which introduces an allegorical *Satura* into the work itself, Relihan uses *satura* in a stylistic sense as a medley of prose, verse and parody. He points out, however, that in *De Nuptiis*, this understanding of *satura* does not relate solely to the form of writing alone, but also to the content of the work. The subject matter, too, contains a confusion of paradoxes and contradictions that defy coherent meaning denying any possibility of a text which can enlighten or instruct. *De Nuptiis* is an extreme example of a Menippean satirist's self-mockery.

The self-mocking characteristics of Menippean writing are emphasized as Relihan develops Frye's observation of the frequent juxtapositioning of prose and verse:

The author, who usually begs to be identified with his narrator, makes fun of his own standards of literary taste, by writing in this bizarre fashion. Impropriety of form is closely linked to the inadequacy of preaching and of truth, for speaking in verse is itself a parody of the conventions of rational and civilized discourse.<sup>58</sup>

The insertion of verse extracts into prose can serve a number of purposes in a novel: it can vary the pace of the narrative, or involve the reader's emotions directly with those of the characters; poetry can be used to illustrate or enhance the atmosphere of an epic or tragedy, by direct quotation or reference. In Menippean satire, however, the use of verse for illustrative purposes or as part of the dialogue is almost invariably parodic. Relihan argues that this motif creates a idiosyncratic sense of impropriety within the literary form itself, casting doubt not only on the substance of the theme, but also on the veracity of a narrator who

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<sup>58</sup>Relihan, p.18.



perverts the style of rational argument. These reflexive attributes of Menippean satire are distinctive, in that the satirist mocks the presuppositions of traditional satire. The satirist usually has no intention of leading his audience towards some ideological truth, and writes in such a way that he undermines and calls into question the whole validity of his own narrative. Menippean satire, according to Relihan, is 'primarily a parody of philosophical thought and forms of writing, a parody of the habits of civilized discourse in general, and it ultimately turns into a parody of the author who has dared to write in such an unorthodox way.'<sup>59</sup> The Menippean satirist, 'militant in his denial of authority', deliberately sets out to provoke and frustrate the reader who, if in pursuit of truth, expects the reassurance of resolution.<sup>60</sup>

Kaplan (2000) adds a further dimension to the debate by establishing parallels between the literary context of Menippean satire and those of other disciplines, in particular philosophy, theology and science. Using the later work of Wittgenstein as a starting-point, Kaplan identifies similarities between his techniques of descriptive analysis and the self-referential properties of Menippean satire as it enquires into itself, as well as exposing the conceptual confusion, and the inadequate understanding, which surround mythologized cultural issues. From an exploration of theological and scientific methods of enquiry which, in their various forms, both resemble and contrast with Kaplan's interpretation of Menippean satire, he goes on to make a case for distinguishing the mode, not by its previous function as a literary genre, but as a challenge to any dogmatic critical

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<sup>59</sup>Relihan, p.10.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.17.

theory, an analytical form of literary exposition which operates, within its own framework, as a constantly dilating, self-corrective monitor of debate.

Kaplan's interpretation of the mode in the light of Wittgenstein's theories widens Relihan's view that Menippean satire follows 'the cardinal principle that there can be no authoritative point of view about anything important'.<sup>61</sup>

According to Wittgenstein, philosophy, as an intellectual discipline, cannot stand in its own right. Rather than a theoretical search for an ultimate truth, scientific, theological, cultural or any problem of philosophical debate, it should be used as the means of assessing the sense of methods of theorizing used in other specific areas of enquiry, a tool to modify or affirm the interpretation and significance of empirical evidence. Kaplan explains: 'Wittgenstein argued that philosophy must seek an analytical dissolution of conceptual confusion; therefore, true philosophy must become an activity of contextual identification and linguistic clarification. This is the activity of synoptic analysis.'<sup>62</sup>

The link between Menippean satire, as it monitors contemporary themes displayed in a literary context, and synoptic analysis, as a tool of philosophical enquiry, now becomes clearer. Kaplan analyzes the function of the genre as investigative, rather than parodic, as it explores modes of philosophical enquiry. Conceptual confusions, which have arisen as a consequence of illusionary reasoning or the imprecise interpretation of evidence and meaning, can be more accurately and systematically represented. Furthermore, Menippean satire, as it attacks its external targets and focuses on an exploration of all possible points of view, contains within itself the monitoring device of self-mockery. Dogmatic

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<sup>61</sup>Relihan, p.17.

<sup>62</sup>C. Kaplan, *Critical Synoptics: Menippean Satire and the Analysis of Intellectual Mythology* (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), p. 30.



opinion runs too great a risk of adding to conceptual confusion and mythologized 'truths'; like the apophatic theologians, the Menippean satirist defines meaning by pointing out what his topic or theme cannot possibly mean. His discourse is marked by ambivalence, the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible differences which he does not seek to reconcile. He hides behind his own synoptic analyses to mock those who believe that they have found definitive answers; he is obliged to pre-empt any tendency that he may have to fall into the same trap, by holding his own methods in question. Whereas a follower of Wittgenstein may conduct a serious analytical enquiry into a commonplace viewpoint, seeking to expose the intellectual flaws of the argument in order to clarify its significance, the Menippean satirist, in his medium of seriocomic fiction, will point out the ludicrous and the absurd, the ridiculous and the impossible, leaving the reader to reconstruct, if he is able, a semblance of meaning out of the resultant chaos.

Kaplan also establishes a connection between Menippean satire and a mode of analysis more commonly found in the context of theological discourse:

False theology is poetic and mythological. What then is true theology? From a Menippean perspective, the exercise of pointing out the errors in poetry makes up a large part of theology. This is to say that an important part of theology is teaching us what theology *is not*. Much of what we know about 'God' is by understanding what we know 'God' not to be. This negative theology is conventionally styled 'apophatic theology,' or theology by negation.<sup>63</sup>

It is difficult to see how Menippean satire, an essentially comic form of writing, can be closely linked to theological theory. However, the connection that Kaplan implies can be more clearly seen through the process methodologies of the two modes. Apophatic theology views language as an inadequate means of expressing divine concepts, and approaches the truth of a concept by a process of quietly

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<sup>63</sup>Kaplan, p. 31.

eliminating what is obviously untrue. So far, there is a connection with Menippean satire. In the sense that Kaplan employs it here, Menippean satire can be seen as a test of 'truth', which demonstrates what the 'truth' is not, thereby making room for what it possibly could be: that which cannot be exposed as erroneous. This is a reflection of the way that Peacock used the mode, as a process of intellectual investigation. On the other hand, however, Thackeray, sought to uncover the 'truth' by the paradoxical method of practising a series of complex deceptions. The reality he presents is displayed through the distorted perceptions of a series of untrustworthy narrators, so obviously fictive that readers have to sift beneath layers of exaggeration, in order to discover what the author really intends them to understand.



Recent critical theories of satire have been emphasized here because of their specific relevance to the work of Peacock and Thackeray. For a long period extending from the early decades of the nineteenth century until the 1950s and '60s, discussions of satire lay dormant, locked in traditional notions of the genre as a corrective and didactic monologic discourse.<sup>64</sup> Those satirists who adopted a dialogic form of discourse and failed to instruct their readers to a clearly defined point of view, were seen as inadequate exponents of their art, even potentially dangerous, existing beyond the pale of serious literary criticism. Peacock, still performing within the eighteenth-century ideal of authorial autonomy, produced prose steeped in classical allusions and erudition. He did not, however, conform to conventional models of satire, and although he earned the respect of his contemporaries, he was sometimes misunderstood. Thackeray, whose early work

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<sup>64</sup>See above, p.24.



was moderately successful in the popular magazine culture of the period, failed to attract any real degree of critical attention until after the publication of *Vanity Fair*. Both writers suffered from the misapprehensions of a critical hierarchy which, at the time, could find no literary precedent to their work. However, since Frye and Bakhtin have drawn attention to the traditions of Menippean satire, and this work has been further developed, new interpretations of their writings have become possible.

Particularly relevant to the work of Peacock and Thackeray is the idea that, while the Menippean satirist may deride the folly and fallacies of the world as he finds it, he does so without any presumption of resolving conflict produced in the reader. Menippean satire will be shown to provide a defence against recurrent critical accusations that Peacock and Thackeray lacked consistent meaning and moral purpose in their writing. Butler (1979) writes of a 'formidable consensus' of opinion 'that if Peacock believes in anything, he has not shown what'.<sup>65</sup> She also comments that he 'has never convinced the world of his seriousness', and also remarks that other twentieth-century critics, Priestley (1927), Mills (1968), Dawson (1970) and Felton (1973), 'have been unanimous on the point that it is useless to look for a consistent meaning'.<sup>66</sup>

Both Peacock and Thackeray used satire in ways which were unfamiliar and sometimes uncongenial to their more prosaic contemporaries. The next chapter examines their writings in the context of Menippean satire and will suggest how this critical mode of interpretation may be able to extend previous interpretations of their work.

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<sup>65</sup>M. Butler, *Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in his Context* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p.3.

<sup>66</sup>Butler, p.2.

## Chapter Two: Authority Undermined

Several twentieth-century analysts of Menippean satire have cited Peacock's work as clearly demonstrating elements of the sub-genre. For the most part, these references direct attention to the narrative style of his work, detecting components of the mode according to the studies of Frye and Bakhtin. There has been very little mention of Thackeray's early periodical writings in this context, and, while the Menippean elements reflected in his work are less immediately obvious than those found in Peacock's books, he demonstrates new developments in the use of satire, as the genre migrated into the popular culture of periodical publication.

Frye, Butler and Dyer all identify Peacock, by name, as a writer in the Menippean tradition. Frye's discussion of Peacock points out that the lack of critical understanding of the form has created 'a general impression ... that his status in the development of prose fiction is that of a slapdash eccentric'.<sup>1</sup> He traces the development of the Menippean sub-genre from its origins as a form of verse satire, to which 'prose interludes' were added. Eventually, the prose interludes superseded the verse to the extent that it has now become recognized as: 'a prose form, though one of its recurrent features (seen in Peacock) is the use of incidental verse'.<sup>2</sup> Frye also writes, in general terms, of the Menippean satirist's use of characterization, which is 'stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N. Frye, p.309.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ch.1, n.47.



Butler refers to Frye's interpretation of Menippean satire, or 'anatomy', and observes the relationship of the form to Peacock's fiction, acknowledging that Frye provides: 'an excellent diagnosis of the spirit and intention of Peacockian satire, invoking as it does the very writers to whom Peacock himself consistently pays tribute'.<sup>4</sup> In her opinion, it is *Crotchet Castle* (1831), with its wide-ranging cultural debates, 'a dispersed panorama -- the book of Peacock's which best fits the term "anatomy" ' and accords most readily with Frye's analysis.<sup>5</sup> Butler's discussion of Peacock's modes of characterization successfully dismisses the *roman à clef* name-games by which contemporary reviewers and early twentieth-century critics have previously attempted to explain his stylized methods of representing his people in his satirical fictions.<sup>6</sup> Although she makes no specific reference to Menippean satire as such in this context, her analysis of Peacock's use of character reflects, in general, Frye's assertion that 'Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behaviour'.<sup>7</sup>

Peacock was well aware of distinctive modes of presenting characters, both from his own studies and the skills he developed as a literary analyst when writing reviews for periodicals during his later career. In 'French Comic Romances' (1835), written for the *London Review*, he enumerates two kinds of comic fiction: in the one, the 'characters are abstractions or embodied classifications, and the implied or embodied opinions the main matter of the work';

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<sup>4</sup> Butler, pp 56-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.183.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Ch.1, n.47.

in the other, the characters are drawn as 'individuals ... the opinions, however prominent they may be made, being merely incidental'.<sup>8</sup> To the former category he assigns Aristophanes, Petronius, Rabelais, Swift and Voltaire, a list to which he could well have added his own name. This facet of Peacock's work is expanded by Dyer, who asserts, perhaps too comprehensively, that 'Peacock's brilliant narratives ... unquestionably are in the Menippean tradition'.<sup>9</sup> Dyer reinforces Frye's emphasis that Menippean satire deals with intellectual problems using impersonal modes of characterization, and he also illustrates, by references to the work of numerous contemporary writers, that Peacock's satire, confined to targeting topical issues and the ideologies of public figures, was not typical of a period during which satirists delighted in exposing the personal affairs of their victims.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this is a charge which Peacock himself was most anxious to evade, and his intentions in this respect have already been mentioned in chapter one.<sup>11</sup>

Butler's allusions to the unresolved nature of Peacock's satire, mentioned at the conclusion of the previous chapter, can be further developed when informed by the later treatises of Bakhtin and Relihan. While this characteristic of Peacock's work may have contradicted traditional interpretations of satire as a monologic form of discourse, both Bakhtin and Relihan have emphasized unresolved debate as a salient feature of the Menippean satirist's work. The author or narrator makes it his business to expose the fallacies in orthodox points of view, while consistently resisting any form of dogmatic resolution. In

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<sup>8</sup> *Halliford Edition*, Vol. 9, p.258.

<sup>9</sup> Dyer, p.18. and p.101.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.101 passim.

<sup>11</sup> Ch.1, n.33 and n.34.



addition, Bakhtin identifies traces of other literary antecedents within the sub-genre, which are just as relevant to an analysis of Peacock's narrative style. His historicized account of the Menippean sub-genre posits that its origins are to be found during the period when use of the Socratic dialogue was in decline, the first emergence of the form predating the life of Menippus himself. Although stressing that Menippean satire is not descended from the Socratic dialogue alone, he identifies a dialogic mode of discourse common to both styles which acts as a form of investigative inquiry into ideological theory and intellectual attitudes. According to Bakhtin, both the Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire are essentially open-ended modes of inquiry, which seek to expose ideological anomalies while avoiding any authoritative assertion of principles.

The Socratic dialogue, according to Bakhtin, is a process of refining argument:

The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to *official* monologism, which pretends to *possess a ready-made truth*, and it is also counterposed to the naive self-confidence of those who think that they know something, that is, who think that they possess certain truths. Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.<sup>12</sup>

Peacock's use of the form of the Socratic dialogue in his satirical fiction offers some explanation towards the lack of 'consistent meaning' which has confounded critics and readers used to moral-didactic, closed forms of satire. In particular, emphasis on the dialogic characteristics of the mode and the deliberate juxtaposition of conflicting points of view throws new light on the ways in which he deliberately avoided resolutions to the debates of his fictional disputants. In *Headlong Hall* (1816), the 'insides' of the Holyhead mail display conflicting views

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<sup>12</sup>Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p.110.

of the perfectibilian and deteriorationist doctrines of human progress even before they arrive at their destination, but the argument is interrupted by the prospect of breakfast at an inn. Mr. Fax of *Melincourt* (1817) propounds Malthusian principles of population and upholds the cause of reason, while Forester deplors the 'tangible eloquence of the pocket', concluding the discussion with a satirical remark on university education, which has little to do with either side of the argument.<sup>13</sup> In chapter six of *Crotchet Castle*, aptly entitled 'Theories', Mr. MacQuedy elaborates on the principles of James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy* (1821) to a cacophony of counterproposals, which range from support for Robert Owen's co-operationist movement to dubious methods of scientific research. However, Peacock's use of the form of the Socratic dialogue differs from the classical mode of the genre in one important respect. He employs an uncharacteristic lightness of tone and frequently introduces topics of superficial interest, suggesting that, although he presents his subject matter as a search for the 'truth', he has no intention of drawing any firm conclusions. Dawson (1970) refers to the discussions in *Crotchet Castle* as 'mock Socratic dialogues, without a guiding Socrates'.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Peacock, in his ideological debates, is, in fact, parodying the style of the Socratic dialogue.

While some disputants present their opinions with a degree of logic, others, especially the minor characters, lapse into absurdity. These conversations, especially those of *Headlong Hall* and *Crotchet Castle*, deal with topical frivolities as well as intellectual subjects, and the pursuit of 'truth' takes second place to ridicule. In some of the books, in particular, *Headlong Hall*, *Nightmare Abbey*

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<sup>13</sup>Garnett, ed., p. 143.

<sup>14</sup>Carl Dawson, *His Fine Wit* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1970), p. 266.



(1818) and *Crotchet Castle*, it could be argued that the comic exuberance of Peacock's fiction outweighs any serious philosophical intention. Although many of these discussions serve to expose the fallacies of the various stances taken by the disputants, none of them ever reaches an explicit resolution. Rather than reaching a specific viewpoint, Peacock prefers to leave matters open to the reader's judgement, concluding with the prospect of a meal or an adjunct to 'pass the bottle'. Much later in his career as a writer, in a review of Muller and Donaldson's *History of Greek Literature* published in *Fraser's Magazine* (1859), he remarks, in defence of Lucian's work: 'To clear the ground of falsehood is to leave room for the introduction of truth.'<sup>15</sup> Peacock uses satirical debate both as a means of exploring important contemporary ideologies and as a method of 'clearing the ground' of trivial or established fallacies, but the 'truth', if it makes any appearance at all, remains cloaked in suggestion rather than expressed in definitive terms. Furthermore, the philosophical focus of the dialogue often becomes more complex when a plot, usually a love interest, which is just as stylized in presentation as the characters themselves, is introduced into the narrative.

Bakhtin emphasizes that there are fundamental differences between the Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire. Although Menippean satire, like the Socratic dialogue, focuses on examining the validity of a theory or an idea, the treatment of the plot and subject matter remains essentially novelistic. As in Peacock's work, the comic element is more in evidence, and whereas the ideologies explored in the Socratic dialogues remain abstract in form, the Menippean satirist presents ideas as concrete images, often as fictional characters in an imaginary context. In this way, the search for 'truth' may be represented as a

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<sup>15</sup> *Halliford Edition*, Vol. 10, p.225.

voyage or journey and the theory under evaluation may be embodied in the form of the traveller. The addition of a plot allows the satirist room to manoeuvre his protagonist, who can usually be identified with the focal idea, through the actions and counteractions of circumstances and situations, either of this world or on an imaginary plane of the writer's own creation. Bakhtin makes the point that 'the menippea is characterized by an *extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention*'.<sup>16</sup> The Menippean satirist is not constrained by a naturalistic representation of either character or events. The strength of the underlying ideology is tested as the protagonist interacts with incidents and circumstances, frequently fantastic or bizarre, but all, nonetheless, subordinated to discovering the 'truth' of the central theme. 'And it is essential to emphasize once again', writes Bakhtin, 'that the issue is precisely the testing of an *idea*, of a *truth*, and not the testing of a particular human character, whether an individual or a social type'.<sup>17</sup> Elements of fantasy and the incongruous juxtaposition of underlying philosophies appear frequently in Peacock's books, to the extent that it is rarely possible to identify a focal argument. Sometimes the novelistic form is overshadowed by a preponderance of Socratic dialogue, as in the symposia of *Headlong Hall*, *Nightmare Abbey* and *Crotchet Castle*. However, the greater freedom of the Menippean tradition becomes very much more in evidence in *Melincourt* (1817) and in the less constrained forms of the historical romances, *Maid Marian* (1822) and *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829). These books will be discussed in greater detail later.

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<sup>16</sup>Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 114.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.



It is difficult to gauge how far Peacock had assimilated a conscious analysis of the Menippean modes of satire employed in his writing. Those of his letters and diaries that have been preserved give some clues to the extent of the depth and breadth of his reading. The range of this is made more apparent in the books themselves, largely from his extensive use of literary allusions. This intensely allusive style of writing pays tribute to a host of literary predecessors, from classical writers to the work of his contemporaries, and has provoked much critical commentary, mostly influenced by the cultural context in which the work was produced. Garnett writes: 'I know of few other writers (T.S. Eliot is one of them) whose work is so full of phrases taken from the great literature of the world and so fortified with quotations.'<sup>18</sup> His editing of the numerous literary allusions in Peacock's novels is a painstaking piece of scholarship, and he offers three explanations for the frequent occurrence of these references:

Just as many writers think and write in the threadbare commonplaces of current journalism, so Peacock thought and wrote allusively in passages taken from the works of other writers whom he admired. He used them, for the most part, as parliamentary orators of the old school used them - to gain the good will and respect of his audience. But he also used them, I believe, to give a certain remoteness and perspective to his characters.<sup>19</sup>

Here, the second sentence contradicts the sense of the argument contained in the first. If, as Garnett begins by saying, Peacock's use of literary allusion derives spontaneously from an internalized familiarity with the works of other authors, it is difficult to accept the notion that he also employed the technique deliberately as a means of gaining the respect and goodwill of his audience. Burns (1985) supports Garnett's opinion that Peacock's allusive style emerged as a by-product of his extensive reading: 'At times, we have the suspicion that this is cultivated

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<sup>18</sup>Garnett, ed., p. xvi.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp.xvi-xvii.

bric-a-brac, floating loose in Peacock's well-read mind, and finding its way gratuitously onto the pages of the book.<sup>20</sup> This bears out Garnett's view that Peacock 'thought and wrote' sometimes in the words of writers whose work had struck a chord with the material he was handling at the time. However, Burns extends the argument by citing literary references to Milton, Shakespeare and Cervantes, which, he claims, have been used with the specific purpose of illustrating themes in the work. In this case, Burns claims, the use of allusion is intentional and often employed ironically, for the purpose of contrasting the commonsense of these earlier writers with the foolishness of the opinions put forward by Peacock's contemporaries. Garnett's third explanation of Peacock's use of literary allusions, in order to maintain the 'remoteness and perspective' of his characters, also assumes authorial intent. It seems most likely that Peacock actually used literary allusion deliberately, usually in a parodic sense, with the specific purpose of emphasizing the philosophical inconsistencies of his speakers, or as a means of undermining the meaning of what they had to say.

An examination of Peacock's prolific literary allusions, at this stage of the discussion, reveals that, in addition to the standard classics of his period, he was also familiar with the works of a wide range of authors who have since been identified as writing in the Menippean tradition. He quotes from both Petronius and Apuleius and makes frequent allusions to the works of Lucian, Butler's *Hudibras* (1662-80) and European seriocomic literature in the tradition of Rabelais and Cervantes. Peacock's knowledge of literature implies a familiarity with forms of satire and seriocomic writing which were in sharp contrast to the

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<sup>20</sup>B. Burns *The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Sidney: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 103-5.



eighteenth-century formal modes of the genre. Although he appears to have made no direct references to Menippean satire by name, there can be little doubt that he had assimilated a tacit understanding of the style from his classical studies and extensive reading of European literature, and was able to draw on elements of the mode as he developed his own methods of writing. The next section investigates ways in which recent theories of Menippean satire can extend interpretations of Peacock's work, and be used to explain some of the problems his readers have encountered.



Contemporary and early twentieth-century critiques of *Melincourt*, many of which were based on the assumption that the book was intended to be read as a novel, stumble inconclusively through all three volumes of its shifting satirical foci and political comment. The book bears a close resemblance to some of the characteristics discussed in the previous chapter, particularly those which link Menippean satire to the form of the *satura*. *Melincourt*, as a *satura*, deals with an extraordinary medley of satirical targets and, in further keeping with the Menippean tradition, makes use of numerous inserted genres. The narrative form is that of a parodic Romance, interspersed with passages of Socratic dialogue, ballads and poems, but the story is continually interrupted by incidents and adventures apparently unconnected with the main plot. A rustic wedding, an elopement and a deserted mansion all serve to diversify the text and to disseminate the ideological opinions of the participants. Peacock targets numerous intellectual themes and political questions. In addition to an exposure of the contemporary argument of Malthusian principles of population, he presents a moral perspective of the West Indian sugar trade, the early abuses of paper currency, theories of

Kantian metaphysics, parliamentary corruption and the politics of reform. The diverse themes of the book are bound together by a plot which examines the validity of the ideals of chivalry and romantic love, recurrent motifs in fashionable contemporary fiction.

The first volume of *Melincourt* opens with Anthelia's search for her knight-errant, and volume three ends when she has found him -- or, at least, the man she believes to be a close nineteenth-century equivalent. It is no accident that she is heiress to a castle situated high among the raging torrents and mountainous beauties of Westmoreland, the home of the Lake poets, whose poetry and political apostasy are shadowed throughout the book. Born and bred in seclusion among 'the majestic forms and wild energies of Nature' of her native countryside, Anthelia is staunchly independent and sufficiently educated to be influenced by a taste for Italian poetry, which 'nourished a naturally susceptible imagination by conjuring up the splendid visions of chivalry and enchantment in scenes so congenial to their development'.<sup>21</sup> Convention demands that a young lady in her position should be supplied with a husband and suitors arrive to invade her solitude. In the second chapter, a dialogue between Anthelia and Mrs. Pinmoney sets the romantic ideal in juxtaposition to the financial practicalities of the contemporary marriage market. Challenged by an observation from the latter, that the spirit of chivalry is irrelevant to present-day matrimonial considerations, Anthelia remains unequivocal in her conviction: 'I believe it possible to find as true a knight-errant in a brown coat in the nineteenth century, as in a suit of golden armour in the days of Charlemagne' (113). Further Socratic dialogues and verse insertions in the form of ballads and songs illustrate both sides of the argument, and Anthelia identifies a moral basis

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<sup>21</sup>Garnett, ed., pp.105-6. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.



for her objections to marriage as a financial arrangement: 'I fear that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred in which the course of true love is thwarted by considerations of fortune, it will be found that avarice rather than prudence is to be considered as the cause' (153).

Anthelia's quest for her chivalrous 'knight-errant in a brown coat' plunges her into a series of dramatic adventures worthy of her role as the heroine of a love-story, and Peacock uses these to burlesque popular literary conventions. She is rescued from a raging torrent by the superhuman strength of Sir Oran Haut-ton, and subsequently abducted and imprisoned at Alga castle. However, the perpetrator of this outrage, Lord Anophel Achthar, appears, not as the customary black-hearted villain of a Romance, but as a 'fool and a coxcomb' (148).

Anthelia's faithful lover, Forester, temporarily shaken by the disappearance of his sweetheart, sets out on an expedition, a kind of knightly quest, in order to discover her whereabouts. His journey, however, is frequently interrupted by chance encounters, irrelevant narratives and random dialogues, which have nothing to do with the plot but reinforce Peacock's ideological themes.

Both Bakhtin and Relihan make reference to the degree by which Menippean satire subsumes other modes of writing. Bakhtin identifies a diversity of inserted genres, in addition to the form of the Socratic dialogue: 'Characteristic for the menippea is a wide use of inserted genres: novellas, letters, oratorical speeches, symposia, and so on; also characteristic is a mixing of prose and poetic speech', which, with 'varying degrees of parodying and objectification', serve to reinforce 'the multi-styled and multi-toned nature of the menippea'.<sup>22</sup> Relihan sees the insertion of verse into passages of dialogue as serving a more specific purpose:

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<sup>22</sup>Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 118.

'Another weapon in the arsenal of Menippean satire is the creation of amusing verse parodies, put in the mouths of people who are ridiculous because they speak in verse.'<sup>23</sup>

Peacock does use verse quotations to undermine the authority of his speakers, but sometimes these are employed with different intentions. In chapter sixteen, 'The Symposium', Feathernest cites *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hudibras*, apparently undermining his defence of pecuniary preferment (196-7). In contrast to this, Forester's more serious line of argument against such practices is presented only in prose. When his journey takes him to Mainchance Villa, however, during his search for the missing Anthelia, a verse extract appears in his dialogue serving a different purpose. Peacock introduces the last five lines of Wordsworth's sonnet, *November 1806*:

We shall exult if they who rule the land  
Be men who hold its many blessings dear,  
Wise, upright, valiant; not a venal band,  
Who are to judge of danger, which they fear  
And honour which they do not understand. (320)

In this instance, verse is not used with the intention of undermining Forester's point of view, but as an attack on the contemporary position of the poet himself, emphasizing the way in which the ethics of his present public office conflict sharply with the sentiments he expressed just over a decade earlier, when the poem was first written. The 'fallen state' of the poet, so much lamented by Forester, and the underlying theme of political corruption, is emphasized by the subtle alteration of one word. The substitution of 'venal' for the 'servile' of the original poem accentuates the degradation and cupidity of those who use government office for personal gain.

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<sup>23</sup>Relihan, p.19.



In *Melincourt*, Peacock's speakers not only communicate in verse, they also burst into song and the lyrics are used to illustrate themes in the narrative. Mr. Derrydown and Anthelia sing their arguments for prudence (or avarice) as opposed to romantic love in marriage. The ballad of 'Old Robin Grey', as sung by Mr. Derrydown, endorses Mrs. Pinmoney's respect for the financial implications of matrimony, as set out in the dialogue in the second chapter (150). Anthelia reiterates her own viewpoint by countering with 'The Tomb of Love', which, she declares, 'does not contain too severe an allegory in placing the tomb of chivalric love among the ruins of the castles of romance' (154). The drinking songs and glees, which appear regularly throughout Peacock's fiction, frequently work to diffuse the mounting tension of differing opinions. Sometimes appearing at the end of a long section of dialogue -- for example, as in chapter five of *Headlong Hall* -- a song will act as a means of reconciling opposing viewpoints, without having to declare in favour of one side or the other (37). Elsewhere, Peacock uses song for the purpose of undermining the credibility of his speakers and the validity of their intellectual stances. The ridicule of the political stance of the *Quarterly Review*, and the corrupt practices of Paperstamp, Feathernest and Antijack, is brought to a climax as the 'Quintetto' concludes the debate at Mainchance Villa (321-2).

Forester's views, as they appear in the dialogues in *Melincourt*, are put forward as serious, but Peacock does not allow his opinion to remain unchallenged. Even more importantly, from the point of view of a discussion of Menippean satire, they cannot in any way be identified with the author's own beliefs. Forester's dialogue is balanced against Mr. Fax's dogmatic Malthusian approach, both points of view being treated seriously and given equal weighting in

the debate, without the satirical ridicule that Peacock uses to undermine some of the more frivolous themes elsewhere in the narrative. In the juxtaposition of the ideologies, Peacock successfully exposes the weaknesses of both arguments in a way which precludes any sense that the discussion can be resolved. However, although philosophical questions are left open, as a parodic Romance, the plot of *Melincourt* has to be resolved, and Peacock's handling of this aspect of the book increases the significance of the roles of both Forester and Sir Oran Haut-ton.

By the time that Forester's circuitous and frequently interrupted journey to secure Anthelia's liberation is finally completed, he is the most prominent contender for her hand in marriage. However, it is Sir Oran who leads the rescue, not Forester. Peacock not only parodies the knightly quest of popular Romance, but also plays a Menippean trick on the reader. As the door to Anthelia's prison bursts open, Sir Oran appears framed in the aperture, 'with the Reverend Mr. Grovelgrub in custody', ready to avenge Anthelia's honour, with true knightly ardour (339). As Burns points out: 'Peacock's ultimate joke in *Melincourt*, and one that he plays slyly on his characters as well as his readers, is that the novel's consummate knight-at-arms, the embodiment of Anthelia's maidenly dreams, is not a man at all but an orang-outang.'<sup>24</sup> Anthelia subverts the dramatic climax of the narrative by rushing, not into the arms of her liberator, but into Forester's embrace: "Oh Forester!" said Anthelia, "you have realised all my wishes. I have found you the friend of the poor, the enthusiast of truth, the disinterested cultivator of the rural virtues, the active promoter of the cause of human liberty" (340).

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<sup>24</sup>Burns, p.65.



In *Melincourt*, Peacock updates the concept of chivalry by offering the hypothesis that the nineteenth-century knight 'in golden armour' is a thinker and intellectual, who transposes the daring exploits of the Romantic hero into the practical tasks of upholding liberal principles. Forester's quest is not so much that of an intrepid knight-at-arms, but of a Menippean ideological hero, a seeker of 'truth', one who lives by the intellect rather than the sword. In his search for Anthelia, Forester is confronted, not by potentially physically dangerous situations, but by orthodox contemporary practices, opinions and arguments which test his principles of fair-play and forbearance. It is Sir Oran's fate to fulfil the literary conventions of courtly love and, like the Satyr in Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess*, he has to be content to worship an unattainable love (341).

Sir Oran's role in *Melincourt* is complex. As already shown, he shadows the ideals of valour and chivalry, sentiment and self-sacrifice, which Peacock burlesques in the narrative. He also presents the author with opportunities to explore eighteenth-century theories of primitivism, and the innate goodness of man in his natural state, as opposed to the corruption that civilization has wrought on society. Sir Oran is appropriately presented as Forester's protégé but, unlike his mentor and Peacock's other fictional people, he is unable to express his opinions. These are exemplified by his actions, which are not moderated by reason but occur as the spontaneous responses of a 'natural man', as situations occur during the course of the narrative. He sheds 'tears in great abundance' when Anthelia is abducted and administers 'natural justice' to her enemies. He wrecks the hustings at the Borough of Onevote out of fear and misapprehension, but retains his dignity throughout the following skirmishes, in contrast to the riotous mob he leaves behind. Apart from music, for which he has a natural aptitude, he

remains untouched by literature, philosophy and the arts, and those intellectual disciplines which commanded the respect of early nineteenth-century cultural circles. Peacock solemnly justifies Sir Oran's attributes in copious scholarly footnotes, which allude, in detail, to the writings of Lord Monboddo and Buffon. He puts forward the concept of the orang-outang as a 'natural man', playing with Rousseau's theory of the 'noble savage', and then juxtaposes these ideas against the corrupt conventions of 'civilized' behaviour. As Sir Oran accompanies Forester's travels, he takes on a role in Menippean satire, described by Relihan as that of the 'naïf', a participant in the narrative 'who observes a wholly ridiculous other world', which, in the case of *Melincourt*, is unmistakably that of early nineteenth-century England.<sup>25</sup> Unable to speak, Sir Oran cannot express an opinion on what he sees or make much sense of what he hears, and, unlike his articulate companions, he cannot rationalize or attempt to justify the chaos that surrounds him. The reader is compelled to see things as they must appear to him, unjustifiable and irrational, and, at times, the narrative itself, with its numerous themes and capricious vagaries of plot, adds to the sense of disorder and disorientation.

Butler has attempted to establish order in the construction of the book by producing a diagram of chapters and themes, which demonstrates a symmetry of structure, across all three volumes.<sup>26</sup> The apex of this diagrammatic representation appears in the middle of volume two, in the centre of Sir Oran's election campaign to the City of Onevote and the Borough of Novote. Whilst this appears to emphasize parliamentary reform as an important theme in the narrative, Peacock has already playfully pre-empted any such obvious conclusion on the part

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<sup>25</sup>Relihan, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup>Butler, p. 85.



of the reader in an earlier chapter. At Redrose Abbey, Sir Telegraph Paxarett implies that Forester's intentions, in purchasing a baronetcy and seat in parliament for Sir Oran, are to expose political corruption, but Forester protests that his motives are ideological: 'I really think him a variety of the human species: and this is a point which I have it much at heart to establish in the acknowledgement of the world' (133). Peacock's own references to contemporary theories which appear to support this argument undermine the reader's confidence in Forester's point of view. The notion, that an orang-outang is 'a variety of the human species', is given more weight by Forester than the political implications of unfair representation and the purchase of parliamentary seats. Furthermore, although Forester seeks to protect Sir Oran from 'any kind of contumely', he is himself affirming political injustice and social convention in pursuit of his own ideological ends: 'With a view to ensuring him the respect of society, which always attends on rank and fortune, I have purchased for him a baonetcy, and made over to him an estate' (132).

There is a marked conflict of interests here. The corrupt purchase of a parliamentary sinecure, in order to secure the well-being of Sir Oran and the universal acknowledgement of his anthropological heritage, is set in opposition to the obvious benefits of fairly elected representation. At this point in the narrative, there is even the possibility that Peacock is undermining one of the predominant political themes of his period, the movement for Parliamentary Reform. Butler's contention that, 'if Peacock believed in anything, he has not shown what', lies at the heart of his relationship with the Menippean tradition of satire.<sup>27</sup> As Altick has remarked, 'The Four Ages of Poetry' (1820) shows a marked authorial subordination to the Benthamite point of view, but the tone is so subservient that

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<sup>27</sup>Ch. 1, n. 64.

there is a strong possibility that Peacock's underlying intentions were, in fact, ironic.<sup>28</sup> In the literary culture of his most productive period of writing and, indeed, for a long time afterwards, satirists whose work did not present a didactic point of view were not taken seriously and their place in the literary canon remained uncertain. Peacock overreaches the monologic discourse of formal satire, which replaces one attitude with another, and demonstrates a method of philosophical investigation which uses a dialogic mode of the genre, exposing intellectual problems in ways that deny any possibility of closure. The next section discusses recent critical research in this area and looks at the implications of this interpretation.



Reference has already been made to Kaplan's discussion of Wittgenstein's theories, but at this point, it is relevant to expand on these in order to add a new dimension to applications of Menippean satire. Kaplan explains: 'What Wittgenstein finally introduced as a replacement for philosophy shares astonishing conceptual and methodological similarities with the oldest and most trenchant form of literary/critical analysis: Menippean satire.'<sup>29</sup> Wittgenstein's 'replacement for philosophy' is based on the theory that language has come to be seen as a source of meaning in itself, rather than the medium by which meaning may be expressed. Philosophical problems come about as a result of misapprehensions in the use of language, and the reification of an abstract idea, particularly when presented out of context, results in conceptual

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<sup>28</sup>R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: London: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.134.

<sup>29</sup>Kaplan p.26.



misunderstandings and confusion. A concept, however adequately it may appear to be expressed by language, has to be decontextualized and reassessed in unfamiliar usage. Philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is not about uncovering conceptual truths or reality, but rather a means of testing the sense of intellectual propositions in a variety of different contexts. Kaplan argues that 'It is just this rearrangement of expressions, concepts and propositions that one finds in Menippean satire'.

To the reader of *Melincourt*, Anthelia's literary concept of the ideal of medieval knighthood is transposed into a nineteenth-century setting, and, initially, it lacks substance, being merely the whim of a young girl whose head has been filled with Italian poetry. However, set against a broader canvas, in the manner outlined by Kaplan above, it takes on new meanings and possibilities. In the context of early nineteenth-century England, against a background of political injustice, rural poverty and dogmatic ideologies, Peacock presents a new concept of chivalry based on intellectual principles.

Kaplan also explores a postmodernist interpretation of Menippean satire, as 'the revelation of what is already known', by contrasting dogmatic and sceptical approaches to literature and philosophy:

A dogmatist is one who has hit upon some truth, some dogma, some great approach, some great design, some celebrated manifesto, and who seeks to measure all phenomena and experience based upon the apparatus of this truth. The dogmatist rejects all phenomena which fail or refuse to conform to this grand design. The dogmatist, in surrendering to the grand design, is in danger of becoming dictatorial, and often succumbs to a compartmentalized and pragmatic resignation. The skeptic, on the other hand, approaches grand design and fixed approaches with caution. While the dogmatist labors to hammer experience into generalities, the skeptic is a cool observer of particulars. The dogmatist sees black and white where the

skeptic sees gray. Most of all the skeptic does not seek to promote her sensibility through coercion, but through illustration, sobriety, and humor.<sup>30</sup>

This interpretation emphasizes the dichotomy between the interpretations of satire that had governed eighteenth-century critical analyses and the Menippean sub-genre. The latter offers a broader, looser style of discourse which not only tolerates opposing points of view, but is also non-didactic and non-assertive, avoiding dogmatic resolution. Seen from a liberal perspective -- for Kaplan's extract quoted above is certainly an echo of classic liberalism -- it is not difficult to appreciate how the sceptical viewpoint is clearly illustrated in the work of both Peacock and Thackeray, and this highlights similarities in their fundamental principles. It also demonstrates how their satire can be interpreted as a reaction against the predominant culture of their period.

Both authors lived and wrote in a cultural context which was very much influenced by a growing emphasis on factual scientific discovery and the satisfaction of definitive answers. Ideologies were contrived out mistaken concepts, and authoritative assertions of unproven principles, the 'intellectual mythologies' of the early nineteenth century, underpinned just about every aspect contemporary life.<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, it can be argued that it was exactly these dogmatic attitudes, generated by a prescriptive and authoritarian culture, that stimulated writers like Peacock and Thackeray into making satirical challenges. On the other hand, it has to be remembered that this austere, dogmatic, black and white image of nineteenth-century England has been transmitted to succeeding generations through culturally selective media which, in themselves, may be seen

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<sup>30</sup>Kaplan, p.33.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.9.



to be promoting dogmatic points of view. It is through the satire of the period that we are afforded glimpses of what may have been a much richer reality.

Peacock's satire presents an essentially non-dogmatic challenge to the intellectual mindset of his era. Deeply engaged in the ideologies of the period, he informs and illustrates his work with references to both ancient and contemporary literature. The underlying theories of treatises, fiction and poetry are all subjected to scrutiny and analysis. Thackeray's early periodical contributions, however, present a more generalized overview of contemporary society. Working in the commercial world of periodical publication, he presents the reader with an intricate canvas of nineteenth-century society, drawn from his immediate observations. From their differing standpoints, both writers were united by a challenge to dogmatism and orthodox opinion.



Thackeray's attitude to the dogmatic spirit of his age is more readily gleaned from his letters and private papers than his fiction. However, even in his correspondence and diaries, he gives little indication of any deep, intellectual engagement with philosophical problems or doctrinal theories. He records his spontaneous reactions to immediate experiences but does not attempt to refine these by thoughtful deliberation. This reluctance to intellectualize his experiences has sometimes led to negative criticism.

After spending two days in his company during a lecture tour in 1857, an acquaintance reports: 'He does not develop his ideas much; he only puts into words just the thought that passes through his own mind.'<sup>32</sup> The underlying principles that appear in his periodical writings are implicit in what is, essentially,

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<sup>32</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 4, p.377.

satirical description and any apparent resolution, when it rarely occurs, is usually of an ambivalent nature. Ray quotes Henry James Senior's remark to Emerson, in 1853, that: ' "Thackeray could not see beyond his eyes, and had no ideas, and merely is [sic] a sounding board against which his experiences thump and resound" ', adding that this comment may well have been the stimulus for Thackeray's own admission, ' "I have no head above my eyes." ' <sup>33</sup> An anonymous reviewer of *The Newcomes* (1855) acknowledges Thackeray as a 'great humorist', but writes: 'What he can see, hear, smell and taste he can describe, and even idealize, but he can go no further than the range of his five senses'. <sup>34</sup> Roscoe, writing for the *National Review* in 1856, comments that 'It is curious how independent he is of thought; how he manages to exist so entirely on the surface of things'.<sup>35</sup> Later, in the same article, he comments further on Thackeray's lack of intellectual engagement with his material:

Thackeray never reasons, he never gains one step by deduction; he relies on his instincts, he appeals to the witness within us; he makes his statement, and leaves it to find its own way to the conviction of his readers; either it approves itself to you, and you accept it; or it does not, and you leave it. The highest moral truths have been thus enunciated, perhaps can only be thus enunciated; but Mr. Thackeray does not enunciate great truths. The most he does is to generalise on his social observation. <sup>36</sup>

This lack of intellectual deliberation and unwillingness to 'enunciate great truths' fell short of the critical expectations of the period. However, when placed in the tradition of seriocomic writing, his open-ended presentation of an argument, which

<sup>33</sup>G. N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom 1847-63* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), p.119.

<sup>34</sup>[Samuel Lucas], *The Times*, 29 August 1855, from G. Tillotson and D. Hawes, eds., *Thackeray, The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968, pp.228.

<sup>35</sup>W. C. Roscoe, 'W. M. Thackeray, Artist and Moralist', *National Review*, Vol. 2, January 1836, pp.264-308, from Tillotson and Hawes, eds., p.272.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 273.



either finds 'its own way to the conviction of his readers ... or it does not', gains a new significance. The fact that Thackeray relied so heavily on 'his instincts', his immediate impressions and observations, suggests something of Kaplan's approach to Menippean satire through postmodernist theory. Unlike Peacock, Thackeray shows little interest in presenting abstract arguments and ideological problems, but emerges more in the role of the 'cool observer of particulars', a writer whose natural scepticism and humour portray the real experience, in a way that is much closer to the 'truth', than the heavily idealized and fictive 'great truths' that the literary critics of the period had come to expect.

Later in his career, Thackeray's fidelity to a realistic portrayal of nineteenth-century life was acknowledged by his contemporaries. Lewes (1848) comments that Thackeray's work is distinguished by 'a strong sense of reality pervading his writing -- a reality never lost sight of even in his most extravagant bursts of humour'.<sup>37</sup> Thackeray's close affinity with contemporary society and the subject matter that this provided for his satire is in direct contrast to the intellectual problems that Peacock chose to examine. In particular, this aspect of their work is distinguished by their techniques of characterization. Peacock's speakers, especially in the conversation satires, appear as the physical embodiments of intellectual concepts, voices rather than people, identified by their own attitudes and what they have to say rather than by any personal attributes. Thackeray, however, creates his characters from his real-life observations, with an acute faculty for realistic visual detail. Forster, in the *Examiner* (1848), writes: 'They are drawn from actual life, not from books or fancy; and they are presented

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<sup>37</sup>G. H. Lewes, *Morning Chronicle*, 6 March, 1848, from Tillotson and Hawes eds., p.48.

by means of brief, decisive, yet always most discriminative, touches.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, in much of the contemporary criticism of Thackeray's early work, the sharpness of his observations and the often unflattering realism of his descriptions proved to be unpalatable to a sizeable proportion of his critics. An anonymous reviewer of *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840) in the *Spectator* says: 'His vein of humour is essentially satirical; it is too severe and biting to be pleasant.'<sup>39</sup> Eight years later, in an article suggested by the book publication of *Snobs*, Lewes praised Thackeray 'for his admirable judgement in steering clear of party questions, and didactic purposes', but complained: 'As a satirist, it is his business to tear away the mask from life, but as an artist and a teacher he grievously errs when he shows us *everywhere* corruption underneath the mask. His scepticism is pushed too far.'<sup>40</sup> Thackeray himself commented on these aspects of his work as he reviewed his development as a writer, and his attitude began to change. The young Thackeray, beginning an association with *Punch* in 1842, delighted in satire as an opportunity for 'unrestrained laughing sneering kicking and gambadoing'.<sup>41</sup> His early work, governed as it was by the practicalities of the publishing milieu in which it was produced, was far removed from the eighteenth-century interpretation of satire as a mode of corrective discourse. It was a few years later that the didactic functions of satire became clear to him, when he was making the transition from periodical writer to novelist.

In 1849, at the height of the 'Snobs' controversy, he wrote to Lemon:

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<sup>38</sup>J. Forster, *Examiner*, 22 July 1948, pp. 468-70, from Tillotson and Hawes, eds., p.54.

<sup>39</sup>Unsigned review, *Spectator*, 18 July 1840, Vol. 13, p.689, from Tillotson and Hawes, eds., p.25.

<sup>40</sup>G. H. Lewes, *Morning Chronicle*, 6 March 1848, from Tillotson and Hawes eds., p. 46.

<sup>41</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 2, p.54.



A few years ago I should have sneered at the idea of setting up as a teacher at all, and at this pompous and pious way of talking about a few papers of jokes in *Punch* - but I have got to believe in the business, and in many other things since then.<sup>42</sup>

The mature Thackeray had learned from reactions to *Vanity Fair* (1847) that mid-nineteenth-century critics were often reluctant to face up to the unpleasantness of reality. This created tensions between his authorial integrity, his ideal of presenting the 'truth', and the conventional artistic constraints of the literature of the period. It was a problem he endeavoured to accommodate in his later years. In the preface to *Pendennis* (1850), he says: 'I ask you to believe that this person writing strives to tell the truth. If there is not that, there is nothing.'<sup>43</sup> In the same piece, he records how it had become necessary to modify fact in order to please contemporary tastes; how, since the demise of Fielding, 'no writer of fiction among us has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN. We must drape him, and give him a certain conventional simper. Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art.'<sup>44</sup> At the end of the preface, his tone is openly apologetic: 'A little more frankness than is customary has been attempted in this story; with no bad desire on the writer's part, it is hoped, and with no ill consequence to any reader. If the truth is not always pleasant, at any rate truth is best.'<sup>45</sup>

Searching for the 'truth' was to become a feature of Thackeray's later work, but even after he had 'come to believe in the business', there was very little

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<sup>42</sup>Edgar F. Harden, ed., *Selected Letters of William Makepeace Thackeray* (London: Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 136.

<sup>43</sup>W. M. Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis*, Biographical Edition, Vol. 2, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1898), p. xlvii.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xlviii.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

in his writing that could be construed as expressing an authoritative point of view. However, the young Thackeray of the 1830s, immersed in the periodical trade and barely making himself a living, had less serious preoccupations.



It was through the transitory world of magazines and the new popular culture of the periodicals that Thackeray's scepticism eventually found satiric expression. Over a relatively long period, roughly the decade 1835-45, Thackeray was able to develop complex narratorial techniques which distinguish his work from much of the popular periodical satire of the day, and place this phase of his writing in the context of seriocomic literature and the literary traditions of Menippean satire.

Recent analysis of Thackeray's work examines the techniques by which he overturns the conventions of narrative to reveal multiple layers of meaning beneath the surface of his fiction. Full of topical references to the immediate context of nineteenth-century society, his early texts are a mixture of satire, parody and keen observations. Peters (1987, 1999) comments on his narratorial technique, in this instance as it appears in the *Yellowplush Papers* (1838):

Thackeray established himself as a writer of fiction who had a unique and instantly recognisable narrative method: one which works by stripping off layers of pretence. The observer is himself observed, and the assumptions the narrative has first encouraged the reader to make are undercut, forcing him to look again.<sup>46</sup>

The method that Thackeray devised was, in reality, an extension of the literary convention of the authorial pseudonym, and it is in the development of this technique that he most clearly demonstrates a relationship with Menippean satire.

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<sup>46</sup>C. Peters, *Thackeray: A Writer's Life* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), pp. 81-2.



The use of a pseudonym was, of course, not just confined to the periodical press. Peacock also published his books anonymously, *Melincourt*, in 1817, being attributed to the 'Author of *Headlong Hall*,' which had appeared in the previous year. However, Peacock's use of a pseudonym was very different. There is no suggestion that he disguised his identity for any reason other than to preserve his authorial anonymity, and, as a narrator, named or otherwise, he exerted total control of his material. On the other hand, Thackeray developed the *nom de plume* to serve a number of intricate functions. In the first instance, in the competitive context of commercial writing, the complex narratorial *personae* he adopted were used, as Pearson suggests, as a means of promoting his work by providing 'a literary identity for himself that would be recognisable and memorable'.<sup>47</sup> Secondly, this 'literary identity' could be changed at will, giving Thackeray the possibility of several aliases from which to choose, according to the nature of his subject matter, the focus of his satire and the editorial stance of the periodical concerned. Thirdly, his interchangeable *personae* ultimately developed a sophisticated narratorial function, whereby the author distanced himself from the narrative in order to call into question the authority of a narrator who was, after all, the author's fictional creation. The narrator, whose own discourse is essentially satirical, becomes yet another target of the author's satire, while the author dissociates himself from the immediate persuasions of the text and provokes the reader into reinterpreting a new set of possibilities. The next section will examine two of Thackeray's magazine contributions which illustrate the early

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<sup>47</sup> R. Pearson, *W.M. Thackeray and the Mediated Text: Writing for Periodicals in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Burlington USA: Ashgate, 2000), p.32.

evolution of these narratorial techniques.



The first of these, a 'Letter from Augustus Wagstaff Esq.', which appeared in the *Paris Literary Gazette* in 1835, has recently been reprinted for the first time.<sup>48</sup> This 'Letter', a comic review of the *Narrative of a Second Voyage in Search of a North-West Passage* (1833) by Captain Sir John Ross, is a reductive dissertation on the chronicles of an expedition to the magnetic pole, as recorded in the author's diaries. The Wagstaff 'voice' initially undermines the epic pretensions of the book in a brief summary of its contents:

All that I can gather from this bulky volume is, that Sir John Ross, like the King of France recorded by the poet, 'who with twenty thousand men, marched up the hill -- and then marched down again,' has been to the North Pole, and has come back again; that he has planted his Majesty's flag upon several islands and tracts of land, the possession of which no monarch in Europe will be such a fool as to dispute; and that the end of his labours, and the glorious reward for his exertions has been -- 'permission to dedicate his work to his majesty, and to add the name of William IV. to the magnetic pole!' (220-1)

The contents of this 'bulky volume' are summarized in a single sentence. The inflated importance its writer gives to the expedition is undermined by comparing Ross's leadership to the antics of a French king who, like the Grand Old Duke of York in the English folk song, set off ' "with twenty thousand men, marched up the hill - and then marched down again" ' (220). The 'islands and tracts of land' designated as British by the Captain, in the name of the king, are of so little value as to excite no competition or counterclaims from other sources. Wagstaff subverts Ross's 'glorious reward for his exertions' when, a few lines later on, we learn that William IV saw fit to disperse the sovereignty of the magnetic pole around the crowned heads of Europe with a 'liberality' that he would most

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<sup>48</sup>Pearson, pp.220-8. Further references to this source are given in the text.



certainly have been reluctant to demonstrate had the Arctic wastes been of any obvious practical use. The great discovery of the magnetic pole is ultimately reduced to a pantomime, as it becomes 'the most aristocratic spot in the world -- as full of kings and queens as a "fairy tale' (221). Wagstaff goes on to attack the Captain's personal vanity by pointing out that it is not actually Sir John Ross who reaches the pole, but his nephew who, as a Commander, outranks him. He then emphasizes again the length and irrelevance of the narrative; Sir John Ross, 'the man who did *not* discover the magnetic pole, has given to the world five hundred pages, which contain the history of his virtues and those of his men' (221).

In this piece, Thackeray successfully undermines a pretentious author and an unremarkable book and also experiments with the conventions of the formal review by using a fictitious narrator. From the beginning, the reader is aware that Wagstaff himself is also a target of the satire. He begins by beguiling the reader with formal expressions of self-deprecation to his editor: 'I recollect an opinion regarding my merits as a critic, which my known modesty will forbid me here to mention' (220). However, as he later starts to expose the personal vanity of Sir John Ross, he exhibits some of his own authorial ambitions; styling himself as Augustus Wagstaff, Esq. in the title of the review, he announces that he 'is ready, at three months notice to make a book twice as amusing as the captain's and equally as edifying' (222). The flow of the text is interrupted by digressive insertions. Wagstaff's wife is a woman who cannot hold her tongue; she falls asleep and sets fire to a manuscript. The formal reception of the travellers, by the Esquimaux, appears as a parody of the Court Circular; a ceremonial exchange of gifts between the explorer and his hosts is burlesqued by an image of the Captain wearing the 'complete female dress' which was presented to him (223).

The reader, at the end of the piece, is just as aware of the intrusive Augustus Wagstaff as the book which is the subject of the review. Thackeray, however, does not stop with the creation of a fictional reviewer, but experiments with another authorial deception that he was to continue to practise in his later work. Speaking as Wagstaff, he reminds his editor:

I confess that I expected to have commenced my labours in your journal, either with a profound metaphysical paper, or a touching article on poetry, or a brilliant historical essay; -- why, then, did you (entertaining those sentiments which you have been so pleased to express) send me this unfortunate book which figures at the head of this letter? (220)

The creation of a fictional editor and the epistolary review was a narratorial device which reappeared with the introduction of both Yellowplush and Titmarsh, and this allowed Thackeray the opportunity to extend his subject matter. By 1835, he had already experienced the practicalities of running the *National Standard*, but no longer fully in control of editorial decisions at the *Gazette*, he was not in a position to direct his satire at rival publications. Instead, as Wagstaff, he makes a tentative attack from within, questioning the editor's decision that 'this unfortunate book' was actually worthy of anyone's attention and offering what was, in effect, the antithesis of a periodical 'puff'. Thackeray, still only in his twenties, had already had enough experience of the magazine trade to discover some doubtful editorial practices, and editors, as the long-suffering 'Oliver Yorke' at *Fraser's* was to discover, were entitled to no deference.

In 1837, Yellowplush, Thackeray's successor to Wagstaff, appeared in *Fraser's*. His début was as the author of 'Fashionable Fax and Polite Annygoats', a comic review of *My Book; or, The Anatomy of Conduct* by John Henry Skelton (1837), a manual of nineteenth-century social behaviour.<sup>49</sup> Thackeray establishes

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<sup>49</sup>*Fraser's Magazine*, Nov. 1837, Vol. 16, pp.644-9.



the character of his footman narrator immediately, as Yellowplush informs his 'editor' that he is definitely a cut above 'the common writin creaturs who do your and other magazines at so much a yard'.<sup>50</sup> The adoption of a servant's *persona* and speech, complete with comic malapropisms, misplaced aspirants and popular slang, gives Thackeray's satire a new focus. He uses this fictional narrator to cross the assumptions of class stratification, on which both *My Book* and *Fraser's* depended for their reading audiences. Thackeray is no longer writing for his middle-class readers as 'one of themselves', but as an outside observer from the lower ranks of society.

The review of *My Book* is at once both knowing and naive. It is introduced as 'a work that has been long wanted in the littery world'; this immediately casts doubt on the skills of the reviewer, and establishes the review in the comic mode (251). In a tone of cheerful familiarity, Yellowplush rambles discursively through his narrative, commenting on details and interrupting the flow of the text with amusing anecdotes on the lives of his fellow servants and their upper-class employers. He begins with enthusiasm: 'A reglar slap-up, no-mistake, out-an'-out account of the manners and usitches of genteel society, which will be appreciated in every famly from Buckley Square to Whitechapel market' (251). As Yellowplush progresses, however, the reader becomes aware of an ironic quality in his enthusiasm; his tone turns to mockery and he calls on his editor for support: 'But read the whole bunch of remarx, Mr. YORKE; an't they rich? ...Why, sich things an't done, not by the knife-boy, not the skillery-made, who dine in the back kitchen after we've done!' (258). There is, throughout the review, an implicit

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<sup>50</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol.13, p.251. Further references to this volume are given in the text.

authorial understanding that the readership of *Fraser's Magazine* would have no need of a book of this nature. *My Book* may have been aimed at those aspiring to the 'genteel' classes, but Thackeray makes it clear that he does not believe it to be a necessary addition to the bookshelves of his readers.

The whole concept of using a footman as a reviewer satirizes the expectations of the literary review, particularly when Yellowplush attacks Skelton's pretentious, formal style of prose and exposes his own shortcomings as a writer: 'Miss Simpkins, my Lady's *feel de chamber*, says its complete ungramatticle, as so it is' (252). Skelton's presumed authority on the subject of manners is ultimately subjected to the mockery of a servant from 'below stairs'. However Yellowplush, like Wagstaff, has pretensions of his own and Thackeray, in a spurious editorial comment, has the last word: 'We at once saw that only Mr. Yellowplush was fit for Mr. Skelton, Mr. Skelton for Yellowplush' (259).



It was said at the beginning of this chapter that elements of Menippean satire in Thackeray's work are not easy to identify. However, these become more apparent as he continues to refine his narratorial techniques. Wagstaff, as an early experiment in this vein, disclosed a method of writing satire which had more than one layer of meaning. In the creation of Yellowplush, there is evidence that Thackeray's narratorial devices were reaching new levels of sophistication. The characterization is stronger and the character's fictional context is more clearly defined. In addition, the use of a fictional 'voice' creates a complex undercutting of authorial assumptions and reader expectations, and together these indicate further possibilities of linking Thackeray's work to the Menippean mode.



Yellowplush is, essentially, a Menippean narrator, 'oblivious to his own inadequacies and contradictions as he strives towards his goal'.<sup>51</sup> Thackeray uses him to satirize his primary target, but there are underlying ambiguities in the discourse. The reader is asked to accept the opinion of a narrator whose authority is undermined by his own parodied speech. The narrative does not run smoothly; Yellowplush distracts the reader's attention with comic anecdotes, and Thackeray introduces complex agendas and ambiguities in the text, implicating other targets in addition to the central focus of the satire. This creates a strong sense that elements of Menippean satire are present, but in an organic form, an amorphous accumulation of seriocomic traditions that have infiltrated an essentially journalistic style of writing. At times, however, characteristics of the mode emerge more clearly. There is clear evidence that he is using satire as a means of investigation, not into intellectual concepts and ideologies, but into the orthodox social values of his period.

Yellowplush introduces the 'subjick' of *My Book* by contending that it warrants more serious attention than 'politix, mettafizzix, or other silly sciences' (251). As the review continues to ridicule Skelton's work, there is an implicit sense that Thackeray is also deliberately undermining both the values of nineteenth-century society and the contemporary cultural preoccupation with dogmatic political and scientific concepts. The upper classes, as Yellowplush clearly shows, are certainly not constrained by the conventions of formal conduct; when Lady Smigsmag's dentures are almost swallowed by an important guest, the whole company, servants as well, join in the laughter. Furthermore, as Yellowplush points out, a literary review, even of a book like Skelton's, should

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<sup>51</sup>Relihan, p.24.

take priority over the 'silly sciences'. Thackeray is not merely ridiculing a pretentious piece of nonsense; he is also pointing out that anyone like Skelton, who sets himself up as an authority, will ultimately have his point of view challenged.



Part of the problem in identifying elements of Menippean satire in Thackeray's work has come from the nature of his subject matter. Peacock, who was deeply engaged in the intellectual preoccupations of his period, fits more closely to the paradigms of the sub-genre as defined by twentieth-century literary criticism. However, there is a danger that too much reliance on structured analysis will become too prescriptive, particularly with a mode of writing that essentially challenges formal constraints.

Relihan has commented that Bakhtin, in his analysis of Menippean satire, 'casts his net very wide', but it is this wider application of Bakhtin's theories that best contributes to an understanding of Thackeray's use of the genre, and this argument will be extended in chapter four.<sup>52</sup> However, in order to clarify contextual issues that this will raise, it is necessary to acknowledge some of the changes that occurred during the period, in particular those within the publishing industry. The impact of these developments, and their relevance to the work of both authors, will be examined in the next chapter.

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<sup>52</sup>Relihan, p.6.



### **Chapter 3: Menippus in the Marketplace**

No attempt to identify a place for the writings of Peacock and Thackeray in the literary tradition would be complete without some contextual discussion of their work in relation to contemporary changes in the publishing industry. Although publishing history has come to the forefront of research during the last two decades, highlighting both the means of production and the responses of reading audiences, little has been done to examine the effects of these revolutionary changes on the way writers worked and on the texts they produced. The growth of periodical publication, and the greater emphasis on commercial interests, brought together groups of authors who would be called on to collaborate and interact in a way unheard of by previous generations of writers. This chapter looks at how changing modes of publication in the first half of the nineteenth century challenged traditional values in literature. In particular, it is an investigation into the ways in which Peacock and Thackeray responded to the cultural tensions which came to exist in a new world of mass production and public readership.

Peacock and Thackeray began their writing careers from a similar social standpoint. Both enjoyed a degree of gentlemanly status and both were possessed of a small financial independence, which neither found sufficient for the support of a family and household. However, the twenty-six years that divided their birth dates was a quarter-century which saw some of the most revolutionary changes in the publishing industry. New methods of production, the growth of periodical publications and, in addition, changes in reading audiences, swept away eighteenth-century traditions of authorship forever. Inevitably, these alterations in production methods had a profound and lasting effect on readerships. Although

Thackeray's early work immediately followed the most productive period of Peacock's writing career, the markets they served graphically illustrate the demise of traditional notions of the author as a gentleman of letters, and the emergence of a new kind of writer who was, in effect, a tradesman and a man of business.

Siskin (1998) traces throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries changes in the publishing industry, which culminated in a transition from earlier traditions of literary output to a recognizably modern form of print production:

The year 1830 may appear to be an obvious candidate for the endpoint since it matches roughly the conventional close of British Romanticism, but it arises from this book [*The Work of Writing*] for different reasons. A combination of technological and economic change points to the third decade of the nineteenth century as a kind of watershed: beyond this lies the modern ... world of print.<sup>1</sup>

While it may be arbitrary and historically unsound to adopt a specific endpoint for what was, after all, a gradual process of change, other commentators show an awareness that, as the 1820s merged into a new decade, the whole concept of writing and publishing had opened up unprecedented commercial opportunities for both businessmen and authors. Just as Peacock was completing *Crotchet Castle*, his sixth and penultimate satirical fiction, Thackeray, desperate for direction and financial independence, was looking for employment in a publishing environment very different to that of book production: the world of journals and newspapers.

Pearson's investigation into Thackeray's early work clearly demonstrates the dilemma that faced serious writers at this time:

Culturally, he [Thackeray] emerged onto a faultline between the declining notion of writing as a gentlemanly and aristocratic pursuit, and the modern age of commercial publishing. More than any other writer of the period, he

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700-1830* (Baltimore: London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 11.



exemplifies a transitional figure, continuously renegotiating between the ideal and the reality of authorship. Though ultimately successful, financially and artistically, he remained deeply ambivalent about the power image and responsibility of the writer in a world of trade and trade-off.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to place Peacock and Thackeray either side of Pearson's 'faultline'. Peacock, representative of traditional values, the 'ideal' of an author as a scholar and a gentleman, was engaged with a book trade which still belonged predominantly to the educated and intellectual privileged classes. Thackeray, a 'transitional figure', caught up in a whirlwind of new production methods and market forces, was able to look forward to a new age of commercial publishing, a world of mass media opportunities, where the working writer would still be able to claim a modicum of class privilege and artistic integrity, but also where lucrative, full-time employment within the industry was rapidly becoming a possibility. Although Pearson's research into Thackeray's early writings raises possibilities that he had made significant contributions to periodicals prior to acquiring his own paper, it is generally accepted that his literary apprenticeship commenced when he bought the *National Standard* in 1833.<sup>3</sup> This took place just two years after Peacock had completed the first and main phase of his literary production. By this time, he was almost fifty years old, living quietly in Lower Halliford and enjoying a well established and prosperous career in the service of the East India Company.

Unlike Thackeray, there is no evidence to suggest that Peacock ever looked to literature as the means of earning a regular income. His earliest published work, the largely unsuccessful poems that appeared during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, was placed firmly outside contemporary changes in the publishing industry and the emerging public readership. Financed

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<sup>2</sup> Pearson, pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231-5.

by a small independence and the generosity of his mother, his situation at this time reflects what Pearson describes as the 'ideal' of authorship, writing as the part-time occupation of an educated man, the 'gentlemanly and aristocratic pursuit' of those who enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle of financial independence, or who wrote in their spare time while engaged in some other kind of profession.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the idea of professionalism was just beginning to emerge, not yet as in the modern sense of undertaking remunerative employment, but as a pattern of behavioural expectations attributable to the leisured classes and those occupations, commonly legal and medical, which required extensive training: 'Even the very word *professional* - as an adjective describing a particular set of behaviors - first appeared at the turn into the nineteenth century, a moment also marked lexically by the debut of terms of difference such as *amateur*.<sup>4</sup> The concept of the author or poet as a professional did not yet exist, not least because the notion that true gentlemanly status precluded the necessity of earning a living.

Peacock, during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, had the means and leisure to follow an enthusiasm for literary studies and writing poetry, when necessary meeting the expenses of publication out of his own pocket. *The Monks of St. Mark*, by T.L.P., appeared in 1804 in pamphlet form, two folded sheets, probably privately printed. In January 1806, *Palmyra and Other Poems*, by T.L. Peacock, reached the booksellers, this time as a bound volume of one hundred and forty-one pages, published by W.J. and J. Richardson, price seven shillings. His next poem, *The Genius of the Thames*, did not appear until four years later, although a self-deprecatory letter to Hookham reveals that he had

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<sup>4</sup> Siskin, p.21.



begun work on it three years previously: 'Perhaps I have undertaken more than I can perform, and shall be obliged at last to leave the poem unfinished: however, as I have no better occupation, I will return to the "idle trade" of writing verses.'<sup>5</sup>

There was one interruption to Peacock's progress in the 'idle trade' in 1808, when he was encouraged to embark on a short-lived naval career: 'As to writing poetry, or doing anything else in this floating Inferno, it is almost next to a moral impossibility.'<sup>6</sup> *The Genius of the Thames: A Lyrical Poem in Two Parts*, by Thomas Love Peacock, was eventually published in London by Hookham, and in Edinburgh by Manners and Miller, in May 1810.

In a letter to Hookham in the same year, he reflects on the financial implications of bringing out a second edition of *Palmyra*. He also states explicitly his ultimate ambition, the hope of literary recognition:

Richardson's bill - the expence of printing - the little probability of encouragement from the *trade* to a work which was *strangled in its birth* - and many other considerations - induce me to think that it would be better to defer the republication of *Palmyra* till some other work of mine shall have attained a degree of popularity, which I do not expect to be the case in the course of the ensuing winter. -- The temple of Fame must be gained by slow approaches, not taken by storm.<sup>7</sup>

Peacock's literary aspirations in 1810, his vision of achieving the 'temple of Fame' as a poet, reflect an attitude which viewed recognition as a reward in itself. He saw the 'expence of printing' and lack of encouragement from a '*trade*', which knew only too well the financial implications of a restricted market, as minor inconveniences in his progress as a man of letters. Before him stood the gentlemanly 'ideal' of authorship, where the intrinsic value of a work was unrelated to financial reward. Commercial transactions necessary to the publication of a

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<sup>5</sup> *Halliford Edition* Vol. 8, p.160.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 188.

book were matters for the trade concerned, not for the author and his anticipated readers. It is important to remember that, as Klancher points out, the literary world of early nineteenth-century England was still, for the most part, culturally circumscribed in ways which made it 'possible to conceive the writer's relation to an audience in terms of personal compact'.<sup>8</sup>

Klancher offers an analysis of eighteenth-century English reading audiences by tracing an index of change in the modes of interaction which evolved, during the eighteenth century, between periodical writers and the reading public. Citing Defoe's *Review* (1704-13) and Addison's *Spectator* (1711-12 and 1714) and allowing for a degree of editorial pretence, he elaborates on a method by which periodical writers frequently made use of readers' letters to shape the content and style of their own discourse: 'The reciprocity of the reader and writer becomes so fundamental to the discourse that it must be suspected even where the style is apparently the monological signature of the writer himself.'<sup>9</sup> This interactive relationship between editors and their readers, which continued in various forms until the last decade of the eighteenth century, appears to have had a dual effect on reading audiences. Initially, the reciprocal contact between a writer and his readers 'constructed a knowable community of discourse that united its members and distinguished their social language from that of other audiences'.<sup>10</sup> Later, as magazine production increased during the course of the eighteenth century and these intimate communities of readers and writers became more numerous, small groups had the effect of colonizing an amorphous reading public into focused subdivisions, which in turn stimulated the production of yet more

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<sup>8</sup> Klancher, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 20.



periodicals, each designed as a specific approach to some section of the culturally diverse, middle-class reading public.

This conception of writing, as a personalized interchange between the author and his readers, was already changing, even during the early years of Peacock's career. Klancher identifies the French Revolution as the catalyst which dramatically galvanized the cultural structure of English literary production. He calculates that alterations in authorial modes of address changed the eighteenth-century reader-writer balance of power, creating new forces in the relationship between an author and his audience. Radical writers, in adopting conventions of classical rhetoric to address their audiences, assumed authorial precedence over their readers. The intimacy between the middle-class readers and writers of eighteenth-century periodicals now gave way to a new authoritarian stance on the part of the writer, with the reader assuming a passive role. In addition, authors were now producing work for a less easily identifiable audience.

Klancher continues:

The phenomenon of the *unsought* mass audience also appeared in the early nineteenth century: Lord Byron and Walter Scott awakened to something hardly imaginable to the writers who thought in terms of a deliberately formed compact between writer and audience. The new mass public Byron faced could not be shaped, imagined or directed.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of the public readership, however, with a few exceptions, did not gain real impetus until the 1820s. Peacock, in *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), shows that he was aware of this '*unsought* mass audience'. Mr. Flosky, created by Peacock to shadow the opinions of Coleridge, remarks: 'How can we be cheerful when we are surrounded by a *reading public*, that is growing too wise for its betters?'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Klancher, p.172.

<sup>12</sup>Garnett, ed., p.413.

According to Jones's contention as outlined in chapter one (p.14), Shelley was, by 1820, attempting to embrace a more heterogeneous audience, but this appears to have escaped Peacock's notice.<sup>13</sup> A couple of years later, Peacock was to write to him in the following terms, making an implicit reference to Byron's popular success:

*Cain* is very fine; *Sardanapalus* I think finer; *Don Juan* is best of all. I have read nothing else in recent literature that I think good for anything. The poetry of your *Adonais* is very beautiful; but when you write you never think of your audience. The number who understand you, and sympathise with you, is very small. If you would consider who and what the readers of poetry are, and adapt your compositions to the depth of their understandings and the current of their sympathies, you would attain the highest degree of poetical fame.<sup>14</sup>

Peacock may well have had a growing awareness of the new author/writer relationships that were emerging in the literary marketplace, but in his own work at least, there is little indication of a change in practice. For Peacock, a public reading audience that could not be 'shaped, imagined or directed' was a phenomenon to be resisted. The notion that an author wrote to satisfy an identifiable audience, and that this reciprocal process, to some extent, controlled the work he produced, was a strategy firmly entrenched in Peacock's concept of authorship and the coterie nature of some of his work will be expanded upon below.

A few years later, when Thackeray was about to begin his career as a journalist, literary recognition, within a selective readership, was fast becoming irrelevant in a publishing climate that took its cue from the economics of industrial production and profit. Work had to sell to a rapidly increasing mass audience and the author would expect to be rewarded accordingly. Writing as a full-time

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<sup>13</sup>Jones, p.105.

<sup>14</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, p.228.



occupation had become a reality. A prolific writer could hope to gain a viable income from his work, but success came at a price, a constant engagement with the demands of the marketplace where his work was bought and sold. His performance, to a vast and anonymous reading public, was governed by the economic considerations of trade. Altick assesses external factors fundamental to the growth of the reading public. Demographic and economic changes, which accelerated at this time, had almost doubled the population: 'At the same time, the class structure and the occupational and geographical distribution of the people underwent alterations which affected the availability of reading matter, educational opportunities, the conditions under which reading could be done, and the popular attitude towards print.'<sup>15</sup> This argument may be extended by a reconsideration of the position of the reading population. It is unlikely that any steadily increasing group of people would remain totally passive, shaped only by external stimuli and pressures. Furthermore, the emergence of a 'popular attitude towards print', would have been influenced by political events, changing cultural perceptions of what was actually being written, as well as the way printed material was being produced and distributed.

Thackeray's ambitions as a writer, during the early years of his career, reflect an engagement with the economic climate of the publishing industry which was, to some extent, dictated by his own difficult financial circumstances. In 1841, mistaken for the anonymous author of *Cecil*, which was, in fact, the work of Mrs. Catherine Gore, Thackeray expressed a wish to his correspondent, Mrs. Procter, that the rumour were true:

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<sup>15</sup>Altick (1957), p.81.

Not for the book's sake but the filthy money's which I love better than fame. The fact is I am about a wonderful romance and oh I long for the day the 3 vols. shall be completed -- not for fame's sake again but for the disgusting before-mentioned consideration.<sup>16</sup>

During this period, in direct contrast to Peacock's expectations of literary recognition of its own sake, Thackeray was looking to writing as a means of making a living. There is no reference elsewhere to the 'wonderful romance' mentioned in his letter to Mrs. Procter. Throughout the last months of 1840, he was negotiating copyright terms for *Titmarsh in Ireland* with Chapman and Hall, corresponding with *Fraser's* over the publication of 'A Shabby Genteel Story', and offering some *Comic Miscellanies* to Cunningham for republication, in addition to making regular contributions to a number of periodicals. In 1845, Thackeray, with over a decade of journalistic experience, was still belittling his achievements in a manner that implies a view of success in commercial rather than artistic terms. In a letter to Richard Bedingfield, he wrote that his stories were 'not saleable' and that it was a 'question of trade', adding 'I can suit the magazines (but I can't hit the public, be hanged to them)'.<sup>17</sup> The young Thackeray, his hand forced by adverse financial circumstances, elected to engage in the realities of the trade. Peacock, who had reached a similar situation in his own career a few years earlier, pursued a very different route.

His approach to the 'temple of Fame' was slow indeed, although it appears that *The Genius of the Thames* did, eventually, attain a small 'degree of popularity'. *Palmyra* was reprinted in 1812 in a collected edition of *The Genius of the Thames, Palmyra and Other Poems*, by T.L. Peacock, published by Gale & Curtis as a seven-shilling volume. This publication also carried an advertisement

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<sup>16</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 2, p.13.

<sup>17</sup>Harden, ed., p.122.



for *The Philosophy of Melancholy*, which had been published by the Hookhams the previous February at eighteen shillings. The former volume had a modest success and reached a second edition, being reissued at five shillings a copy in 1817, but the latter remained in one edition only. Peacock's most obvious success at this time, in terms of book sales, was in the children's market. *Sir Hornbook: or, Childe Launcelot's Expedition*, a 'grammatico-allegorical ballad' for children, written in verse, was published anonymously in December 1813 by Sharpe and Hailes. This book, dubbed 'an aid to grammar without tears', went into five editions, being revived in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> *Sir Proteus: A Satirical Ballad* followed in 1814, published by the Hookhams at three shillings and sixpence, a bound volume of seventy-two pages, under the pseudonym of P.M. O'Donovan, Esq. Although listed as a new publication in the *British Critic* for March 1814, and retailing at half the price of his previous volumes, there is no record of its receiving any critical attention, and it was not reprinted until 1875 in Cole's edition of his *Works*. Peacock was to continue writing verses throughout the remainder of his life, but with the exception of *Rhododaphne* (1818) and a few short satirical poems, which were published in the periodicals, the greater number of these remained in manuscript, appearing for the first time in posthumous collections of his works. However, his interest in writing poetry was waning and he shortly began a transition from poet to prose satirist.

The appearance of Peacock's first three prose satires, *Headlong Hall* (1816), *Melincourt* (1817) and *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), marked an acceleration in his speed of production, but only a marginal increase in readership. In the first

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<sup>18</sup>*The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C.E. Jones, Halliford Edition, Vol. I (London: Constable & Co., 1934), p. lii.

instance, his work would have had potential readers restricted to those classes which had not only the financial resources to purchase hard-backed volumes, but also sufficient leisure time in which to read them. This readership, however, would have been extended by library membership, the most rapidly expanding mode of distribution at that time. Secondly, his audiences would have been limited by intellectual considerations. Much of the humour in *Headlong Hall*, *Melincourt* and *Nightmare Abbey* would be lost to readers without sufficient education to appreciate the numerous allusions to classical, Renaissance and contemporary literature found in the books. To the increasing number of readers of his own class who were attracted by the growing popularity of the novel, his books must have seemed quaint, lacking the vital ingredients of plot, incident and character, and overwhelmingly heavy with classical scholarship, literary allusion and ambivalent opinion.

During most of this second decade of his writing career, Peacock had no occupation other than his writing. The *Biographical Introduction* to the *Halliford Edition* quotes a letter from Charles Clairmont to his sister: 'He [Peacock] seems an idly-inclined man; indeed, he is professedly so during the summer.'<sup>19</sup> At this stage of his life, having no other priorities, Peacock may well have agreed. His diary for July and August 1818, written while living at Marlow, contains innumerable references to passing days on end on the river. He studied, sailed or wrote at his leisure, without pressure. Although now in his early thirties, unlike the young Thackeray at a similar age, he had no editors to satisfy and no deadlines to meet. He wrote as he wished to write, when he wished to do so, influenced scarcely at all by market considerations, but a great deal by the

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<sup>19</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 1 (1934), p.lxiii.



stimulation of the ideological debates and intellectual pursuits within his immediate circle of associates.

In 1812, Peacock had been introduced to Shelley, and throughout their friendship, they shared an acquaintanceship which, in addition to writers and poets, eventually came to include some of the more radical representatives of the publishing industry and periodical trade. Initially, this circle consisted of a number of eccentric individuals, whose ideological enthusiasms Peacock found to be lacking in reason and restraint. In 1813, Shelley was in Bracknell and actively involved with the Newton-Boinville circle, but Peacock was becoming increasingly amused by some of the philosophies that Shelley and his acquaintances so earnestly espoused. In his 'Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley', published in *Fraser's* in 1858, he recalls this period of his life:

At Bracknell, Shelley was surrounded by a numerous society, all of a great measure of his own opinions in relation to religion and politics, and the larger portion of them in relation to vegetable diet. But they wore their rue with a difference. Every one of them adopting some of the articles of the faith of their general church, had each, nevertheless some predominant crotchet of his or her own, which left a number of open questions for earnest and not always temperate discussion. I was sometimes irreverent enough to laugh at the fervour with which opinions utterly uncondusive to any practical result were battled for as matters of the highest importance to the well-being of mankind; Harriet Shelley was always ready to laugh with me, and we thereby lost caste with some of the more hotheaded of the party.<sup>20</sup>

This ambivalent attitude towards an overzealous preoccupation with philosophical trivia becomes very apparent in the parodies of Newton's treatise on vegetarianism and Shelley's *Notes to Queen Mab* that appear in *Headlong Hall*. Peacock's light-hearted treatment of contemporary issues in this first prose satire illustrates an attitude which owed its development to his experiences with the Bracknell company, during the early years of his friendship with Shelley. The

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<sup>20</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, pp. 70-1.

ideologies -- or, possibly, fads -- that he tackled in *Headlong Hall*, deteriorationism as opposed to the potential perfectibility of the human race, vegetarianism and the currently fashionable crazes for landscaping, phrenology and metaphysics, were the preoccupations of those whom Frye was later to describe as pedants, bigots and cranks, and whose deliberations, in reality, had little real use or practical application. Taken to obsessional extremes, such notions merited satire rather than serious contemplation, but it is essential to note that, as Butler points out, it was the opinions themselves that Peacock attacked, not the individuals to whom they were ascribed.<sup>21</sup> Entertaining as some of these ideas may have been, they were, nevertheless, incompatible with Peacock's perception of an age which valued rational thought and logical deduction. There is a sense that *Headlong Hall* was written in opposition to the group, perhaps even with the intention of enlightening those members, including a young and impressionable Shelley, who took such matters so seriously.

When Shelley adopted a new circle of acquaintances, Peacock was again invited to become part of the group. In this way, he met, among others, Hunt, Hogg and Hazlitt, a body of practising writers and thinkers whose literary and political interests were of a more substantial nature than any he had previously encountered. The localized coterie of the Bracknell group, with its entertaining repertoire of eccentricities and crotchets, was replaced by a more seriously inclined association of intellectuals, whose discussions centred on a much wider range of issues. Although *Nightmare Abbey* was produced as a satire on the literary tastes of some of his contemporaries, in *Melincourt* (1817) and *Maid Marian*, all but complete by the end of 1818, Peacock demonstrates a much

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<sup>21</sup>Butler, p. 16.



stronger focus on the political issues of the day, an aspect of his work which will be expanded in a later chapter.

Peacock was probably not introduced to this group until the spring of 1817, but there is no doubt that he met with them frequently during his period of residence at Marlow. Cox (1998) writes of a well-organized association of intellectuals: 'With Hunt as their chief organizer, they formed an intelligentsia, with the *Examiner* as their organ, with reform, anticlericalism, and joyful paganism as their platform, and with shared enthusiasms such as Mozart, vegetarianism, and myth.'<sup>22</sup> He further cites a letter from Alaric Watts to William Blackwood, which links Charles Lamb to the group 'listed with "Procter, Hazlitt, Hunt, Peacock, Chas Ollier, Talford, Reynolds *cum multis aliis*"', who "'boast of their freedom from the shackles of religious sentiment of every kind"<sup>23</sup> Although Peacock may have been unable to take too seriously some of the 'shared enthusiasms' of the group, many of his sympathies were akin to those expressed within the more central membership.

It is a measure of the prominence of the Hunt circle that it came under frequent attack from the established periodicals of the day, in particular *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*, and, as illustrated in chapter one, also became a target for satire in the public journals. The unpopularity of the group stemmed from the views expressed in the work of its members, which were construed as radical and oppositional by the reactionary press of post-1815 Britain:

The very things that bothered the Cockney School critics - its attacks upon the government and organized religion, its celebration of sexuality, its very

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<sup>22</sup>Cox, pp.21.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp.19-20.

status as a coterie - identify it a countercultural movement, rejecting established authority, embracing eroticism rather than violence as a means for revolutionizing life, and offering in its own communal organization a model for a society remade.<sup>24</sup>

It was the united strength of the underlying ideologies of the coterie that provoked *Blackwood's* attacks on the 'Cockney School'. Manuscript coterie had existed in literary circles throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a common, interactive process of literary production in the pre-printing era. However, the term also had political connotations. Used in eighteenth-century France to refer to groups of peasants, united against their landlords in the common cause of defending their rights of tenure, coterie activities came to be viewed as culturally marginal. In the volatile political climate of post-Waterloo Britain, such a highly articulate, organised circle led by Hunt, who had already suffered imprisonment for his radical publications, would have been seen as a threat, a thorn in the side of those who upheld reactionary attitudes towards government and religion. However, there is no evidence that the group ever had revolutionary intentions or even aspired to organise themselves politically. Like Peacock, their interest in contemporary affairs was intellectual. They were held together by intellectual deliberation, educated, politically and culturally aware, but open-minded and freethinking, engaged with the ideas rather than the actualities of the period. The novel-reading public may have found Peacock's books hard to digest. To members of the Hunt circle, they would have seemed relevant and representative, confirming Peacock's allegiance to the group's oppositional opinions and hopes for cultural change.

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<sup>24</sup>Cox, p.61.



Cox has argued a strong case that coterie writing was central to the Hunt circle and that these activities, for the most part, revolved around the work of its core membership. The extent to which Peacock took part in these sonnet competitions and epistolary verses is not particularly clear. There are, however, records that he was involved in arguments surrounding Ollier's refusal to publish Shelley's *Laon and Cythna* on account of the radical views it expressed, and he was engaged in the critical discussions and communal editing sessions that eventually produced the modified form, published in 1818 as the *Revolt of Islam*.<sup>25</sup>

Cox confirms that his connections with the group were maintained, even after Shelley left England in 1818, and he continued to associate with some of its members in later years: 'While we think of these new additions [Hogg and Peacock] as the friends of Shelley, after Shelley went to Italy Hunt reported that "Hogg and Peacock generally live over here Sunday ... and we pass very pleasant afternoons, talking of mythology, and the Greeks ..."'.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, he and Shelley continued to share a common interest in Hunt's *Examiner*, and following the latter's departure to Italy, Peacock regularly forwarded his back copies to the poet, later arranging for Ollier to 'execute the commission' of having the magazine mailed directly to Shelley.<sup>27</sup>

Just as Peacock had found satirical targets among the crotchets and ideologies of the more extreme members of the Newton-Boinville circle, he came to perceive cultural excesses in the work of some of his contemporaries. Although, ultimately, he respected the work of Byron, there were aspects of his style that Peacock found untenable. *Nightmare Abbey* was written as a protest

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<sup>25</sup> *Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, p. 141.

<sup>26</sup> Cox, pp. 46-7.

<sup>27</sup> *Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, pp. 196-7.

against what he felt to be the exaggerated melancholy of modern literature -- in particular, that which he had encountered in the fourth canto of Byron's *Childe Harold* (1816-18). While engaged on the book, he wrote to Hogg that he was amusing himself 'with the darkness and misanthropy of modern literature, from the lantern jaws of which I shall endeavour to elicit a laugh'.<sup>28</sup>

In May 1818, *Nightmare Abbey* was 'almost finished' and he wrote to Shelley that Byron's 'fourth Canto of *Childe Harold* is really too bad. I cannot consent to be *auditor tantrum* of this systematical "poisoning" of the "mind" of the "reading public".<sup>29</sup> Shelley agreed: 'I entirely agree with what you say about *Childe Harold*. The spirit in which it is written is, if insane, the most wicked and mischievous insanity that was ever given forth.'<sup>30</sup> This 'wicked and mischievous insanity' was already in the process of being exposed in *Nightmare Abbey*, and Byron receives no mercy at the hands of Peacock. Mr. Cypress's dialogue would have been immediately recognizable to readers of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and in case the relationship was not sufficiently clear, Peacock pointed out very specifically, in his own footnotes, his allusions to the text as, for example, in this extract of dialogue:

I have no hope for myself or for others. Our life is a false nature; it is not in the harmony of things; it is an all-blasting upas, whose root is earth and whose leaves are the skies which rain their poison-dews upon mankind. We wither from our youth; we gasp with unslaked thirst for unobtainable good; lured from the first to the last by phantoms -- love, fame, ambition, avarice -- all idle and all ill -- one meteor of many names, that vanishes in the smoke of death.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>*New Shelley Letters*, ed. by W. S. Scott (London: The Bodley Head, 1948), p.112.

<sup>29</sup>*Halliford Edition*, vol. 8, p.193.

<sup>30</sup>*The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by H. Buxton Forman, Vol. 4, (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880), p. 60.

<sup>31</sup>Garnett, ed., p.410.



This is a parody of canto 4, verses cxxiv and cxxvi, and echoes a Menippean tradition in which the speaker is mocked by his own narrative, an effect which Peacock heightens by a dislocation of his readers' expectations. He presents poetry in prose form, and Byron's words and the sentiments they convey are made to sound ridiculous when used as part of a prose dialogue in which the reader's attention is focused on literal meanings, rather than configurations of rhythm and style in the verse. However, Peacock's satire of Byron, and the insertion of a chapter devoted to his work, are a mark of his respect for the poet; on the other hand, Keats, protégé of Hunt and foremost among the 'Cockney poets' at this time, was, in his opinion, not worth the effort. In 1820, he wrote to Shelley: 'If I should live to the age of Methusalem, and have uninterrupted literary leisure, I should not find time to read Keats's *Hyperion*. Hogg and I are now reading Demosthenes.'<sup>32</sup> Peacock was about to throw down a public challenge to Shelley and other members of the Hunt fraternity.

'The Four Ages of Poetry' was printed in the first and only issue of *Ollier's Literary Miscellany*, a short-lived project of 'prose and verse by several hands'. Published by Charles Ollier, a fellow member of the Hunt circle, it questions explicitly the value, in utilitarian terms, of poetry as a literary medium, but, as already mentioned in the preceding chapter, Altick acknowledges that the essay is 'so faithful to the Benthamite view that its ironical intention is sometimes overlooked'.<sup>33</sup> In this essay Peacock argues for the decline of poetry and assigns it to an ineffective role in contemporary society. The whole tenor of the work reads as a new departure, a transition into the business of writing periodical

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<sup>32</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, p.219.

<sup>33</sup>Ch.2, n.28, p.58..

contributions. Authoritative in tone, the work is leavened by characteristic hints of ironic humour. There is a sense of platform rhetoric, words designed less to wound than to provoke, inflame and, more importantly, to elicit a response. The prose is vigorous, a cropped rhythm of short sentences, those of longer duration being divided into numerous sub-clauses and phrases; it has pace and energy; the language is direct and forceful, with much less trace of the scholarly allusions and copious footnotes that litter the fictional narratives and *Sir Proteus* (1814). The colloquial denunciation of individual writers burlesques contemporary poetry as a serious form of literature. Written to raise a response from the second-generation romantic poets engaged in the collaborative network of the Hunt coterie, it succeeded. In 1821, Shelley published his *Defence of Poetry*.

Peacock's disillusionment with contemporary trends in literature did not begin and end with poetry. A year later, he was complaining to Shelley that 'the present state of literature is so thoroughly vile that there is scarcely any new publication worth looking at, much less buying'.<sup>34</sup> Once established in his appointment at India House, he urged his friend to follow this example by pursuing 'some scheme of flesh and blood - some interesting matter connected with the business of life, in the shape of a practical man'.<sup>35</sup> The influence of an administrative, rather than creative environment was making itself felt, and although connections with the Hunt circle were not completely severed, they gave way to new interests. It seems likely that his close proximity to James Mill at India House may have had some bearing on the fact that Peacock turned his attention from literature as an mode of artistic expression to the more austere

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<sup>34</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, p.221.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 226.



doctrines of Bentham and Utilitarianism. The impetus to gain literary recognition, never very vigorously pursued, now retreated against the advance of a different kind of success.



The 1820s and the 'watershed' effect that this decade brought to the publishing industry was beginning to influence Peacock's modes of publication. Whilst his engagement with literature continued as a 'gentlemanly and aristocratic pursuit', he began a desultory flirtation with the periodical press. Between the publication of 'The Four Ages of Poetry' (1820) and *Maid Marian* (1822), he contributed 'Rich and Poor; or, Saint and Sinner' to both *The Traveller* and *The Examiner* in 1821. This was a light-hearted verse response to Wilberforce's comment that 'the offences of the poor came more under observation than those of the rich'. It appeared again in the *Globe and Traveller* (1825), and was picked out by Thackeray, some fifteen years later, and appended, as a footnote, to his 'Essay on the Genius of George Cruickshank' (1840), with this explanation: 'The following lines -- ever fresh -- by the author of "Headlong Hall", published years ago in the *Globe and Traveller*, are an excellent comment on several of the cuts from "Sunday in London".'<sup>36</sup> 'Paper Money Lyrics', written in 1825-6, was twice privately circulated among Peacock's immediate acquaintances, the first time, in 1826, in manuscript form, perhaps an echo of the coterie practices of the Hunt circle. On the second occasion, one hundred copies were privately printed, together with a few other poems, shortly after the verses appeared in 1837 in *The Guide*.

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<sup>36</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 13, p.300.

For a short period, between 1827 and 1830, Peacock became a contributor to the *Westminster Review*, no doubt through his connection with James Mill, then his superior at India House. John Stuart Mill comments on the inception of the magazine:

Contrary to what may have been supposed, my father was in no degree a party to setting up the *Westminster Review* ... Mr. Bentham determined to establish the *Review* at his own cost, and offered the editorship to my father who declined it as incompatible with his India House appointment.<sup>37</sup>

One of the intentions in setting up the *Westminster* was that it should both monitor and challenge the quality of the other review publications of the period. Between 1827 and 1830, Peacock supplied four contributions to the magazine, the first three appearing as reviews of recently published books, the fourth being an essay. A selection of Peacock's work for the *Westminster* and other periodicals will receive more detailed attention in chapter five.

In 1830, Peacock was still active as an author. In addition to a few satirical verses, which had been published in periodicals, *The Misfortunes of Elphin* appeared in 1829, and *Crotchet Castle* was nearing completion. There is also evidence that he had some kind of engagement with various periodicals in the role of a theatre critic. At the same time as he was writing for the *Westminster*, he was also contributing short theatre notices to the *Globe* and the *Examiner*. Brett-Smith and Jones have traced numerous unsigned examples of these from cuttings retained in the Peacock family papers, some of which they claim to be certainly his work.<sup>38</sup> Other references appear to support this theory. Hazlitt, in an article on 'The Utilitarian Controversy' for the *Atlas* (1829), attacked the

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<sup>37</sup>J.S. Mill, *Autobiography* (New York: New American Library of World Literature, 1964), pp.80-1.

<sup>38</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 9, pp. 414-420.



puritanical fervour of some of the *Westminster* reviewers and suggested that Peacock's position as a contributor to that magazine was incompatible with his role as theatre critic:

Will Mr. Irving [Rev. Edward Irving] send you to the opera to hear sounds from Madame Pasta 'that might create a soul under the ribs of death?' No more will the *Westminster* ! P -----, poor fellow! dare no more show his face there than his own Sir Ourang-Outang!<sup>39</sup>

Peacock's reactions to Hazlitt's comments are not recorded, but he must have been well aware that subservience to the internal politics of the periodical market could act as an embarrassing constraint on authorial autonomy. Among these theatre notices, some that were originally published in the *Examiner* (1831-34) have been reproduced in the *Halliford Edition* of his works.<sup>40</sup> These reviews relate almost exclusively to opera at the King's Theatre and appear with a regularity that suggests a contractual obligation to the magazine. The *Examiner* also printed, in 1831, 'The Fate of a Broom', which Peacock included as a footnote to Dr. Folliatt's strictures on Brougham in *Crotchet Castle*, published in the same year.

Throughout the 1830s and coinciding with Thackeray's early debut as a journalist, Peacock continued to engage with the periodical market, but it appears to have been an activity that was incidental to the main business of his life, which focused on the affairs of the East India Company. His articles were published through personal connections, rather than by any active canvassing on his own behalf. The *London Review* published some of his work during the 1835-6 period, a review of *Lord Mount Edgumbe's Musical Reminiscences*, and three essays, 'French Comic Romances', 'The Epicier' and 'Bellini', the last two appearing in the same issue. 'Paper Money Lyrics', now over a decade old, made a first public

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<sup>39</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 9, p.403.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p.405.

appearance in *The Guide* in 1837. This signalled the end of Peacock's first period of literary production. There is no record of published material from his pen during the 1840s, although manuscript poems exist from this decade, but in 1851, 'Gastronomy and Civilization' made an appearance in *Fraser's*. This heralded a connection with the magazine which culminated in the serialization of *Gryll Grange* in 1861.

Peacock's periodical contributions are of less literary interest than his prose fictions. In these, the wild satire and exaggerated humour of his books is conspicuous by its absence, but there is still a sense of intense intellectual activity beneath the surface of his work. There is also an almost pedantic preoccupation with accuracy, which unsettles the reader with a suspicion of an underlying authorial irony, and this is a theme which will be explored in chapter five.



At this point of the discussion it is important to emphasize that Peacock's engagement with literature relates closely to eighteenth-century traditions of authorship; Thackeray's relationship with the periodical marketplace of the 1830s was very different. From the beginning of his career, Thackeray looked to writing as a means of earning a livelihood, and he found himself at the mercy of a commercial environment which not only demanded profit, but exploited both its authors and readership by advertising its own interests. He quickly found that some who were engaged in the fast-growing market of print production had few principles and less scruples.

As a very young man, he suffered a baptism of fire. Duped into buying a non-existent newspaper from two scoundrels, he purchased another which was to fail just over a year later. However, Thackeray seemed able to learn from his



experiences very quickly. Pearson summarises his position at this time: 'Thackeray entered the profession at a moment of significant cultural change in the production, marketing and sale of literature. He is a writer who participates in the emerging mass media and reflects upon the transformation of literary production.'<sup>41</sup>

At the age of twenty-two, Thackeray, full of energy and ambition and desperate for financial independence, became at once the proprietor and editor of the *National Standard* (1833-4). The experience, although brief, gave him not only an insight into the writing skills needed to produce good copy and meet the hectic pace of printers' deadlines, but also a unique awareness of how an editor had a responsibility to his readers to maintain a corporate identity for a publication as a whole. He also learned very quickly that in a market which depended increasingly on successful networking among its participants, some vaguely dubious publishing practices were a necessary corollary to financial survival (12). Authorial autonomy, in a commercial context, was bought at the price of isolation, and isolation meant financial ruin.

Thackeray's early difficulties within the periodical market were due a lack of experience in the business, rather than any problem with the creative side of the work. There is evidence that he may have begun his career as a journalist earlier than previously credited. Pearson's research into Thackeray's early work identifies eighteen possible contributions to the *Original* (1832), a short-lived comic miscellany edited by John Thom and Henry Plunkett Grattan (231). He also augments existing records of Thackeray's contributions to the *National Standard*, building on the work of Saintsbury (1899), Gulliver (1934) and Hawes (1972), to produce a list of over two hundred and fifty articles, probably attributable to

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<sup>41</sup>Pearson, p. x. Further references to this source are given in the text.

Thackeray, spanning three volumes of the periodical. It would appear that he was not only the paper's owner and editor, but also its chief contributor, and it is possible to conclude that, by the time Thackeray approached the next stage of his career, he had already amassed a range of journalistic experience. In 1835, he began to write for the *Paris Literary Gazette*, and Pearson offers a substantial argument that the transition from his former role as editor of the *Standard* to that of a contributor to the *Gazette* was instrumental in his development as a writer:

The alteration of concerns in moving from the *National Standard* to the *Paris Literary Gazette*, the sudden inappropriateness of engaging in satirical combat with other rival magazines, forced Thackeray to develop new strategies for his own writings. A study of Thackeray's contributions to this small magazine compared to Thackeray's other known writings of the 1830s, gives a greater sense of continuity to the development of his ideas and the evolution of his narrative techniques than has hitherto been accepted. (26)

Some of Thackeray's work for the *Paris Literary Gazette* and the development of his narratorial skills have already been mentioned in the previous chapter (see pp.66-67). The paper itself bore similarities to the *National Standard* in that it was a 'light-hearted miscellany', but there were marked differences in the markets served by the two papers (23). The *Standard*, which was issued from London and forced to increase in price during Thackeray's first year as editor, attempted to create a market for itself as a low-priced literary weekly, targeting a mainly middle-class readership. Attempting to maintain independence from the major publishing houses, which owned or controlled the journals to which they fed their products, Thackeray launched a series of satirical attacks on the commercial practices of periodical publication. Isolated from his competitors and misunderstood by his readers, he was forced to abandon the paper. On the other hand, however, the *Gazette* was aimed at a more specific readership within a less competitive marketplace. His engagement with the magazine freed him from the



ties of marketing practices which he found unacceptable, and enabled him to evolve a personal style of writing with wider applications within the periodical market. The *Gazette*, with its readership confined socially and geographically to the middle-class English population of Paris, provided a safe environment in which he could experiment with forms of writing that allowed him a degree of authorial autonomy, but did not transgress editorial authority. It also enabled him to engage with a knowable reading audience, allowing a degree of author/reader intimacy which reflected earlier styles of periodical publication. This apprenticeship, although fraught with uncertainties and financial problems, was a highly significant period in his development as a writer. As mentioned in the previous chapter (see p.67), some of these experiments lay the foundations of his future work, and on his return to England, they were to become the trademark of his craft as a writer.

Between the years 1837 and 1846, *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, to give it its full title, bought numerous contributions from Thackeray. Once again he was forced to accommodate change, adapting his skills to suit a new corporate identity and a different set of editorial criteria. From Thackeray's point of view, one factor in favour of *Fraser's* would have been that the magazine was independent of any book publishers and prided itself on the non-partisan quality of its reviews. This was the very principle that had guided Thackeray during his period of editorship and had ultimately contributed to the demise of the *National Standard*. In addition, *Fraser's Magazine* was obliged to meet the needs of a very much wider audience than that of the *Paris Gazette*. Thackeray was now addressing a readership, diverse in social and cultural interests, which included the rural gentry and aristocracy, as well as a growing group of successful businessmen from all strata of the urban middle classes. A typical monthly issue of

*Fraser's* consisted of approximately a hundred and twenty pages, printed in two columns, with perhaps two or three very small illustrations. One such copy, that which published 'Miss. Shum's Husband', includes book reviews, a long and detailed critique of Parisian newspapers, essays on topical affairs and an occasional piece of verse.<sup>42</sup> The tone of this issue is, for the most part, serious, didactic and satirical in a politically prescriptive manner. 'The Prospects of the New Year' debates the possibility of the Whigs and Radicals joining forces against the Tory party, and advises against it; the last contribution to the number is an assessment of the effects of the Reform Act, entitled 'How Long Can it Last?', explicitly resentful that, as far as *Fraser's* was concerned, the Radicals had served the interests of the Whigs.

In one respect, 'Miss. Shum's Husband', which signals Yellowplush's successful transition from comic reviewer to storyteller, seems strangely at odds with the mood of the accompanying texts, but the fiction, with its robust humour and comic style, provides a light contrast to the more earnest tones of the other contributions. Thackeray had found a narratorial method which not only allowed him to develop his complex style of satire, but also suited his determination to maintain authorial autonomy. Disguised as a fictionalized narrator who was himself a part of the fiction, Thackeray was safe from the censure of both the publishing hierarchy that controlled the market for his work, and the public to whom his texts were addressed. He had attained a significant advantage in his approach to an ideal of authorship that would allow him to write as he wished.

Thackeray was still contributing regularly to *Fraser's* in July 1838 as Yellowplush, but a new narratorial *persona* was following hard on the footman's

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<sup>42</sup>*Fraser's*, Vol. 17, January 1838.



heels. Michael Angelo Titmarsh first appeared in the same issue as Yellowplush's 'Mr. Deuceace at Paris', as the writer of 'Strictures on Pictures', a comic review of the Royal Academy exhibition at the National Gallery.<sup>43</sup> The style of this piece is by now very familiar. The epistolary form, the narratorial interruptions, the rambling, disjointed nature of the discourse and a fictive editorial footnote all distinguish the creation of this new narratorial identity; others were to follow. During the same year, *The Adventures of Major Gahagan*, written in the style of a comic military memoir novel, was being serialized in *Colburn's New Monthly Magazine*. In 1839, *Fraser's* serialized *Catherine*, as related by Ikey Solomon, a very dubious narrator appropriate to the subject matter. This was followed by the creation of George Savage Fitzboodle, middle-aged clubman and *bon viveur*, who regularly sent in contributions to *Fraser's*, and acted both as the narrator of *Men's Wives* and the fictional editor of *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon* (1844). *Fraser's* exploited Thackeray's multiple identities by spinning a web of intrigue around these mysterious contributors. 'But who is TITMARSH?' demands the anonymous author of 'Titmarsh's Tour Through Turkeydom', a review of Thackeray's *Tour from Cornhill to Cairo* (1845): 'Is he a man or myth? human or a hoax?'<sup>44</sup> With inside knowledge of the periodical trade, the writer lists his other aliases, Yellowplush, Gahagan, FitzBoodle, and names the 'latest incarnation' as the Fat Contributor in *Punch*.

With the exception of Titmarsh, these 'incarnations' have several characteristics in common. They are comical and foolish. In varying degrees, most of them exhibit an inclination towards dishonesty. They are materialistic, full

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<sup>43</sup>*Fraser's*, Vol. 17, June 1838, pp.758-64.

<sup>44</sup>*Fraser's*, Vol. 33, April 1846, p.86.

of their own importance, and collectively embody some of the least attractive attributes of their class and period. Each merits the satire that Thackeray hands out to him, and each, convinced of his own veracity, demolishes his credibility with every line.

Titmarsh, however, was different. The best known and easily the most prolific of Thackeray's narrator-personae, he was also a more versatile conception than Yellowplush or FitzBoodle and, undoubtedly, the favourite of the Thackeray family. In later years, the author's daughter, Anne Ritchie, spoke of Titmarsh: 'To the kingdom of heaven he assuredly belongs! kindly humorous, delightful little friend; droll shadow behind which my father loved to shelter himself.'<sup>45</sup> Titmarsh was Thackeray's professional voice, the journalist within a journalist, who satirized contemporary cultural values and commented on the practices of his own profession. He was also a loyal and faithful recorder of his creator's impressions and Thackeray often referred to himself as Titmarsh. In a letter to his mother, written in 1840 in desperate personal circumstances, he laments: 'O Titmarsh Titmarsh why did you marry? - why for better or for worse.'<sup>46</sup> Titmarsh was the literary cover which allowed Thackeray the freedom to attack humbug and cant without compromising his personal position in the publishing world. He created Titmarsh as a failed artist, and the irony of this would not have been lost on his friends; however, although Titmarsh's behaviour may occasionally appear to be wanting in discretion, he is never presented as a fool. The reader is left with a strong impression that Titmarsh's authority is not undermined by the author and

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<sup>45</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 3, p. xxxviii.

<sup>46</sup>Harden, ed., p.73.



his remarks, although often flippant, are worthy of serious reflection.

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The realities of journalism in the mid-nineteenth century confirmed for Thackeray his own disillusionment, both with the profession and with the spurious values of his era: 'Our calling is sneered at because it is not well paid. The world has no other criterion for respectability.'<sup>47</sup> No longer in possession of any form of gentlemanly independence, he sketched and wrote to support his daughters and a sick wife. For a time, he was caught in a dislocated set of values and tensions, a victim of developing commercial practices still at an innovative stage. As a 'transitional figure', trapped in the superstructure of an evolving industry, he would have been well aware that traditional notions of an author's position in society were anachronistic and unviable in this new commercial context. The public readership was expanding rapidly, as was the number of writers seeking the opportunity to get their work into print. Competition was intense; frequently it was a question of quantity rather than quality, and Thackeray's earlier experiences as the lone voice of the *National Standard* had taught him that a moral crusade against the commercial practices of the literary marketplace was doomed to failure. If he were to survive financially, he must accept the popular image of the writer as a tradesman and accept a tradesman's position in society, working long hours under intense pressure. He wrote for financial reward and to gratify the popular readership, but used his satire to challenge the commercial culture on which he was dependent.

The theme of money as a criterion of respect is central to *The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond* (1841), first published as a

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<sup>47</sup>'A Brother of the Press,' *Fraser's* Vol. 33, March 1846, p.334.

serial in *Fraser's Magazine* and attributed to Samuel Titmarsh, the nephew of Michael Angelo. In the book, Thackeray uses a reference to Peacock's *Maid Marian*, the only one of Peacock's books to achieve a measure of popular success. Brough, the chairman of the Independent West Diddlesex Fire and Life Assurance Company, has a rebellious clerk, Bob Swinney, who, 'too knowing by half, had obtained free admission to the Covent Garden Theatre:

He was always talking down at the shop, as we called it (it wasn't a shop, but as splendid an office as any in Cornhill) -- he was always talking about Vestris and Miss Tree, and singing

'The bramble, the bramble,

The jolly jolly bramble!'

one of Charles Kemble's famous songs in 'Maid Marian'; a play that was all the rage then, taken from a famous story-book by one Peacock, a clerk in the India House; and a precious good place he has too.<sup>48</sup>

The song differs from Peacock's original words: 'The bramble, the bramble, the bonny forest bramble ...', probably a lyricist's adaptation of Brother Michael's song for the stage.<sup>49</sup> The use of this reference sets the action of Thackeray's fiction firmly in the historical context of the early 1820s, when Planché adapted Peacock's book for the stage. It is also a satirical reduction, which trivializes *Maid Marian* as a 'story-book' and its author as a 'clerk in the India House'. The throwaway rider, 'and a precious good place he has too', may be a contemporary reference to Peacock's promotion in 1836 to the position of Chief Examiner, with an annual salary amounting to two thousand pounds. The financial security that accompanied this appointment, together with the respect and status it conferred, may well have been a source of envy for the penurious, debt-beleaguered Thackeray. However, it is essential here to remember whose viewpoint is being revealed. The book and its author are not being evaluated by Thackeray himself,

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<sup>48</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 3, p.10.

<sup>49</sup>Garnett, ed., p. 451.



but through the words of Samuel Titmarsh, who is unable to understand the deeper significance of Peacock's work, either as a parody of contemporary tastes in literature or, in parts, as a serious political satire. His superficial perceptions may be the product of youthful inexperience, but they are also representative of the growing popular culture, a mass audience taking at face value whatever the media provided as entertainment.

Thackeray was slow to acknowledge, publicly at least, any significance in the role that a journalist could play in this new world of mass-produced literature and inexperienced reading audiences. The authorial objectives he discussed in his correspondence appear to be closer to the popular values he professed to despise, rather than suggestive of any serious commitment to literature. In 1836, he wrote to FitzGerald: 'I like the newspaper work very much, it is a continual excitement to me ... I think in politics where all are rogues to deal with (yr. hble Servt. among them) a man cannot sneer and scorn too much'.<sup>50</sup> In 1842, when he began his association with *Punch*, his motivation was still centred on financial reward, but there was also a sense of sheer enjoyment in writing satire: 'I've been writing for the FQ [*Foreign Quarterly*] and a very low paper called *Punch*, but that's a secret - only it's good pay, and a good opportunity for unrestrained laughing, sneering, kicking and gambadoing.'<sup>51</sup> However it would be unfair to gain an impression from the cheerful flippancy of his correspondence that Thackeray had no serious intentions as a journalist and writer.




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<sup>50</sup>Harden, ed., p.38

<sup>51</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 2, p.54.

Some of the work Thackeray produced, particularly during the 1835-45 period, provides evidence that he was a competent reporter of news and events, capable of tackling complex and emotive issues with sensitivity and skill. Although contributing regularly to *Fraser's Magazine* and later to *Punch*, he continued to experiment with styles of journalism relevant to a much wider range of publishing outlets. In 1840, he contributed 'An Essay on the Genius of George Cruickshank' to the *Westminster Review*, a long and sensitively written appraisal of the artist, showing him to be very much in sympathy with his subject.<sup>52</sup> During the same year, *Fraser's* published 'Going to See a Man Hanged', a perceptive piece of reporting on the execution of François Courvoisier.<sup>53</sup> Ray indicates that Thackeray, during the early years of his career, had hopes of obtaining newspaper work as a staff reporter, rather than continuing in his better known role as a freelance contributor to the magazines. Of the two main dailies of the period, he entertained a preference for the *Morning Chronicle*: 'The *Chronicle's* liberal political policies made it far more congenial to Thackeray than its great rival [the *Times*], and for many years he endeavored unavailingly to obtain a place on its staff.'<sup>54</sup> Whatever his scruples about the politics of the *Times*, he was still happy to contribute to their columns and his review of Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution* appeared in the paper in 1837. None of these overtures were to lead to long-term engagements, however, although he did manage to secure a floating association with the *Chronicle*, during the 1840s. Ray has identified a number of these anonymous contributions to this publication, largely from the evidence of

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<sup>52</sup>*Westminster Review*, June 1840, Vol. 34, pp.1-60.

<sup>53</sup>*Fraser's Magazine*, Aug. 1840, Vol.22, pp.150-8.

<sup>54</sup>G. N. Ray (ed.), *William Makepeace Thackeray: Contributions to the Morning Chronicle* (University of Illinois Press, 1955), p. xi.



references in the author's letters and private papers. As examples of his work, they show that Thackeray was a competent journalist, a perceptive and knowledgeable art critic and a capable literary reviewer. In this latter capacity, he was able to recognise the potential of work, which later came to be acknowledged among the classics of the period and, with a few exceptions, offered positive encouragement towards those authors whose publications were less than remarkable. Ray confirms one aspect of his talents that has already been observed in the comic reviews of Wagstaff and Yellowplush: 'Perhaps he shows his greatest ingenuity in making tedious books amusing, in transforming sow's ears into silk purses.'<sup>55</sup>

There are, no doubt, numerous pieces of journalism written by Thackeray that lie unaccounted for in the newspapers and magazines of the first half of the nineteenth century, and the volume of work he produced, together with his pace of production, is in direct contrast to Peacock's literary engagements. To the fictional material, books, reviews and reports of this period of Thackeray's career may be added the numerous illustrations he provided for his own work and a wide range of periodicals. His correspondence shows him to be in constant engagement with editors and publishers. Anne Ritchie writes of this period: 'He was writing for newspapers, he was maturing his future plans, looking for work wherever he saw a chance. He was also working steadily on "Barry Lyndon", and reading books of every description, chiefly for his work.'<sup>56</sup> The picture here is one of a working writer, engaged in every feasible aspect of the innovative and competitive marketplace he sought to supply. Together with his newspaper work, he brought out several books published independently of the magazines. *The*

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<sup>55</sup>G. N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity, 1811-1846* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. xv.

<sup>56</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 5, p. xxxiii.

*Sketch Books, Comic Tales and Sketches, The Second Funeral of Napoleon* and the *Tour from Cornhill to Cairo* all appeared as single volumes between 1840 and 1845, some as compilations of previous magazine contributions, others as new publications. In addition to the work already mentioned, he was also contributing to the *New York Corsair* (1839), the *Comic Almanack* (1839-40), *Ainsworth's Magazine* (1842), *Colburn's New Monthly* (1844) and the *Edinburgh Review* (1845). A monthly issue of *Fraser's* could contain two contributions from Thackeray, each on average taking up ten two-column pages; one weekly copy of *Punch* would sometimes include a prose feature, verses and illustrations by his hand. By the mid-1840s, his efforts were beginning to pay off: in a letter to William Nickisson he wrote: 'Between ourselves I believe I am in a career of most wonderful money-getting.'<sup>57</sup> Those publications like the *Examiner*, which demanded too much of his time for less than he was prepared to accept, were cast aside.<sup>58</sup>

His first contributions to *Punch*, 'Miss. Tickletoby's Lectures on English History' (1842), made an inauspicious start to his career with this comic weekly. It was, however, the prelude to later success. Against the advice of Edward Fitzgerald and with some ambivalent feelings of his own towards the paper, Thackeray began writing almost continuously for *Punch* from 1843. In December that year, he was accepted on the staff of the magazine, an engagement which was to last until 1854, although his connections with the paper were sustained after his resignation. He continued to write with indefatigable energy, increasing the pace of his earlier output to meet the demands of weekly publication. Once again, the

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<sup>57</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 2, p.191.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p.203.



move to a different publication illustrates his ability to craft his work to the expectations of an unfamiliar audience, as well as satisfying new criteria within the identity of the magazine itself, and *Punch's* satirical style made the magazine a particularly appropriate vehicle for his versatile narratorial strategies.

Altick's account of *Punch's* first decade of publication and the commercial success of the magazine provides an interesting insight into conditions within the literary marketplace, as the middle of the nineteenth century approached. He also illustrates the way in which literary perceptions of writing for the public readership were beginning to change. In a sense, *Punch* acted as a bridge between the growing popular culture and the less accessible interests of intellectual circles. Altick sets the paper in a cultural context:

*Punch's* quick success among men and women of discriminating taste was all the more remarkable for two reasons. One was that, far from being a serious magazine targeted at the intelligentsia, its closest ancestral ties were with gutter papers better known for their scurrility and sensationalism. The other was that it was launched without capital by a group of workaday journalists who had no higher ambition than to put bread on their tables. They were not conscious innovators or reformers; they did not set out to break the hard encrusted mold of comic journalism. But that is exactly what they did.<sup>59</sup>

Altick attributes *Punch's* acceptability, in part, to its innocuous satire, which avoided personal attack and promoted a sense of generous good humour with a desire for fair play. In the literary marketplace of the early 1840s, the paper also found that it had some established and respected allies. The *Times* began by printing small extracts as column fillers, later reproducing whole features, which were sometimes used as a focus for editorial comment. In October 1842, the *Westminster Review* ran a fifty-three page evaluation of the first two volumes of

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<sup>59</sup>R. D. Altick, *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution 1841-1851* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), p.xvii.

the magazine. Favourable in the main, but with some reservations, the impact of this was to promote the paper to the attention of the readers of serious periodicals, who may have otherwise shown no interest in a cheap comic weekly. Part of *Punch's* early success story was due to the fact that the paper appealed to differing levels of reader expectations. The paper was aimed at a heterogeneous and largely unidentifiable public readership but, nonetheless, still succeeded in attracting an audience of celebrated literary practitioners, including Barrett and Browning, Carlyle, the Brontës and, in America, Emerson and Longfellow.<sup>60</sup> The 'workaday' journalists who made up the retained staff of the magazine and whose business was to provide the weekly copy, however, had yet to make their literary reputations.

The staff who worked on *Punch* during its first formative years were a cross-section of writers and illustrators, far removed from the artistic and intellectual preoccupations of 'high' literature, all engaged in the new industry of mass communications, described by Altick as 'a world where Grub Street and Fleet Street met'.<sup>61</sup> Although they were contracted to the paper in the sense that they were allowed a guaranteed weekly space, income from other sources was essential, and Thackeray was not alone in continuing to search for work outside the pages of *Punch*. Some of the contributing team, like Thackeray, had had experience of periodical work, but not all of this was particularly distinguished or desirable. All had energy, talent and a will for the paper to succeed. Each, in his own way, sought fortune and fame. Ages within the group ran from twenty to

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<sup>60</sup>Altick (1997), pp.19-26.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 43.



forty-one and they represented a wide range of social and educational backgrounds.

Ray demonstrates the heterogeneity of this group of practising journalists. Mark Lemon, who became the sole editor following Bradbury and Evans's purchase of the magazine in 1842, and was affectionately known by his staff as 'Uncle Mark', was a former publican. Douglas Jerrold, acerbic wit, penurious dramatist, Thackeray's closest rival and, on occasions, his fiercest opponent, was the most radical of the group. As Ray points out: 'He read Cobbett and Leigh Hunt eagerly and was converted to their political creed.'<sup>62</sup> Other contributors included two former barristers, à Becket and Taylor, two medical students, Percival Leigh and John Leech, and a former surgeon, Albert Smith. Altick puts Thackeray into context among the magazine's early contributors: 'Of all the *Punch* regulars, Thackeray had the strongest social credentials, as a scion of a wealthy Anglo-Indian family; the others came from distinctly lower levels of the middle class.'<sup>63</sup> He was also one of the few who had enjoyed the advantages of a classical education.

For the first time in his writing career, Thackeray found himself part of a group of writers and illustrators engaged in a common project. He had also, by this time, amassed sufficient experience of the periodical market to be in a position of some authority in the decision-making processes of publication. Altick's research into the constitution of the *Punch* 'cabinet', and the composition of the staff team, provides an interesting insight into the trial and error editorial methods of the new industry of periodical publishing. He writes: 'If *Punch* had a deliberate,

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<sup>62</sup>Ray, *Uses of Adversity* (1955), p. 356.

<sup>63</sup>Altick (1997), p. 45.

well-articulated editorial policy, as contrasted with ad hoc decision making, it is not on record.<sup>64</sup> Although, after the departure of Mayhew, Lemon ultimately had the last word, the final cuts appear to have been decided by a mutual consensus, evidence of a democratic mode of control that contrasts sharply with the formal, authoritarian editorial identity of the more established publications. The group that surrounded Lemon during the early years of *Punch* also illustrates the cultural contrast between those engaged in the production of the mid-nineteenth-century popular press and the intellectual preoccupations of the literary group, including Peacock and Shelley, which had been centred around Hunt and the *Examiner* just over two decades previously.

Hunt's *Examiner* has been described by Thompson as 'the weekly of the Radical [sic] intelligentsia' and the magazine was distinguished for its radical views and by the quality of its contributions.<sup>65</sup> Whereas Hunt's circle followed a broadly homogeneous political and intellectual ideology, the *Punch* contributors took their material from whatever aspects of the popular culture happened to be immediately topical. Both groups, however, were obliged to learn strategies to accommodate internal dissension and the response of each group to differences of opinion were variable. Cox writes of the Hunt circle: 'Productive debate, not universal agreement, was the group's goal.'<sup>66</sup> All who contributed regularly to the *Examiner*, as well as those who, like Peacock, remained on the periphery of the group, were committed to the artistic and ideological ideals of the journal. There was less accord among the *Punch* group, however, and the political tensions

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<sup>64</sup>Altick (1997), p. 42.

<sup>65</sup>E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1966), p.675.

<sup>66</sup>Cox, p.54.



which existed, particularly between Jerrold and Thackeray, have been documented by both Ray and Altick, and will be discussed further in the final chapter.

Of *Punch's* own claim to the 'miracle' of the paper's early popularity, Altick comments: 'What was miraculous about it was the way an oddly assorted group of talented men managed to suppress whatever personal antipathies and frictions existed among them ... in the interests of turning out, each week, a paper with a pronounced and distinctive flavor.'<sup>67</sup> In spite of the diversity of interests among its staff writers, weekly issues of *Punch* did indeed reflect a sense of unity. This, as Altick points out, was partly governed by demanding production schedules, but there are stylistic aspects of the paper which have to be considered in this context. Unlike the radical press of the post-Waterloo period, which was largely made up of diatribes, mixed with satire, parody, factual reporting and polemical debate, the style of *Punch* was uniformly satirical, often displaying a thematic unity of content. Topical rather than intellectual, a single issue would sometimes expose all angles of a subject in fiction, prose, parody, verse and drawings. It would be too sweeping a generalization to say that the corporate identity of *Punch* was Menippean in character, but there is evidence to suggest that the magazine, with its variety of genres and consistently satirical style, owes something to the influences of this mode on traditions of seriocomic writing. Unlike Hunt's *Examiner*, *Punch*, during the early years of publication, did not attempt to create the grounds for a new society. It ridiculed irrational aspects of its period, celebrated the bizarre, and left humour to do the rest.

Volume nine, August to December 1845, appeared at the height of railway speculation and its subsequent collapse, and is a good demonstration of

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<sup>67</sup>Altick (1997), p.42.

how *Punch* exploited a topical theme. Full of satire, parody, verse and caricatures, the first issue of November is devoted almost entirely to the scandals of Capel Court, and in the space of twenty or so pages, portrays the panic and hysteria of those who were obliged to watch their fortunes ebb away.<sup>68</sup> A full-page piece of artwork, 'The Momentous Question', depicts Victoria comforting a despairing Prince Consort, imploring him to confess his dealings in railway shares (186). Another drawing, entitled 'Anti Railway Meeting of Fox-Hunters', depicts a runaway train with wings pursuing Hudson on horseback (188). 'Punch' himself presents a parody of a railway shares prospectus, 'his own inimitable lines, branching out in an infinite series, without the smallest prospect of a terminus' (189). The personal columns of the *Times* are parodied in a short account of the 'Births, Deaths and Marriages (of Railway Companies)' (192). Jacques, from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, is transported from the Forest of Arden to Capel Court where he proclaims: 'All the world are stags! / Yea, all the men and women merely jobbers!' (197). Thackeray contributed 'A Doe in the City', in verse, a drawing by 'Frederick Haltamont de Montmorency' entitled 'Holborn Hill Settling Day' (191), and an instalment of 'Jeames's Diary' entitled 'Jeames on the Time Bargings' (195).

Perhaps the most marked difference between the *Punch* production team and the writers who contributed to Hunt's *Examiner* is reflected in the cultural identity assumed by the latter group. In a letter to Hogg dated October 1824, the widowed Mary Shelley 'eulogized the members of the Shelley-Byron circle as "a part of the Elect"'.<sup>69</sup> Her actual words were:

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<sup>68</sup>*Punch*, Vol. 9, 1 November 1845. Further references to this issue are given in the text.

<sup>69</sup>Betty T. Bennett, ed., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. 1



I can sometimes for a while enter into the spirit of the game, but my affections are in the past & my imagination is not so much exalted by a representation mean & puerile when compared to the real delight of my intercourse [with] my exalted Shelley, the frank hearted and affectionate Edwa[rd] and others of less note, but remembered now with fon[dness] as having made part of the Elect. (450)

It is doubtful that Peacock would have been included among Mary Shelley's fond memories, and the tension between them reflects the cultural conflicts of the Romantic and anti-Romantic schools of writing of the period. She made no secret of her dislike of her husband's friend, and her letters to Hogg, Hunt and even Shelley himself, during the Marlow period, are peppered with unflattering references to him (10-41). Following Shelley's drowning in 1822, she was still complaining to Maria Gisborne: 'Is not Peacock very lukewarm & insensible in this affair?' (262). However, much as she may have resented his lack of demonstrative grief, it was to Peacock she turned for practical help, and ultimately she came to rely very heavily on his advice and administrative skills in negotiations concerning the late poet's estate.

It has to be remembered that among the Shelley's immediate associates, which included Lord Byron, there were a small number whose social ranking offered a degree of privilege in their pursuit of literature. Not all of them, however, would have subscribed to a view of themselves as a 'part of the Elect'. In fact, the social mix of the Hunt circle was almost as diverse as that of Lemon's 'cabinet'. Of the literary members of the circle that surrounded Peacock during the 1818-22 period, Hunt and Hazlitt, as practising journalists, made writing their livelihoods. Others followed non-literary careers, writing in their spare time. Lamb, in common with Peacock, had an appointment with the East India

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(Baltimore: London: John Hopkins University Press), p.xi. Further references to this edition are given in the text.

Company, and Hogg spent many months on the road in his capacity as a circuit judge. Like the contributors to *Punch*, they had been drawn together, initially, by coincidences of time and place, and, for a period at least, were united by shared goals and related interests. In any case, the almost religious connotations of forming a 'part of the Elect', in the sense of being specially chosen, would have been in serious conflict with Hunt's stated principle of 'freedom from superstition' and, therefore, alien to their essential beliefs. However, in spite of their reformist politics, there is a sense that, fundamentally, they continued to subscribe to the standards and tastes of an established cultural hierarchy, distinguishing themselves as an intellectual elite.

Whether united by commercial interests or ideological aims, both the Hunt circle and the *Punch* writers acquired public identities. The literary group connected with the *Examiner* gained unsought recognition as the 'Cockney School', a designation thrust upon them by outside agencies, namely *Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly Review*. Cox interprets the class values encoded in the word 'cockney' as an attempt, by *Blackwood's* in particular, to isolate the Hunt circle, not only as a reaction against its political principles and attacks on religion, but also because of the social ranking of some of its members. He also identifies an attempt, by some reviewers, to 'detach Shelley and Byron, the aristocrats of the group, from the rest of the circle', a move emphasizing how the established magazines of the period still subscribed to the 'premise that poetry is best left to gentlemen', and that a reactionary element in literary culture was becoming increasingly 'disturbed by what appears to them as a democratization of literature'.<sup>70</sup> Although, during Hunt's editorship at least, the *Examiner* had a very

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<sup>70</sup>Cox, p.27.



strong corporate identity among its own contributors, it was an internalized image, very much the product of the coterie style of the group itself and the responses of an experienced but circumscribed circle of readers, some of whom had followed the fortunes of the periodical since its inception in 1808. *Punch*, on the other hand, as a new publication operating in a largely unknowable marketplace, could not rely on historical reputation or a perceptive readership. The magazine needed to devise its own image, one that was immediate, relevant and commercially unique. In contrast to *Blackwood's* portrayal of Hunt as the 'King of the Cockneys' and the *Examiner* as his 'court gazette', *Punch* had to project an identity that was entirely its own.<sup>71</sup>

As Altick points out, during the first eighteen months or so of its existence, the paper seemed to suffer from a lack of corporate intention, other than making a living for its staff.<sup>72</sup> There was little focus in its contents, a certain lack of direction in the miscellany of satire, theatrical reviews and comic drawings and essays to be found between its pages. Certainly Thackeray did not seem to have much sense of a common mission beyond the 'unrestrained laughing, sneering, kicking and gambadoing' mentioned earlier. This attitude was perhaps the greatest source of contention between him and Jerrold, who complained bitterly to Dickens in 1846: 'I am convinced that the world will get tired (at least I hope so) of this eternal guffaw at all things ... Some men would, I believe, write the Comic Sermon on the Mount.'<sup>73</sup> Where *Punch* did succeed, however, almost from its outset, was in presenting the public with a personalized image which, in theatrical

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<sup>71</sup>Cox, p.25.

<sup>72</sup>Altick (1997), p.10.

<sup>73</sup>E. P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo, eds., *The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the Morning Chronicle 1849-50* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp.15-16.

terms, may be compared to the title role in a dramatic production. While some of the less successful mass journals made little attempt to present a unified commercial image, *Punch* borrowed from the marketing techniques of established periodicals and added an individual touch of inspiration. Mr. Punch was already an acknowledged figure, a frequenter of the streets and marketplaces, a hero of comic entertainment. Using the image of an eponymous showman was the masterstroke, which placed the magazine firmly in the centre of the popular culture and allowed limitless opportunities for development. Although a character from fiction, Mr. Punch's antics, depicted pictorially in the pages of the magazine, provided the readers with a concrete image that easily surpassed the less definitive 'Christopher North' of *Blackwood's*, or the pseudonymous 'Oliver Yorke' of *Fraser's Magazine*. It was, in a sense, a collective extension of those narratorial techniques which had already been tried and tested by Thackeray when he created Yellowplush, Titmarsh and Gahagan.

It is important to note here that Thackeray's creation of Yellowplush and Gahagan preceded his connection with *Punch*. Both these narratorial identities are central to the discussion in the next chapter, which places his work more firmly in the traditions of seriocomic writing. In addition, there follows an investigation into the work of both Peacock and Thackeray from the perspective of Bakhtin's broader interpretations of Menippean satire.



#### **Chapter 4: Carnival Crowds and Bourgeois Banquets**

The position of Peacock and Thackeray in the Menippean tradition, as shown in chapter two, demonstrates both writers' different approaches to elements of the sub-genre. Peacock's use of the form of the Socratic dialogue as a means of investigating ideological problems, and the emphasis he places on the comic aspects of his work, is more easily recognizable as Menippean writing as it has come to be understood by late twentieth-century theorists. Thackeray, on the other hand, writing in a very different publishing environment, evolved narratorial techniques in the presentation of his satire which display elements of the mode as it has appeared in the tradition of seriocomic writing, but which are, nevertheless, open to a broader interpretation. In this chapter, the work of both writers will be examined in the light of Bakhtin's theories of carnival influences on the tradition of seriocomic writing. In particular, attention will be given to his study of the relationship between carnivalesque characteristics of literature and the Menippean sub-genre. The discussion will explore the concept of 'carnival' and its relevance to literary criticism, with particular reference to Thackeray's use of narratorial devices. Bakhtin's theories will also be used to develop the significance of the banquet, an image frequently used by both writers.

Late twentieth-century literary analysis of modes of seriocomic writing has been deeply influenced by Bakhtin's exposition of the influences of folk humour on literature, and in particular, the medieval and Renaissance traditions of carnival. The collective human experience that Bakhtin describes as 'carnival', once a physical reality, has reappeared in literature as an inherited memory of composite folk traditions, 'thoughts' which have 'coalesced and survived for

thousands of years among the broadest masses of European mankind'.<sup>1</sup> Although these 'thoughts', or inherited memories, predate the social stratification of the modern world by centuries, Bakhtin posits that they still resurface in certain literary modes -- in particular, those forms of seriocomic writing which present a non-authoritative challenge to the predominating culture.

Of the elements of carnival writing that can be identified in the work of both Peacock and Thackeray, certain features of the style are particularly conspicuous in the latter's periodical contributions. On the one hand, there is the Menippean mode that Peacock employed in his work, which had its origins in classical philosophy and makes a great display of the author's erudition, as it exposes intellectual problems in abstractions of language and dialogue. On the other hand, Menippean satire can also be interpreted as a mode of enquiry into the human experience, a non-didactic challenge to popular opinion and established hierarchies which provides questions rather than supplying any answers. This mode of the sub-genre is particularly relevant to the social comment that predominates in Thackeray's early periodical satire, and it is closely related to the influences of folk humour that Bakhtin has traced in the seriocomic European literature of the pre-modern era.

His explanation of this particular form of humour is significant in this context:

Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnival laughter. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope: it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay,

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p.123.



triumphant, and at the same time mocking and deriding. It asserts and denies, buries and revives.<sup>2</sup>

The carnival of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had its origins in pagan ritual. It was a way of life, led by the people, for the people; a time of temporary insanity when everyday life was turned on its head, yet it was also a time of cleansing and renewal, of change, or of reaffirmation of the established order. United in laughter and irrespective of rank, those who took part in these festivals found a temporary access to a new world. Carnivals were 'the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance'.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the period of this temporary alternative culture, in a parody of the feudal and ecclesiastic infrastructure of society, hierarchical precedence was suspended and all were seen as equal. Bakhtin presents a picture of carnival as an inviolable human right, even when challenged by the established order: 'But this true festive character was indestructible; it had to be tolerated and even legalized outside the official sphere and had to be turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace.'<sup>4</sup>

With its origins in popular culture and an ambiguous attitude towards the established order of society, the carnival traditions of impropriety, ambivalence and laughter were ideally placed to make the transition from the medieval fairground into the popular culture of the rapidly developing nineteenth-century periodical marketplace. However, although this new medium offered opportunities for the regeneration of the seriocomic mode, its boundaries, for most writers, were circumscribed by new social stratifications and economic conditions.

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<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

The very act of substituting printed material for the physical realities of the streets and the market squares meant that large tracts of the population had little or no access to a tradition which had been a universal right. Furthermore, the predominant culture, during Peacock's most productive period as an author, was turning towards the subjective individualism of the second generation of Romantic writers. Although a considerable quantity of satire and comic fiction still found its way into the popular culture of the periodicals, much of this was imitative and derivative and offered little indication of the universal ambivalence of opinion that was fundamental to the carnival tradition.

Recent criticism has questioned the validity of Bakhtin's theories in the context of modern literature. Blanchard (1995), writing of Menippean satire, has raised the point that Bakhtin's readings of Rabelais neglect the intellectual substance of the work, emphasizing that 'the Menippean form is often an extremely learned form with a necessarily limited audience'.<sup>5</sup> Kaplan also has reservations about the relevance of carnival, particularly in the context of contemporary satire: ' "Carnival," despite the promise it holds for some academics as an instrument for social reform, remains a place where people go to find cheap thrills and lose money.'<sup>6</sup>

It is not difficult to concede Blanchard's point in the context of Peacock's satirical fiction, but any generalized restriction of Menippean satire to a 'necessarily limited audience' of intellectuals is most certainly in conflict with the protean spirit of a sub-genre which is able to infiltrate a wide range of modes and discourses. Certain elements of Menippean satire were less focused on intellectual

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<sup>5</sup> W. Scott Blanchard, *Scholar's Bedlam: Menippean Satire in the Renaissance* (London: Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1995), pp. 26-7.

<sup>6</sup> Kaplan, p.51.



subject matter and Bakhtin has identified a relationship between these and carnival modes of writing: 'Menippean satire became one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world in literature, and remains so to the present day.'<sup>7</sup> This connection between the two modes rescues the former from intellectual exclusiveness and confirms the place of the latter in the literary tradition. Kaplan's dismissive scepticism, founded on a culturally selective interpretation of Bakhtin's discussion, ignores one essential concept of the carnival mode; in a literary context, it may indeed provide superficial entertainment and fleeting laughter, but its significance goes much deeper than this, working on different levels as it monitors the existing hierarchy and mocks established patterns of authority. The comments of both Blanchard and Kaplan appear to reinforce a cultural divide in two modes of writing when, in fact, they may be seen as united in intention, each offering an investigative approach to authority and established opinion. The distinguishing features of the two modes are determined by the subject matter of the text. Whereas Peacock, to a certain extent, retained the intellectual values of an earlier generation, Thackeray investigated the customs and values of contemporary urban society and his satire found expression through the images he derived from this, some of which will be shown to relate directly back to an earlier period of the popular culture.



Anne Ritchie, Thackeray's daughter, comments on this essential feature of her father's work in her biographical introduction to the *Yellowplush Papers Etc.*, unconsciously using carnival imagery:

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<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p.113.

We know that Haroun al Raschid used to like to wander the streets of Bagdad in various disguises, and in the same way did the author of "Vanity Fair" - though he was not a Caliph - enjoy putting on his various dominos and characters ... Sensitive people are glad of a disguise, and of a familiar who will speak their thoughts for them ... <sup>8</sup>

The 'dominos', or carnival costumes, that Thackeray used to cloak the narrators of his early work for *Fraser's* and Colburn's *New Monthly Magazine*, as well as some of the later contributions to *Punch*, were much more than authorial disguises. They were sophisticated narratorial devices which allowed him to explore new modes of satirical expression. As masks, they also allowed him the freedom to write as he wished in a protean publishing climate that demanded subjugation to editorial policy, readership expectations and established opinion.

Bakhtin's discussion of the use of a mask can be closely related to the position in which Thackeray found himself as he embarked on his career in journalism:

Even more important [than images of the grotesque] is the theme of the mask, the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nick-names. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles.<sup>9</sup>

Thackeray was writing in an era of rapid change, in which reading was no longer a solely intellectual pursuit but had become for many readers a recreational activity, a form of entertainment that replaced the street spectacles and marketplace festivities of the pre-modern world. The use of a mask, in the context of carnival celebration, reflects one of the paradoxes of the tradition. It affords the wearer a greater degree of freedom and familiarity of contact with those he entertains, while

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<sup>8</sup> *Biographical Edition*, Vol. 3, pp. xxxvii - viii.

<sup>9</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp.39-40.



at the same time increasing his distance from them. The adoption of such a mask, or narratorial *persona*, allowed Thackeray greater freedom from the conventional boundaries of journalism and absolved him from authorial responsibility.

According to Rudlin (1994), tradition demanded that 'A masked man had no right to bear arms during Carnival season in medieval Italy because he was considered to have divested himself of his own identity by assuming another persona, for whose actions he was therefore not responsible'.<sup>10</sup> The man behind the mask is no longer himself but another, and, as such, cannot be held responsible for his actions. In using a mask, Thackeray was able to challenge conformity of opinion, whilst being granted absolution from any personal implication in the points of view expressed in the text.

Thackeray was no stranger to the masks and dominos of street carnivals and the pavement entertainments of Southern Europe. His work shows not only the literary influences of carnival, but also describes events of this nature. 'Shrove Tuesday in Paris', which he wrote as Titmarsh, was first published in *The Britannia* in 1841, and the piece is interesting as a record of one of the original European Carnivals, the *carne vale*, or feast of the last of the preserved winter meat, which anticipated the renewal of the yearly cycle of food production and, in the Christian era, preceded the fast of Lent. Superficially, the picture of Shrovetide in Paris emphasizes some depressingly tawdry details, but the voice of Titmarsh is so faithful to the English point of view that the reader cannot fail to suspect an undertone of irony. The focus of the piece is the contrast between the assumed respectability of the readers of *The Britannia* and the dubious morals of

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<sup>10</sup>Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.34.

their French neighbours, who 'lead a life of immorality so extraordinary that an Englishman cannot even comprehend, much more share it'.<sup>11</sup> Thackeray, in role as Titmarsh, describes the kind of madness that grips the Parisians during the carnival period with its feverish round of theatre masquerades and masked balls, a period of liberation unimaginable in England. Meeting an old acquaintance, Mlle. Pauline, lately governess to an English family, he finds that she has voluntarily rejected the comforts and privileges of her former position and, in the excitement of the season, has pawned her one good gown for a disgustingly dirty carnival costume. Thackeray contrasts the constraints of her previous situation with the joyful freedom of her new identity, and makes it very plain that she has found a new liberation, a sense of rebirth in the spirit of the carnival. There is an ambivalent irony in Thackeray's comment: 'There are a hundred thousand Paulines in Paris, cheerful in poverty and prodigal in good fortune, but dreadfully lax in some points of morals in which our own females are praiseworthily severe' (569). Pauline, a *grisette*, represents a part of the social history of France which is culturally alien to the English, at least to the middle-class readers of *The Britannia*. The *grisettes* of Paris, cheerfully improvident working-class women, in whose way of life there still lingered the remnants of an indigenous folk culture, understood an entirely different set of values to that of the 'praiseworthily severe' ladies of England. Mr. Titmarsh may shake his head sadly at Pauline's rejection of the English way of life, but the reader retains a strong impression that it is Thackeray himself who puts in a generous plea for tolerance: 'Let us neither abuse her nor pity her too much, but look at the woman such as we find her, if we look

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<sup>11</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol.13, p.569. Further references to this volume are given in the text.



at her at all' (569). Similarly, the schoolboy of fifteen who spends three days dancing with 'des demoiselles charmantes' may provoke raised eyebrows, but the reader cannot fail to admire, or even envy, his joy and vitality (572). The ambivalent irony of the piece is encapsulated in the closing paragraph: 'the wonderful difference that a score of miles of salt water can make in the ways and morals of people' can be interpreted in two ways; either the Channel is vital in protecting the English from their profligate neighbours, or perhaps it preserves a more liberated race from the stern moral prejudices of a selective culture, which denies all but its own authority (572). Titmarsh, reporting these events in Paris, is playing with attitudes that may, or may not, scandalize the readers of *The Britannia*, and Thackeray as author leaves the matter unresolved.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Titmarsh made his *début* as an art critic in *Fraser's Magazine*, the author of 'Strictures on Pictures', a comic review of the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1838, and Thackeray continued to use this narratorial device throughout his career, until Titmarsh's final appearance as the narrator of the *Rose and the Ring* in 1855. Like the earlier reviews by Wagstaff and Yellowplush, 'Strictures on Pictures' is written in epistolary form, as a letter to a fictitious M. de BricaBrac of Paris. The manner of Titmarsh's introduction immediately sets the satirical tone of the piece, and once again, the intrusion of random domestic details sets the narrator in a novelistic context.

The review begins by undermining the new venue for the Royal Academy Exhibition, which is held 'in one wing of a little building like a gin-shop'; Wilkins's National Gallery, begun in 1835, is described as a 'pigmy abortion, in lieu of a noble monument to the greatest school of painting in the greatest country of the modern world', although Titmarsh concedes that its interior is 'marvellously

pretty and convenient for the reception and exhibition of the pictures it will hold' (262).

He picks up an Academy catalogue of contributors, and caricatures its listings of serious artists with a series of spoof titles. Maclise, a fellow contributor to *Fraser's*, who wrote under the name of Alfred Croquis, is dubbed 'Prince Daniel'.<sup>12</sup> William Mulready is honoured by a carnivalesque crowning as King, while Charles Eastlake, later knighted for his work as Director of the National Gallery, appears as an Archbishop, 'because the rank is so respectable and there is a certain purity and religious feeling in all that Mr. Eastlake does, which eminently entitles him to the honour of the prelacy' (263). The review itself is a mixture of lively descriptive writing and offhand, disparaging comments: Sir David Wilkie 'does everything for a picture nowadays, but the *drawing*. Who knows? Perhaps it is as well left out' (265). Mulready's 'Seven Ages' is a 'beautiful monument', but the king is then ritually decrowned for producing some 'queer-looking limbs'; other artists are shown even less mercy: James Ward has produced 'mysteriously hideous' religious paintings which are 'monstrous, livid, and dreadful, as the dreams of a man in the scarlet fever' (266-7).

There is a Menippean twist to the piece, as the review tails off into a series of irrelevancies, undermining the narratorial position and confusing the reader. A rambling fiction, inspired by a painting of the prodigal son, is followed by the random insertion of a menu for serving fatted calves in general. The piece concludes, just as it reaches Titmarsh's own fictitious masterpiece, 'Heliogabalus in the Ruins of Carthage', with an 'editorial' explanation that the manuscript had been

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<sup>12</sup>'Christmas Revels: An Epic Rhapsody', by Alfred Croquis Esq., *Fraser's Magazine*, Vol. 17, May 1838, pp. 633-44.



retrieved from a gutter outside the Academy, its inebriated author having been previously removed from the scene. However, this comic irreverence is not to be mistaken as mere frivolity. Beneath the light humour, which undermines the authoritative prestige of the Royal Academy, Thackeray is raising serious questions about the artistic standards of the dominant culture.

The ambiguities inherent in Thackeray's work, as Titmarsh, were recognized by his contemporaries. An anonymous contributor to *Fraser's*, in a review of Thackeray's travel book, *A Journey from Cornhill to Cairo* (1845), comments on this aspect of his writing:

His book, though apparently jocular, is in truth profoundly suggestive; nor has it been the first time in our experience, as reviewers, that the solemnity of the impression made on our minds was in inverse ratio to the assumed gravity of the work placed before us.<sup>13</sup>

Just as the author of 'Titmarsh's Tour Through Turkeydom' found food for thought in *A Journey from Cornhill to Cairo*, the reader of 'Strictures on Pictures' is left with a number of irreconcilable impressions of the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1838. Even the most accomplished of its contributors display some weakness of technique, some are scarcely worthy of comment, while others, whose skills are obviously less proficient, justify their inclusion in the catalogue by possessing some special quality, '*a great heart*' as it is called in the text (266). However, there is energy and a deep engagement in the way Thackeray describes individual works of art. Although the tone is light and, at times, mocking and derisory, there is also a sense of reaffirmation: the selection methods of the Royal Academy may not be foolproof but, in general, they adhere to the established criteria of good taste.

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<sup>13</sup>'Titmarsh's Tour Through Turkeydom', *Fraser's Magazine*, Vol. 33, April 1846, p.91.

Thackeray wrote as Titmarsh in order to comment on the cultural standards of his era. He also used the narratorial disguise to draw attention to social prejudices within the cultural hierarchy. 'On Men and Pictures' (1841) is explicit in its message that art should not be solely the prerogative of the privileged classes:

I must confess, with a great deal of shame that I love to go to the picture gallery of a Sunday after church, on purpose to see the thousand happy people of the working sort amusing themselves -- not very wickedly as I fancy -- on the only day of the week on which they have their freedom. Genteel people, who can amuse themselves everyday throughout the year, do not visit the Louvre on a Sunday. You can't see the pictures well, and are pushed and elbowed by all sorts of low-bred creatures. (365)

Here the narrator affects an assumed superiority over the working-class visitors to the galleries, a specious reinforcement of the expectations of his reading audience, but the focus of his satire is turned towards these very same people who choose not to visit the Louvre on a Sunday. There is a sense of carnival liberation in the ensuing glimpses of Paris, with its street entertainments and 'uproariously happy' children; and the comic description of a seething crowd of excited Sunday visitors belies the condescending tones of the author. There is also a sense that the cheerful spectators provide more entertainment than the masterpieces displayed on the walls; it scarcely matters that 'you can't see the pictures well', because the people themselves provide more interesting amusement. Titmarsh makes it plain that it is not he who objects to being 'pushed and elbowed'; he loves to see 'the thousand happy people'; it is 'you' -- in other words, the 'genteel' reader -- who would resent a public intrusion into such a cultural preserve.

Thackeray's stance on the Sunday opening of galleries and museums will be discussed further in chapter six, in connection with Oxford election of 1857, but during the early days of his work as Titmarsh, he rarely discussed



political questions. He did, however, question the internal politics of the newspaper business. His awareness of the shortcomings of journalism as a mode of factual writing, and the way facts could be represented to suit political or editorial purposes, is particularly evident in the 'The Second Funeral of Napoleon', a short volume of one hundred and twenty-two pages, published by Cunningham in 1841.

Again writing as Titmarsh, and using the epistolary form to a fictional 'Miss. Smith', Thackeray begins by questioning the accuracy of historical facts, as they are customarily presented to young ladies in Bowdlerized form: 'As for those Greeks and Romans whom you have read of in "sheep-skin," were you to know what those monsters were, you would blush all over as red as a hollyhock, and put down the history-book in a fury.'<sup>14</sup> He then presents a narrative of Napoleon's disinterment at St. Helena, as written by 'an eloquent anonymous Captain in the Navy', to show how events can be fictionalized according to the preferred style of the author and the tastes of his anticipated reading audience (676). His concerns with the veracity of authors and journalists become more immediate as the cortège winds impressively up the Champs Élysées. Thackeray, or rather Titmarsh, presents a long and detailed description of the proceedings. He is, however, forced to acknowledge that this too is, for the most part at least, a fiction:

But as, my dear Miss. Smith, the descriptions in this letter, from the words in page 697, line 29 - *the party moved* - up to the words *paid to it*, on this page [701], have purely emanated from your obedient servant's fancy, and not from his personal observation (for no being on earth except a newspaper reporter, can be in two places at once), permit me to now communicate to you what little circumstances fell under my own particular view on the day of the 15th of December. (701)

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<sup>14</sup>*Biographical Edition* Vol. 4. p. 674. Further references to Vol. 4 are given in the text.

The account of the re-interment procession and ceremony, as Titmarsh imagines it, is a parody of the kind of press report that elaborates ceremony and ritual as a reinforcement of the established order. Thackeray was well aware that the ceremony was a political attempt to reaffirm the strength of the Franco-British alliance in the eyes of the people, some of whom engaged in mutual animosity on the streets of Paris. He gives an amusing account of a family of English spectators masquerading as French and comments: 'Did the French nation, or did they not, intend to offer up some of us English over the Imperial grave?' (695). On this occasion, working independently of the conventions of the periodical market, he was able to write outside the constraints of editorial opinion.

As he continues, Thackeray undermines the solemnity of the ceremony by presenting it in terms of a festival. Street merchants hawked their wares, and right up to the last minute, 'carpenters and workmen were still making a huge banging and clattering among the sheds which were built for the accommodation of the visitors' (702). An English woman, wrapped in a tartan blanket, had to be ejected from the VIP seats. The cue for the arrival of the coffin was given prematurely, an hour before it was actually due to arrive, undermining the solemnity of the occasion. When it eventually came into view, there was a sense of anticlimax, the procession chanting 'something in a weak, snuffling, lugubrious manner, to the bray of a serpent', the coffin itself topped by a dingy crown. The lights were switched off prematurely, Louis Philippe departed via a back door, and the people, including Titmarsh, went home. Thackeray's authentic account of the proceedings exposes the fictive nature of the official life of a nation, as it is reinforced by displays of authority, ritual and ceremony; it also exposes the complicity of the press in perpetrating this deception.



Just as the fictional *persona* of Titmarsh granted Thackeray an opportunity to undermine the predominant culture of his era, he created other roles for himself, each relevant to a particular topic or satirical target. A few of these, used for his work in *Fraser's*, Colburn's *New Monthly Magazine* and *Punch*, appear as grotesques, comic exaggerations of fictional stereotypes, which not only exhibit the influences of earlier folk cultures in his writing, but actually owe their origins to the traditions of the street performances, festivals and carnivals of the European marketplace. In the pre-modern world, for much of the population, these entertainments were their only access to the written word, physical manifestations of symbols which could be interpreted by a minority readership. The next section is an extended discussion of the heritage of folk entertainments and will examine the relevance of these to Thackeray's work for the popular literary marketplace.



Frost and Yarrow (1990) investigate the origins of early forms of public performance and suggest that the art may have developed from the religious rituals of the tribal shaman, mediators between the spirit world and human beings, who were believed to have the power of interpreting the will of the gods to mankind. Writing of the techniques of mime and dramatic improvisation, they point out that the theatre clown has long been recognized as a universal manifestation of the human need for the relief of laughter. He appears in Sanskrit drama as Vidusaka, a bald dwarf with red eyes and protruding teeth, allowed to speak only in the vernacular Prakrit rather than the formal Sanskrit, an outcast from the highest caste. In some of the early traditions of Dorian Greek drama (*circa* 581 BC), predating the era of the tragedians and Satyr plays, a similar role is to be found in

the *autokabdaloï*, the street buffoons and improvisers of the town of Megara: 'At the heart of the performance lay both the burlesquing - the relativising - of sacred myth, and the celebration of the human body.' Just as Vidusaka spoke only in the common dialect, his Greek counterparts revelled in low tricks and obscenities; both belonged to the popular culture of their day, mocking the dignity of gods and men. Significantly, Frost and Yarrow continue by reminding us that 'the parodic impulse coexists with the religious; the profane is intermingled with the sacred ... The spirit of carnival is a powerful and enduring force.'<sup>15</sup>

The oxymoronic juxtapositioning of the sacred with the profane, authority and dissension, is fundamental to the spirit of early popular entertainments, and echoes the influences of the carnival tradition that Bakhtin has identified in later European writings. The parody, irony and burlesque that existed in these public spectacles, as well as the literature that was descended from this area of the popular culture, contribute to a sense of comic ambivalence which, unlike the formal satire of Horace, Juvenal and the eighteenth-century satirists, makes no didactic judgements. Instead, it is an acknowledgement, even a celebration, of the polarities of human experience. Represented in some of the earliest forms of drama and finding expression in forms accessible to all levels of a common culture, the spirit of carnival, both comic and profound, pervaded art forms throughout European cultural history. In sixteenth-century Europe, it became manifest as an integral part of folk theatre, the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Commedia had its origins in the marketplaces and street carnivals of Italy. Performances portrayed a number of stock characters as standardized

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<sup>15</sup>Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisations in Drama* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p.7.



representations of universally recognizable social types, whose masks, costumes, ritualized gestures and speech patterns showed only slight regional variations. Rudlin gives an account of the growth and development of Commedia, showing a wide dissemination of the style, as itinerant troupes of players spread across Russia, Czechoslovakia and Denmark as well as Southern Europe: 'Wherever Commedia found itself, without compromising in essentials, it adjusted to local circumstances and such national variations contributed to, rather than detracted from, its universality.'<sup>16</sup> There are few eye-witness accounts of the extent and nature of *Commedia dell'Arte* performances at carnival times. As Rudlin points out: 'The Renaissance was a period of rapid oligarchical cultural advancement in which no ink seems to have been wasted on documenting the traditional popular calendrical manifestations of Carnival' (28). What is reasonably certain, however, is that the travelling bands of players, very often family groups, professionals who made a living from their performances, spread across Europe, entertaining wherever there was a sufficient gathering of people to make a worthwhile audience. Although most accounts of Commedia, as a distinct form of theatre, date its period of decline from the early eighteenth century, it appears that such performances were still entertaining crowds throughout a much more extended period. As late as 1826, a contemporary account of the Roman Carnival speaks of 'Pulchinelli, Arlecchini, Brighelli, Pantaloni cutting a thousand capers of terror' at the appearance of a 'Spectre', to the delight of crowds watching a street performance (30).

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<sup>16</sup>Rudlin, p.5. Further references to this source are given in the text.

Bakhtin examines the relationship between *Commedia dell'Arte* and the traditions of carnival and identifies its continuing influence on comic-grotesque forms of literature produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries:

In all these writings, in spite of their differences in character and tendency, the carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.<sup>17</sup>

By the time that Thackeray embarked on his career in journalism, the principles which had governed the carnival-grotesque forms of writing outlined above were becoming overshadowed by artistic divisions that served to segregate an established culture from the public marketplace. Literary representations of the grotesque had already assumed a mantle of respectability. The carnivalesque principle of the universal relativity of all aspects of human experience had been undermined by hierarchical assumptions within the established culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Bakhtin cites Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) as an example of the 'subjective grotesque', and the Gothic novel as another form, the Romantic grotesque, both being modes of writing which no longer related to the universal culture of the marketplace, but which were 'marked by a vivid sense of isolation', transposing the carnival spirit 'into a subjective, idealistic philosophy' (37). Moreover, it was not only literature that became the subject of cultural tensions. As the prevalence of *Commedia* performances declined, eighteenth-century critics (Moser, 1761 and Flogel, 1788) turned their attention to a dispute that was gathering in the German theatre as the *Arlecchino*,

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<sup>17</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 34. Further references to this source are given in the text.



previously confined to popular, comic theatre, also intruded into serious drama. Bakhtin raises a question which puts this controversy into a much broader cultural context: 'Beyond the narrow scope of this dispute there was a wider problem of principle: could manifestations such as the grotesque, which did not respond to the demands of the sublime, be considered art?' (35). In a partial answer, he puts forward the view that 'Pre-Romanticism and Romanticism witnessed a revival of the grotesque genre but with a radically transformed meaning' (36). Although this artistically idealized version of the grotesque may have been acceptable to the predominating culture of the period, the literature it produced was alien and inaccessible to the most numerous section of the population. Older modes of the comic grotesque, as it had existed in the *Commedia dell'Arte* and Renaissance comic writing, were being discarded in favour of artistic principles which deprived both the old texts of their traditions and a whole culture of a part of its heritage.

The established cultural order was, however, shortly to be overtaken by a resurgence of the popular culture in the magazines and periodicals. In addition, some intellectuals and members of literary circles had begun to question the validity of these idealized modes of literature. Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, published posthumously in 1818, and Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*, which appeared in the same year, both satirize the Gothic grotesque as it appeared in the contemporary novel. In the public readership, the satire and parody that appeared in the periodicals of the 1820s presented challenges which reached much wider audiences than those who had watched the carnivals and street performances of earlier times. What had hitherto been localized physical manifestations of hierarchical reversals, temporary aberrations within the established order, were now written down and fixed in print, available to an increasing number of readers.

The literary standards of the educated classes, which had traditionally dominated the publishing markets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were, in the early years of the nineteenth century, challenged by forms of literature that were directed towards culturally marginal readerships. The physical manifestations of carnival ritual, with its parodies, burlesques and reversals of the established order, had given way to a paper commodity which was, in essence, just as transitory as the real thing, literature that was bought to be read and then thrown away. The next section will suggest ways in which Thackeray made use of his experience of the traditions of European carnivals and popular entertainment, as he sought to satisfy the demands of this new public reading culture.



The periodical markets of the late eighteen-thirties and early forties provided the ideal context for a resurrection of these old traditions of folk entertainment. Punch himself was a comic-grotesque of street festivals and his establishment as the eponymous editor of a comic weekly indicates that these traditional influences were still a part of the popular culture. Thackeray's extended use of the authorial pseudonym has already been discussed in the preceding chapters, but a closer examination of his narratorial 'dominos', in the context of popular entertainment and street carnivals, will reveal a strong relationship between some of these and comic grotesques of the *Commedia d'ell Arte*.

Although the stock roles of *Commedia* are, as social stereotypes, clichés in themselves, when set in juxtaposition against the idealized conceptions of their literary counterparts, they emphasize the tedium of convention and the impossibility of substantiating fixed representations of character. Each, in his or her own way, the *Lovers*, *Arlecchino*, *Colombina*, *Il Dottore*, *Pantalone*, *Il*



*Capitano* and the *Zanni* represent grotesque exaggerations of universal human weaknesses and the comic vitality with which these are exposed is both provocative and liberating. *Commedia dell'Arte*, in the spirit of carnival mockery, is non-judgemental and has no respect for rank or fortune. Masters are made to appear just as ridiculous as their servants and the ignorant can have flashes of insight, just as the wise may be made to appear foolish. Those who believe in their own infallibility suffer the greatest reversals.

As the traditional street theatre of *Commedia dell'Arte* died out, the stock characters of the tradition lingered on, in Bowdlerized form, in popular nineteenth-century theatre performances. In particular, the *Arlecchino* and *Colombina* made regular appearances in the Harlequinade, 'the bizarre afterpiece of the English pantomime'.<sup>18</sup> Thackeray was no stranger to the pantomime. In 'A Night's Pleasure', published in *Punch* in 1848, he records his enjoyment of exactly one such 'bizarre afterpiece': 'King Gorgibus became Pantaloon, the two Giants first and second Clowns, and the Prince and Princess ... became the most elegant Harlequin and Colombine that I have seen for many a long day.'<sup>19</sup>

Images of carnival and modes of popular entertainment appear again and again in Thackeray's early work and drawings. These make a tentative appearance in the 'Yellowplush Papers' and feature much more strongly in 'The Diary of C. Jeames de la Pluche', the *Punch* reincarnation of the garrulous footman narrator, who appeared 1845-6. Both Jeames and the earlier Yellowplush exhibit characteristics of the *Arlecchino* of the traditional *Commedia dell'Arte*, the competent but wily servant who is never quite bright enough to succeed in his

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<sup>18</sup>Rudlin, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 6, p.573.

elaborate schemes, but still often succeeds in outwitting his master. The *Arlecchino* mask is reflected in the mixture of ignorance and naiveté common to both the 'Plush' narrators, who nonetheless also show characteristic flashes of intelligence, especially when their own interests are at stake. Like Yellowplush and Jeames, *Arlecchino* displays a superficial coarseness, tempered by deep sensitivity, but there is more comedy than pathos in his childlike transports of grief and joy. He is a good servant, faithful up to a point, but also ambitious and greedy, and this makes him more than willing to undertake any slightly fraudulent business that may be to his advantage.

Yellowplush, as an *Arlecchino* mask in 'Miss. Shum's Husband' (1838), takes the ups and downs of his trade in his stride. As a young valet to Frederic Altamount, he listens at doors, facilitates the course of true love between the lovers, his master and Mary Shum, almost steals an illicit kiss from Mary when the opportunity arises, and cheerfully accepts a slapstick retribution, as a kick to his rear sends him 'sprawling among the wet flannings and things'.<sup>20</sup> In the service of Mr. Deauceace, he grows more cunning and less likeable, clearly echoing the unattractive qualities of his master. He helps himself generously to his unofficial 'purquizzets' and peeps and spies into his master's affairs. Eventually he colludes with him in order to escape debtors, celebrates temporary prosperity in 'foring parts', and ultimately accepts a bribe to desert him for the more prestigious service of the Earl of Crabs, when he faces ruin.

His successor, 'James Plush, Esq., lately footman to a respected family in Berkeley Square', makes and loses a fortune in railway speculation. At the

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<sup>20</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 3, p.242. Further references to this volume are given in the text.



height of his good fortune, he assumes the French version of his appellation, returning to the plainer James Plush when he falls into his former station in life. Jeames, as a fictional narrator, demonstrates the fundamental principle of Commedia, the ascendancy of a *persona*, or 'type', over the individual personality. In many ways a maturer creation than Charles Yellowplush, he is closer to the *Arlecchino* than his predecessor, being just as devious but a great deal more naive in his dealings with people. The story-line that progresses through the pages of Jeames's Diary is close to being a re-enactment of the traditional 'Harlequinade'. In the pages of *Punch*, this particular *Arlecchino* meets his *Colombina*, and, after making and losing a fortune, is successfully tamed. 'Mary Hann 'Oggins', in the tradition of the *Colombina*, loves James Plush, although she can see straight through his tricks and foolish pride. The lovers of the Commedia tradition, Lady Angelina and her sweetheart, Captain Silvertop, command Mary Ann's loyalty and she aids their elopement, by which they escape *Pantalone* -- in this case, Lord Bareacres. Like her Commedia counterpart, Mary Ann is a lady's maid, well-dressed in her mistress's cast-offs and beautiful to the extent that, when the dallying Jeames sees her, the plot uses the Commedia tradition of mistaken identity, as he believes her to be Angelina. Realising his mistake, he admits: 'I coodn help comparing them and I coodnt help comparing myself to a certing Hanimale I've read of, that found it diffiklt to make a choice betwigt 2 Bundles of A' (406). Like the *Arlecchino*, he has a roving eye and makes a fool of himself by paying inappropriate attentions to Angelina: 'He was the laughter of all the servant's hall' (417). In her role as *Colombina*, 'the only lucid, rational person in *commedia dell'arte*', Mary Ann, unable to change him, accepts him as he is.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Rudlin, p. 130.

At the same time that Thackeray was creating Yellowplush, in the likeness of an *Arlecchino*, for *Fraser's Magazine*, he was also fashioning a new carnival domino for himself based on another stock character from Commedia, *Il Capitano*. The origins of *Il Capitano* have been traced to classical literature, as Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus* or the 'Trasone' of Terence's *Eunuchus*. In European history, this stock character has also been connected with the *hildago*, a member of the minor Spanish nobility who, as a mercenary and military adventurer, traditionally appears as 'a mixture of Don Juan, Pizarro and Don Quixote'.<sup>22</sup> Augustus Wagstaff of *The Paris Literary Gazette*, hero of Bundlesbund, Futtugur and Ferruckabad, with a black glass eye and a 'large piece of sticking-plaster covering the spot where once had grown a goodly nose', is sufficiently alarming, but his appearance pales into insignificance beside that of Major Gahagan.<sup>23</sup> The Major entered the pages of Colburn's *New Monthly Magazine* in 1838 and his personal vanity is unparalleled:

I am, so I have stated already, six feet four inches in height, and of matchless symmetry and proportion. My hair and beard are of the most brilliant auburn, so bright as to be scarcely distinguished at a distance from scarlet. My eyes are bright blue, overshadowed by bushy eyebrows of the colour of my hair, and a terrific gash of the deepest purple, which goes over the forehead, the eyelid, and the cheek, and finishes at the ear, gives my face a more strictly military appearance than can be conceived. When I have been drinking (which is pretty often the case) this gash becomes ruby bright, and as I had another which took off a piece of my under-lip, and shows five of my front teeth, I leave you to imagine that 'seldom lighted on the earth (as the monster Burke remarked of one of his unhappy victims) 'a more extraordinary vision.' I improved these natural advantages; and, while in the cantonment during the hot winds at Chittybobbary, allowed my hair to grow very long as did my beard, which reached to my waist. It took me two hours daily to curl my hair into a thousand little corkscrew ringlets, which waved over my shoulders, and to get my moustaches well round to corner of my eyelids. I dressed in loose scarlet trousers and red morocco boots, a scarlet

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<sup>22</sup>Vernon Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (London: Satchell, 1880) from Rudlin, p.120, n. 267.

<sup>23</sup>Pearson, p.224.



jacket, and a shawl of the same colour around my waist; a scarlet turban, three feet high, and decorated with a tuft of scarlet flamingo feathers, formed my head-dress, and I did not allow myself a single ornament, except a small silver skull and cross-bones, in front of my turban. (145-6)

Major Gahagan, arrayed from head to foot in scarlet, is a nineteenth-century incarnation of *Il Capitano*, the soldier braggart of the *Commedia dell' arte*, a larger-than-life liar who is, at heart, a coward and a fraud. His costume illustrates two possibilities from the *Commedia* tradition: the loose trousers, shawl around the waist and the turban may be indicative of his empty boasting and cowardice, for *Il Capitano*, in hostile terrain, would avoid attack by dressing like the natives; alternatively, in the spirit of the *Commedia*, he could be wearing the head-dress of a slain enemy, an infidel. His stature too, 'six feet four inches', which is incidentally comparable to Thackeray's own height, is also in the tradition of *Il Capitano*, whose costume, movements and stance are all designed to give an impression of great size, so that he occupies the maximum amount of space, indicative of his high status and 'feet on the ground, head in the clouds' characteristics.<sup>24</sup> Major Gahagan, commander of the Ahmednuggar Irregulars is a satire on the military profession, or, more specifically, a satire of a particular type of professional soldier.

Like his *Commedic* predecessor, the Major is a showman of the first order and boasts of his conquests: 'I have been at more pitched battles, led more forlorn hopes, had more success among the fair sex, drunk harder, read more, been a handsomer man than any officer now serving Her Majesty' (121). It is interesting to compare his exaggerated accounts of battlefield exploits with an

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<sup>24</sup>Rudlin, p.121

excerpt from an original commedia script. *Il Capitano*, in this instance 'Captain Coccodrillo', speaks of his prowess in battle:

While I am fighting there comes a cannon ball and strikes me in the mouth, knocking out, as you see, two teeth, but without doing me further harm. I turn this ball round in my hands and hurl it back to the enemy, and, striking a tower in which there are fifteen hundred men, knock it down, killing all the soldiers and reducing the whole to dust so that there remains no trace of it whatsoever.<sup>25</sup>

Confronted by a female warrior, he seizes her by the hair and throws her up to the 'fifth heaven', where she knocks out Mars. Jove, who sees Captain Coccodrillo below, brandishing his sword, urges the gods to be silent, lest the enraged soldier should enter heaven and slay them all. Although Major Gahagan cannot quite equal his predecessor's feat of terrifying Jove and a heaven full of gods, hyperbole comes just as easily to him. On one occasion, he fells one hundred and thirty-five elephants with one bullet and slays an opponent with a single blow: 'His head, cut clean in two between the eyebrows and the nostrils, even between the two front teeth, fell one side on each shoulder' (129). Later, fettered to a stake 'a couple of feet thick and eight high', driven five feet into the ground, he wrests it free, and wields it to upend his executioners and the Maharata's palanquin bearers, neatly batting them on to the sabres of an approaching army. When he runs out of ammunition, Gahagan loads the garrison's last remaining food supplies into the guns, bespatters the enemy with cheese and kills Loll Mahommed, with '*one hundred and seventeen best Spanish olives*' (178).

Traditionally, *Il Capitano* of the *Commedia dell'Arte* suffers a denouement at the hands of the other characters when he is exposed as a coward and a liar. Major Gahagan, as the narrator of his own story, successfully evades

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<sup>25</sup>Fabrizio de Fornaris, *Angelica*, (1585), from Rudlin, p.124.



exposure by others, but falls ignominiously into his own trap. He asserts 'gravely and sadly' to his incredulous readers that he is unequivocally 'a teller of THE TRUTH' (131). Booth has commented that, 'though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear'.<sup>26</sup> Thackeray, as the author of Major Gahagan's memoirs, is still very much in evidence, reinforcing one of the key principles of the Menippean satirist: those who claim to tell the truth deceive themselves more than anyone else.

This examination of Thackeray's use of carnival imagery in the narratorial devices he employed in his magazine fiction illustrates an important aspect of his work. The assimilation of the traditions of folk culture into his writing reflects a tacit understanding that, at this period of his career, his work belonged to a transitory marketplace culture. He was writing, not for an intellectual minority, but to appeal to a heterogeneous public readership, with the intention to amuse rather than instruct. In spite of the spurious discourse of his narrators, their self-delusions and naiveté, their lies and knavish tricks, in the true spirit of comedy and in the carnival tradition, each triumphs over his misfortunes. Yellowplush rises through the ranks of domestic service, Major Gahagan ecstatically announces his marriage, and, when James Plush comes to his senses, he and Mary Ann live happily ever after. Although Thackeray's letters of this period show an inherent distrust of bigotry and humbug, he was not yet prepared to take a didactic view of his writing. A few years later, he came to appreciate a different view of authorial responsibility; for the moment, however, like the

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<sup>26</sup>Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: London: University of Chicago Press, 1961, 1968), p. 20.

buffoons and entertainers of the ancient marketplaces, he found it sufficient to celebrate foolishness with ambivalence and good humour.

Thackeray's use of Menippean satire, in particular those elements of the mode that also reflect the carnival traditions and folk humour of seriocomic writing, are especially relevant to both his subject matter and the literary markets he sought to supply. On the other hand, Peacock, exploring topical ideologies and writing for a more intellectual readership, usually employed the sub-genre in ways that reflect those twentieth-century interpretations of the mode as a means of philosophical enquiry. However, both writers made extensive use of one pivotal image of the carnival tradition, the banquet, and their work demonstrates how the celebratory feast, the symbol of universal plenty and abundance, had been, by the nineteenth century, all but destroyed by the increasingly divisive structure of society.



Any reader familiar with the works of Peacock and Thackeray cannot fail to observe the importance that both writers attach to the subject of food. Among Peacock's later papers was found an incomplete cookbook in manuscript, dated 1849-50, probably intended, at some stage, for publication.<sup>27</sup> His conversation satires revolve around a loaded dinner table. From Dr. Gaster's mishap, as he responded to meet the call to breakfast at the start of *Headlong Hall*, to Dr. Opimian's 'Bacchic ordnance' of champagne corks at the end of *Gryll Grange* (1860), Peacock's speakers fill their stomachs and loosen their tongues with an abundance of food and wine.<sup>28</sup> It is also well documented that Thackeray

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<sup>27</sup>Halliford Edition, 1967, Vol. 9, Appendix II, pp 446-455.

<sup>28</sup>Garnett, ed., p.982.



was never reluctant to write on the subjects of food and drink. His published works abound with a wealth of culinary details, as do his private papers and letters. 'Memorials of Gourmandising' (*Fraser's*, 1841), 'A Dinner in the City' (*Punch*, 1847), 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's' (*Punch*, 1848), all mark him out as a gourmand, a *bon viveur* and, ultimately, as Carey points out, 'his gourmandizing was the death of him'.<sup>29</sup>

Bakhtin has analysed and historicized the image of the banquet as it has appeared in seriocomic literature, and presents an account of festive eating as one of the rituals of carnival, a symbol of abundance and equality, of man's triumph over the world by his work. In its earliest manifestations, in feudal Europe, the feast fulfilled both the physiological and psychological needs of its participants. It symbolized a temporary period of liberation for the people, which existed outside the prevailing established order, with plenty of food, laughter and frank, regenerative conversation.

Bakhtin also examines the significance of the 'official feast', the formal banquet, from which ordinary people were excluded, and by which the predominant culture sought to reinforce its authority and the established order:

On the other hand, the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. The link with time became formal; changes and moments of crisis were relegated to the past. Actually, the official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present. Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political and moral values, norms and prohibitions. It was the triumph of truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>J. Carey, *Thackeray: Prodigal Genius* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p.82.

<sup>30</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 9.

It is difficult to identify, in nineteenth-century literature, recreations of the 'earlier and purer feast' which features so strongly in Bakhtin's interpretation of carnival tradition. The whole concept of work and the production of food, which had been central to the subsistence economy, had, by this time, become distorted by the market priorities of the growing consumer society. In an agricultural economy, elements of the celebration of man's triumph over his environment could still be found in the celebrations of successful harvests, where all had worked together for one common purpose. However, in the divisive class stratification of urban industrialization, where commercial prosperity was won at the expense of the social exclusion of those who laboured in production, the celebratory feast had been replaced by the ceremonial banquet, a means by which hierarchical values were reinforced. Even the private dinner party, its form dictated by the expectations of the host and his guests, served to emphasize and maintain the established social order. In the public sphere, the 'official feast', with its ritual toasts and formal speechmaking, became a monologic reinstatement of the existing hierarchy. The grotesque imagery of carnival, in both art and literature, with its folkloric, elemental humour and its universal applications, was rapidly being relegated to the past or, at least, reduced to specific events and isolated social groups. Nineteenth-century literature echoed the class cultures it represented and which sponsored its creation, and, as Bakhtin has summarized the situation, 'laughter was cut down to cold humour, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be joyful and triumphant hilarity. Its positive, regenerating power was reduced to a minimum.'<sup>31</sup>




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<sup>31</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p.38.



Peacock's use of the form of the Socratic dialogue has already been examined in chapter two. These conversation scenes, often centred around a private dinner-table in the mode of the classical symposium, present opinions by the juxtaposition of conflicting points of view, each imparted with a sense of conviction that allows no room for any other interpretation. Collectively, however, the ideologies themselves are shown to be flawed by the contrasts that become apparent as they are set side by side with each other, and the ultimate focus of the satire centres on the intellectual limitations and the presumption of those who claim to have discovered the truth.

In *Maid Marian*, however, Peacock makes use of the feast in a way which clearly illustrates some distinctive features of the banquet in its original form, as a celebration of man's temporary liberation from the established order and of his triumph over the world. The final chapter of the book sets a scene of carnival feasting and hierarchical reversal. In an atmosphere of joyful celebration, the foresters gather for their banquet to enjoy an abundance of food and drink, the fruits of their outlawed labours. The friar enters into a dialogue with an unidentified knight and puts forward the case that, in his own domain, Robin the outlaw has as much right to rule as King Richard:

Richard is courteous, bountiful, honest and valiant: but also is Robin: it is the false word that makes the unjust distinction. They are twin-spirits, and should be friends, but that fortune hath differently cast their lot: but their names shall descend together to the latest days, as the flower of their age and of England: for in the pure principles of freebootery have they excelled all men; and to the principles of freebootery, diversely developed, belong all the qualities to which song and story concede renown.<sup>32</sup>

The themes explored here will be discussed further, in chapter six, in the context of Peacock's political satire. At this point, it is relevant to look at the content of

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<sup>32</sup>Garnett ed., pp.537-8.

the friar's speech, as an example of banquet discourse outside the domain of the 'official' feast. He suggests that power and the right to rule are attained by 'freebootery', the acquisition of wealth by nefarious means. He who excels in plundering his peers gains authority over them, but of those who actually obtain this kind of power, circumstances dictate the supremacy of one faction over another. The ideals of royalty, traditionally presented in religious and heroic terms by the established order, are little short of a celebration of robbery and violence. In a different set of circumstances, the deeds that confirm kingship fall outside the law and are subject to punishment. Robin and Marian, presiding over the feast as the king and queen of the forest fellowship, are ritually decrowned when the unidentified knight turns out to be the reigning monarch, but the hierarchical reversal is ambiguous. The king and the outlaw are 'twin-spirits' and between them there is little to choose. The principles by which they uphold their positions are common to each; each has earned his right to rule and each is as good, or as bad, as the other.

The context of *Maid Marian*, the nature of the book as a comic Romance and the location of the story in the forests of medieval England, successfully distances the reader from the narrative in a way which can accommodate the informal spontaneity of a carnival banquet. Thackeray's work, however, in its urban settings, among populations governed by rigid class stratification, cannot be liberated from established authority in this way. Thackeray's feasts are those of the official life, ceremonial banquets designed to confirm and uphold the existing order of society. A frequent participant in official banquets, Thackeray came to understand the esoteric nature and hollow significance of these functions. 'A Dinner in the City', published in *Punch* in three



parts in 1847, satirizes the extravagance, pomp and ceremony of such an event. The narrator, on this occasion, is Mr. Spec, middle-class and respectable, living with his equally respectable wife and their children in 'one of the most healthy of the suburbs of this great City'.<sup>33</sup> The invitation is an enormous honour to this rather inconsequential family, and the piece, written as one of the series of 'Sketches and Travels in London', is in sharp contrast to the stark poverty that Thackeray depicted in the immediately preceding contribution, 'The Curate's Walk'.

Mr. Spec is invited to accompany an acquaintance to a formal banquet given by the 'Worshipful Company of Bellows-Menders, at their splendid Hall in Marrow-pudding Lane' (553). As the guests of the Bellows-Menders begin to converge on the City, there is a carnival atmosphere about the event. The military in scarlet and gold lace and the equipages of foreign ambassadors, resplendent with their cockaded servants, form a triumphal procession towards the City, the stronghold of commerce on which the prosperity of the established order depends. However, this is not a carnival of 'all the people', and the wholeness of the celebration has been lost. As the guests approach their destination, the mood changes:

In Cornhill we fell into a line, and formed a complete regiment of the aristocracy. Crowds were gathered round the steps of the old hall in Marrow-pudding Lane and welcomed us nobility and gentry as we stepped out of our equipages at the door. The policemen could hardly restrain the ardour of these low fellows and their sarcastic cheers were sometimes very unpleasant. There was one rascal who made an observation about the size of my white waistcoat, for which I should have liked to sacrifice him on the spot. (554)

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<sup>33</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 6, p.592. Further reference to Vol. 6 are given in the text.

The arrival of the guests at Marrow-pudding Lane emphasizes the social divisions that mark the occasion as an 'official feast'. The name 'Marrow-pudding' is suggestive of abundant food, but many of those who have worked to contribute to the national prosperity are excluded from the feast. The 'welcome' is ironic, a barrage of insults by which they show their resentment of 'us nobility and gentry'. There has been no carnival 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions'.<sup>34</sup> Spec, as narrator, reacts with a spontaneous hostility but is pulled away. However, the incident outside the door is forgotten in the rush of the 'black streaming crowd, into the gorgeous hall of banquet' (557). The extravagance of the glass, plate and gold statues, the turtle soup, peas and blancmange, all signify an abundance which is no longer available to all. The Worshipful Company of Bellows-Menders represents a new precedence in the established order, in which commercial success now lies parallel to the old hierarchies of rank and prestige, and is affirmed in a public display of spectacle and ceremony. Guests are announced by name and rank at the door, emphasizing allegiance to the old order. Portraits of the Prince Regent and the Dukes of Kent and Cumberland look down from the walls, consecrating the past and affirming the present. The City tradesmen conduct their distinguished guests to the table and it becomes clear that the old order is now inextricably linked to the new. Future honour and distinction are no longer the privilege of birth but the right of commercial success and financial prosperity (558).

Spec, as narrator, is initially overwhelmed by the splendour of the occasion and the prominence of the guests, and he confesses: 'To be in a room

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<sup>34</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 10



with these great people gave me a thousand sensations of joy' (556). However, he grows sceptical of the excesses of the banquet and its tedious rituals:

On a centre table in the hall, on which already stood a cold Baron of Beef - a grotesque piece of meat - a dish as big as a dish in a pantomime, with a little standard of England stuck on top of it, as if it were round this we were to rally - on this centre table, six men placed as many huge dishes under cover; and at a given signal the master cook and five assistants in white caps and jackets marched rapidly up to the dish-covers, which being withdrawn, discovered six great haunches, on which the six carvers, taking out six sharp knives from their girdles began to operate. It was, I say, like something out of a Gothic romance, or a grotesque fairy pantomime. (558-9)

Thackeray's description of a nineteenth-century City banquet works as the antithesis of the significance that Bakhtin found in the banquet imagery of Renaissance writing. The ritual of carving is elaborately staged, re-enacting the past: 'Feudal barons must have dined so, five hundred years ago', but the festive significance of the re-enactment is changed (559). The relationship of the feast 'with speech, with wise conversation and gay truth', is lost in the nonsensical babble of full mouths and befuddled brains; the ceremonial rituals of formal speeches, toasts and patriotic songs are meaningless parodies of official languages.<sup>35</sup> Writing a retrospective account, seven months after the event, Mr. Spec asks:

' " What the deuce has that absurd song to do with her Majesty, and how does it set us all stamping with our glasses on the mahogany?"' (561). The whole scene transforms itself into a grotesque pantomime, a burlesque. The original sense of banquet imagery, with its 'inherent tendency towards abundance and an all-embracing popular element', is destroyed by images of gluttony and excess by a selected few.<sup>36</sup> Others, whose labour has contributed to this luxury and

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<sup>35</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.281.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

abundance, are left to jeer outside the door. The popular festive energy has suffered a reversal and the banquet, for these people at least, has been reduced to an occasion for resentment and derision.

Bakhtin examines the changing significance of banquet imagery, as class stratification brought about social and cultural divisions:

However, even within bourgeois culture the festive element did not die. It merely narrowed down. The feast is a primary, indestructible ingredient of human civilization; it may become sterile and even degenerate, but it cannot vanish. The private, 'chamber' feast of the bourgeois period still preserves a distorted aspect of the ancient spirit; on feast days the doors of the home are open to guests, as they were originally open to 'all the world.' On such days there is a greater abundance in everything: food, dress, decorations. Festive greetings and good wishes are exchanged, although the ambivalence has faded ... The feast has no utilitarian connection (as has daily rest and relaxation after working hours). On the contrary the feast means liberation from all that is utilitarian.<sup>37</sup>

Thackeray provides a compelling picture of the bourgeois 'chamber' feast in 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's', which was published in *Punch* in 1848. This short, five-part novella demonstrates the altered significance of the banquet image, when it is no longer 'open to "all the world"', but confined to the restrictive area of a suburban dining-room. It depicts a form of feasting which has become sterile and corrupt. Rosa Timmins's motives for this lavish entertainment are the antithesis of the original spirit of the banquet; aided and abetted by her mother, Mrs. Gashleigh, she uses the feast as a means of confirming her own social position. Universal liberation has been supplanted by the triumph of a few at the expense of many. It is not even an 'official feast' in the sense that it affirms the established order, for, unlike the dinner in the City, it cannot call on history and tradition for justification. Her guest list includes not even her closest fiends, but only those acquaintances whom she believes will benefit her socially. The

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<sup>37</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 276.



banquet, in this context, represents personal ambition; nothing is freely given and there is no sense of joyful festivity. High-ranking guests attend unwillingly and their conversation is meaningless, broken by strained pauses, during which the guests hear the voices and activity of the servants, those who have been excluded. The atmosphere is tense and claustrophobic and the Timmins's 'uncommonly compact' little house in Lilliput Street cannot accommodate everyone. Every sound from the kitchen permeates the scene and the feast is reduced to a cacophony of noises. The baby screams, china and banisters are smashed, and an attempt to dance brings down the dining-room lamp. The concept of the feast, as a period of abundance and temporary liberation from work, is destroyed in a pantomime of hired plate and servants, professional caterers, escalating expenditure and, ultimately, financial ruin. Like Robin and Marian, the host and hostess are ritually decrowned, but, in contrast to Peacock's banquet in Sherwood Forest, there is no ambivalence in their descent. Timmins and Rosa emerge without honour, victims of their own foolishness. In this context, the concept of the popular feast is not merely distorted, as it is in the 'official' banquet at Marrow-pudding Lane. Along with the Timmins's china and banisters, the dining-room lamp and their dignity and reputation, it has been totally destroyed.



Carnival imagery, in most of Peacock's work, is not easy to find. His use of the feast, as a literary image, is circumscribed by his subject matter and his anticipated readership. Although the act of feasting serves to generate conversation and ideological debate, there is no suspension of the social hierarchy among those who participate. Furthermore, the talk that surrounds the dinner-table is not relevant to 'all the people', but serves to stimulate the kind of

intellectual discussion which can be accessed only by an educated minority. In much of his work, significantly *Headlong Hall*, *Nightmare Abbey*, *Crotchet Castle* and the much later *Gryll Grange*, there is a sense that, in the feast, Peacock had found a useful formula around which he is able to construct his dialogues, and intellectual considerations take precedence over the act of eating.

Thackeray's work, on the other hand, shows a much deeper assimilation of carnival influences, and Bakhtin's discussion of the tradition, and its relationship to Menippean satire, is helpful in providing an historicized literary context for his writings. His subject matter, based on social rather than intellectual problems, accommodates images from the contemporary popular culture as well as those of the pre-modern world. Graphic descriptions of food and references to the contemporary consumer market provide the reader with a very visual, physical reality. 'Dinner in the City' and 'A Little Dinner at Timmins's', both published in the late-eighteen-forties, show how the festive impulse was constrained by contemporary social strictures.

Both Peacock and Thackeray thought deeply about the quality of contemporary literature. Each defended his own attitude towards both the traditions and the innovations of nineteenth-century literature, and their respective positions are revealed in the literary reviews they published in the magazines of the period. The following chapter examines some of these in detail, and demonstrates how their differing principles were guided by their respective reading audiences and by their own authorial integrity.



## **Chapter Five: The Case for 'Belles Lettres' versus a Brother of the Press**

This chapter focuses on the work of Peacock and Thackeray as literary reviewers. Both authors wrote critical appraisals of the literature of the first half of the nineteenth century. Their reviews of the work of other writers and the ways in which they viewed their own writings, define not only their personal literary ideals, but also underline the differences in their attitudes towards the cultural changes of the period. In addition, it will be shown how both writers questioned the standards and underlying ideologies of the reviewers themselves.

Peacock's discussions of contemporary work display expectations that were predominantly eighteenth-century in character. He viewed the author as occupying a position of intrinsic responsibility towards the traditions of literature and scholarship and, by subscribing to utilitarian principles of criticism, tested the validity of this ideology in a reassessment of literary values. Thackeray, whose career began just as Peacock had begun to write for the periodical market, also shows a strong awareness that an intellectual and artistic approach to writing was still the ultimate ideal of authorship. However, his close interaction with the contemporary publishing market brought him to the understanding that the changing nature of the popular readership, together with commercial demands, required a more flexible approach. For Thackeray, literature that took into account the interests of an ever-widening audience for printed material, could be just as culturally sound as that which sought to satisfy an exclusively intellectual readership.

Peacock began his writing career by publishing small volumes of poetry and satirical fiction, later exchanging this role for that of an occasional contributor to periodicals. His earliest published book review, *'The Epicurean'*, by Thomas

Moore', appeared as an anonymous contribution to the October number of *The Westminster Review* of 1827. The essay illustrates the tensions that were beginning to emerge, as the new demands of the novel-reading public collided with both the influences of contemporary ideologies and Peacock's personal ideals of scholarship. First of all, it is helpful to consider the background of Peacock's connection with the *Westminster* and the ideological context of the periodical.

As mentioned earlier (p.96), the *Westminster Review* was established in 1824, by Jeremy Bentham, as an organ of the philosophical radicals and was designed to challenge the respective political strangleholds of the *Quarterly* and the *Edinburgh Reviews*. Although James Mill declined Bentham's offer of editorship, he became a regular contributor to the periodical during its formative years. John Stuart Mill captures some of the philosophical and political intensity that surrounded the publication during its early issues. He writes of his father's first contribution, a critical analysis of the *Edinburgh Review*: 'So formidable an attack on the Whig party and policy had never before been made; nor had so great a blow been struck, in this country, for radicalism, nor was there, I believe, any living person capable of writing that article, except my father.'<sup>1</sup>

Peacock, whose interest in radical reform had grown during the period of his acquaintance with Shelley, Hogg and Leigh Hunt at Marlow, was also employed at India House, during the early years of the *Westminster Review*, in an administrative capacity immediately subordinate to that of Mill. However, in spite of a common interest in radical politics and close contact within their sphere of employment, there does not appear to have been a great deal of sympathetic understanding between the two men. Peacock, although contributing to the

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<sup>1</sup> J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 82.



*Westminster*, seems to have remained sceptically aloof from the inner circle of Mill's ideological disciples, and Howard Mills suggests that his 'reactions to James and John Stuart Mill were bare human tolerance and intellectual distaste'.<sup>2</sup> His acquaintance with Bentham, however, seems to have flourished on a closer correlation of philosophical exchanges, and it has been recorded that the two men, for some time, enjoyed a weekly dinner engagement, although there is no account of their discussions at these meetings. It would appear more than likely that the utilitarian ideology propounded by Bentham was of interest to Peacock as topic for intellectual deliberation. Although the views that he expressed in some of his early essays -- the 'Essay on Fashionable Literature', which he was working on in 1818, and 'The Four Ages of Poetry', published in 1820 -- reflect Bentham's ideas, there is little reason to suggest that, among the many philosophical debates that coloured the years of the Regency, these principles alone should have been allowed to remain immune from the intensely objective scrutiny that he was in the habit of applying to other contemporary tenets and beliefs. As already pointed out in a previous chapter, Peacock's faithful subservience to Benthamite philosophy as shown in 'The Four Ages of Poetry' may well be read as an ironic challenge to the very opinions he is pretending to support, and his apparent allegiance to Benthamism masks a satirical enquiry into the validity of a utilitarian view of literature.<sup>3</sup>

Altick summarizes the relationship between utilitarian thought and the literature of the period:

Literature, and poetry in particular, was judged above all in terms of its didactic power, its moral usefulness ... Other values, such as the pleasure

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<sup>2</sup> H. Mills, p.204.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. 2, n.28.

arising from the music of the verse or striking images or felicity of phrase, were always subordinate to this, if indeed they were recognised at all. The function of literature as sheer entertainment was seldom conceded in critical discussion.<sup>4</sup>

In general terms, the utilitarians viewed literature as a potential obstacle in the path of progress. Writing, which was elegantly constructed or imaginatively conceived, was beyond the pale of serious literary consideration unless it could be seen to fulfil a moral or didactic function. One may register here a marked relationship between this view and the cultural values attached to eighteenth-century satire as discussed in the first chapter. Poetry and satire, in the context of classical literature, had proved their worth as a valid means of conveying philosophical thought. This role had now been superseded by the philosophical essayist, and poetry or satire which lacked intellectual substance or didactic intent was of little relevant consequence. Such views were explicitly expressed in an anonymous article in the *Westminster Review* which, in 1825, declared: 'Literature is a seducer; we had almost said harlot. She may do to trifle with; but woe be to the state whose statesmen write verses, and whose lawyers read more in Tom Moore than in Bracton.'<sup>5</sup>

Peacock's review of Moore's novel, *The Epicurean*, is interesting for a number of reasons and merits an extensive discussion in this context. In the first instance, it represents the type of work that was designed to attract the novel-reading audiences of the period. Siskin confirms an 'increased emphasis on the positive entertainment value of the novel' in the late eighteenth century, adding that this 'was accompanied by a reformulation of its dangers.'<sup>6</sup> Whereas earlier

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<sup>4</sup> Altick (1957), pp.136-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Westminster Review*, Vol. 4, (1825), pp.165-66, from Altick (1957), p135.

<sup>6</sup> Siskin, p.185.



efforts to elevate the novel as a literary genre had met with opposition on both moral and artistic grounds, later opinion demonstrated a relaxation of rigid modes of criticism. However, the advent of utilitarian theory, largely stimulated by Bentham, demanded a re-evaluation of standards of literature during the early nineteenth century. In addition, Peacock's application of utilitarian literary theory to Moore's novel illustrates the intensifying cultural tensions of the period, as reading populations increased and authors and publishers sought to create new markets. The review of Moore's *Epicurean* also demonstrates how Peacock, now writing in a new publishing context and, ostensibly, in a serious vein, was still unable to resist undermining prescriptive ideologies.

Superficially, Peacock's review of the novel supports utilitarian literary theory. The excessive ornamentation of the style in which the book is written, and the inaccuracies and licence with which Moore treats his subject matter, set it firmly outside the boundaries of serious literary consideration. Peacock begins with an obliquely satirical attack on the novel as an example of commercially produced fiction, designed for an artistically undiscerning section of the market, the female readership:

This volume will, no doubt, be infinitely acceptable to the ladies 'who make the fortune of new books.' Love, very intense; mystery, somewhat recondite; piety, very profound; and philosophy, sufficiently shallow; with the help of

-- new mythological machinery,  
And very handsome supernatural scenery;  
strung together with an infinity of brilliant and flowery fancies, present a combination eminently calculated to delight this very numerous class of readers.<sup>7</sup>

In the first short sentence, Peacock demolishes *The Epicurean* as serious literature, and attacks the reliance of the fiction market on a female readership. He

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<sup>7</sup> *Halliford Edition*, Vol. 9, p.3.

then reduces the literary tastes of women readers, and finally questions the integrity of an author who writes in a way 'eminently calculated' to appeal to this section of the market. However, the topic of a female reading audience was not new to Peacock. In *Headlong Hall*, published eight years before the inception of the *Westminster Review*, he was already satirizing authorial subservience to the popular taste, presenting his opinions in the person of Miss Philomena Poppyseed. Aided and abetted by her publisher's marketing team, the reviewers Mr Gall and Mr. Treacle, Miss. Poppyseed had become 'an indefatigable compounder of novels, written for the express purpose of supporting every species of superstition and prejudice'.<sup>8</sup> Peacock here takes a markedly Benthamite stance that such work was indeed 'almost a harlot'; not only was it of no intellectual value, but it could also be seen as symptomatic of social decadence and moral decay. Writers of Miss.Poppyseed's calibre influenced young ladies 'to consider themselves as a sort of commodity, to be put up at public auction and knocked down to the highest bidder'.<sup>9</sup> The unfortunate Mr. Panscope, 'heir-apparent to an estate of ten thousand a-year', is blissfully unaware that his apparent popularity among the calculating majority of his female acquaintance, 'whose morals had been formed by the novels of such writers as Miss Philomela Poppyseed', is directly in proportion to his financial prosperity.<sup>10</sup> Even Anthelia Melincourt, whose attraction to Italian poetry preserved her from the worse forms of moral atrophy, has been shown to be under the fictive influences of literature when applying her romantic ideals to her search for a flesh and blood husband.

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<sup>8</sup> Garnett, ed., p.20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.40.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.39.



Whereas Peacock's application of utilitarian principles to literature is, in his fictions, essentially satirical, his essays and reviews are coloured by potentially contentious statements and a provocative irony. He pursues his argument on the subject of women as readers in the unfinished 'Essay on Fashionable Literature', which remained unpublished during his lifetime. In this work, he writes: 'Young ladies read only for amusement: the best recommendation a work of fancy can have is that it should inculcate no opinions at all, but implicitly acquiesce in all the assumptions of worldly wisdom.'<sup>11</sup> The accusation that the tastes of female readers were causing a decline in standards in the novel was not confined to Peacock. Godwin, in his essay 'Of History and Romance', published as an appendix to *Caleb Williams* (1794), had made similar claims.<sup>12</sup> Peacock's reference to the subject in his 'Essay on Fashionable Literature' evinces such a sense of challenge and deliberate provocation that it must have been purposefully designed to invite inflamed response, either from a general readership or, possibly, even from individual members of the Hunt coterie itself. There is also a sharp contrast here between Peacock's reduction of the female intellect and the implicit values that he emphasizes in his portrayals of the women who appear in his satirical fiction. As Garnett points out, he was 'markedly in advance of his age in showing a preference for intelligent, well-educated, and even moderately emancipated women'.<sup>13</sup> References to Celinda Toobad of *Nightmare Abbey*, Matilda Fitzwater of *Maid Marian*, or Lady Clarinda of *Crotchet Castle*, illustrate this point. All are revealed as young women of intelligence, whose own opinions

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<sup>11</sup> *Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, p. 274.

<sup>12</sup> W. Godwin, *Things as they are: or the Adventures of Caleb Williams*, ed. M. Hindle (London: Penguin, 1794, 1988), p.369.

<sup>13</sup> Garnett, ed., p.646.

most definitely do not 'implicitly acquiesce in all the assumptions of worldly wisdom'. There is also a sense that the independence of mind shown by some of Peacock's female fictional speakers goes far beyond the usual social expectations of women of their period. Much less likely than their male acquaintances to become the targets of authorial satire, Peacock's ladies and their opinions are, for the most part, treated with authorial sympathy and respect.

Having opened with a challenge to Moore's novel in general terms, Peacock quickly moves on to more specific criticisms. As he turns his attention to the academic discrepancies that appear in the subject matter of the book, he adopts a sternly didactic tone and issues advice to the aspiring author: 'He will go really through the preliminary labour of accumulating all that is essential to his object, instead of making a vain parade of scraps and fragments, which will be found, on due examination, to be not the relics of a rich table, but the contents of a beggar's wallet.'<sup>14</sup> Here, it has to be remembered that Peacock was, at this time, engaged in writing *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829), and this work was preceded by many years of research into the legend of Taliesin. It was a matter of pride to him that his studies in this area eventually earned the respect of Welsh archaeologists, who considered it to be 'a serious and valuable addition to Welsh history'.<sup>15</sup> As a self-taught classical scholar, he was also familiar with the details of Epicurean philosophy, and he took exception to the licence with which Moore adapted these principles to the needs of his fiction.

Peacock objected to Moore's 'vain parade of scraps and fragments' on divided grounds. In addition to an inherent contempt for careless research, he also

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<sup>14</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 9, pp.66-7. Further references to this volume are given in the text.

<sup>15</sup>Garnett, ed., p. 550.



sees Moore's misuse of fact in a more sinister light -- as a means of exploiting the commercial market by pandering to the tastes of contemporary readers. He cites several extracts which he sees as deliberately misrepresenting aspects of the Epicurean philosophy in the cause of fiction. Alciphron, the hero of the novel, is elected to lead the Epicurean school of philosophers by virtue of his youth and good looks, 'a circumstance, the author says, without precedent, and we conceive without probability' (3). Moore's subservience to the expectations of his reading audience becomes even more irritatingly apparent to Peacock as, with historical inaccuracy, the former contrasts the ' "simple and sublime austerity" ' of Christianity with the ' "alarmed bigotry" ' of declining Epicurean philosophy (6). A festival described in terms 'much more Vauxhallian than Attic' leads to sweeping accusations of plagiarism, and Moore's hero is ultimately dismissed as 'a *bon vivant*, a gay deceiver, a seeker after eternal life, and a believer in dreams', who further transgresses Epicurean ideals by conceiving a violent and exclusive passion for one woman, together with an atypical preoccupation with omens and portents (11). In short, Peacock claims that Moore, in the creation of his protagonist, 'has drawn a portrait of everything an eminent Epicurean was not, and presents it to us as a fair specimen of what he was. Hamlet's uncle might as fairly have sat for the portrait of Hamlet's father' (51).

He continues by emphasizing much unintentional humour in some of the more bizarre twists of the narrative and Moore's inaccurate presumptions. As the history of Alethe's birth unfolds, he comments: 'So here is a pregnant woman elected a priestess of Isis, and lying-in, as a matter of course, under the auspices of the Sacred College!' (33-4). He picks up anachronistic names applied to the architecture of ancient Egypt by a purportedly Greek narrator: 'We wish Mr.

Moore would tell us what is the Attic word for a chapel' (24). Further on, he asks how an Athenian could have acquired a notion of a 'spire', a feature of British architecture, as an illustration of harmonious female voices "' towering high and clear over all the rest'" (25). When the hero finds himself among flowers, shrubs and 'verdant turf' in a subterranean garden, Peacock exhorts the author to try 'growing a pot of grass in his cellar before he again amuses the public with similar fantasies' (28).

With a utilitarian ardour for the functional accuracy of language, Peacock then raises objections to what he sees as contrived extravagance in Moore's prose. As he undermines the text with attacks on some of the literary conceits and overblown imagery of the descriptive passages, it has to be acknowledged that the tone of the review begins to exhibit a degree of comic pedantry, rather than earnest discussion. Moore depicts Alciphron rowing through the moonlight towards the City of the Dead, but, as Peacock remarks, his 'very petty straining after pantomimic effect ... for the sake of a tricky phantasy', together with inaccuracies in the renderings of the interplay of moonlight and shadow, reduce the potential beauty of the scene (15). He further illustrates Moore's unjustified use of forced embellishment and literary ornamentation, by quoting directly from an extract in which Alciphron embarks on his journey towards the Nile: "' The gay, golden-winged birds that haunt these shores, were, in every direction, skimming along the lake; while, with a graver consciousness of beauty, the swan and the pelican were seen dressing their white plumage in the mirror of its wave" ' (31). Peacock argues that the passage is 'a conceit, a misrepresentation, and an impossibility', adding that, whilst he has never had the opportunity of observing the behaviour of pelicans, he is able to state with



conviction that 'the swan never looks into the water for any purpose but to detect food' (31). Such exaggerated and fanciful forms of description come 'from books and imagination, and not from nature' (32). He underlines his point by citing Wordsworth's poem, 'Yarrow Unvisited', as an example of literature which results from accurate observation: 'The swan, on still St. Mary's lake,/ Floats double, swan and shadow' (32). Mills comments on the somewhat surprising selection of this reference: 'He has come to respect much of Wordsworth, but not before his time, and only such as can be assimilated to eighteenth-century or classical canons of correctness.'<sup>16</sup>

Peacock's academic conservatism and respect for scholarship would have made him naturally inclined towards the literary principles of this earlier age. However, his opinions cannot be fully identified with the utilitarian view, in its strictest sense, that literature can be of value only when, stripped of all decoration, it serves a functional and didactic purpose. The reader is left in no doubt that Peacock does indeed find aspects of Moore's work to be absurd, but it is the inappropriateness of the language and scholarly inaccuracies that are offensive, rather than the sentiments the writer hopes to convey. Although, as a contributor to the *Westminster Review*, he may have felt obliged to demonstrate a degree of authorial allegiance to the underpinning ideology of the magazine, he does show a certain sympathy with Moore's attempts to depict elevating scenes. In the extract mentioned above, Peacock does not deny the potential 'sublimity of the picture of the City of the Dead by moonlight, standing ... on the margins on the water', but merely objects to Moore's clumsy rendition of the scene. As his reference to Wordsworth illustrates, descriptive writing of the highest order is to be admired

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<sup>16</sup>Mills, p.221.

for its verisimilitude to nature, the product of sustained thought and accurate observation, rather than fanciful emotions. Furthermore, this was a point of view acquired several years before he came into contact with Mill and the *Westminster*. In 1818, he had forwarded to Shelley a copy of Birkbeck's *Notes on America*, commenting that: 'He is a man of vigorous intellect, who thinks deeply and describes admirably.'<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, Peacock found that Moore's work lacked this kind of authenticity: 'The truth is, the sublime is beyond his grasp; and, in aiming at it without adequate power, he only achieves, as many worthy aspirants have done before him, a pompous seizure of its close neighbour the ridiculous' (15-16). The 'sublime' had a place in literature, but only when attempted by the most accomplished authors.

In the review, Peacock appears to reflect the views of those who were shaping the identity of the *Westminster*, but it is possible that they may have been dissatisfied with the way he presented his material. John Stuart Mill, James Mill and others who were strongly interested in the principles of the *Westminster* are recorded as being disappointed with the conduct of the magazine. The younger Mill writes: 'But it is worth noting as a fact in the history of Benthamism that the periodical organ by which it was best known was from the first extremely unsatisfactory to those whose opinions on all subjects it was supposed specifically to represent.'<sup>18</sup> Certainly his *Autobiography* does not mention Peacock among those contributors who were favoured by the central core of the magazine.

Peacock's examination of Moore's flamboyant style does, however, reflect Mill's own opinion. Only a year previously, Mill had published an essay in

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<sup>17</sup>Halliford Edition, Vol. 8, p.205.

<sup>18</sup>J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 84-5.



the *Westminster* commenting generally on the preoccupation of English authors with ornamentation and literary conceits and comparing their style with that of French writers. Mill implies that the work of French authors was closer to utilitarian literary principles than their English counterparts and that they avoided extravagant embellishment, writing in the expectation of providing the reader with more than mere entertainment: 'Though many of them are highly gifted with the beauties of style, they never seem desirous of shewing off their own eloquence; they seem to write because they have something to say and not because they desire to say something.'<sup>19</sup> Peacock's summary of his objections to Moore's prose appears to agree with Mill's point of view. Arguing that the conceits and misrepresentations of fact that Moore used for effect in his text may have been pardonable in a 'cockney poet' or a magazine critic (Peacock, of course, was writing in this capacity at the time, as was J. S. Mill), they could not be tolerated in 'an author who quotes Greek, and has had opportunities of observation beyond the Regent's Park' (33). However, there is an underlying irony and lightness of tone, which will be discussed further in relation to Peacock's later review of Moore's work on Byron.

As a proficient classical scholar, Peacock may have been expected to examine Moore's command of the classics. Having identified, in the novel, a misquotation from Plato, he goes on to discuss other examples of Moore's misuse of Greek: 'He is very fond of parading scraps of Greek and on one occasion treated the public with a Greek ode, which is still an unrepented sin, as we see it figuring in every new edition of his *Anacreon*' (61-2). This was indeed a long-standing error of judgement in Peacock's eyes, as Moore's translation of the

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<sup>19</sup>*Westminster Review*, 1826, Vol. 6, p.63, from Altick, pp.136-7.

*Odes of Anacreon* had first been published in 1800. Peacock examines Moore's command of Greek in this ode, using a combination of technical terms and plain English, together with a long explanatory footnote which would have been largely incomprehensible to anyone other than a master of classical languages. Moore's culpability extends to mixing up 'iambic catalectic dimeters ... with Trochaic acatalectic dimeters ... as if they were isochronical', misusing the 'poor particles' and committing 'in short, as many sins against language, syntax, and prosody, as it was almost possible to perpetrate within so small a compass' (63-4). However, Moore is not his only target in this context.

Peacock also makes an attack on the way that reviewers in general have failed to monitor these slipping standards of scholarship:

We have noticed this ode in this place, because it is of a piece with the Greek pretensions which Mr. Moore is always putting forth: because it is, as we have said, an unrepented sin: and because it is doubly curious as illustrating, at once, the sort of thing that passes with the multitude for scholarship, and the materials of which the great herd of trading critics is made, seeing that none of the gentry who professed to review Mr. Moore's *Anacreon* took any notice of the matter. (64)

The use of the corporate 'we' is significant in that it shows that Peacock was aware of literary convention; it also implies an adherence to the ideological stance of the *Westminster*, which was to monitor the quality of literary reviews.

Fundamentally, Peacock would not have been in disagreement with the editorial intentions of the periodical. Recalling his sustained attack on the *Quarterly* in chapter thirty-nine of *Melincourt*, it is clear that he entertained a long-standing dissatisfaction with the 'great herd of trading critics', which actually predates the inception of the *Westminster*. Measured against an inflexible utilitarian framework of critical principles, he makes Moore's book the subject of some very amusing ridicule, although his arguments, even when expressed with a certain



degree of ironic humour, carry conviction. The penultimate sentence of the review is a close summary of the Benthamite position on literature. Even if *The Epicurean* had demonstrated greater literary merit, this 'would scarcely reconcile us to the total absence of any moral purpose in a work of so much pretension' (67). Here, however, Peacock subtly introduces an implicit distinction. In certain circumstances, the absence of moral purpose, in writing of an otherwise exceptionally high quality, may be forgiven. Nevertheless, for an author who aspires to literary recognition, or, indeed, even in one who has already attained this distinction, such a lack of direction is unpardonable.

Although, superficially at least, Peacock appears to have adhered faithfully to the spirit of utilitarian literary values, it is difficult to reconcile this view with what is known of his work as an author and satirist. The whole ambience of his satirical fiction leans towards a Menippean style of comic writing, which shies away from the unqualified espousal of any one particular ideology or doctrine. In the serious ideological debates in his books, his speakers are carefully arranged in a way that exposes all sides of a discussion, and no argument is brought to a dogmatic conclusion. In addition, certain aspects of the *Epicurean* review seem to undermine the apparent indignation of the author. Whilst there is no question that Peacock saw little to praise in Moore's book, the comparisons and images he uses to demolish the work are, at times, expressed with too much satirical humour to convince the reader that his intentions are totally serious. Clues to unravelling this apparent inconsistency in his work are to be found in another discussion of Moore's work, Peacock's review of the *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, the first volume of which was published in 1830.

Peacock's review of Moore's work, on this occasion, appeared in the April edition of the *Westminster Review* in the same year. As with the review of the *Epicurean*, he criticizes Moore's 'shallow sophisms and false assumptions' in a manner 'imperiously demanded of us by our sense of moral duty' to enlighten the reader of such discrepancies in the text (139). There are also characteristic attacks on Byron's accuracy in his command of classical texts and allegations of Moore's sycophancy towards both his subject and the literary world in general. However, there are indications elsewhere that, although Peacock is giving an authentic reading of the work before him, his commitment to the corporate ideology of the *Westminster* may not have been as complete as the essay implies.

This review of Moore's work opens with a general discussion of the problems a biographer faces in discriminating between the real and the 'artificial semblance' of his subject (71). Stating unequivocally that Byron 'was early distinguished by a scrupulous regard to truth', but that this had been undermined by 'the attrition of the world', Peacock cites other reminiscences of the poet, in particular those of Medwin and Hunt, as being unreliable interpretations of anecdotal biographical evidence (74). He points out that Byron often engaged in a light, playful, bantering tone, very much in the spirit of *badinage*:

Indeed, both in his writings and conversation he dealt, in his latter years especially, very largely in *mystification*; and said many things which have brought his faithful reminiscents into scrapes, by making them report, what others, knowing he never could have believed, think he never could have asserted: which are very different matters. (73)

He defines *badinage* as 'things not meant or expected to be believed, and which literal interpretation would turn into something never dreamed of by the writer', providing examples of the style taken from *Don Juan* and from the poet's



letters (81). The jests that Byron engaged in, sometimes at his own personal expense, led ultimately to embarrassment in the credulous and denial among those who knew him better. However, as Peacock points out, neither parties recognized that Byron employed the technique defensively against public intrusions into his personal life, as a means of 'playing with self-conceited credulity, or ... parrying or misleading impertinent curiosity' (75). Peacock acknowledges that Moore understood this facet of his subject's character, and, quoting with typical erudition from Aristo, appears at this point in the text to condone Byron's tendency to stretch the truth of things for his own purposes. Then there is a sudden, exaggeratedly self-righteous condemnation of any such application: 'For ourselves, we hope we shall never adopt, we certainly shall not justify, the practice. We are for the maxim of the old British bards : "The Truth against the World" ' (76). The *Westminster* may have disapproved of such practices, but Peacock, writing in other contexts, did not. The spirit of *badinage* that he recognized in Byron's work was a tool of the satirist and the seriocomic writer, one which he often employed himself, and there are glimpses of it in the style of his prose, even when he is purportedly expressing the most austere point of view.

Peacock, however, does not always treat the subjects of his reviews to such irony and ridicule, and at times puts forward opinions with earnest sincerity. Above all, he admires authorial integrity, and the style of writing that he employs in his reviews of such works is entirely free from the ironic twists he uses elsewhere. One such commentary, his review of the *Memoirs of Thomas Jefferson* (1829), published in the *Westminster Review* in 1830, exactly summarizes those qualities in writing that he considered to be most worthy of praise. In contrast to his opinion of Moore's work on Byron, he applauds the editorial technique by

which the memoirs are presented: 'The publication before us carries with it intrinsic evidence of being an honest and complete publication of all papers of public interest. The sanctity of private life is respected throughout' (146). He writes that the subject matter is of sound wisdom and encouragement to all who would 'make it their study to ameliorate the condition of their fellow-men' (146). He concludes with a harsh comparison to similar volumes produced in his own country; Jefferson's *Memoirs* present 'such a body of good sense, of careful and comprehensive investigation, of sound and dispassionate decision, of kindly feeling, of enlarged philanthropy, of spotless integrity', that they disgrace 'the soul-withering influence of our own frivolous and sycophantic literature' (184-6).

There are other indications that, as Peacock's engagement with periodical reviews developed, he came to reserve his satirical pen for fiction and verse. His essay on *Chronicles of London Bridge*, by an Antiquary (1827), which appeared in the same number of the *Westminster* as Jefferson's 'Memoirs', incorporates references to parliamentary reports and the meetings of relevant committees.<sup>20</sup> This article, meticulously researched, well-argued and informative, proves to be not so much a literary review, but an essay on public expenditure. Although it becomes clear that Peacock, and, presumably, the *Westminster*, do not support the construction of the new London Bridge, the real focus of his writing lies in his condemnation of corruption in public affairs. From his investigation, he discerns that evidence is indeed collected, but it is tailored to meet the arguments of those who stand to gain most financially from the venture; there is a public show of accumulating plans and tenders when, in fact, the architect and contractors have already been selected, and 'millions are thrown away in buildings,

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<sup>20</sup>*The Westminster Review*, Oct. 1830, Vol. 13, pp.404-15



in colonies, in baubles and incumbrances of all kinds, in order to put a few thousands into the pockets of favoured individuals' (218). The essay concludes with what may be a rare glimpse of a subjective conservatism, for in addition to corrupt practices, he did not like to see 'these sweeping changes, which give to the metropolis the appearance of a thing of yesterday, and obliterate every visible sign that connects the present generation with the ages that are gone' (219).

The degree of conservatism that is to be found in Peacock's attitude towards his contemporary culture is reflected in a concern for what he identifies as declining standards of taste: 'The public taste has changed and the supply of the market has followed the demand' (244). This comment could have equally well been applied to literature, but was written in the context of the English opera. In a review of the revised fourth edition of Lord Mount Edgcumbe's *Musical Reminiscences* (1834), written for the *London Review*, he expresses anxiety for the state of the operatic libretto.<sup>21</sup> Giving examples of 'English musical poetry -- astounding and impertinent nonsense -- answering no purpose', he compares these unfavourably with 'the poetry of the Italian Opera', which offers, 'with little or no ornament, the language of passion in its simplest form' (232). The simplicity with which old English songs were written has been corrupted by 'false sentiment, overwhelmed with imagery utterly false to nature', a situation he partly blames on 'Mr. Moore, with his everlasting "brilliant and sparkling" metaphors'. However, there is a deeper underlying social cause, 'a very general diffusion of heartlessness and false pretension' (234).

Peacock not only despised the public's taste for poor quality entertainment; he also condemned the way in which damage was done to

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<sup>21</sup> *The London Review*, April 1835, Vol. 2, pp.69-84.

individuals by the invasion of their privacy. His determination that his own work would satirize only the public *personae* and never the private concerns of his subjects has already been mentioned in chapter one. These principles are reflected in his own conduct and reiterated in his discussion of Moore's work on Byron. It was a matter of regret to him that anyone in the public interest should have to suffer intrusions into their privacy, in order to provide material for 'the prurient appetite of the reading rabble' (76). Furthermore, there is a sense of his cultural conservatism coming to the fore in his resentment at the effect that the growth of the public readership and the sway of popular taste was having on the quality of contemporary writing. In 1818, he wrote in his 'Essay on Fashionable Literature': 'This species of literature, which aims only to amuse and must be very careful not to instruct, had never so many purveyors as at present', and, averse to 'the product of reason and the bold investigation of truth', had come about as a result of intellectual idleness.<sup>22</sup> He believed that this lack of mental application, together with the need for more of 'that solid and laborious research which builds up in the silence of the closet', was undermining the stability of literature.<sup>23</sup> Work without intellectual substance was, in Peacock's view, just as transient as the fashionable tastes of the readers for whom it was produced, and he passed comment that such transitory literature was a feature of periodical publications, not because of a lack of individual talent among authors, but because 'what it has gained in breadth it has lost in depth'.<sup>24</sup>

In *Crotchet Castle*, he presents the Ap-Llymry household in terms of a rural idyll and remarks on the 'venal panegyric' of elaborate descriptions:

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<sup>22</sup> *Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, p.263.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.267.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.266-7.



We shall leave this tempting field of expatiation to those whose brains are high-pressure steam engines for spinning prose by the furlong, to be trumpeted in paid-for paragraphs in the quack's corner of newspapers; modern literature having attained the honourable distinction of sharing with blacking and macassar oil, the space which used to be monopolized by razor-strops and the lottery, whereby that very enlightened community, the reading public, is tricked into the perusal of much exemplary nonsense.'<sup>25</sup>

This is an authorial comment, not an extract from the dialogue of one of his speakers, and, in the same paragraph, he makes it clear that inordinate attention to irrelevant detail was not an indication of literary worth. Furthermore, such 'prose by the furlong' receives indiscriminate praise from those critics who worked under contract to the periodicals. Such literature is transitory and subject to the changing whim of fashion, and he likens it to commonplace commodities that attain popularity through advertising. Peacock had been long aware of practices which were designed to sell books on behalf of publishing houses connected financially to the periodicals. In 'An Essay on Fashionable Literature', he declared that: 'The success of a new work is made to depend, in a great measure, not on the degree of its intrinsic merit, but on the degree of interest the publisher's connections might have with the periodical press.'<sup>26</sup> This commercial practice, which Peacock recognized in 1818, was even more widespread by the time he published *Crotchet Castle* in 1831. Among reading audiences which were becoming more and more dependent on circulating libraries and cheap fiction, it was a strategy that Thackeray too came to question, when he took ownership of the *National Standard* in 1833.




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<sup>25</sup>Garnett, ed., p.736.

<sup>26</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, p.272.

Thackeray began his career as a newspaper owner and editor in a market that was already full of short-lived literary magazines. Many of the less successful of these consisted of random, unauthorized compilations from other papers and books, paying little attention to the quality of the material that filled their columns. Others, with wider circulations, either attracted the interest of the major publishers, who sought favour with the reviewers, or were founded partly as advertising channels by those publishing houses that had books to sell. Pearson cites Colburn's *New Monthly* as a magazine which was run, in part, to promote the sales of Colburn's new authors, and argues that many of the book reviews published in the *National Standard*, and written by Thackeray himself, focused on the mechanisms of the commercial marketing of fiction and on the aberrant relationship that this process brought into effect between the author and his reading audiences.<sup>27</sup> Thackeray's reviews, at this point of his career, came to be not so much a commentary on contemporary literature as an exposé of the advertising and commercial exploitation of fiction as a transient commodity. These processes, which he later came to satirize in *Pendennis* (1848-50), became the targets of his editorials during the *National Standard's* short history.

Pearson explores the complexities of trade relations that existed within the newspaper industry in the early 1830s and asserts that Thackeray was fully aware of the finer implications of these on his own situation as the proprietor, editor and chief contributor of a periodical:

Thackeray pronounced the independence of his reviews for the *National Standard* and situated them outside this industrial relationship. However, he recognised the ambiguity of his own editorial practice; the desire to promote the paper was, in itself, a mechanism of the market-place, and it is therefore caught in the net of commerce. Integrity is, ironically, a selling point, a form

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<sup>27</sup>Pearson, pp. 12-4.



of commercial exploitation. Reviewing could never be without a motive, especially the profit motive.<sup>28</sup>

The ambiguity that Thackeray recognised in his own practices is reflected in the ambivalent tone of his editorials and reviews. Whilst, like Peacock, he was ruthless in denouncing fiction that subscribed to fashionable trends in literature and relied on publishers' 'puffing' to create sales within a restricted market, he was acutely aware that the economic viability of the *Standard* and his own financial stability depended on 'fishing' for an editorial image that would increase his sales to the wider periodical readership. His chosen identity for the *Standard* was to present the paper as an independent review which, unfettered by publishers' interests, would offer its readers a frank, unbiased opinion on contemporary works. Hoping to appeal to a public that was tired of advertisers' cant and humbug and would genuinely welcome a renegotiated standard for literature, Thackeray was disappointed. Finding his public unwilling to purchase twopence-worth of honest opinion, he turned his disillusionment to attacking journalistic practices, using a front-page editorial column which became a regular feature of the *Standard* from September 1834.<sup>29</sup> He also continued with his narratorial experiments to find ways of circumventing the ethics of a corrupt press. Wagstaff, Yellowplush and Titmarsh, at this point of his career, were waiting in the wings.

However, Thackeray continued to write critical essays in a more serious vein. In 1837 he published, in the *Times*, an anonymous review of Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History*, which had been published earlier in the same year. The opening paragraph of the review adopts the plural pronoun, which continues in use throughout, thus upholding the convention of associating the author with

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<sup>28</sup>Pearson, p.6.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.11.

the corporate identity of the publication. He begins by acknowledging the extremes of contemporary opinion on the book, before taking a stand for the positive attributes of the work. The review goes on to emphasise Carlyle's impartiality about the events he describes, while praising the way in which the book was written.<sup>30</sup>

Thackeray then refers, in particular, to the idiosyncratic style of Carlyle's description of the fall of the Bastille:

This is prose run mad - no doubt of it - according to our notions of the sober gait and avocations of homely prose; but is there not method in it, and could sober prose have described the incident in briefer words, more emphatically, or more sensibly?<sup>31</sup>

Here he shows a perceptive appreciation of Carlyle's individual mode of writing, some years later dubbed 'Carlylese' by his critics. The style of the extracts that Thackeray uses to illustrate his point is unusual for the period; energetic and full of pace, containing sudden interjections and rhetorical questions which are interspersed among short dislocated sentences. In contrast to the usual 'sober prose' of a nineteenth-century history book, Carlyle makes frequent use of the present tense, imparting a sense of energy and immediacy to his descriptive passages. Events appear before the readers' eyes in dramatically heightened visual scenes, a running commentary of incidents as they are actually happening, rather than an historical account of events which had taken place almost half a century previously. There is the feeling that this book should be read aloud, delivered orally to a listening audience, rather than perused in silence.

Peters (1999) refers to the influence of Carlyle's prose style on Thackeray's opening paragraphs to *Catherine: A Story*, which was published in

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<sup>30</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 13, p.240.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p.242.



*Fraser's* (1839-40).<sup>32</sup> There are other instances of Carlyle's influence in his early journalism -- in particular, 'The Fêtes of July', originally published in the *New York Corsair* in 1839 and later inserted into *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840). 'The Fêtes of July' is written in an epistolary form, an emulation of earlier journalistic modes of writing which established, however spuriously, a sense of reciprocal intimacy between the eighteenth-century reader and the editor of his periodical.<sup>33</sup> Thackeray translates for the benefit of his correspondent, on this occasion the fictitious editor of the *Bungay Beacon*, a French journalist's account of the public display of mourning as 'sheer, open, monstrous, undisguised humbug'.<sup>34</sup> He finds the topic of the French Revolution and subsequent history of France so paradoxical that he suggests it should be written, not as a history by Carlyle, but by a novelist, a 'Dickens or Theodore Hook', and asks 'where is the Rabelais to be the faithful historian of the last phase of the Revolution -- the last glorious nine years of which we are now commemorating the last glorious three days'. Then, in prose reminiscent of Carlyle's version of the storming of the Bastille, he writes:

O 'Manes of July!' (the phrase is pretty and grammatical) why did you with sharp bayonets break those Louvre windows? Why did you bayonet red-coated Swiss behind that white façade and, braving canon, musket, sabre, prospective guillotine, burst yonder bronze gates, rush through that peaceful picture-gallery, and hurl royalty, loyalty and a thousand years of Kings, head-over-heels out of yonder Tuileries windows?<sup>35</sup>

Thackeray writes with rhetorical questions, a satirical parenthesis and a breathless rush of visual images which reflect his description of Carlyle's book as an 'historic painting', but with a distinctive difference of intention.<sup>36</sup> Whereas Carlyle's

<sup>32</sup>Peters, p.86.

<sup>33</sup>Klancher, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 5, p.35.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p.36.

<sup>36</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 13, p.242.

account is praised for its 'loftier and nobler impartiality', his own writing makes it clear that he can see nothing in the Revolution or its consequences worthy of celebration.

Thackeray was deeply affected by this bloody period of French history and this is a point of view which becomes apparent at the end of his critical commentary on Carlyle's book. The review concludes with the hope that those in this country who sought to repeat the experiment tried in France, would show moderation in their demands. He also makes the responsibilities of his own profession very clear:

Pert quacks at public meetings joke about hereditary legislators, journalists gibe at them, and moody starving labourers, who do not know how to jest, but can hate lustily, are told to curse crowns and coronets as the origin of their woes and their poverty, -- and so did the clever French spouters and journalists gibe at royalty, until royalty fell poisoned by their satire; and so did the screaming hungry French mob curse royalty until they overthrew it: and to what end? To bring tyranny and leave starvation, battering down Bastilles to erect guillotines, and murdering kings to set up emperors in their stead.<sup>37</sup>

The interest in this passage lies not in its apparent anti-Republicanism -- he was, after all, writing for the *Times* -- but in the way that he was already assimilating techniques of journalism, while at the same time acknowledging the power of the newspaper rhetoric in shaping public opinion. He adopts the emphasis of alliteration; the labouring classes are taught 'to curse crowns and coronets', French 'journalists gibe' at royalty, and the Bastille was battered down. One long sentence builds up to a simple question: 'and to what end?' followed by a succinct answer. Thackeray's initial examination of Carlyle's account of the French Revolution was as a piece of literature, and in it he shows that, like Peacock, he is discontented with the current superficial standards of the literary reviewer. The first-time

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<sup>37</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 13, pp.249-50.



reader of *The French Revolution* has to contend with the prejudices of 'some honest critics' who have 'formed their awful judgements after scanning half-a-dozen lines, and damned poor Mr. Carlyle's because they chanced to be lazy'.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, however, the review turns into a statement of political opinion in a straightforward address to the readers of the *Times*, which clearly equates the viewpoint of the writer with the editorial identity of the newspaper. Unlike Peacock, who was deeply engaged intellectually with the ideals of the Revolution, and whose more temperate disappointment with its outcome is mentioned later in the chapter, Thackeray makes no allowance for the original aspirations behind the insurrection. There is little humour or ambivalence in his condemnation and no satire whatsoever. In fact, he states unequivocally that satire, used indiscriminately in the context of political journalism, can be a dangerous and powerful instrument of attack.



Neither Peacock nor Thackeray was able to find a great deal of satisfaction in the state of English literature during the decades that followed the defeat of Napoleon. In 1821, Peacock complained to Shelley that 'the present state of literature is so thoroughly vile that there is scarcely any new publication worth looking at, much less buying'.<sup>39</sup> Pearson comments on Thackeray's efforts to launch the *National Standard*: 'It is perhaps the misfortune of Thackeray's magazine that it was bought and produced at a period when the literary world lacked genuine talent', and he goes on to describe the production of contemporary literature at that time as being 'formulaic'.<sup>40</sup> Just as Peacock was to complain

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<sup>38</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 13, p.241.

<sup>39</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, p.221.

<sup>40</sup>Pearson, p.10.

later, in his review of Lord Edgcumbe's *Musical Reminiscences*, that song writing had 'followed the demand' created by changing public tastes, authors had identified various literary blueprints that enabled them to sell their work. The various schools of writing that appeared at this time, the 'Silver-fork' and 'Newgate' novels, Gothic fiction and the contemporary romance, are evidence of a generation of writers who had discovered the means of satisfying readerships outside the constraints of 'high' literature with a ready supply of printed material.

Klancher writes that the reciprocity between eighteenth-century writers and their readers declined in the aftershock of the French Revolution, in ways which isolated the author and created a newly fragmented audience that was forced to reorganise in terms of ideological loyalties, social class and intellectual and literary tastes.<sup>41</sup> Assuming identities according to these divisions, audiences from the late eighteenth century came to be seen in terms of a literary hierarchy. Idealized notions of authorship, which began to develop during the early nineteenth century, did not come to the fore until the rapid expansion of periodical publishing began to make itself felt in the 1820s. Altick (1957) writes that Lamb and Leigh Hunt were instrumental in 'emotionalizing of the very idea of literature', and for them, books 'aroused emotions almost as fervent as those with which Wordsworth regarded nature'.<sup>42</sup> Although this attitude was initially confined to a close circle of writers of the period, it was diffused through the essays of Lamb, Hunt and Hazlitt, and 'literature came to be surrounded by a sentimental aura that contrasted strangely with the orthodox Benthamite view'.<sup>43</sup> As pundits of a literary culture which was almost evangelical in its intensity, Hunt, in particular, urged the

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<sup>41</sup>Chapter 3, n.10.

<sup>42</sup>Altick (1957), p.139.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.



reading habit through the pages of his journals, and this movement assumed wider proportions as the cheap, family periodicals that appeared during the 1830s echoed the cry, and reading became the fashionable spare-time occupation of the middle classes.

In contrast to this, however, there was still a strong body of opinion that was becoming increasingly alarmed by the quality of printed material flooding the literary marketplace. Hierarchical notions of literature began to develop independently of Benthamite theory, showing a preference for work that was morally didactic or geared towards self-improvement; the kind of reading material that was produced to entertain mass audiences lay outside the margins of serious criticism. Siskin, with reference to Godwin's essay 'Of History and Romance', relates this hierarchical stratification of literature to the emergence of the novel, which generated both quantitative and qualitative distinctions in writing, putting '*literature*, previously a term for all writing ... in opposition to the indiscriminate workings of *trade*'.<sup>44</sup>

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Although Peacock steadfastly adhered to the formal literary standards of his era, Thackeray, whilst entertaining his own personal ideals of '*literature*', was forced by circumstances to work within the constraints of '*trade*'. As an occasional critic of new publications, he was obliged to devise a means of reconciling the expectations of formal literary criticism with a new framework of criteria that would be relevant to the increasing tracts of literature that were being produced to serve the interests of the mass reading audiences. He achieved this, once again, by his narratorial devices, manipulating both the comic discourse of

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<sup>44</sup>Siskin, p.171.

the reviewer and distancing his own point of view, not only from that of the purported author, but also from the text under discussion. This technique, first aired in the comic review by Wagstaff in 1835 and developed by Yellowplush in 1837, was continued by the inception of Titmarsh as staff reviewer for *Fraser's Magazine*.<sup>45</sup>

'A Box of Novels' (1844) is written in the form of an essay and 'treats of the severity of critics' and its author's 'resolutions of reform in that matter'.<sup>46</sup>

Writing as Titmarsh, Thackeray uses the authorial disguise for himself and adopts the pseudonymous Oliver Yorke, editor of *Fraser's Magazine*, as his correspondent:

Some few - some very few years since, dear sir, in our hot youth, when Will the Fourth was king, it was the fashion of many young and ardent geniuses who contributed their share of high spirits to the columns of this magazine, to belabour with unmerciful ridicule almost all the writers of this country of England, to sneer at their scholarship to question their talents, to shout with fierce laughter over their faults historical, poetical, grammatical, and sentimental; and thence to leave the reader to deduce our (the critic's) own immense superiority in all the points which we questioned in all the world beside. I say *our*, because the undersigned Michael Angelo has handled the tomahawk as well as another, and has a scalp or two drying in his lodge. (398)

The introduction sets the tone of the review as comic. The name of the late monarch is abbreviated in a too familiar way and the narrator uses ironic exaggeration to depict the attitude of earlier critics in general, admitting that he too was one of the 'young and ardent geniuses' who believed utterly in their own authority. The attack he mounts on the techniques of formal criticism relates directly back to the period of Peacock's review of Moore's *Epicurean*. Titmarsh

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<sup>45</sup>W. M. Thackeray, 'A Box of Novels', *Fraser's Magazine*, Feb. 1844, Vol. 29, pp.153-69.

<sup>46</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 13, p.398. Further references to this volume will be given in the text.



refers satirically to exactly those 'faults' that Peacock, in this earlier review, found to be so exasperating, and Thackeray is taking to task those critics who had only one standard by which to review literature, a standard which, in 1844, had become largely irrelevant in the widening discourse of the literary marketplace. In 'A Box of Novels', Thackeray presents the reader with a discursive miscellany of ideas on a wide range of contemporary literature, and provides evidence of the merits of popular fiction when examined within its own context. He acknowledges the standards by which the evaluation of literature has come to be seen in hierarchical terms, but makes it clear that these criteria are not relevant as an assessment of the type of work which was currently being enjoyed by a new, popularized readership.

Commencing with Charles Lever's *Tom Burke of Ours* (1844), he places the book in a general context of Irish literature and begins by contrasting two extreme points of view, those of both the English and the Irish critics. The former, particularly the provincial press, although laudatory, misrepresent the 'Harry Lorrequer' stories by reducing them to nothing but 'side-splitting merriment', oblivious to the underlying melancholy of the text and the spirit of 'extreme delicacy, sweetness and kindness of heart' in which they are written (402). On the other hand, Irish critics prove themselves unable to accept the humour in the fiction and complain of Lever's lack of political comment and the absence of patriotic fervour. In particular, Thackeray parodies the negative tenor of contemporary criticism, as it 'finds fault with a book for what it does not give' instead of emphasizing its positive aspects:

'Lady Smigsmag's new novel is amusing, but lamentably deficient in geographical information.' 'Dr. Swishtail's "Elucidations of the Digamma" show much sound scholarship, but infer a total absence of humour.' And

'Mr. Lever's tales are trashy and worthless, for his facts are not borne out by any authority, and he gives us no information upon the political state of Ireland. Oh! our country; our green and beloved, our beautiful and oppressed! accursed be the tongue that should now speak of aught but thy wrong; withered the dastard hand that should strike upon thy desolate harp another string!' &c. &c. &c. (404)

Thackeray's parodies of the style of the formal review stress the contemporary preoccupations of literary critics. 'Geographical information' and comments 'upon the political state of Ireland' were criteria demanded by those reviewers who still adhered to notions of literature as being didactic, rather than entertaining. The satire and exaggerated rhetoric of the parodies are light-hearted in tone and the humour emphasizes Titmarsh's role as a critic outside the margins of serious literature. However, there is a strong sense that Thackeray is using Titmarsh to express a personal point of view. Written mainly in the first-person singular, the opinions put forth are, superficially, those of Titmarsh and not the collective editorial stance of *Fraser's*. When the plural 'we' or 'us' does occasionally appear, it is with the sense of an author/reader partnership, not the author as the representative of his publisher's corporate identity.

*Tom Burke of Ours* is acclaimed as a 'lively, sparkling, stirring volume', which entertains and is deservedly popular (406). However, not all reviews have been favourable, particularly in Lever's own country, and Thackeray, using Titmarsh as a mask, comments on how success for an author can be distorted by overexposure in the review publications. The 'Harry Lorrequer' books, he writes, were printed and approved: 'But his publishers sold twenty thousand of his books. He was a monster from that moment, a doomed man; if a man can die of articles, Harry Lorrequer ought to have yielded up the ghost long ago' (402-3). Charles



Lever had become a victim of his own popularity, in a cultural climate unable to acknowledge that commercial success did not necessarily equate with inferiority.

Although Thackeray had personal reservations about certain schools of popular fiction as being of unsound moral value, and his original intention in writing *Catherine: A Story* (1837) was to counter the popularity of the Newgate novel, he was able to accept that literature as entertainment had a valid place in the modern world of publishing. 'A Box of Novels' demonstrates a generous tolerance towards inaccurate scholarship and lack of moral didacticism, and Thackeray indicates the delight he takes in the pace and energy of the genre. Samuel Lover, author of a series of works entitled *£. S. D.*, which was published in parts in 1843, is praised for the vigour and incident that make up his tale, a 'romance of war, and love, and fun, and sentiment, and intrigue, and escape, and rebellion' (407). There are, however, hints that Thackeray recognizes a specious glamour in Lover's nostalgic descriptions of battle and victory, and his stirring lyrics arouse passions perhaps best laid to rest: 'Leave the brawling to the politicians and newspaper ballad-mongers. They live by it. You need not ... Don't let poets and men of genius join in the brutal chorus and lead on starving savages to murder' (411). For Thackeray, political passion and inflammatory rhetoric had no place in popular fiction.

'A Box of Novels' concludes with a review of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, which Thackeray uses to return to his primary target, the earnest and authoritarian solemnity of formal criticism:

I do not mean that the 'Christmas Carol' is quite as brilliant or self-evident as the sun at noonday; but it is so spread over England by this time, that no sceptic, no *Fraser's Magazine*, - no, not even the godlike and ancient *Quarterly* itself (venerable, Saturnian, big-wigged dynasty!) could review it down. 'Unhappy people! Deluded race!' one hears the cauliflowered god

exclaim, mournfully shaking the powder out of his ambrosial curls. 'What strange new folly is this? What new deity do you worship? Know ye what ye do? Know ye that your new idol hath little Latin and less Greek? Know ye that he has never tasted the birch at Eton, nor trodden the flags of Carfax, nor paced the academic flats of Trumpington? Know ye that in mathematics or logics this wretched ignoramus is not fit to hold a candle to a wooden spoon? See ye not how, from describing low humours, he now, forsooth, will attempt the sublime? Discern ye not his faults of taste, his deplorable propensity to write blank verse? Come back to your venerable and natural instructors. Leave this new low and intoxicating draught at which ye rush, and let us lead you back to the old wells of classic lore. Come and repose with us there. We are your gods; we are the ancient oracles and no mistake.' (417).

This sharply satirical reference to the *Quarterly Review* puts this periodical squarely in the centre of Titmarsh's argument against reactionary and outmoded standards of evaluating popular literature. The image of the godlike critic with his powdered wig of judgement reflects the lingering power of cultural prejudices rooted in eighteenth-century ideals. However, the author is no longer an educated man of letters pursuing scholarly ideals, but one now set firmly in the midst of a new culture where literature can supply the pleasure of the moment. Conservative modes of criticism can only condemn contemporary fiction, but some authors have the power to transcend these outdated criteria. Thackeray implies that popular fiction was an important feature of a new reading society and traditional values in literature would have to be adapted to encompass new styles of writing and authorship.



Championship of the popular readership was a topic that Thackeray was to return to when he reviewed Laman Blanchard's life and work for *Fraser's Magazine*. In 'A Brother of the Press on the History of a Literary Man, Laman Blanchard, and Chances in the Literary Profession' (1846), Thackeray's views on popular literature are made more explicit. Assuming the now familiar epistolary



form, the review is presented as a letter from Titmarsh to the Rev. Francis Sylvester [Mahoney], pseudonymously known as Father Prout, a former Jesuit and non-practising priest of the Catholic faith, who had been an early contributor to *Fraser's* under the editorship of Maginn. In 1846, Mahoney was currently deployed in Rome as a correspondent for Dickens's *Daily News*. Thackeray's choice to make him the focus of his appeal for the critical recognition of authors of light literature may have been based on the knowledge that Mahoney represented both sides of the argument raised in 'A Box of Novels'. Highly educated in the classical tradition, he was also a fellow journalist, producing work which was a combination of scholarly erudition, humour and satire.

In 'A Brother of the Press', Titmarsh argues that reviewers should strive for a 'liberty of conscience against any authority, however great', and poses the question: 'Why should not the day have its literature? Why should not authors make light sketches? Why should not the public be amused daily or frequently by kindly fictions?' (467). He goes on to make a plea for honesty among those who, like himself, are literary practitioners and for whom writing, in common with other trades, is their daily work:

In some instances you reap Reputation along with Profit from your labour, but Bread, in the main, is the incentive. Do not let us try to blink this fact, or imagine that the men of the press are working for their honour and glory, or go onward impelled by an irresistible inflatus of genius. 'If only men of genius were to write, Lord help us! how many books would there be? How many people are there even capable of appreciating genius? Is Mr. Wakely's or Mr. Hume's opinion about poetry worth much? As much as that of millions of people in this honest stupid empire; and they have a right to have books supplied to them as well as the most polished and accomplished critics have. (468)

The point of view expressed here is in direct contrast to esoteric ideals of writing and authorship as the privilege of the intellectual classes, and professes the validity

of literature that is designed to appeal to the tastes and interests of a popular readership. These new groups of readers should have access to the books they choose to read, just as in an open market writers have an unrestricted right to supply them. Thackeray was fully aware that the qualitative distinctions drawn by reviewers were in conflict with his own status as a practising journalist. As Titmarsh, he writes in opposition to three particular hierarchical trends in literary criticism. In the first instance, he deflates the notion that all writers should claim to aspire to literary recognition or, as Peacock called it, the 'Temple of Fame'. He then counters the emotionalization of the idea of literature as something almost sacred, a feature of the work of Lamb and Hunt mentioned earlier in this chapter. Finally, he sets himself firmly on the side of the reading public -- that they should be allowed to follow their own tastes and interests -- against a climate of opinion that decreed all reading matter should be morally uplifting, didactic and artistically acclaimed.

Altick (1957) describes how the 'lower orders' of society, which accounted for a wide proportion of the public readership, were very much at the mercy of religious and utilitarian publishing houses and their reading matter contained little that could be described as entertaining.<sup>47</sup> People obliged to work for a living, and this included a large sector of the growing middle classes, were perceived to have no need for amusement. Evangelical and religious publications gradually gave way to the self-improvement movement, and cheap printed material suffered from class constraints imposed on it by the illiberal attitudes of a literary hierarchy. This situation did not show much sign of change throughout the middle of the nineteenth century, and later came to be energetically challenged by Dickens

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<sup>47</sup>Altick (1957), p. 137.



with *Household Words* (1849) and *Hard Times* (1854). As Altick points out, the acknowledgement that reading could be a 'simple, pleasurable relaxation' was a slow process, but eventually, 'The icecap of evangelical seriousness and utilitarian distrust of the feelings was melted by the attitudes we associate with the "romantic" temper'.<sup>48</sup>

In 'A Brother of the Press', Thackeray is quick to defend Blanchard's achievements. Attacking Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton's subordination to hierarchical prejudice, he supplies a quotation from his 'kind and affecting biographical notice of our dear friend'. Lytton writes: ' "He [Blanchard] neglected his talents: he frittered away in fugitive publications time and genius which might have led to the publication of a great work " ' (470). Thackeray is quick to defend Blanchard, underlining his argument that there is a place for a literature of the popular culture: 'I think his education and habits, his quick easy manner, his sparkling, hidden fun, constant tenderness and brilliant good humour, were best employed as they were' (470). As a professional writer working in the epicentre of the mass media publishing industry, Thackeray saw, in Blanchard's work, a parallel to his own. He was able to acknowledge that light literature was of greater relevance to those members of the public who were new to the reading habit, rather than those whose privileged circumstances allowed them access to works of intellectual and artistic excellence. This was a recognition of the realities of the publishing market. The demand for transitory reading material, via the periodical and cheap novel, was not incompatible with traditional literary standards, and the marketplace had enough space to accommodate both.

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<sup>48</sup> Altick (1957), p.138.

In a social system which offered widely differing opportunities for education and leisure, readers, privileged or otherwise, entertained a diversity of cultural tastes and conflicting demands. Thackeray may have been planning his own ideal of authorship, a work 'of genius' from which he might yet 'reap Reputation'. Meanwhile, as Titmarsh, he was determined to defend the literature of a marketplace outside the constraints of a cultural minority.



Both Peacock and Thackeray were fluent in European languages. Peacock's knowledge of French was largely self-taught, gained from the literature of the period; Thackeray's came from the firsthand experience of living and working abroad. In 1835, *The London Review* published an article by Peacock entitled 'French Comic Romances'.<sup>49</sup> *The Paris Sketch Book of Mr. M. A. Titmarsh*, a compilation of magazine articles from various publications, with some new additions, appeared in 1840 and included a chapter 'On Some French Fashionable Novels: With a Plea for Romances in General'. Written only five years apart and, with due allowance being made that the form of the 'comic romance' is a rather different concept to that of a 'fashionable novel', these reviews are still a clear demonstration of the two writers' contrasting attitudes and cultural values.

In 'French Comic Romances', Peacock begins by comparing the work of Pigault le Brun and Paul de Kock. The main points of difference he identifies between the two writers are remarkably similar to the features that distinguish his own writing from that of Thackeray. He writes of Pigault le Brun: 'The political and religious opinions of the author are kept always prominent; and we find him a

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<sup>49</sup>'French Comic Romances', *The London Review*, Vol. 2, October 1835, pp. 69-84.



sturdy enemy to priestcraft and tyranny throughout.<sup>50</sup> Like le Brun, Peacock's own fiction explored opinion, often political, sometimes theological, usually as subjects for satirical investigation, and he frequently made use of topical political situations and events in his work. His theological opinions, too, lay implicit in his satire of the clerical profession, a mode of writing he identifies as a traditional feature of French comic fiction and one which he shares only with le Brun, for the 'ecclesiastics, who cut a very conspicuous figure among the buffoons of Pigault le Brun, as they have done in French comic tales of all ages ... are never exhibited by Paul de Kock, either for good or for ill' (257). In Paul de Kock's fiction, Peacock maintains that 'a theological opinion is here and there slightly indicated, but a political opinion never; the era of his narratives is marked by manners only, not by political events and opinions' (256). De Kock's characters act out their scenarios against a background of 'Sunday excursions of the Parisians -- the village dances and gaieties of Sunday evening', his only vague and non-specific references to government being used as a means of creating some kind of context for the narrative (256).

While his own choice of subject matter bears a closer comparison to the work of le Brun, Peacock is careful not to make a qualitative distinction between the two writers and, recalling that le Brun was writing at the time of the Revolution, suggests a possible reason for 'so remarkable a difference' in their work:

Whether the regular succession of disappointments which have been inflicted on the friends of liberty, in the persons of Robespierre, Napoleon, the Bourbons, and Louis Phillipe, has, among a very large class of readers, converted the bright hopes of the earlier days of the revolution into a

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<sup>50</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 9, p.256. Further references to this volume are given in the text.

sceptical indifference to their possible realization, is a point we reserve for future consideration. (257)

He points out that both writers have much in common and share similar liberal opinions, but le Brun, writing concurrently with the political upheavals in France, engaged more deeply with the ideologies of his period, rather than de Kock, whose most productive period of writing began in 1820. This 'regular succession of disappointments' is precisely the same as the disillusionment referred to by Thackeray, as discussed above, in his review of Carlyle's *French Revolution*, when he expresses a strong sense of disgust at what he perceives to be one form of tyranny replaced by another. Whereas Peacock appeared to find the outcome of the revolution a matter of regret, Thackeray, perhaps, was one of the large class of readers who were victims of the 'sceptical indifference' to the underlying political ideals, and saw the Revolution as tragic and futile.

Thackeray's review of Carlyle's *French Revolution* had been written anonymously for the *Times* newspaper. His essay 'On Some French Comic Romances', written more informally as Titmarsh, was first published in the *Paris Sketch Book* in 1840 and exhibits a more frivolous tone. Just as the introduction to 'A Box of Novels' appears to be a direct contradiction of Peacock's critical stance in 'Moore's Epicurean', Thackeray's 'Plea for Romances in General', which begins the essay, could have been written in direct contradiction to Peacock's albeit ironic disparagement of the female readership. Thackeray finds justification for reading novels on the basis that fiction can provide a verisimilitude to life, which is missing in factual historical accounts:

If then, ladies, the bigwigs begin to sneer at the course of our studies, calling our darling romances foolish, trivial, noxious to the mind, enervators of intellect, fathers of idleness and whatnot, let us at once take the high ground and say, -- Go you to your own employments, and to such dull studies as



you fancy; go and bob for triangles from the Pons Asinorum; go enjoy your dull black-draughts of metaphysics; go fumble over history books, and dissert upon Herodotus and Livy ...<sup>51</sup>

Here Thackeray again puts forward the idea that writers should cater for the tastes of all sections of the reading public. Peacock's ironic view of the female readership is now reversed. Thackeray continues with the argument that fiction, as a source of insight into the human condition, may be deemed to be of equal importance as the 'contemptible catalogues of names and places, that can have no moral effect upon the reader' (81). He admits that 'the writer has not so much to do with works political, philosophical, historical, metaphysical, scientific, theological', entertaining a preference for novels, but only in so far as these texts reflect an accurate picture of the context in which they are set (82). English authors, and here he refers to Lady Morgan and Mrs. Trollope, who write of 'tea-parties in the French capital, begin to prattle about French manners and men,' but cannot give a true rendering of their subject. On the other hand, 'a Frenchman might have lived a thousand years in England, and never could have written "Pickwick" ' (84).

Both Peacock and Thackeray discuss extracts from French authors, which illustrate their respective literary expectations. Peacock selects a work by Henri du Laurens, *Le Compère Mathieu*, written in the Rabelasian tradition and first published in 1766:

The design of running a tilt at predominant opinions is manifest throughout this work; but it is by no means evident what use the author, Du Laurens, proposed to make of his victory, or what doctrines he wished to exalt in the place of those he aimed to overthrow.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 5, p.80. Further references to this volume are given in the text.

<sup>52</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 9, pp.262-3.

This description could be applied just as appropriately to Peacock's own prose satires. The Compère, with a cosmopolitan collection of companions, sets out on a journey. Peacock writes that, in common with his uncle the Révérendissime Père Jean who accompanies him, he has 'thrown off the yoke of all the prejudices belonging to religion and law, but has some philosophical notions of right and wrong of his own, which he wishes to substitute for the opinions by which the mass of mankind is misled.'<sup>53</sup> The adventures which befall this ill-assorted band of travellers are solved or evaded according to the differing philosophies of the Compère and his uncle. These two characters are in frequent dispute over their ethical standards right up to the death of the Compère which occurs in Paris. Fearing for his immortal soul, he returns to the faith and his uncle, in disgust at this turnabout, becomes a captain of dragoons. No conclusions are reached concerning the merit or otherwise of the protagonist's opinions and readers are left to make their own judgements. Peacock recognizes the influences of Rabelais in du Laurens's work. To the twenty-first-century reader of Bakhtin, Relihan and Kaplan, *Le Compère Mathieu* is also identifiable as a Menippean satire. The voice of its naive narrator, the simple-minded and credulous Jérôme, tells the story of a bizarre journey which forces the protagonist to explore established philosophy, only to arrive at an ambivalent and open ending where nothing is resolved.

Thackeray's stated aim, in writing 'On Some French Fashionable Novels,' was to introduce English readers to some new French writers. Reviewing *Les Ailes d'Icare* by Monsieur de Bernard, Thackeray adopts the more formal first-person plural and says of de Bernard: 'He is more remarkable than any other French author, to our notion, for writing like a gentleman: there is ease, grace, and

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<sup>53</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 9, p.265.



*ton* in his style, which if we judge aright, cannot be discovered in Balzac, Soulie, or Dumas.<sup>54</sup> He sketches his characters in a 'sparkling, gentlemanlike way', and gives a 'lively and malicious account of their manners', in a very different style to the 'laboured descriptions of all sorts of unimaginable wickedness', common in the work of other French writers (84). It is M. de Bernard's ability to suggest *débauch*, rather than write of it explicitly, which appeals to Thackeray, and he implores the reader to judge Bernard's characters, 'not so much in the words in which he describes them, as by the unconscious testimony that the words altogether convey' (92). This 'unconscious testimony' speaks of morals and customs very different to those that the English readers of the *Paris Sketch Book* would find acceptable, but which, nonetheless, illustrate the ability of the novelist to portray aspects of the life of a nation that would never be revealed in a non-fictional account. This is, in effect, an extension to his comments on the work of Mrs. Trollope and Lady Morgan above, whose tea-parties may be set in Paris, but are inevitably portrayed as very British. It is with a coy irony that Titmarsh concludes his account with a scandalized reference to one elderly duchess, about to take a new lover, and another 'with a fourth lover, tripping modestly among the ladies and returning the gaze of the men by veiled glances full of coquetry and attack' (97).

What emerges from the essay most strongly, however, is that Thackeray's interest focuses on the implicit picture of French society and manners embedded in the fiction, and this theme is reflected in his own writing in both the periodical contributions and the novels. Opinions, principles, prejudices and the

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<sup>54</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 5, p.93. Further references to Vol. 5 are given in the text.

more profound moral questions are raised implicitly through the incidence of character and action in the narrative, but, unlike Peacock, he rarely examines these in depth. When Thackeray seeks to make his readers question their commonplace values and superficial judgements, he does not elaborate on the ideological foundations of society, but devises a fictional microcosm in which his characters -- and, frequently, the narrators too -- display their foolishness, naiveté and defects of judgement against the backdrop of the world they have, in part, helped to create.



Peacock's reviews examined in this chapter span a period from 1817 to 1835 and those of Thackeray extend for a further decade until 1846. This period, effectively, provides a summary of Peacock's attitude towards literature and is crucial in illustrating the development of Thackeray's authorial identity. These writings also give a unique insight into some of the intellectual and commercial pressures brought to bear on writers, in the context of a radically changing publishing market. In addition, the viewpoints of both authors, set side by side, illustrate a broad spectrum of the tensions and cultural prejudices that divided literary criticism at this time.

Peacock and Thackeray found themselves in conflict with other reviewers of the period and both had reason to question contemporary modes of literary criticism. Peacock's critical essays and his satirical fiction make frequent references to the reactionary politics of the established reviews, the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*. As shown above, there is also an implicit sense in his work that even the utilitarian ideologies of the *Westminster Review*, which published much of his work in this field, did not entirely satisfy his expectations. In common with



Thackeray, he recognized that the literary reviewers were often under too much commercial pressure to be totally unbiased in their judgements, and for Peacock, their lack of scholarship and knowledge was a cause for concern. Unlike Peacock, however, who remained faithful to his ideals of scholarship and literature, Thackeray was able to make concessions to the demands of new groups of readers and the market which sought to supply them. In order to do so, without undermining his own integrity, he employed narratorial devices which allowed him to speak his mind and offer a positive approach to work which lay outside the margins of established literary ideals.

Publishing their reviews in the context of a commercial marketplace, both Peacock and Thackeray understood the necessity of a superficial subservience to the corporate identity of the periodical concerned. However, although the style and presentation of their work was often adapted to editorial requirements, neither changed his fundamental ideals of authorship. For Peacock, closeted in his study, these ideals were scholarly and intellectual, the product of much solitary study and centuries of literary tradition. Thackeray also entertained traditional ideals of authorship, but his daily work as a practising journalist forced him to acknowledge the transitory literature of the day and the commercial demands of publishing. Writing as Titmarsh, he was able to negotiate a new set of standards for his work, which did not compromise his beliefs in the dignity of literature.

In the first chapter, we found that the editor of *The Spirit of the Public Journals* could not entirely avoid political comment in his selection of light-hearted contributions for the 1824 anthology. In the same way, it has proved difficult, so far, to focus exclusively on the literary and cultural context of Peacock

and Thackeray's writings. Political comment has inevitably intruded and the next chapter will investigate both writers' responses to contemporary government policies and historical events.



## Chapter Six: No Final Word

This chapter investigates the ways in which Peacock and Thackeray used satire in response to the political challenges of the first half of the nineteenth century. Peacock's satire, in this context, is almost entirely contained within *Melincourt*, *Maid Marian* and *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, and he uses fictional characters and situations to explore the underlying concepts of established modes of government. Initially, the predominantly social context of Thackeray's early writings, and his preoccupation with 'national peculiarities', appear to take precedence over political questions.<sup>1</sup> However, this work, which was distributed throughout a wide range of periodical contributions and publishing outlets, also makes reference to contemporary issues and events.

Dyer has traced a relationship between satirical writing, political ideology and the commercial world of publishing, highlighting the conflicts that this produced in Peacock's prose fictions, as he sought to reconcile the radical discontent of his social circle, while retaining his own distanced impartiality and a sense of gentlemanly propriety.<sup>2</sup> Peacock's association with a group of early nineteenth-century intellectuals has already been acknowledged, and his letters to Shelley, during the latter's residence in Italy, make frequent references to political questions and the contemporary condition of England. Butler views Shelley's arrival in Marlow, where he joined Peacock and established a connection with Leigh Hunt and his family, as widening an already established circle of writers whose predominant interests were literary, 'virtually a school, a dominant force in English poetry in the next few, rich years'.<sup>3</sup> However, this presents an incomplete

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<sup>1</sup> Ray, *The Uses of Adversity*, p.350.

<sup>2</sup> Dyer, pp. 98-9.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, p. 103.

picture, as the group was not exclusively literary and its members were representative of a much broader spectrum of cultural interests. More recently, Cox has placed a stronger political emphasis on the work of its members, by identifying Hunt as central to the organization of the circle and his highly politicized, but strictly non-partisan, *Examiner* as the 'textual home' of the group.<sup>4</sup>

The *Examiner* was, as Cox makes clear by quoting Hunt's own words, intended to be distinguished for its radical views and by the quality of its contributions:

Whether pursuing government oppression, religious prejudice, and 'the spirit of money-getting', offering dramatic reviews by Hunt and Hazlitt, providing commentary on the visual arts by Robert Hunt and Haydon, or publishing poems by Hunt, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, Lamb, Reynolds and Smith, the *Examiner* was consistently lively and interesting and continually committed to its program of 'Reform in Parliament, liberality of opinion in general (especially freedom from superstition), and a fusion of literary taste into all subjects whatsoever.'<sup>5</sup>

The concept that politics were inextricably linked to the cultural arena had already been established among Hunt's immediate associates and the readers of the *Examiner* during the first decade of the magazine's publication (1808-1818). In 1812, it had been one of the most successful journals of its day, having 'higher sales than any of its competitors'.<sup>6</sup> Although some readers felt that the *Examiner's* radical tone had softened following Hunt's imprisonment (1813-15), and there is some justification for believing that he did retreat from overt political confrontation at this time, he was successful in developing an editorial practice that was anti-didactic, but which, nevertheless, sought to achieve the aims of Parliamentary Reform and promoting liberal opinion without an obvious defiance

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<sup>4</sup> Cox, p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.42.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



of the law. The *Examiner*, throughout the years of Peacock's connection with the Hunt circle, was established on a broader cultural framework than previously, and although it still maintained an appeal to middle-class liberals, it had relinquished the more intensely radical positions of the day to the popular press.

At the time that Peacock was introduced into the Hunt circle, he was a reader of periodicals, rather than a contributor to this portion of the publishing market. As an author, his favoured mode of publication was, as yet, firmly entrenched in the tradition of the bound volume destined for the library bookshelf. He had just published *Melincourt* and was completing *Rhododaphne*, his last serious attempt to make a name for himself as a poet. In chapter two, the discussion of *Melincourt* focused on the book as a combination of Menippean satire and a parody of romance. However, there is also evidence that Peacock was, at this time, broadening the literary and intellectual themes of his prose satires, and experimenting with methods by which he could comment on the politics of the period.

*Melincourt*, as a political satire, has been criticized for sacrificing the impact of its attack on parliamentary representation, corruption and reactionary politics by diverting the reader's attention to the satire of more general ideological and cultural issues. Spedding, writing in the *Edinburgh Review*, felt that *Melincourt* was actually two books, one of which explored the reform issue while the other focused on the literary themes of chivalry and romance.<sup>7</sup> Mills challenges this as an over-simplification of an 'ambitious experiment', which omits the significance of the dialogues between Fax and Forester and the apparently

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<sup>7</sup> Spedding, *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 68, (Jan 1839), pp. 445-6, from H. Mills, p.99.

irreconcilable ideologies of Malthus and Romanticism.<sup>8</sup> This juxtaposition of political satire, Malthusian philosophy and parodic romance has been regarded as excessive, and Butler is of the opinion that it 'has been agreed, virtually without a dissenting voice, that *Melincourt* is Peacock's failure. It was of course a political failure, a fact which to Peacock would have mattered a good deal.'<sup>9</sup> Burns, discussing the book from an aesthetic point of view, overlooks the important fact that *Melincourt* was *both* a parodic Romance *and* a political satire. In particular, he echoes the main body of critical opinion with his condemnation of the Mainchance Villa chapter. Finding it awkwardly placed and disturbing the balance of the third volume of the book, he writes that his 'main contention' is that the 'impetuous pantomime' at the home of Paperstamp has a reductive effect on Forester's acceptance by Anthelia.<sup>10</sup> This interpretation sets the book firmly in the context of the 'romance' and fails to see it in the main generic context of Peacock's work, which was, after all, satire.

At a first glance, there may be some justification for these confused critical reactions to *Melincourt*, which arise largely from the episodic form in which the book is constructed. Some of the narrative interludes inserted into volume three would, with very minor modifications, read as short prose satires in their own right, if presented in the columns of the periodical press. In a work of fiction, according to the conventions of the period, the numerous disconnected topics introduced, explored and discarded would have been considered as detrimental to the continuity of the narrative. However, it has already been emphasized, in chapter two, that *Melincourt* makes sense stylistically when read as

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<sup>8</sup> Mills, p.100.

<sup>9</sup> Butler, p.97.

<sup>10</sup>Burns, p.51.



a Menippean satire. Peacock's use of fantastical situations, the bizarre adventures of Sir Oran Haut-ton throughout the book, together with the means by which the author appears to undermine his own discourse in the argument for Parliamentary Reform, are all very much in the tradition of the sub-genre.

Critical opinion, which was, until recently, circumscribed by earlier eighteenth-century traditions of satire and the novel, has underestimated the dexterity with which Peacock controls his subject matter. The deceptively casual insertion of political themes into the narrative is just as adroitly managed as the cultural and ideological debates in *Headlong Hall* and *Nightmare Abbey*, and the brevity of these episodic interludes, as a feature of the Menippean style in which the book is written, secures the impact of the satire. References to the injustices of the West Indian sugar trade, paper currency, rural poverty and the centrally placed focus on parliamentary reform, together with a strongly satirical response to the reactionary views of the press and its lack of censure of the corrupt practices of contemporary government, indicate that Peacock, in 1817, was moving away from the satire of fashionable intellectual preoccupations and into the political arena.

The final volume of *Melincourt* has provoked more critical contention than any other aspect of the book. Butler attributes the increased political focus of the last fourteen chapters to the worsening condition of national affairs during the winter of 1816-17, when Peacock was in the last stages of writing the book.

Widespread fears of revolution, exacerbated by the Tory press, and calls from the conservative newspapers to curtail the widening circulation of Cobbett's 'twopenny trash', initiated concerns that the freedom of the press was in jeopardy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Butler, p.91.

Peacock, never a disciple of Cobbett, but certainly a regular reader of the *Political Register*, demonstrates sympathy with his aims. Butler writes: 'Yet by and large, the political goals of *Melincourt* are identifiably Cobbett's goals, and his presence is felt powerfully in the last volume which Peacock was finishing off just as Cobbett's dispute with the government press came to a head.'<sup>12</sup> As a political satire, *Melincourt* may have been misunderstood, but as a Menippean investigation into the polemics of the post-Waterloo era, it is a provocative and carefully controlled commentary on some of the most pressing controversies of the pre-reform era.

The appearance of *Nightmare Abbey* in 1818 implies that Peacock was temporarily in retreat from political satire. Butler attributes this change of direction to 'the date and circumstances of its writing', which took place during the period of Peacock's early assimilation into Hunt's cultural circle, with its predominantly literary interests.<sup>13</sup> It has been seen how *Headlong Hall* grew out of Peacock's reactions to the Bracknell group, and for a limited period, he now found irresistible material for satire in the literary preoccupations of some of his new associates. However, as Cox points out, the Hunt circle was already under attack from *Blackwood's* and other conservative reviews, as much for its perceived political challenge as for 'its assault on traditional literary style and the hierarchy of genres'.<sup>14</sup> Hunt's stated objective for the *Examiner*, the 'fusion of literary taste into all subjects whatsoever', undoubtedly included politics.<sup>15</sup> In 1822, he was to write in his Preface to *The Liberal* that, even without a political objective, 'all

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<sup>12</sup>Butler, p.93.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.103.

<sup>14</sup>Cox, p.33.

<sup>15</sup>n.5 above.



writing now-a-days must involve something to that effect, the connexion between politics and all other subjects of interest having been discovered, never again to be done away'.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, some of the work produced by members of the Hunt circle was, politically, very focused. In 1818, Shelley was producing the polemical 'Hermit of Marlow' pamphlets on parliamentary reform, as well as working on *Laon and Cythna*. In addition, anyone like Peacock and Shelley, who were regular readers of Cobbett's *Political Register* and Hunt's *Examiner*, could not for long ignore the political ferment that followed the repressive legislation of 1817. In the two books, which followed the publication of *Nightmare Abbey*, Peacock experimented with new forms of narrative structure, in order to secure a stronger focus for his political themes. Discarding the mode of the Socratic dialogue and substituting the fictional framework of popular folk-tale, he demonstrates, in *Maid Marian*, how satire may be used to expose errors in traditional concepts of power, in the particular context of the reactionary policies of a contemporary government which threatened a return to the political injustices of pre-1789 Europe. In *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, the novelistic structure is extended: Peacock uses old myths and legends as images to illustrate political themes which have a much wider relevance in a broader historical context.

The planning of *Maid Marian* has been well documented. Peacock's private papers and letters, never prolific and rarely extant, leave a comparatively generous account of his work during this period. The earliest references to the book in his diary for July and August 1818 indicate that it was Peacock's original intention to write a parodic romance, perhaps drawing attention to the contemporary passion for medievalism, with a sprinkling of those topics which

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<sup>16</sup>Quoted from Gilmartin, p.195.

Saintsbury called Peacock's 'red rags and black beasts in general - the Universities, the clergy, the profession of letters ... above all anything in the nature of a fad or craze or merely fashionable taste.'<sup>17</sup> On 4 August 1818, Peacock reported in his diary that he was 'fishing for a scheme for a romance' and had read 'some of the *Old English Ballads*'.<sup>18</sup> Two days later, he was so excited by the project as to be unable to 'read or write', although, at this stage, there is nothing in the 'Rivers castles forests abbies monks maids kings and banditti' dancing before him, which actually refers to the Robin Hood legends as central to his ideas (440). However, the entry for 12 August records that he had read 'ballads about Robin Hood'. These have been identified as Joseph Ritson's *Robin Hood, a collection of all the ancient poems, songs and ballads now extant relative to that celebrated outlaw* (1775). Garnett draws attention to Mayoux's analysis of the close parallels between Peacock's work and Ritson's collection of ballads.<sup>19</sup> Butler builds on the connection by indicating the political sympathies Peacock would have shared with Ritson's radical view of Robin as an ideological hero.<sup>20</sup>

Peacock's letters to Shelley, written during the actual composition of *Maid Marian*, show an increase in political comment and a growing state of dissatisfaction with the current condition of England. On 15 September, he refers to an article in the *Edinburgh Review*, 'the cream of which is, that the grand panacea for the national grievances is to bring the Whigs again into power, without reforming the Parliament!' -- to which he adds: 'You remember that the

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<sup>17</sup>Thomas Love Peacock, *Headlong Hall, Nightmare Abbey*, (London: Macmillan, 1896), p. x.

<sup>18</sup>*Halliford Edition*, Vol. 8, pp.439-40. Further references to Vol. 8 are given in the text.

<sup>19</sup>Garnett ed., pp.440-1.

<sup>20</sup>Butler, pp.143-5.



grand remedy for pauperism proposed by this same review was to imbue every man with his Bible' (205-6). By November, he is more explicitly critical of what he sees as power wrongly used. Writing of Tasso, the sixteenth-century Italian poet who was believed to have been unjustly incarcerated as a lunatic because of his passion for the Duke of Este's wife, Peacock says:

I am afraid you judge too well of the modern world in saying that no similar iniquity could happen now. Think of the dungeons of the Spanish Patriots alone; but I could accumulate a pile of instances in which public opinion is powerless. Think of Ney and Labedoyere, and the murder of Derby, and Castlereagh in Ireland. (208)

The same letter contains the first mention of his intentions to make *Maid Marian* a political satire: 'I am writing a comic Romance of the Twelfth Century, which I shall make the vehicle of much oblique satire on all the oppressions that are done under the sun' (209). His next letter continues to express disillusionment with the state of the country as he celebrates the outcome of a capital trial for bank-note forgery, in which the jury, making a stand against hired informers, rejected the evidence of the bank inspectors and acquitted the four defendants. Peacock is uncharacteristically exultant, although there is a suspicion of parody in his response, as well as a foreshadowing of the collapse of the Royal Embankment of Gwaelod, which was to appear a decade later in *The Misfortunes of Elphin*: 'The myrmidons of corruption are aghast. Every new step of the sounding foot of Time makes the pillars of their rotten edifice tremble; it is dislocated in all its joints, and will very soon fall to pieces, amidst the shouts of the world' (212).

*Maid Marian* was written, therefore, during a period when liberal thinkers like Peacock, and others who associated with Shelley and Hunt, were becoming intensely aware of the reactionary nature of government policies.

Although the Massacre at St. Peter's Fields, Manchester, was still some months in

the future, there had been, since 1815, at least four major incidents and several minor ones when those who attempted to challenge government repression had met with military resistance and arrest. However, incidents of violence and a perceived threat of revolution did not cause Peacock or Shelley to modify their beliefs. Like others in the Hunt circle, they kept faith with their liberal principles; they believed the bloodshed in France to be an unfortunate aberration in the progress of liberty, but for them, the ideals that lay behind the Revolution were fundamentally just and sound. At this point in history, a return to eighteenth-century aristocratic rule was unthinkable, and the reactionary policies of Lord Liverpool's government, which followed the peace of 1815, were very much a symptom of paranoia, turning every insurrection or demand for reform into evidence of imminent revolution.

Felton argues that, in *Maid Marian*, Peacock 'attacks the reactionary post-war government of his time', but does not deal with his subjects of satire in any depth.<sup>21</sup> However, it will be shown later in this chapter that Peacock's distrust of hereditary rule, the abuse of privilege and the ambivalent role that the church played in upholding this, are not dealt with superficially. His method, as in his other satires, was to expose a series of irreconcilable questions, in this case leaving the reader to come to an understanding that the political life of the nation was founded on a series of false assumptions and traditions. As a writer in the Menippean tradition, he was unable to comply with critical expectations that the satirist must resolve the questions he provokes. Although *Maid Marian* is presented as an innocuous recounting of some popular folk legends, and the book was often read as such, being later adapted for stage performance as a comic

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<sup>21</sup>Felton, p.169.



operetta, some of the themes that Peacock examines in the text are intensely political, particularly when viewed in the context of the period when the work was begun.



*Maid Marian*, conceived with such enthusiasm and energy during the summer of 1818, was abandoned three months later in December, when almost finished. Four more years were to elapse before the book was eventually completed and submitted for publication. In general, critical opinion has argued that Peacock's appointment to the East India Company in early 1819, and his subsequent marriage, interrupted the production of the book and, no doubt, his transition from the status of a leisured gentleman of letters to the responsibilities of family life and regular employment required some adjustment. However, work at India House was spasmodic, owing to the intermittent nature of the arrival of the post from India and Peacock did find time, in the interim, to write and publish 'The Four Ages of Poetry' and the poem 'Rich and Poor'.

It may have been that the reason for suspending the writing of *Maid Marian* was not the new demands on his time, but a growing awareness that what he had actually written might well prove to be too strong for the contemporary publishing market. *Maid Marian* was a satire which cut so close to the bone of contemporary politics that it was not completed and published until four years after its inception. Although Peacock could scarcely be identified as a potential revolutionary, and there is no evidence that the Hunt circle ever set out to organize themselves politically, the united strength of the underlying ideologies of the group

had already alarmed the Tory press and, as Cox points out, 'Hunt knew everyone from William Wordsworth to William Hone'.<sup>22</sup>

In the political context of the post-Waterloo period, Peacock's satire could have been viewed as constituting an attack on the established government, and prosecution for seditious libel was still a realistic threat in 1818. The previous year had seen the flight of Cobbett to America in order to avoid arrest under the suspension of Habeas Corpus, and William Hone had been prosecuted three times. In 1818, Richard Carlile was imprisoned for bringing out a new edition of Paine's *Age of Reason*. Between 1808 and 1821, there were only seventy prosecutions for seditious libel, but fifty-two of these had occurred during the 1817 to 1819 period. Although the rate of successful convictions was just under fifty percent, the boundaries of prohibition were themselves ambiguous.<sup>23</sup> Satirists walked a precarious tightrope over a legislative safety-net which could be peremptorily snatched away without warning. The majority of these prosecutions were directed towards periodical writers, but since 1789, novelists too had been obliged to tread warily. The 1797 edition of Godwin's *Caleb Williams* contained a preface previously withdrawn from the original 1794 edition at the request of booksellers. There was, at that time, a general alarm among publishers, caused by the five-month imprisonment of the London Correspondence Society leaders, Horne Tooke, Hardy, Holcroft and Thelwall, under the suspension of Habeas Corpus earlier that year, on a charge of high treason. Although the 'conspirators' were eventually released, it was not until the 1797 edition of the book that Godwin was able to publish the original preface, with an explanatory note: 'Terror was the

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<sup>22</sup>Cox, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup>Dyer, p.73.



order of the day: and it was feared that even the humble novelist might be shown to be constructively a traitor.<sup>124</sup>

In *Maid Marian*, Peacock makes satirical references to the most recent suspension of Habeas Corpus, that of March 1817, which followed an attack on the Prince Regent, and he also undermines the Holy Alliance and the traditional support of the Church for the monarchy. Both were politically sensitive topics at that time, and Peacock could not have been unaware that his fiction may have been misconstrued by a government beset by sporadic threats to law and order. He was not being merely playful when he informed Shelley that *Maid Marian* was to be 'the vehicle of much oblique satire'. He knew that he was going to travel a long way beyond the cultural ideologies he had chosen to satirize in *Headlong Hall* and *Nightmare Abbey*. Any direct attack on legislation and the institutions of the Crown and Church, in the political climate of 1818, was dangerous, particularly to someone who was seeking employment in a government controlled office. The East India Company was no longer an autonomous private enterprise; since Pitt's India Bill of 1794, the political, financial and military power of the company had been transferred to the British government, and Peacock was hoping to become, in part at least, an employee of the Crown.

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Peacock opens his attack on the institution of monarchy in *Maid Marian* by undermining the traditional image of Richard I, as presented in idealized terms by contemporary historians and the chroniclers of the Robin Hood legends. Richard is about to set off with loyal crusaders, 'who eagerly flocked

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<sup>24</sup>W. Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, ed. by D. MacCracken, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1794, 1970), p.2.

under his banner in the hope of enriching themselves with Saracen spoil, which they call fighting the battles of God'.<sup>25</sup> Having sold the Locksley estates, confiscated from Robin by Henry II, King Richard finds himself in a moral dilemma:

Now, as the repeal of the outlawry would involve the restitution of the estates to their rightful owner, it was obvious that it could never be expected from that most legitimate and most Christian king, Richard I of England, the arch-crusader and anti-jacobin by excellence, -- the very type, flower, cream, pink, symbol, and mirror of all the Holy Alliances that have ever existed on earth, excepting that he seasoned his superstition and love of conquest with a certain condiment of romantic generosity and chivalrous self-devotion, with which his imitators in all other points have found it convenient to dispense. To give freely to one man what he had taken forcibly from another, was generosity of which he was very capable; but to restore something to the man from whom he had taken it, was something that wore too much of the cool physiognomy of justice to be easily recognisable to his kingly feelings. (490)

This presents a very unattractive picture of kingship, particularly of a monarch traditionally cast in the heroic mould, whose contemporary image had grown out of epic and legend. Peacock's Richard is a charismatic but distinctly tarnished hero. He appropriates land from his subjects and disposes of it as he pleases; he takes part in ostensibly religious wars for the purpose of personal gain; he assumes a reactionary, 'anti-jacobin' stance politically, and raises taxes to finance his expeditions; he has little time for justice when it entails a cost to him personally, and his currently favourable reputation relies on popular fictions and a fashionable taste for the medieval hero of Romance. However, as Peacock points out, Richard, for all his faults, is still superior to any who have more recently succeeded to the throne. The reader is left to identify for himself these unnamed 'imitators', but the reference to the Holy Alliance clearly indicates a parallel with contemporary politics. The Alliance, instigated in 1815 by the royal heads of

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<sup>25</sup>Garnett, ed., p.490. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.



Russia, Austria and Prussia, came to be seen a symbol of reaction among those, who, like Peacock, remained loyal to the underlying philosophies of the French Revolution. Viewed as a political attempt to reinforce the sovereignty of the monarchies of central Europe according to religious principles, there were fears that it would provide opportunities for the resurgence of medieval ecclesiastical control.

The throne and legitimized authority assumed by medieval and Renaissance monarchies depended on the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. This theologically based conception of kingship persisted in Europe until the French Revolution, and was to re-emerge afterwards in the infrastructure of the Holy Alliance. The idea that kingship was bestowed on an individual by God was an anathema to Peacock, Hunt and their associates, who sought 'freedom from superstition' in all matters and greatly feared a return to the pre-1789 *status quo*. Peacock examines the prerogative of any one person to assume authority in a sermon by Friar Tuck addressed to the baron Fitzwater:

What title had William of Normandy to England, that Robin of Locksley has not to merry Sherwood? William fought for his claim. So does Robin. With whom, both? With any that would or will dispute it. William raised contributions. So does Robin. From whom, both? From all that they could, or can make pay them. Why did any pay them to William? Why do any pay them to Robin? For the same reason to both; because they could not or cannot help it. They differ indeed, in this, that William took from the poor and gave to the rich and Robin takes from the rich and gives to the poor: and therein is Robin legitimate: though in all else he is a true prince. (498)

The right to rule is won by force and maintained by wealth. Wealth is obtained by taxation, and taxes are extorted by force or coercion. Thus far, Robin is a 'true prince' in that he extorts money by force, and his actions differ very little from those of a crowned head of state. However, Robin is Richard's moral superior and this is attested by a reversal of the usual practice. Not only does he take from the

rich to benefit the poor, but he also employs a fairer means of distributing his acquired wealth. The common practice of those to whom the privilege of taxation befalls is to share out the takings among those who are of similar rank. Robin, however, distributes his gains among those of lower rank, and although branded an outlaw by the established government, this proves his moral superiority.

Peacock then uses the friar to clarify the moral and political implications of 'right' by playing with the multiple meanings of the word:

There is no right but might: and to say that might overcomes right is to say that right overcomes itself - an absurdity most palpable. Your right was stronger in Arlingford, and ours is stronger in Sherwood. Your right was right as long as you could maintain it; so is ours. So is King Richard's with all deference be it spoken; and so is King Saladin's; and their two mights are now committed in bloody fray, and that which overcomes will be right just as long as it lasts, and as far as it reaches. (499)

The right to rule, once achieved by strength, is also 'right' in the sense of just, as long as the victor is able to maintain his advantage. Furthermore, the moral right to rule, as the successful outcome of a trial of strength, is independent of faith. Richard and Saladin, fighting a religious war, both have an equal chance of success. The supremacy of either depends on whoever musters the stronger force. The right to rule can only be achieved by a trial of strength and is, therefore, synonymous with 'might'. This theme is developed later on in the book as the friar goes on to argue that institutional law has little to do with ethical codes of behaviour.

In the final chapter, Tuck addresses a travelling knight who is, unbeknown to him, King Richard:

Richard is a hero and our Robin is a thief: marry, your hero guts an exchequer, while your thief disembowels a portmanteau; your hero sacks a city, while your thief sacks a cellar; your hero marauds on a larger scale, and that is all the difference, for the principle and the virtue are one: but two of a trade cannot agree: therefore your hero makes laws to get rid of your thief,



and gives him an ill name that he may hang him: for might is right, and the strong make laws for the weak, and they that do make the laws for their own turn do also make morals to give colour to their laws. (537)

Here, Peacock reiterates that 'might' is synonymous with 'right', in both the legal and the moral sense of the word, since, once the right to rule has been established by superior strength, the victor creates his own moral justification for the laws he proclaims. The successful contender of the power struggle not only establishes such laws as are necessary to maintain his advantage, but also defines morality in accordance with his own requirements. The whole superstructure of government is, therefore, designed to preserve the social hierarchy and the interests of the governing classes, regardless of any obligation to the majority of its citizens.

*Maid Marian* was eventually completed and published in 1822, by which time Peacock's dominant political themes had become less contentious. The right of Habeas Corpus had been reinstated in January 1818, and the significance of the Holy Alliance, always uncertain, is generally considered to have petered out by 1822, following Metternich's series of political unions between most of the heads of state of Europe. Peacock, writing *Maid Marian* in 1818, had set out with the intention of investigating some of the traditional philosophies and political ideologies at the forefront of government policy at that time. In doing so, he found the ideal mode of fiction for conveying political satire. In *Headlong Hall* and *Nightmare Abbey*, he had adapted the form of the Socratic dialogue to suit his purposes. In *Maid Marian*, he went on to demonstrate how political satire could be conveyed by using folk mythology and legend as the basis of a plot. Ideological debate, no longer the focus of the dialogue of several speakers, now found expression in the interaction of his characters.

Peacock's next fiction was also a political satire, and once again, he selected the plot of an ancient story from folk history and legend. *The Misfortunes of Elphin* was published in 1829, and Garnett cites the historical and literary sources for this work as *The Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales* and *The Cambro-Briton*, a periodical which commenced publication in 1819 (550). *The Myvyrian Archaiology* was a collection of Welsh prose and verses from ancient manuscripts of the sixth to fourteenth centuries, compiled by the peasant, Owen Jones. *The Cambro-Briton*, edited by John Humffreys Parry, appeared in three volumes between 1819 and 1822, printing English translations of Early and Middle Welsh literature, as well as articles of historical and geographical interest, and Peacock uses quotations from this in his introduction to chapter six<sup>26</sup> (580). Other contemporary publications indicate that Welsh literature and mythology were enjoying a degree of public interest at the time. In 1806, Richard Colt Hoare had published a translation of *The Itinerary of Archbishop Baldwin Through Wales* and William Probert's *Ancient Laws of Cambria* was to appear in 1823. The first two decades of the nineteenth century also showed an increased interest in Arthurian legend, producing numerous source books, novels, plays and operettas based on these stories. Peacock's long period of research into material for this book, which necessitated the translation and collation of the legend of Taliesin from the fragmented sources then available, has been acknowledged as a scholarly achievement in its own right. As a political satire, however, the book has received little critical attention.

Again grafting his satire on to a collection of existing folk stories and legends, Peacock draws ironic parallels between contemporary situations and, this

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<sup>26</sup>Garnett, ed., p.550. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.



time, sixth-century Cambria. Butler relates the political context of *The Misfortunes of Elphin* to the return of the reactionary anti-reform politics of Canning's brief administration in 1827 and the growing strength of the Tory government that followed. She also cites an article in the *Edinburgh Review* of June 1827, in which Macaulay likens the French Revolution to a deluge, identifying this as the source of the collapse of Seithenyn's watch-tower into the sea and making a comparison between this and the fall of the Bastille.<sup>27</sup> Peacock's satire, however, is less specific to time and place. For the first time, the reader becomes aware that he is using images which can be interpreted in a number of ways, thus broadening the relevance of his satirical comments.

King Gwythno 'found the business of governing too light a matter to fill up either his time or his head', and in consequence, preferred to follow the more 'solid pursuits' of music, poetry, feasting and hunting, his subjects having little to do other than to 'pay him revenue' and occasionally 'fight for the protection of his sacred person' (554). This may be interpreted as a generalized view of kingship or, more specifically, as a portrait of George IV, formerly the Prince Regent. Gwythno himself takes very little part in government, but those to whom he leaves the administrative duties of his realm are also unwilling to commit themselves to such mundane tasks. National security depends on effective political leadership and Gwythno's kingdom, the Plain of Gwaelod, is no exception. Dependent on adequate sea defences, it is left in a perilous position by an incompetent hierarchy of Court officials, who have allowed the embankment to fall into decay.

Peacock represents the High Commission of the Royal Embankment, headed by the inebriate Prince Seithenyn, as an analogous image:

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<sup>27</sup>Butler, pp.158-60.

The condition of the head, in a composite as in a simple body, affects the entire organization to the extremity of the tail, excepting that, as the tail in the figurative body usually receives the largest share in the distribution of punishment, and the smallest in the distribution of reward, it has the stimulus to ward off evil, and the smaller supply of means to engage in diversion; and it sometimes happens that one of the least regarded of the component parts of the said tail will, from a pure sense of duty, or an inveterate love of business, or an oppressive sense of ennui, or the development of the organ of order, or some equally cogent reason, cheerfully undergo all the care and labour, of which the honour and profit will redound to higher quarters.  
(555)

The malfunctions of this composite 'body', from the privileged head to its abused tail, are common to any corrupt power structure, as relevant today as when Peacock described them in 1829. Corporate superstructures, without effective leadership, are doomed to incompetence and failure. Peacock may well have offered this image to the reader as a representation of inefficient pre-reform parliamentary representation. It could also be seen equally well as a satire on the pre-1789 *ancien régime*, or any ineffective form of administration, perhaps even the position in which he found himself during the early years of his appointment to the East India Company. Furthermore, it is possible to interpret this image of a beast, which thrived on the efforts of its lesser parts, as an illustration of the hierarchical, early nineteenth-century class structure of England, where the prosperity of an idle ruling class depended on the labours of a diligent 'tail' of workers.

Teithrin, a minor segment of the 'tail', is assiduous in his duties and foresees the danger of an imminent collapse of the sea defences. He enlists the aid of Elphin to remonstrate with the Lord High Commissioner concerning his dereliction of duties. Seithenyn, irritated by the challenge, argues against 'that very unamiable sort of people, who are in the habit of indulging their reason' and takes a reactionary stance on the question of improvements:



But I say, the parts that are rotten give elasticity to those that are all sound: they give them elasticity, elasticity, elasticity. If it were all sound, it would break by its own obstinate stiffness: the soundness is checked by the rottenness, and the stiffness is balanced by the elasticity. There is nothing so dangerous as innovation. See the waves in the equinoctial storms, dashing and clashing, roaring and pouring, rattling and battling against it. I would not be so presumptuous as to say, that I could build anything that would stand against them for half an hour; and here this immortal old work, which God forbids the finger of modern mason should bring into jeopardy, this immortal work has stood for centuries, and will stand for centuries more if we let it alone. It is well: it works well: let well alone. (561)

Garnett points out similarities between Seithenyn's speech and the arguments of the opponents of reform (n. p.561). Butler compares the substance of Seithenyn's argument more specifically with some of Canning's anti-reformation speeches as Prime Minister, in which he stated that the House of Commons, in its present form, was able to accommodate itself ' "to the progressive spirit of the country" ' and that Parliamentary Representation was more efficient ' "for that very want of uniformity which is complained of in the petition" '.<sup>28</sup> Seithenyn's speech is a parody of parliamentary rhetoric. He justifies his argument with a meaningless juxtaposition of opposites: 'soundness' and 'rottenness' combine to supply 'elasticity' as a balance to 'stiffness'. There is a specious eloquence in the rhyming pairs of adjectives that describe the erosion of winter storms; the play on the repetitive 'well' builds up to the authoritative 'let well alone'. The whole speech is elegantly presented but conveys a nonsensical point of view, and, in the applause that follows, Peacock's satire encompasses not only the arrogance of the speaker, but also those who, like the members of Seithenyn's High Commission, are deceived by political rhetoric.

Throughout *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, Peacock makes reference to the immediate political context. He writes that the tradition of song still flourished

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<sup>28</sup>Butler, pp.163-4.

among the Welsh peasantry, 'on the few occasions on which rack-renting, tax-collecting, common-enclosing, methodist preaching, and similar delights in the light of the age, have left them either the means or inclination of making merry' (634). At times, there is a sense of conflict in the satire, an ambivalence and a tension suggesting that, although Peacock is opposed to reactionary government, he himself has some conservative attitudes towards contemporary innovations. He writes ironically that: 'The science of political economy was sleeping in the womb of time. The advantage of growing rich by getting into debt and paying interest was altogether unknown', and the increasing use of paper money was 'a stretch of wisdom to which the people of those days have nothing to compare' (580). The subjects of Gwythno 'made their money of metal, and breathed pure air, and drank pure water like unscientific barbarians', and once more, he returns to the subject of paper money, pointing out that 'when any of their barbarous metallic currency got into their pockets or coffers, it had a chance to remain there, subjecting them to the inconvenience of unemployed capital' (581). There is also a satirical reference to the partizanship of the established periodicals. The bards enjoyed freedom of speech, but if they 'chose to advance their personal fortunes by appealing to the selfishness, the passions and the prejudices of kings, factions and the rabble, our free press may afford them a little charity out of the excess of their own virtue' (581). Sometimes Peacock cannot resist drawing attention to contemporary parallels in the prevalent passion for scientific knowledge: 'In physical science they supplied the place of knowledge by converting conjectures into dogmas; an art not yet lost' (582). Politically, however, little else was different, and there are echoes here of the 'no right but might' arguments employed by the friar in *Maid Marian*: 'The powerful took all they could get from their subjects and neighbours; and



called something or other sacred and glorious, when they wanted the people to fight for them' (581).

At the time of writing *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, thought to be mainly in 1828, Peacock was able to disregard the political constraints that surrounded the composition of *Maid Marian* and the work of his associates during the previous decade. Hunt, with whom Thackeray later also shared an acquaintance, considered that most liberal demands had been met with the passing of the Reform Act of 1832. His *London Journal*, brought out in 1834, declared that this new venture was to be 'devoted entirely to subjects of miscellaneous interest, unconnected with politics', a total contradiction to his earlier comments made in 1822, when everything in literature appeared to have a political relevance.<sup>29</sup> In a climate of less pressing political urgency, Peacock, in *Crotchet Castle*, returned to satirize the cultural ideologies of his era and the Socratic dialogues of his earlier works.



Recent literary historiography has suggested that significant historical events have a profound effect, both on the production of printed matter and the nature of the material created for the publishing market. Altick views the sudden proliferation of post-1815 Radical journalism and the increased popularity of the Sunday papers, which followed the 1819 Newspaper Stamp Act, as being generated by public interest in the unstable political situation of the period.<sup>30</sup> Reference has already been made to Klancher's research, which identifies the events of the French Revolution as instrumental in changing the nature of the

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<sup>29</sup>n. 16 above.

<sup>30</sup>Altick (1957), pp.329-30.

relationship between writers and periodical readers. Eliot (1995), using figures from *Bent's Monthly Literary Advertiser* and its predecessors, *A Monthly List of New Publications* and *The Monthly Literary Advertiser* (1802-1860), traces peaks in published material to political events, for example 1803, 1812 and 1815, together with a considerable rise in 1832, relating to the Reform Act.<sup>31</sup>

Peacock's most productive period as a writer coincided with a turbulent period of history, fraught with political uncertainties. *Maid Marian* and *The Misfortunes of Elphin* were motivated by significant contemporary events during a turbulent period of history, and these issues and incidents acted as a catalyst to prompt his satirical investigation into underlying concepts of government. It is also necessary to emphasize here that, as the political focus of his satire increased, the structure of his fiction was distinguished by a more conventionally novelistic style, adding the interest of plot, action and characterization to the satirical discourse. In *Maid Marian*, and particularly in *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, his people take on individual identities of much greater complexity than the speakers in his other satirical fiction, who were designed to shadow the philosophies and opinions of other people. However, although Peacock chose to present his political satires in a novelistic style, his work was to remain essentially anti-Romantic in conception. He continued to promote an intellectually objective response in his readers, without engaging their emotions in the course of his narratives.




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<sup>31</sup>Simon Eliot, 'Some Trends in British Book Production, 1800-1919', *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed by J.O. Jordan and R.L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.30.



Whereas Peacock's satire, for a limited period, served as an intellectual investigation into political philosophies and ideologies, Thackeray, writing during the eighteen thirties and forties, consciously avoided political comment. His early work focused on the social interaction of his own particular reading audiences and their responses to contemporary culture and values. He did not examine the ideological and political context of his era, and Ann Ritchie writes that her father, at this time, was 'never a keen politician. Pictures and plays form a much larger share of his early interests than either law cases or politics.'<sup>32</sup>

His later work, however, shows a growing awareness of the significance of contemporary issues, and ironically, this aspect of his development came about through his involvement with a comic magazine. Altick writes that the first decade of *Punch* eventually came to be remembered as 'the hungry forties' and adds: 'A case could be made for their having been, in terms of human misery widespread across the countryside and city slums, the worst in remembered centuries.'<sup>33</sup> Two decades earlier, when Peacock had been writing his political satires, the volatile climate of radical opinion had been united by a common political goal, Parliamentary Reform, but this had been quietened temporarily by the 1832 Reform Act. The 1840s saw a re-emergence of discontent, as the Chartist Movement and the Anti-Corn Law League each sought its own remedy to political unrest. However, as Altick explains, there was no uniformity of protest during this period: 'The radicalism of the 1840s was not coherently ideological or programmatic but was determined by the interests of individual persons and groups.'<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 3, p. xxiv.

<sup>33</sup>Altick (1997), p.185.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p.186.

Whereas the radical press of the post-Waterloo period had combined satirical rhetoric with factual reporting, the early years of *Punch* were characterized by radical outbursts, tempered with humour and buffoonery. Ray points out that during the first few years of publication, *Punch* demonstrated 'a decided penchant for the radical view of politics and society'.<sup>35</sup> Altick adds that, although they were producing what was essentially a comic weekly, the founders of *Punch* eventually developed an awareness that they could not completely ignore more serious contemporary issues:

*Punch* should be socially responsible. In the midst of its playful humor it should accommodate an outlook that was neither funny nor sunny; it would not only be a weekly purveyor of laughter but a critic of neglectful society as well. *Punch* was the first popular English periodical of any lasting consequence to whole-heartedly enlist itself in the humanitarian cause.<sup>36</sup>

The 'neglectful society' of the 1840s, in this context, included the largely middle-class readership of the magazine. While some were merely comfortably complacent about humanitarian causes, the greater proportion of the *Punch* readership remained in ignorance of the poverty and hardship that was often just a few streets away from their own homes. The economic divide between rich and poor, the condition of the labouring poor, and recurrent Poor Law scandals frequently found expression in the writings of Jerrold and Lemon and in the drawings of John Leech. Thackeray, whose connection with the magazine began in 1842, initially found little common ground between himself and some of his more radical colleagues. The tensions that clouded his relationship with Douglas Jerrold were not only personal, but also based on matters of principle. Jerrold's ardent and vociferous espousal of radical causes and his unqualified championship

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<sup>35</sup>Ray, *Uses of Adversity* (1955), p.363.

<sup>36</sup>Altick (1997), p.186.



of the labouring classes were alarming to a man who was already opposed to revolution. The visceral intensity of Jerrold's weekly rants caused Thackeray to take a step backwards from the heat, and as a result, his influence at the *Punch* headquarters has sometimes been seen as more reactionary than it actually was.

Ray writes that Thackeray interpreted Jerrold's stance as an unbalanced one:

Its exclusively humanitarian emphasis was foreign to his temperament. His fundamental disposition was to see and to enjoy, and he had a largeness of mind that enabled him to see things in proportion ... In temperament anything but a revolutionary, he became conscious through his opposition to Jerrold of his true role as a writer ... It was not for him to attempt to shake the foundations of Victorian society, particularly through squibs in a comic paper: but by the proper exercise of his talents he could at least help raise the level of feeling and cultivation among those who read him.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, Thackeray was aware of the problems that beset his generation, but opposed sudden and dramatic change. He aimed to make his readers aware of issues he believed to be important, and these were mainly related, at that time, to the social values of his own class. However, Ray's assessment of these intentions should not be interpreted as meaning that Thackeray's reluctance to engage in radical polemics indicated complacency, or that he was exclusively preoccupied with middle-class culture and values. His awareness of contemporary political issues increased throughout the 1840s, but he was also instinctively wary of extreme attitudes such as those expressed in Jerrold's work, seeing these as a potential danger to the national interest. His work, at this point of his career, was essentially apolitical, although he did not shrink from making satirical thrusts at the expense of the ruling classes. Instead, he found in mid-nineteenth-century society sufficient material for comment, and he did not hesitate to exaggerate and satirize what he perceived to be the false values of his era. Occasionally, however, during

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<sup>37</sup>Ray, *Uses of Adversity*, (1955), pp.368-9.

this early period of his career, certain political issues would arouse an intense response and some of these will be examined in the following sections.



One area of legislative activity which caught Thackeray's attention during the early years of his reporting career was the issue of public hangings. 'Going to See a Man Hanged' was published in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1840 and written in response to Ewart's moves to abolish capital punishment. In this article, Thackeray describes not only his reactions to the event as it happened, but also the ethics of a government empowered to put the death sentence into practice. In addition, it becomes obvious that Thackeray, on this occasion, is addressing his audience directly, dispensing with the narratorial disguises that were a common feature of his other contributions to *Fraser's* during the same period.

'Going to See a Man Hanged' reports on the public hanging of François Courvoisier, a valet convicted of the murder of his master. In an effective piece of reporting, Thackeray observes the excitement of the crowd, gathering in the summer dawn outside Newgate Prison to witness an event he came to perceive as a brutal public murder: 'I fully confess that I came away down from Snow Hill that morning with a disgust for murder, but it was *for the murder I saw done*.'<sup>38</sup> As he awaits the execution, he speculates on the continuing stability of contemporary modes of government. Selecting as an illustration 'yonder ragged fellow', who 'speaks with good sense and shrewd good-nature', he asks: 'What are the two great parties to him, and those like him? Sheer wind, hollow humbug, absurd claptraps;

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<sup>38</sup> *Biographical Edition*, Vol. 3, p.648. Further references to this volume are given in the text.



a silly mummery of dividing and debating, which does not in the least, however it may turn, affect his condition' (639).

Thackeray urges the reader to understand that the task of government may not remain the prerogative of a privileged few for very much longer:

Talk to our ragged friend. He is not so polished, perhaps, as a member of the 'Oxford and Cambridge' club; he has not been to Eton; and never read Horace in his life; but he can think just as soundly as the best of you; he can speak quite as strongly in his own rough way; he has been reading all sorts of books of late years, and gathered together no little information. He is as good a man as the common run of us; and there are ten million more men in the country, as good as he -- ten million, for whom we, in our infinite superiority, are acting as guardians, and, to whom we give -- exactly nothing. (639-40)

The mood of this extract implies a need to respect and even fear the self-educated working man and his companions. There is an ironic recognition that the 'we, in our infinite superiority', includes the corporate identity of *Fraser's*, subscribers to the magazine and anyone else who, by the privileges of birth, wealth or class, presumes the right to govern. However, there is no hint here of the patronizing inflections of other contemporary writers, whom Thackeray was to satirize later in 'The Curate's Walk' (1847). Neither does his tone hint at the 'various modes and keys of satire and invective' that Jerrold, among others, was to employ in the columns of *Punch*.<sup>39</sup> Instead, he states the case simply: that the man in the street gains nothing from contemporary government but, nonetheless, in matters of education and understanding he is, or very soon will be, able to present a real challenge to the ruling classes. Thackeray goes on to issue a warning: 'He is a *democrat*, and will stand by his friends, as you by yours ... In the meantime we shall continue electing, and debating and dividing, and having every day new triumphs for the glorious cause of Conservatism, or the glorious cause of Reform,

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<sup>39</sup>Altick (1997), p.187.

until, -- ' (640). Just as the reader is wondering how far he intends to take this point of view, he calls himself back into line with a sharp question: 'What is the meaning of this unconscionable republican tirade -- *à propos* of a hanging?' (640).

When Thackeray states the case against public hangings, however, there is no retraction and no narratorial ambiguity whatsoever: 'The writer has discarded the magazine "We" altogether, and spoken face to face with the reader, recording every one of the impressions felt by him as honestly as he could' (646). Thackeray feels shame that he has been a party to such an 'act of frightful wickedness and violence'. The spectacle is 'hideous and degrading', a symptom of a 'hidden lust after blood', which infects all strata of society, and is condoned by a 'Christian Government' (646). The relevance of the earlier 'unconscionable republican tirade' now becomes clearer; he is warning that a government which follows the Old Testament teaching that 'Blood demands blood', may itself fall victim to the same principle (648).



In spite of his reluctance to engage in radical causes, Thackeray's satire, his later writings and, in particular, his letters and private papers betray an instinctive sympathy towards the republican cause. Rarely directly satirical of political issues, there is nevertheless evidence that, as his work continued into the late forties, he became increasingly more thoughtful about contemporary modes of government and, at the same time, increasingly dissatisfied with his own lack of understanding of these. His correspondence and diaries of this period betray a sense of personal inadequacy and frustration. In 1846, doubtful of making a success of the work he was submitting to the *Morning Chronicle*, he admits to being 'a very weak & poor politician only good for outside articles and occasional



jeux d'esprit'.<sup>40</sup> A month later, the same problems were still on his mind: 'I am making a failure at the Chronicle all my articles miss fire [sic]: except the literary ones. I shall be kicked out at the end of the year.'<sup>41</sup>

Two years later, when revolution broke out in France in February 1848, Thackeray's mother was, at the time, living in the Champs Élysées and it was inevitable that these events would provoke a flurried response. The public Thackeray, contributor to *Punch* and now the acclaimed author of *Vanity Fair*, wrote the riotously satirical 'Club in an Uproar', which made a great play upon some of the more spectacular and improbable rumours that were circulating at the time. Now writing as Mr. Spec, Thackeray comments: 'But oh, my friends! wild and strange as these stories were, were they so wonderful as the truth? ... Was there ever a day since the beginning of history, where small men were so great, and great ones so little?'<sup>42</sup> In private, however, he responded anxiously, trying to understand some of the political thinking that was shaping French history by reading Louis Blanc's *De l'Organisation du Travail* (1840). His reaction was not favourable; he was unable to see how state-controlled industry could provide any answers to the evils of the system it was intended to replace. Blanc's proposals appeared to Thackeray as 'a remedy so absurd and detestable ... that the worst tyranny would be more acceptable feasible and conducive to the general happiness'.<sup>43</sup> His concern here demonstrates an inherent distrust of extreme measures, seeing them ultimately as the cause of far worse problems.

Nevertheless, he was still concerned by injustices in the distribution of wealth: 'I

<sup>40</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 225.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid. p.229.

<sup>42</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 6, p.586.

<sup>43</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 2, pp.355-6. Further references to this volume appear in the text.

cant [sic] find the end of the question between property and labour ... the question of poverty is that of death disease winter or any other natural phenomenon. I dont [sic] know how either is to stop' (356).

Just as the events of 1789 had aroused fears of revolution in England, the deposition of Louis Philippe caused disquiet in government circles. Thackeray echoes this mood and makes evident his feelings that, although reforms may be desirable, these should be brought about by parliamentary means, rather than by popular insurrection:

We wont [sic] have an armed or violent revolution here, please God -- and if we do every man of orderly feelings and peaceful notions in the country would be on the Govt. side. Republicans and all. I am for a social republic not communism -- My dear old parents. You will say I am a sad luke warm reformer after this ... (357)

The republican sympathies are evident, but the actual strategies by which such fundamental reforms could be achieved were, to Thackeray, a major concern. Having turned away from Jerrold's radicalism in the early days of *Punch*, he remained in favour of achieving political aims through peaceful means and widening parliamentary representation. Among some workers' organizations, however, there was a greater determination to emulate the French, and although Peel's repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 had quietened some of the working-class agitation, the Chartist Movement continued to cause concern among government circles. Despite earlier doubts about his abilities as a political commentator, Thackeray was still contributing news items to the *Morning Chronicle*. In April 1848, he wrote to his mother: 'I am writing a little for the Chronicle and getting good pay' (373). During the previous month, the paper had printed reports of two Chartist rallies, which have subsequently been identified as the work of Thackeray (846).



The first of these reports deals with a Chartists' meeting on Kennington Common, for 'the purpose of adopting a congratulatory address to the French Republicans', and this followed a disorderly demonstration in Trafalgar Square, which had been broken up by police some two weeks previously.<sup>44</sup> Kennington had been chosen for the rally being just outside the area of one mile radius from Westminster Hall, which was then under prohibition of public meetings by Act of Parliament. Thackeray records the event and speeches of the organizers, together with the reactions of the crowd, in a straightforward narrative style. He remarks on the prudence of the police in keeping their strong security precautions out of the public gaze and comments that disturbances were minimal, adding somewhat reductively that 'the proceedings yesterday were as dull, tame, and uninteresting as the "thrice told tale" of the Chartists generally is' (193). The presentation of a tricolour flag, intended as a '*coup-de-theatre*', was 'signally ludicrous', and this symbol of insurgence was 'pitilessly pelted with mud and stones by the crowd' at the termination of the speeches (195). The 'great Kennington-common demonstration' ended with a sharp shower of rain, which quickly dispersed the crowd, except for 'two or three little boys crouching for shelter beneath the waggons'. Throughout the report, there is a sense that Thackeray found the meeting an anticlimax; unnecessarily excessive police precautions, the failed *coup-de-théâtre*, and the final picture of small children sheltering from the rain lend irony to the description of a 'great' demonstration.

The second of these reports on Chartist activities describes a meeting at the Literary Institution in Tottenham Court Road and is much shorter. There is a

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<sup>44</sup>G. Ray, ed., *William Makepeace Thackeray: Contributions to the Morning Chronicle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1955), p.192. Further references to this source are given in the text.

satirical touch in the explanation given for the absence of one of the speakers. A member of the delegation to France was 'carried away to such an extent by his enthusiastic feelings, that he was laid on a sick bed at Paris', and this mocking, ironic tone continues throughout the reported speech of Ernest Jones, who delivered a 'not altogether "unvarnished" tale of the trials he had passed, with a "thousand hair-breadth 'scapes by flood and field" ' (199). During the following speech, the speaker's complaint against the press coverage of the event is described as being 'rather pathetically' presented, and once more, an intended *coup-de-théâtre* adds up to a sense of anticlimax. A 'rusty old guillotine' is produced as evidence of the deposed monarch's cruelty, 'but the description was rather over-charged, and what was intended to excite a thrill ended in a titter' (200-1).

It has to be remembered that this report from Thackeray was almost certainly bound by the editorial orientation of the *Chronicle* towards the Chartist Movement. However, whilst he may have adopted a reductive tone when reporting the Chartist meetings in a national daily newspaper, in private he did not underestimate the need to be aware of the dangers inherent in ignoring the condition of the labouring classes, or the strength of a gathering opposition to the ruling minority. His diary for the period 10 to 15 March records:

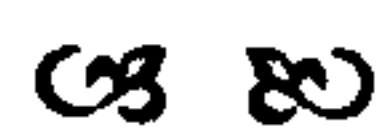
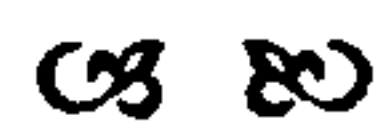
I tried in vain to convince the fine folks at Mrs. Fox's that revolution was upon us: that we were wicked in our scorn of the people. They all thought there was poverty & discomfort to be sure, but they were pretty good in themselves; that powder and liveries were very decent & proper though certainly absurd -- the footmen themselves would not give them up C.V. said --Why the gladiators in Rome were proud of their profession and the masters saw nothing wicked in it. <sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 2, pp.364-5.



The *ennui* inspired by the 'thrice-told tale' of the Chartist Movement, which was evident in his newspaper work, sits less comfortably between the pages of his own diary. His failure to convince 'the fine folk' of the errors and possible consequences of ignoring the poor is followed by a description of privileged indifference, which is chilling in its ignorance and complacency.



Various commentaries on Thackeray's life at this time tend to question his grasp of contemporary issues. Lewes has already been quoted as saying that Thackeray did not align himself with causes or factions. These words, as applied to Thackeray, recall Butler's comments on Peacock mentioned in chapter two: 'if Peacock believes in anything, he has not shown what.' Ray traces the development of Thackeray's political sympathies during the 1848-50 period maintaining that 'The revolutions of the former year had so impressed him with the terrible consequences of putting radical political and social ideas into action that he excluded such topics from his own work', and he avoided the work of other authors who employed their time ' "unscrewing the old framework of society" '.<sup>46</sup> However, the indications are that, although Thackeray was opposed to violence and revolutionary changes, he was not indifferent to the injustices of the mid-nineteenth century, and he continued to use his satire to expose these in the belief that reforms were necessary, although these should only be implemented within existing patterns of government.

This growing political awareness began to affect his professional relationships, however, and, in 1851, he found himself seriously out of tune with

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<sup>46</sup>G. N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom 1847-63* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), p.250.

*Punch*, when the paper published a caricature of Palmerston as "The Judicious Bottleholder", accompanied by an article entitled ' "Old Pam," *alias* "The Downing Street Pet" '. He explains his reactions in a letter written in early December:

I am in a fury with *Punch* for writing the 'Old Pam' article against the chief of foreign affairs. His conduct in the Kossuth affair just suited my Radical propensities. If he could have committed his government to a more advanced policy, so much the better; and that ribald *Punch* must go and attack him for just the best thing he has ever done.<sup>47</sup>

Kossuth had fought for Hungarian independence in 1848, but his attempts to create a new republic had been brutally crushed by the combined strength of the Russian and Austrian armies. He made a controversial visit to England in October 1851 and Palmerston, who was then Foreign Secretary, had to be restrained from granting Kossuth an interview, instead meeting two radical delegations who expressed their gratitude for his support of Kossuth against Austria. This scandalized conservatives and was seen as a snub to the reigning monarchs of Europe. As a result, Palmerston resigned rather than apologize to the Queen and Prime Minister. In a second letter to Lady Stanley, Thackeray complained 'at the indecency and injustice of attacking the only man who was holding the liberal cause in Europe'.<sup>48</sup> Later that month, following the *coup d'état* by which Louis Napoleon seized power, he found, in the same publication, a sketch entitled, 'A Beggar on Horseback: or the Brummagem Bonaparte out for a Ride', in which the Emperor is depicted brandishing a bloody sword, poised above a dead man and his grieving widow.<sup>49</sup> He immediately tendered his resignation. His objection was not intended as a gesture of support for Napoleon III, but an indication that he saw him as a man who was mistaken in using violence to achieve his political aims: 'I

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<sup>47</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 2, p.816.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p.823.

<sup>49</sup>Altick, (1997), p.731.



still think it's an honest man pursuing an impossible ruinous illogical system -- not a selfish monster but a despot on principle a wrong principle wh. entails the use of the worst acts, the worst agents & the most monstrous consequence of ill' (16).

Although, in general, he supported republican modes of government, he shied away from the bloodshed by which this had been achieved in France.

Furthermore, as pointed out earlier in the discussion of his review of Carlyle's *French Revolution* for the *Times*, he believed that the 'gibes' of journalists could inflame political situations. He lists his concerns with the conduct of *Punch* outlined above, and writes that in all these cases, ' "Punch" followed the "Times", which I think and thought was writing unjustly at the time, and dangerously for the welfare and peace of the Country' (432).

Thackeray, in the late 1840s and early fifties, occasionally referred to himself as a radical. In the letter to Lady Stanley quoted above, he admits to having 'radical propensities'. In March 1855, he wrote to his mother: 'I've been trying to be a Whig and a Quietist for a long time -- I cant [sic] bear it no longer and am growing horribly Radical though I think the Peelites were good and hardly used men.'<sup>50</sup> Here, 'horribly Radical' reads as a deliberate overstatement of fact, an interpretation heightened by the preceding ungrammatical double negative. In reality, Thackeray's political thinking bore little relationship to the notion of radical as it has been applied to the agitators of the 1816-20 period. At most, he demonstrates inclinations towards classic liberalism, a desire for political justice and reform with a preference for republican modes of government, but only in so far as these could be achieved without violence, bloodshed and tyranny.




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<sup>50</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 3, p.429. Further references to Vol. 3 are given in the text.

Although, strictly speaking, the 1850s fall outside the period of this discussion, it is necessary to allude to some of Thackeray's later work in order to show that his growing engagement with the political issues of his period was, in the main, consistent. During the fifties, he became more closely involved in the actualities of politics. He supported the Administrative Reform Association, delivered a series of lectures on the Hanoverian kings of England to the Americans, and was adopted as an Independent Parliamentary candidate for the city of Oxford.

Thackeray's involvement with the Administrative Reform Association was a transitory affair. This society, which attracted the attention of Dickens, was founded in 1855, largely as a reaction to the plight of the army at Sebastopol. The military disaster in the Crimea was seen by many as evidence of an aristocratic government that was totally out of touch with the needs of the country. Dickens spoke on behalf of the Association at Drury Lane in June that year, and Thackeray, although a less active participant, also lent his support. Ray quotes from a manuscript speech, prepared by Thackeray but never delivered, in which he exhorts his intended audience to "so agitate the next parliament, as to make it shake off some of the monstrous old trammels wh. make all parliaments inefficient, and destroy for the benefit of future Houses of Commons, some of the corruptions, wh. weaken & degrade the country".<sup>51</sup> The 'monstrous old trammels' were, of course, the monopoly of the ruling classes and inadequate popular representation in government. However, the Association, which Layard and

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<sup>51</sup>Ray, *The Age of Wisdom* (1958), p.253.



Dickens had hoped would spearhead the emergence of the educated middle classes in representative government, did not survive the summer of 1855.

Later that year, Thackeray set off on his second American lecture tour. For the most part, 'The Four Georges' attracted popular acclaim with audiences in New York, Boston and Virginia, but his work was less well received by the press and individuals in England. Wilson writes that some journals were 'asserting that he would not dare to attempt deliver them [the lectures] among his own people', and quotes from an unflattering, anonymous letter to an unnamed periodical: ' "An elderly, infidel buffoon of the name Thackeray has been lecturing on the subject of the Four Georges." ' <sup>52</sup> Leslie Stephen, in his 'Life of W. M. Thackeray', writes more moderately: 'Over-scrupulous Britons complained of him for laying bare the weaknesses of our monarchs to Americans, who were already not predisposed in their favour.' <sup>53</sup> Thackeray's defence to these charges -- specifically, in this case, to objections raised in *The Saturday Review*, 15 December 1855 -- is to be found in a letter to Kate Perry, written from Savannah. Thackeray protests: 'My lecture is rather extra loyal whenever the Queen is mentioned ...', and he continues by quoting the 'most applauded passage' from his talk on George II:

'As the mistress of St. James passes me now I salute the sovereign, wise moderate exemplary of life, the good mother, the good wife, the accomplished Lady the enlightened friend of Art, the tender sympathiser in her people's glories and sorrows'. <sup>54</sup>

He is, perhaps, a little too effusive in the 'rather extra' loyalty of his account of the Queen's virtues for his remarks to be taken completely literally. He continues: 'I can't say more, can I?', and the reader is left with an impression that he would

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<sup>52</sup>J. G. Wilson, *Thackeray in the United States, 1852-3, 1855-6* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1904, Kraus Reprint Co., 1969), p. 202.

<sup>53</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 13, p.707.

<sup>54</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 3, p.564.

have been more credible had he said less, particularly when this is followed by an admission of what amounts to skilful showmanship; he had discovered that his lecture on George III concluded most effectively, 'just with the people on the crying point'.

The first three of the lectures were completed in England, the fourth being written *en voyage* to America. 'The Four Georges' is a curious pageant of fact, historical imagination and nostalgia, and Thackeray strongly denies any political intention: 'Not about battles, about politics about statesmen and measures of State did I ever think to lecture you.'<sup>55</sup> However, the reader becomes increasingly aware of an implicit undercurrent of discontent with the constitution of power, the Church and the ruling classes. Thackeray presents a chilling picture of Europe in the time of George I:

As one views Europe, through contemporary books of travel, in the early part of the last century, the landscape is awful -- wretched wastes, beggarly and plundered; half-burned cottages and trembling peasants gathering piteous harvests: gangs of such tramping along with bayonets behind them, and corporals with canes and cat-of-nine-tails to flog them to barracks.  
(624)

As he develops his portrayal of power and oppression, Thackeray contrasts the splendour of Versailles with 'a nation enslaved and ruined', and goes on to point out that this was not only the situation in France, but that the 'horrible stains and meanness, crime and shame' of royalty could be found everywhere: 'In the first half of the last century, I say, this is going on all Europe over. Saxony is a waste as well as Picardy or Artois; and Versailles is only larger and not worse than Herrenhausen' (625).

When writing of George II, his aim is more specifically personal:

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<sup>55</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 7, p.621. Further references to volume 7 will be given in the text.



Here was one who had neither dignity, learning, morals, nor wit -- who tainted a great society by a bad example; who, in youth, manhood, old age, was gross, low, and sensual; and Mr. Porteous, afterwards my Lord Bishop Porteous, says the earth was not good enough for him, and that his only place was heaven! Bravo Mr. Porteous! The divine who wept these tears over George the Second's memory wore George the Third's lawn. (662)

Here Thackeray openly attacks the weakness of hereditary rule which allows government by those who are unworthy of the privilege, and he satirizes sycophantic members of the clergy who guarantee their own interests by securing royal patronage. Having found nothing to praise in George II, he is more compassionate towards the memory of his successor, but shows no mercy in his treatment of the Prince Regent, afterwards George IV. While his American listeners may have been delighted by the lively vignettes of society and court life, they must surely have recoiled from the excesses of the Regency and the personal debts of the Prince Regent, which reached as much as £650,000 in one year and were paid for with taxes taken from the people. Thackeray asks in exasperation: 'What did he do for all this money? Why was he to have it? If he had been a manufacturing town, or a populous rural district, or an army of five thousand men he would not have cost more' (689). The implication is that a manufacturing town, or even an army, may at least have served some useful function.



Although Peacock's letters demonstrate a keen intellectual response to the political events of his period, he did not take an active role in politics.

Thackeray, on the other hand, in spite of his diffidence towards political theory, was, on two occasions, actively involved in parliamentary election campaigns. As a young man he had been caught up in the excitement of the reform movement and canvassed for Charles Buller at Liskeard in the 1832 election. However, his letters

and diaries of the period betray an enthusiasm fuelled by the excitement of new experiences, rather than a commitment to political ideals. He records a wealth of detail in his descriptions of the people he met and the meetings, addresses, processions and social events he attended, but there is little acknowledgement, or even understanding, of the ideologies that lay behind all this activity: 'We canvassed for Charles very assiduously & successfully pledging him to reforms in politicks & religion of wh. we knew nothing ourselves.'<sup>56</sup> Much later, he became more closely involved on his own account.

Early in 1857, he was offered a Whig nomination for a vacant borough. By May, however, he was writing that he was 'in disgrace with the Whigs who have left me off'.<sup>57</sup> The reason for this change in the course of events was that he was negotiating a candidature as an Independent in an Oxford by-election. In July, he was at Oxford, obliged to rationalize his political beliefs which had never before been fully explained. The election manifesto which bears his name is brief:

I would use my best endeavours not merely to enlarge the Constituencies, but to popularize the Government of this Country. With no feeling but that of good will towards those leading Aristocratic Families who are administering the chief offices of the State, I believe that it could be benefited by the skill and talents of persons less aristocratic and that the country thinks so likewise. I think that to secure the due freedom of representation, and to defend the poor voter from intimidation, the Ballot is the best safeguard we know of, and would vote most hopefully for that measure. I would have the Suffrage amended in nature, as well as in numbers; and hope to see many Educated Classes represented who have now no voice in Elections.<sup>58</sup>

He goes on to exhort patriotic support for whichever Ministry may be in power in the event of war, and concludes by promising that he would 'endeavour to increase

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<sup>56</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 1, p.246.

<sup>57</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 4, p.45.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., pp.382-3.



and advance the social happiness, the knowledge and the power of the people'. There is no hint here of the republican sympathies that had begun to emerge since the 1848 Revolution in France and the tone is one of moderation, but he remains true to certain ideals which had been apparent since his earliest connections with *Fraser's Magazine* and *Punch*, concepts that had intensified since the events of 1848. Thackeray was urging the electorate to accept that government was no longer the prerogative of a privileged few, and his promise of an extended suffrage, to include the 'many Educated Classes', reiterates the aims of the Administrative Reform Association to reduce the power of the aristocracy in government. Since the extension of the franchise in 1832, a sizeable portion of the population had been able to take advantage of the national prosperity and new opportunities for education in order to gain social advancement. Many of these people, now financially stable, well-educated and substantially influential in business matters, were still excluded from the vote.

Thackeray did not gain his seat in Parliament, but it was not, however, an ignominious defeat. His opponent, Cardwell, went on to represent Oxford with a majority of only sixty-five votes. It may have been the memory of his busy and exhilarating experiences as a young man campaigning for Buller which finally decided him take this step. Recent biographers have been dismissive of his motives and his campaign. Taylor (2000) claims that his intentions in standing for election were aimed at securing a public appointment.<sup>59</sup> Peters points out that he stood for Parliament 'with no preliminary canvassing in the constituency, and no more knowledge of politics than Colonel Newcome'.<sup>60</sup> Thackeray, however,

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<sup>59</sup>D. J. Taylor, *Thackeray* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p.394.

<sup>60</sup>Peters, p.242.

believed that it was his support for the Sunday opening of art galleries, museums and special exhibitions that cost him the seat.<sup>61</sup> Aware that his opponents were deliberately misrepresenting him on this question, he issued a broadsheet supplement to his manifesto, in which he declared: 'I believe the labouring man would enjoy these sights in company with his family, and that the enjoyment of them would keep him from intoxication, not lead him into it, as opponents of my views fear.'<sup>62</sup> 'On Men and Pictures', discussed in chapter four, demonstrates Thackeray's evident delight in the spectacle of ordinary working people visiting the Louvre on a Sunday afternoon. There is a sense that his intention to extend this privilege to the labouring classes in his own country has less to do with the need to encourage temperance, or even to attract votes, but rather a desire to contribute to 'the social happiness, the knowledge and the power of the people'.



Thackeray has been criticized for the emphasis he placed on the political interests of the middle classes. It has to be remembered, however, that agricultural labourers and the unskilled industrial workforce were not enfranchised until the Redistribution Act of 1885, and in 1857, no parliamentary candidate would have been expected to make a direct representation of their interests. At that time, the working classes were a race apart from the rest of society but, although Thackeray often satirized the upper and middle classes, he did not ridicule the poor, describing their condition objectively, with sympathy and respect. 'Sketches and Travels in London', a series of articles which also included 'A Dinner in the City', was published in *Punch* between 1847 and 1850. It is

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<sup>61</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 4, p.55.

<sup>62</sup>Broadsheet dated July 18, 1857, reprinted in *Letters*, Vol. 4, pp.382-3.



particularly interesting as, during this three year period of writing, also a turbulent period of French history, Thackeray's work illustrates a marked change in his attitude towards humanitarian causes and the means by which he presents these in his writing.

The narrator of this series, Mr. Spec, has received less attention than Thackeray's other narratorial devices and is, perhaps, the least memorable of his authorial *personae*. Spec makes a rather illogical entrance into an early edition of *Punch* as the writer of 'Mr. Spec's Remonstrance' (February 1843), when he emerges as a penurious historical artist, a hybrid of Wagstaffian bluster and Titmarsh's sensibilities, canvassing for work on the magazine. This may well have been Thackeray's position at the time, as he did not become a retained member of the *Punch* staff until the December of that year. Displaced by the Fat Contributor and James de la Pluche in the interim Spec is reincarnated some years later, in less colourful form, a Satyr who has been 'washed, combed and clothed', and has learned the good manners of a respectable, suburban family man.<sup>63</sup> The new Spec is an astute, rather elderly, middle-class individual who lacks the grotesquely exaggerated characteristics of Thackeray's earlier narratorial creations. A resident of 'one of the most healthy of the suburbs of this great City' and encumbered with an 'inconveniently large family', he has numerous relatives and acquaintances whose social connections he is at pains to relate.<sup>64</sup> He appears as a representative of mid-nineteenth-century respectability, someone in whom some of the *Punch* readership may have been expected to recognize themselves, and initially, Thackeray undermines the middle-class mindset by satirizing Mr. Spec's own

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<sup>63</sup>Ch.1, n. 35.

<sup>64</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 6, pp.592-3. Further references to Vol. 6 will be given in the text.

attitude and social aspirations. However, as the series develops, the reader becomes aware of Spec's own intellectual development. As his disillusionment with mid-nineteenth-century society increases, he convinces the reader of a growing political consciousness.

Although Mr. Spec makes a brief reference to his earlier work as an artist, he is presented, in the introduction to 'Travels in London', as an established contributor to the magazine. Throughout the first number of the series, 'The Curate's Walk', Spec takes on the role of the storyteller and there are events in the narrative which, as an observer, he could not possibly have witnessed. The good curate, the industrious little Betsy caring for her two small sisters, the feckless rogue who lurks outside the pawnbroker's back entrance and neglects his family for the gin-shop, appear as social stereotypes, the stock characters of the fiction of the period (545-52). The reader can no more believe that the narrator actually undertook the long walk to Sedan Buildings than he can accept the meeting in St. James's Park between Spec and Mr. Punch, as described in the introduction to the series. There is, however, a strong sense that Thackeray is using Spec to satirize stylized forms of popular fiction, which offered sentimental portrayals of virtue in the face of poverty. In 'Going to See a Man Hanged', he makes exactly this point: 'Boz, who knows life well, knows that his Miss. Nancy is the most unreal, fantastical personage possible ... He dare not tell the truth concerning such young ladies.'<sup>65</sup> In addition, Mr. Spec's spurious generosity, as he distributes sixpences and coppers to poor children, is shown to be an ineffectual middle-class gesture in the face of intense hardship.

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<sup>65</sup>*Biographical Edition*, Vol. 3, p.643.



The next piece in the series, 'A Dinner in the City', deliberately sets the themes of wealth and poverty in juxtaposition and Spec's introduction immediately undermines the preceding chapters:

Out of a mere love of variety and contrast, I think we cannot do better, after leaving the wretched Whitestock among his starving parishioners, than transport ourselves to the City, where we have been invited to dine with the Worshipful Company of Bellows-Menders, at their splendid Hall in Marrow-pudding Lane. (553)

The dismissively blasé reference to the 'wretched' curate and his 'starving parishioners' re-establishes the satiric mode of the text and serves to debunk any sense that Mr. Spec is joining a humanitarian crusade. However, it is as a result of the excesses of the feast in Marrow-pudding Lane that Mr. Spec begins to undergo a transformation. Although his account is, initially, full of naive wonder at the splendour and pageantry of the occasion, and Thackeray subtly undermines his narrator by presenting these observations in satirical terms, it becomes clear that Spec begins to experience something like guilt in the face of civic extravagance and excess:

'And, gracious goodness!' I said, 'what can be the meaning of a ceremony so costly, so uncomfortable, so unsavoury, so unwholesome as this? Who is called upon to pay two or three guineas for my dinner now, in this blessed year 1847? Who is it that *can* want muffins after such a banquet? Are there no poor? Is there no reason? Is this monstrous belly-worship to exist for ever? (563)

The cultural significance of the ceremony -- in Bakhtinian terms, the 'official feast,' which reinforces the established social hierarchy -- has already been discussed in chapter four. In a political context, Thackeray uses Spec's outburst of rhetoric to draw attention, not only to inequalities in the distribution of wealth, but also to the complacency of those who attempt to deny that this constitutes a form of injustice. Pilkington, who was responsible for Spec's invitation to the banquet, is plainly

embarrassed by his guest's outburst: 'I make no doubt that you for one have had too much' (563). Spec readily admits to the hangover that follows, but there is also in the text the subtle implication that his having had 'too much' refers to more than just the wine.

'Child's Parties' is written in the form of a letter to *Punch* from a 'constant reader', which identifies Mr. Spec closely with the audience of the magazine (594). The irritation he displayed at the feast in Marrow-pudding Lane now extends to the expense and extravagance associated with the juvenile social scene. Through Spec, Thackeray makes it plain that by gratifying their own social aspirations adults are corrupting the values and behaviour of the younger generation: 'How can they be natural or unaffected when they are so preposterously conceited about their fine clothes?' (596). Punishing his own children for their 'pride', he meets with opposition from his wife, just as Pilkington had resisted his controversial ethics at the banquet.

In 'Waiting at the Station', Thackeray pursues the theme of class differentiation and shows authentic indignation at superficial values, which have emerged as a form of social control in perpetuating the misery of those who suffer disadvantage. There is no indication here of narratorial identity and the text echoes the tone of a newspaper editorial. 'We are amongst a number of people' at a railway station, surveying a group of poor women who are about to take advantage of charity assisted passage to Australia (599). The travellers appear to have few regrets at leaving their friends and their native country, and the narrator, arguably Thackeray, compares this to the reaction of children who are forced to escape a neglectful family home. He forcefully accuses those who fail to take responsibility for the miserable plight of the women: 'You are in the wrong, under



whose government they only had neglect and wretchedness; not they, who can't be called upon to love such an unlovely thing as misery, or to make any other return for neglect but indifference and aversion' (599).

There is evidence that 'Waiting at the Station' was written in response to the work of Henry Mayhew, the 'clever and earnest-minded writer', whose letters to the *Morning Chronicle* exposing the condition of the poor were published between October 1849 and December 1850 (602). Thackeray attacks the complacency and ignorance of his own class towards the horrors of a life in poverty and writes of Mayhew's revelations: 'Yes; and these wonders and terrors have been lying by your door and mine ever since we had a door of our own.' There is also evidence that Thackeray had just read Mayhew's most recent contribution. 'The Merchant Seamen' was printed in the *Morning Chronicle* of 7 March 1850, just two days before 'Waiting at the Station' appeared in *Punch*, and Thackeray's version of the sleeping arrangements on board the best emigrant ships (603) tallies almost exactly with Mayhew's description.<sup>66</sup>

However, even if he did borrow from another periodical writer's research, there is no mistaking the honest indignation in this direct address to his readers:

But what I note, what I marvel at, what I acknowledge, what I am ashamed of, what is contrary to Christian morals, manly modesty and honesty, and to the national well-being, is that there should be such a social distinction between the well-dressed classes (as, if you will permit me, we call ourselves), and our brethren and sisters in the fustian jackets and pattens. (601)

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<sup>66</sup>H. Mayhew, 'The Merchant Seamen', *Morning Chronicle*, March 7th 1850, from *Unknown Mayhew*, eds. E.P. Thompson and E. Yeo, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.364.

Here, Thackeray is not implying the need for a fundamental redistribution of wealth; he had never entertained communism as a realistic possibility and freely admitted to seeing no answer to the question of 'property and labour'.<sup>67</sup> Unlike Peacock, he does not investigate political ideologies, and neither writer proposes theoretical solutions to practical problems. His satire questions the justice of a system which results in the misery he has just witnessed, and the attitude, accepted by members of his own class, that those who have money should consider themselves morally superior to those who have none. The injustice of this is more than just a question of morality: the social discrimination of the mid-nineteenth century takes on a political meaning, undermining the well-being of the nation.

Australia is represented in idealized terms, where future generations, ignorant of 'that Gothic society, with its ranks and hierarchies, its cumbrous ceremonies, its glittering antique paraphernalia, in which we have been educated', will live in 'in the midst of plenty, freedom, [and] manly brotherhood' (602). The reader is introduced to the possibility of a new society, in which generosity and hard work will replace the acquisition of money as the criteria of respect. Expressed in terms of 'plenty, freedom' and 'brotherhood', Thackeray's ideal both echoes the cry of nineteenth-century liberalism and foreshadows Bakhtin's later cultural conception of 'carnival', which offered, however temporarily, 'a second life' for the people, in a 'utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance'.<sup>68</sup>




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<sup>67</sup>Ray, ed., *Letters*, Vol.2, p.356..

<sup>68</sup>Ch. 4, n.3.



In concluding this chapter, it needs to be emphasized that, despite their different approaches to political issues, both Peacock and Thackeray were fundamentally united in their rejection of injustice, corruption and the monopoly of power. Like the cultural and social topics of their satire, however, their responses to the complex questions of politics and government provided no authoritative resolutions. Peacock communicated his own intellectual deliberations through the medium of his satire; Thackeray faithfully reported his observations of contemporary society and culture; both ridiculed the ignorance of those who failed to question the flawed attitudes and opinions of their period.

Peacock's satirical challenge to historically established political ideologies employed elements of the Menippean sub-genre, in the sense that it has come to be understood as a mode of philosophical investigation. Responding to the political events and situations of the 1815-30 period, he made structural adaptations to his prose fictions in order to emphasize the political focus of his satire. The novelistic style of *Maid Marian* and *The Misfortunes of Elphin* presents an integral layer of polemical debate within the familiar framework of old folk tales and legends. Unlike his other satirical fictions, in which the juxtaposition of ideas is realized in the dialogue of his speakers, he uses characters within the action of the plot to express his themes, interrupting the progress of the narrative with authorial insertions in order to illustrate relevant parallels in contemporary issues.

Whereas Thackeray's early writings mirror a personal response to experiences and events, his later magazine contributions and lectures demonstrate a more objective awareness of political responsibility. Although his views cannot be described as 'radical', in the sense that the term has been used in the context of

the post-Waterloo period, the constraints of editorial control on his modes of publication have led to misunderstandings that his politics were rigidly circumscribed by middle-class prejudices. However, attention to his private correspondence and some of his writings indicates that, as his personal responses to contemporary events intensified, he became conscious that many of the social attitudes which formed the subject of his satire were a reflection of political issues. Those few periodical contributions in which he dispenses with reporting conventions and addresses his readers directly evince a strong sense of moral conviction. However, the complex interaction of satire and narratorial strategies employed throughout his writing rescue the work from the didacticism of formal modes of the genre, preserving the dialogic quality of the text.



## Conclusion

Until comparatively recently, literary criticism has interpreted satire as a moral didactic mode of discourse. This has led to a reluctance to consider innovative applications of the genre, and from the beginning of the nineteenth century, satirists whose work did not conform to traditional paradigms received little serious critical consideration. Furthermore, during the immediate post-Waterloo period, cultural barriers developed, as satire came to be associated with social unrest and the radical press.

Attention to recent twentieth-century critical analyses of Menippean satire has thrown new light on the generic inheritance of some forms of nineteenth-century satirical writing. However, as the sub-genre has come under scrutiny, some analyses of the mode have been rigorously applied, echoing the earlier constraints imposed by the prescriptive paradigms of formal satire. A more realistic approach is to identify those elements of Menippean writing which appear in the work of Peacock and Thackeray, using these to demonstrate the breadth and scope of the form as it has infiltrated a variety of literary styles.

The writings of both authors discussed here have been selected mainly from the 1815-50 period and illustrate how literary concepts of satire have inhibited critical interpretations of their texts. Placed in the broader tradition of European seriocomic fiction, their work demonstrates elements of the Menippean mode, which emphasize the essentially dialogic character of their satire. Both writers attacked their targets from different perspectives, each using several different voices in order to preserve his authorial distance. Peacock achieved this by the juxtaposition of fictional speakers who debated the ideological concepts of his generation. Thackeray assumed fictional authorial *personae*, whose narratives

he subsequently undermined, to ridicule contemporary social and cultural attitudes. The satire of both writers rejects the traditionally monologic form of the genre and disseminates a diversity of opinion, as opposed to the affirmation of a definitive point of view.

Peacock's work is able to comply with some of the more rigorous interpretations of Menippean satire. As he exposed the fallacies of contemporary philosophical misconceptions, he also ridiculed those who used authoritative speech to present flawed opinions. His topics were often bizarre enthusiasms, which happened to become fashionable for a time, but sometimes he investigated complex philosophies which were fundamental to the predominant culture and deeply entrenched in contemporary politics. Peacock has already been identified as a writer in the Menippean tradition, and this critical perspective effectively frees his satirical fictions from the misused classification of 'novels'. Although he did adopt a novelistic structure for his two political satires, his use of plot, action and characters continued to remain subsidiary to the main purpose of the text, which was to investigate the substance of his ideological themes.

Thackeray's approach to writing has not received much attention in the context of Menippean satire, and it may be argued that his work, which lacked intellectual motivation, does not conform to recent interpretations of the mode as a form of intellectual investigation. This, however, is a culturally restricted point of view and does not recognize the historical associations of the sub-genre as it appears in his periodical contributions. Thackeray's complex layers of satire, together with the ambivalent irony he uses to undermine his own narratives, create a disordered sense of purpose, and show a distinct relationship to elements of Menippean writing which have influenced European seriocomic literature.



A contextual account of changing modes of publication has emphasized how the widening distribution of printed material among new sections of the population generated increasingly homogeneous reading audiences. Satire was dislodged from its former elevated position by the Romantic schools of writing, and against a background of commercial publishing practices, the genre began to migrate towards the literature of the popular culture. Although Peacock's satire was essentially counter-Romantic, and he used it to evaluate the underlying ideologies of the predominant culture, his work remained firmly entrenched in the scholarly ideals of authorship, directed towards those who were sufficiently educated to appreciate his wit and erudition. Thackeray's audiences were drawn from a broader cross-section of the reading population, and his writing was to some extent determined by the corporate identity of the periodicals which published his work. However, it does not seem to be too much of a generalization to say that his early journalism was addressed to an undefined, but predominantly middle-class, group of readers, which made up a significant proportion of the early modern public readership.

Reference to Bakhtin's analysis of the influences of folk traditions in European seriocomic fiction has helped to supply this section of the literary market with a generic history. Thackeray's early work was deeply engaged in the commercial interests of publishing, and throughout his career, he was obliged to negotiate strategies which would balance market practices with his own need to retain a sense of authorial integrity. Although his assimilation of images of folk culture into some of the narratorial devices incorporated into his fiction sets it in the commercial context of the periodical marketplace, this aspect of his work also reflects elements of a more significant literary tradition.

Both writers parodied popular contemporary fiction. Peacock assumed an elevated critical perspective, attacking authors and reviewers who failed to meet his esoteric ideals of scholarly excellence. On the other hand, Thackeray's literary reviews challenged this hierarchical view of literature. His early fiction was shaped by the needs of a consumer market and of readers who were relatively new to the reading habit and sought entertainment rather than enlightenment. Aware that the standards of the established critical reviews had little relevance to the work of an emerging generation of new writers, he negotiated a more eclectic overview of contemporary fiction.

In the political arena of the late eighteenth century, Horatian and Juvenalian satire, the two predominant modes of the genre, had become associated with oppositional party preferences. Used in this way, the constraints of the formal styles of the genre are even more apparent. The satirist, in an attack on conflicting political interests, maintains an intrinsically monologic value structure, an authoritative doctrine to which he endeavours to persuade the reader. If the satirist is to take on a constructive role in political reform, it is first of all necessary for him to investigate the substance of his own argument. This dialogic process is clearly demonstrated in Peacock's work, particularly in *Maid Marian*, in which the whole concept of monarchy is shown to be corrupted by superstition and power struggles before being reaffirmed in the closing chapters of the book.

Both Peacock and Thackeray responded to the political climate of the 1815-50 period, but the latter's eventual involvement in politics was the product rather than a focus of his satire. His acknowledgement of the political implications of social attitudes appears to have crystallized as a reaction to the 1848 Revolution in France. There is also a sense that his involvement in politics was, in



Bakhtinian terms, a process of ideological 'becoming', the result of prolonged satirical investigations into the superficial and prosaic values of his own middle-class culture.

Peacock and Thackeray rarely attempted to resolve the problems thrown up by the ideological discrepancies revealed in their satire, and both have been criticized for what appears to be a lack of prior assumption in their fiction. The dialogic mode of discourse common to both writers confirms that the Menippean strain of the genre works as an open process of discovery, an instrument of literary and philosophical enquiry rather than a means to its own end.

Whereas earlier critical analysis focused on verse forms of satire, those elements of the Menippean mode identified here in the work of Peacock and Thackeray offer fresh insights into the nature of the genre as it has been used in the nineteenth-century novel. Kaplan has already suggested Menippean readings of Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* (1852) and Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), both written during the period when Thackeray began to emerge as a novelist.<sup>1</sup> Mallock's *New Republic* (1877) is so similar in structure to Peacock's satires that it justifies a re-evaluation. From twentieth century literature, Huxley's *Crome Yellow* (1921) and Waugh's *Scoop* (1938) both demonstrate the type of intellectual curiosity associated with Menippean fiction.

It would be inappropriate to present a dogmatic conclusion to a discussion of a literary form which centres on a resistance to authoritative opinion. Menippean satirists will continue to investigate and interpret the various versions of the 'truth' as it is expressed by future generations. As a mode of ideological

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, pp.79-90 and 114-30.

enquiry, and as a significant part of the literary tradition, Menippean satire is unlikely to run out of subject matter, and as the title of the last chapter implies, there can be no final word.



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