

## The Liberating Effect of the 1843 Theatre Licensing Act

Burletta and melodrama form the theatrical context of the officially-sanctioned dramatic adaptations of Charles Dickens's [Christmas Books](#) which took the London stage by storm in the mid-1840s. According to the "Chronological Table" of Frederick and Lise-Lone Marker in sixth volume of *The Revels History of Drama in English* (pp. xv-xliv), few notable plays debuted on stages in the United Kingdom during most of the first half of the nineteenth century, except in the period 1832-42, which preceded the new Theatre Regulation Act (1843). By the terms of this act, which [Sir Edward G. D. Bulwer-Lytton](#) sponsored, the Office of the Lord Chamberlain acquired licensing authority over all playhouses in Great Britain; Lord Chamberlain's powers up to that time had extended only to the "legitimate" theatres of London's Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

## The Stage Context of the 1830s and Browning's Dramatic Writings

Among that period's major dramatic events were [Dion Boucicault's](#) *Legend of Devil's Dyke* (1838) and comedy of manners *London Assurance* (1841), Bulwer Lytton's historical pieces *The Lady of Lyons* (1838), *Richelieu* (1839) — showing the influence of *The Three Musketeers* — and *Money* (1840), and three unsuccessful tragedies by Robert Browning, who "in those days . . . was struggling for recognition" (Ley 35). One may speculate that the failure on the commercial stage (despite the involvement of William Macready) contributed to Browning's throwing his creative energies into the development of the dramatic monologue through the medium of the magazine *Bells and Pomegranates*. Some of the finest examples of the form such as "[My Last Duchess](#)" and "[Soliloquy in A Spanish Cloister](#)" Browning published in 1842. The 1836 poems "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover" are arguably of the new genre also, but predate Browning's historical drama *Strafford* by a year, while his last play intended for the stage, *Colombe's Birthday* he wrote in 1844, somewhat after his chief period of dramatic production and commercial failure.

## Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, and Browning

Oddly enough, Dickens's interest in Browning's verse dramas rather than in the highly popular historical romances of the novelist-cum-dramatist Bulwer Lytton seem of more significance to Dickens's novel-writing. In particular, Browning's failed *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* is relevant to Dickens's works during that period (1841's *Barnaby Rudge* alone qualifying as an historical novel). Bulwer-Lytton achieved his three great theatrical successes with the aid of Drury Lane's chief actor and manager W. C. Macready, a friend of Dickens and producer of Browning's unsuccessful plays. While Browning was failing in his attempts at reviving verse tragedy (at least partly because his notion of a play was not dialogue "but a succession of monologues" (Lounsbury 69), Dickens and Lytton were succeeding on stage and in print with works more congruent with the tastes and spirit of the early Victorian period:

With the 1840's a change came over comedy. Not only was it becoming gradually more domestic and realistic, though still with a strong admixture of rhetoric. . . . The major themes explored in comedy over the next thirty years were those of wealth and social ambition; the virtues of rustic and domestic simplicity; the artificiality and moral inferiority of Society; the idealizing of womanhood, the marriage bond, and domestic harmony. . . . (Booth, vol. 3, page 21)

## Browning's *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* (1842)

Were it not for Dickens's privately expressing to their mutual friend [John Forster](#) his great admiration for Browning's *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, a work which he apparently was responsible for Macready's producing at Drury Lane, the theatrical historian might be inclined to dismiss the play as an utter failure: like his *Strafford* (1837), a verse drama influenced as much by [Shelley's](#) *The Cenci* (1819) as by Forster's biography of the 17th-century nobleman, the second Browning tragedy closed after a few nights. Edmund Gosse defends *Strafford* as stageworthy, and blames the poor reception on Macready's production: the piece "was produced when the finances of Covent Garden Theatre were at their lowest ebb, and nothing was done to give dignity or splendor to the performance" (406). In fact, the great actor-manager William Macready had not been confident of the play's reception because the principal's passion seemed baseless and, consequently, implausible.

Although it, too, is set in eighteenth-century, rural England, Browning's tragedy of familial love and honour is a far cry from Dickens's Christmas Book for 1846, *The Battle of Life*, which the novelist, modeling the novella on *The Vicar of Wakefield*, deliberately set in Goldsmith's period "for the sake of anything good in the costume" (*Pilgrim Letters*, IV, 648) for illustration. Whereas Browning's 1842 tragedy concerns a hot-blooded and impulsive aristocratic family and a pair of star-crossed lovers, Dickens's five Christmas Books (1843-1848) are firmly grounded in the middle-class realities of hearth, home, and family. Although the first two of the series share a contemporary urban setting, the third moves to the country. The fourth, *The Battle of Life*, is set in the previous century, like Browning's play, but in a typical country village rather than in a patrician's hunting lodge

or mansion. In fact, few of the characteristics of the period's bourgeois melodrama (including a village setting, poverty afflicting a noble and honest peasantry, a hard-hearted or negligent landowner or employer, and a ruthless steward) seem applicable to Browning's *Blot*, while such elements are detectable even in the urban-based fiction of Dickens.

Despite its three-act structure, the plot of *A Blot in the Scutcheon* (written in 1842; finally produced in 1843) is relatively simple, involving as it does a single action based on the forbidden love of Mildred, sister and ward of Lord Tresham, and Henry, Earl Mertoun, a young neighbour. Until the couple's romantic indiscretion is revealed by Mertoun's climbing in Mildred's window at the close of the first act, the action is both slow and confusing. Tedious speeches such as those by Mildred's sister, Guendolen, harp on Tresham's "find[ing] no flaw, /No slightest spot" in one who wishes to graft himself into this peerless stock" (200). Browning delights in putting such archaisms as "poursuivant" and "varlets" (p. 195) into the mouths of the retainers, who serve as a chorus in much the same manner that contemporary melodramas used villagers, to introduce the opening situation and principal characters. Unlike Benjamin and Clemency in Dickens's *The Battle of Life*, these minions never become characters in their own right, whereas Dickens develops the quirky servant couple into thriving middle-class entrepreneurs.

The play's chief source of interest is neither of the lovers, but Tresham, who is so obsessed with his family's honour that he is "the one scarer of [Mildred's] dreams" (201). A secondary villain is the old huntsman, Gerard, who informs his inflexible master of Mildred's affair. There is, however, less of Webster's malcontented henchman of *The Duchess of Malfi* about Gerard than there is of such contemporary misanthropes as Buckstone's Luke the labourer and Dickens's Tackleton the toymaker in the Christmas Book for 1845, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, both of whom anticipate [W. S. Gilbert](#)'s malignant Dick Deadeye in *H. M. S. Pinafore* thirty years later.

In fact, although Browning's poetic and dramatic models may have been Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, there is still more of nineteenth-century melodrama than of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy in Browning's *A Blot in the Scutcheon*. Browning has, for example, a humourous female, Guendolen, and pasteboard antagonists, Tresham, agonizing over his sister's lack of chastity, and Mertoun, feeling guilty about his duplicity with Mildred's brother.

Something of the dramatic tastes of young Charles Dickens, whose first literary work was the *Tragedy of Misnar, Sultan of India* (1820) must have stayed with England's foremost novelist in the 1840s. Although attuned to the popular taste, Dickens greatly admired the anguished lines from Mildred's soliloquy that closes the first act (and in the original appeared once more in the second act) when he read the Browning manuscript Forster had lent him — "I was so young, loved him so, I had / No mother, God forgot me, and I fell" (203). "I know no love like it, no passion like it, no moulding of a splendid thing after its conception, like it" (*Pilgrim Letters*, III, 381). However, the most compelling aspect of the play as theatre is the intense irony of the second act.

Browning produces great dramatic and situational irony when Tresham, angered by his sister Mildred's refusing to divulge the identity of her clandestine lover, believes that in accepting Mertoun's marriage proposal she is deceiving "an unconscious trusting youth" (208). The audience is aware (as Dickens's reader is not in the case of Dot's supposed infidelity in *The Cricket on the Hearth*) that Mertoun is the unknown lover. (Guendolen's brother possesses an inflexible pride and jealousy of his family name analogous to those of Alfonso D'Este, the infamous Duke of "My Last Duchess.") After Guendolen has guessed at and informed her brother of the lover's identity, Tresham, the older and superior fencer, waylays and slays Mertoun in a one-sided duel not unlike the fencing match between Tybalt and Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. Tresham is then bitten by remorse as the youth, dying, reveals — improbably — that he had never properly come to know the Treshams socially because his admiration of Tresham's person had rendered him diffident. Even more improbably, to preserve the family's honour (apparently) Tresham takes poison and dies. Mildred unexpectedly dies, too — the audience surmises of a broken heart — when she learns of Mertoun's death. As he joins his sister, Tresham enjoins the survivors to uphold the familial *Ōscutcheon* and remember that "Vengeance is God's, not man's" (216).

"The grossest improbabilities were therefore to be accepted" (Lounsbury 142) by Browning's audience in both the behaviour of the principal characters and the plot of the piece, which seems totally divorced from reality in both motivation and action. However, ever the sentimental romantic, Dickens in reading the manuscript in November, 1842, was affected deeply by Browning's poetic rendering of the Romeo-and-Juliet theme:

I swear it is a tragedy that MUST be played; and must be played, moreover, by Macready. There are some things I would have changed if I could (they are very slight, mostly broken lines); and I assuredly would have the old servant [Gerard] begin his tale upon the scene [II, i]; and be taken by the throat, or drawn upon, by his master, in its commencement. But the tragedy I never shall forget, or less vividly remember than I do now. And if you tell Browning that I have seen it [ms.], tell him that I believe from my soul there is no man living (and not many dead) who could produce such a work . . . [*Pilgrim Letters*, III, 381-3]

Subsequently, thanks to the combined efforts of Forster and Dickens in persuading Macready as manager of Drury Lane to stage it (although Browning in a 15 December, 1844, letter to Hill, the editor of the *Daily News*, ridiculed the notion that it was these two rather than the work's merit that had influenced Macready), performances of *A Blot in the Scutcheon* were given on 11, 15, and 17 February, 1843. While most London weeklies criticized the play's structural defects, lack of probability, and unpleasantness of subject (even though Macready had made Browning's fourteen-year-old Mildred eighteen to stifle such objections), the *Examiner's* dramatic critic (probably Forster) defended the play. In his *Introduction to Browning* (1906), Symons describes the American productions of *A Blot in the Scutcheon. A Tragedy in Three Acts*:

[Published in 1843 as No. V. of *Bells and Pomegranates*, written in five days (*Poetical Works*, 1889, Vol. IV.,

pp. 1-70). Played originally at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, February ii, 1843 (*Mildred*, Miss Helen Faucit; *Lord Tresham*, Mr. Phelps). Revived by Mr. Phelps at Sadler's Wells, November 27, 1848; played at Boston, U.S., March 16, 1885, under the management of Mr. Lawrence Barrett, who took the part of Lord Tresham; at St. George's Hall, London, May 2, 1885, and at the Olympic Theatre, March 15, 1888, by the Browning Society; and by the Independent Theatre at the Opera Comique, June 15, 1893. The action takes place during two days.] (69)

Symons characterizes *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* as

the simplest, and perhaps the deepest and finest of Browning's plays. The Browning Society's performances, and Mr. Barrett's in America, have proved its acting capacities, its power to hold and thrill an audience.' [See note below.] The language has a rich simplicity of the highest dramatic value, quick with passion, pregnant with thought and masterly in imagination; the plot and characters are perhaps more interesting and affecting than in any other of the plays; while the effect of the whole is impressive from its unity. The scene is English; the time, somewhere in the eighteenth century; the motive, family honour and dishonour. The story appeals to ready popular emotions, emotions which, though lying nearest the surface, are also the most deeply-rooted. The whole action is passionately pathetic, and it is infused with a twofold tragedy, the tragedy of the sin, and that of the misunderstanding, the last and final tragedy, which hangs on a word, spoken only when too late to save three lives. This irony of circumstance, while it is the source of what is saddest in human discords, is also the motive of what has come to be the only satisfying harmony in dramatic art. It takes the place, in our modern world, of the Necessity of the Greeks; and is not less impressive because it arises from the impulse and unreasoning wilfulness of man rather than from the implacable insistency of God. It is with perfect justice, both moral and artistic, that the fatal crisis, though mediately the result of accident, of error, is shown to be the consequence and the punishment of wrong.

(Note) A contemporary account, Written by Joseph Arnould to Alfred Domett, says "The first night was magnificent . . . there could be no mistake at all about the honest enthusiasm of the audience. The gallery (and this, of course, was very gratifying, because not to be expected at a play of Browning) took all the points quite as quickly as the pit, and entered into the general feeling and interest of the action far more than the boxes. . . Altogether the first night was a triumph.' — *Robert Browning and Alfred Domett*, 1906, p. 65. [Symons 69-70]

Although Dickens never saw the play produced on stage, reading it in manuscript undoubtedly left its mark upon him, for he pronounced it "at once the most tender and the most terrible story I have ever read" (*Pilgrim Letters*, III, 383) to his artist-friend Maclise the day after he had appraised the play in writing to Forster on 25 November, 1842.

It seems peculiar that Dickens, whose own works were often so perfectly attuned to the Victorian taste, had completely overestimated the power of so slight an action to hold the stage. What affected his judgment was the purity of the lovers' passions and their anguish (which, to Browning, mitigates their having sinned). These same features Dickens utilized two years later in *A Cricket on the Hearth* in which the lady's immorality mercifully turns out to have been illusory; however, John Peerybingle's distress at the supposed infidelity of his young wife is far more powerfully described. In the second Christmas Book, more viciously realistic than either [A Christmas Carol](#), with its talk of prisons and workhouses, or Browning's *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, Trotty Veck's terrible premonition of Meg's moral decline and eventual suicide may also echo the turbid passions of Browning's characters.

However, Dickens in [The Chimes](#) (1844) utilizes such feelings to enlist the support of his middle-class readership for the cause of the urban and rural poor, and not merely (as with Browning) as an exercise in voyeurism. Higher though his purpose be, Dickens provides means of averting disaster in the Christmas Books as improbable as Browning's bringing it to fruition in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*. In the first two of the series Dickens resolves the problem — the wretched futures of Scrooge, Tiny Tim, Trotty's daughter and friends by the dream mechanism, a device which was then not so hackneyed. Similarly, he explains at the conclusion of *Cricket* that Dot's affection for the disguised stranger was innocent, after all, and at the conclusion of *Battle* that Marion's dishonourable elopement was a mere ruse. In the last of the series, [The Haunted Man](#), Dickens manipulates the supernatural machinery so that the 'gift' of perception utterly devoid of sentiment may be recalled.

Although, for example, in *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845) the disguised stranger's turning out to be Caleb's long-lost son and May Fielding's childhood sweetheart returned just in time to rescue her from marriage to the odious Tackleton seems to be as incredible as the multiple deaths that close of Browning's *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, Victorian audiences and theatre critics alike, nurtured on such melodramatic fare as Buckstone's *Luke the Labourer or, The Lost Son* (1826), would have accepted Dickens' denouements as being well within the conventions of the contemporary stage, which in turn sprang from those of the eighteenth-century stage and novel.

For example, in *Luke the Labourer* the plot-line resembles that of *The Cricket on the Hearth* superficially: Farmer Wakefield's son, stolen in youth by Gypsy Mike and the malevolent Luke, returns just in time to save the honour of his sister, Clara, from the lecherous Squire Chase and his sordid henchmen. The Victorian audience, then, was prepared to countenance an action as improbable as Browning's if the dramatist provided an entertainment that conformed to the contemporary formula for melodrama: an attractive hero and heroine of the middle class who, although threatened by the machinations of upper-class villains and lower-class thugs, marry or are reunited after separation. In short, what a successful play provided in the 1840s was domestic sentiment and a happy ending in which virtue is triumphant. Despite the quality of his verse and his improved sense of dialogue in this second play for Macready, Browning again failed because, especially in the young earl's song "There's a woman like a dewdrop" that he jauntily sings as he proceeds to his mistress's chamber, it contradicted the temper of the Victorian age. The scene so affronted the audience's sensibility "that on the first night of its performance the play came near being wrecked on this particular scene" (Lounsbury 140). "With the emphasis on commercial and domestic reality and the concern in much drama to depict the minutiae of everyday existence, legitimate tragedy was doomed" (Booth, II, 13) because of the tendency of such dramatists

as Browning and Knowles to violate "the truth of life" (Lounsbury 145) with characters and situations that bore little relationship to bourgeois, urban, and contemporary realities.

As Booth explains, what Browning's audience would have more readily accepted would have been the sort of compromise between tragedy and melodrama that Lytton effected in *The Lady of Lyons* (1838) and *Richelieu* (1839). Even the friendly reviewer in *The Examiner* was doubtful of the play's continuing because "People are already finding out . . . that there is a great deal that is equivocal in its sentiments, a vast quantity of mere artifice in its situations, and in its general composition not much to touch humanity" (as cited in Cooke, p. 64). This, of course, was Dickens's gift, making appealing the lives and even the hardships of ordinary people from the working and middle classes.

Browning himself had recognized that his dramatic construction was deficient in the sort of action that Dickens had advocated interpolating; in his 1837 preface to the printed version of *Strafford* he conceded that in his "eagerness to freshen a jaded mind by diverting it to the healthy natures of a grand epoch, may have operated unfavourably on the represented play, which is one of Action in Character rather than Character in Action" (Browning, *Strafford* in *Poetical Works*, II, 9)

The 1842-43 tragedy exhibits the same tendency. In an age that demanded theatrical spectacle and effect, a play dependant upon the poetry of the dialogue could hardly be expected to succeed, even though the plot offered a denouement as violent and sensational as that of Sheridan Knowles's *Virginus* (1820).

Macready's proposed cuts run to approximately 310 lines, or about one-fourth of the play. . . almost all the changes are understandable or justifiable—the Drury Lane audience could hardly be expected to sit quietly through a five-act discussion of family pride. Browning still had not mastered the idiom of the stage; he did not understand that it was impossible to convey closet-drama subtlety in the spoken theatre . . . Macready was revising for the recently-enlarged Drury Lane, where most of the gallery could see only part of the action and hear very little of the dialogue even when it was shouted (as most of it was). [Reed 599]

This version of the play's reception is corroborated by a personal friend of Browning, Joel Arnould, who with his wife attended the play for all three nights, that is, on the opening Saturday (11 February), Wednesday (15 February), and Friday, 17 February. These dates, incidentally, do not square with Browning's 1884 recollection that his play's production was contemporary with those of two other fresh and unconventional pieces, *The Patrician's Daughter* and *Plighted Troth*.

Macready all this time was struggling with pecuniary difficulties. It is not likely that a manager so beset, whatever might be his personal feelings, would risk the chances with two new and untried plays [*Patrician's Daughter* of 1 October, 1842, and *Plighted Troth* of 27 December, 1841] while a third one, with which he could be sure of attracting large audiences, was suffered to remain unacted. [Lounsbury, p. 122]

Arnould, as reported by Lounsbury, recalled that, although the opening night of *A Blot in the Scutcheon* was a triumph, on the second night a mere seventy occupied the pit while the boxes were empty.

The third night I again took my wife to the boxes. It was evident at a glance that it was to be the last. . . the miserable great chilly house with its apathy and emptiness produced in us both the painful sensation which made her exclaim that she 'could cry with vexation at seeing so noble a play so basely marred.' [p. 125]

Browning had interfered by insisting that Samuel Phelps, an unknown quantity to London audiences, instead of Macready, the foremost actor of his day, should take the leading role of Tresham. "To have a new play brought out at Macready's theatre, without Macready in it, was courting failure, no matter whether much or little money was spent on the accompaniments of its representation" (Lounsbury, p. 115).

In contrast, Dickens's advice on the production of *The Battle of Life* (Lyceum, 1846), a novella which the *Times* had scorned as "trash" but which within a month of publication had outsold its predecessors, compensated for weakness with in the cast and produced some interesting special effects. In particular, Dickens proposed a recent addition to the Lyceum company, Leigh Murray (who had made his London debut on 19 April, 1845, in Knowles's *Hunchback* at the Princess's) for Alfred Heathfield, in which capacity he gave an "Intelligent, gentlemanly performance . . ." (*Illustrated London News* 26 December 1846, p. 413). That Dickens chose him particularly for the role of Alfred indicates the novelist's sound theatrical sense, for Murray's "comic acting was marked by refined vivacity, as his serious acting was by refined feeling" (Marston 391). He possessed both grace and charm on stage as well as correct elocution and a "prepossessing appearance" (Marston 391) admirably suited to juvenile leads.

For the production of *The Battle of Life* the author, Charles Dickens, had likewise intervened by vetoing the Keeley management's choice of the too-broadly-comic and notoriously inept W. H. Oxberry for either Snitchey or Craggs. Within a week of his return to London he had made the company "very quick and excited in the passionate scenes, and so [infused some appearance of life into those parts of the play]" (*Letters*, IV, 682). The reviews affirmed Dickens's judgments about the production, singling out for censure the actresses who played the sisters and for unbounded praise Mrs. Keeley, who had brought Clemency Newcome to life: "it was certainly beyond her well-remembered explanation of her conduct as *Dot Peerybingle* last year; and that is no poor compliment" the *Illustrated London News* remarked. However, if the effectiveness of the production was indebted to Mrs. Keeley, it was indebted no less to Dickens himself, who had selected the Lyceum for the adaptations of his third and fourth Christmas Books on account of the comedic talents of its star-managers, Robert and Mary Ann Keeley. With the parts of Benjamin and Clemency ready-made for the couple, Albert Smith was the only one of the novella's seven London adaptors to score a theatrical hit with a vehicle artificial in plot and deficient in character.

Whereas Browning's *A Blot in the Scutcheon* possessed similar failings and lasted three nights, Dickens's *The Battle of Life* with a generally strong cast and the coaching and snow scenes that were Dickens's own

innovations, managed forty-two performances as a Christmas play, despite the fact that it has neither the supernatural machinery nor the yuletide atmosphere of *A Christmas Carol*. The difference between the Christmas Books generally and Browning's plays lies in the motivation and credibility of character:

The story taken as the groundwork of the drama may be as unreal and impossible as one found in the Arabian Nights. But that once accepted, what is required is that the personages should act as they would were it probable and true. But in no work produced by any great poet have these principles been more systematically violated. [Lounsbury, p. 132]

Through his participation in the dramatisations of the Christmas Books Dickens accomplished far more than the introduction to the stage of less stereotypical characters and more natural dialogue. Continuing where Douglas Jerrold in *Black-Eyed Susan* (1829) and *The Rent-Day* (1832) had halted in developing socially realistic yet popular plays, through his assisting with the dramatic adaptations of the Christmas Books in the 1840s Dickens helped create a drama that arose from neither the arid streambed of traditional, aristocratic tragedy, "cut off from the mainsprings of modern English life and thought" (Booth, I, 21), nor the upstart, working-class, domestic melodrama, vibrant but awkward. He helped restore drama to the status of respectable, middle-class entertainment, and assisted in laying the basis for the more realistic dramas of Tom Robertson, Henry Arthur Jones, and Arthur Wing Pinero. It is probably no accident that Robertson, like Boucicault, learned his dramatic trade by first serving an apprenticeship as a stage adaptor of Dickens.

Like Robert Browning, Charles Dickens had attempted to bridge the gulf between literature and the stage, but while Browning's static and confusing *Stratford* and his improbable and wooden *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* failed to gain popular acceptance, Dickens's Christmas Books, like his *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* earlier, were enormously successful on stage. The writing and staging of the Christmas Books, then, mark a significant point not only in Dickens' progress as a writer, but also as a period halfway between the old, aristocratic comedy of Sheridan and the new, middle class comedy of *Wilde* and Shaw. Dickens was, in fact, one of the few great Victorian literary personalities to achieve commercial as well as critical success on the stage. He did so, first of all, by grudgingly recognizing that he was not a true dramatist, and that his genius was better fitted to the novel than to the popular dramatic forms of his day. That Browning never arrived at a similar realisation about his dramatic talents is attested to by his refusal to accept Macready's judgment about the necessity for editing *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* for the stage and by his inability even years later to recognize the limitations imposed on drama by the physical realities of the Victorian theatre, as well as by the tastes of its patrons.

In the second place, Dickens was content to advise the theatrical companies to whom he gave (for a nominal hundred pounds) his sanction and his proofs of the Christmas Books. Demanding a new sensitivity of playing, Dickens also made suggestions that produced coherent realizations of his work in terms of setting and effect. While accepting that theatrical 'hacks' would pare down his dialogue, convert his descriptions to action and scenery, and hew his plot to meet popular expectations, he endeavoured to have the actors and actresses with whom he worked retain the sense of his words and the essential conceptions of his characters as these existed in the original. With Edward Stirling, who gave the first sanctioned adaptation of a Christmas Book, he probably had too little control of the actual scripting, embarking upon the enterprise after the script was complete; with his friends Lemon and A' Beckett at the Adelphi in December, 1844, he probably exercised too great a degree of control, compelling them to retain dialogue that, while excellent in the printed version of *The Chimes* would become tedious on stage. Stirling had wanted, above all, to create novel effects. Dickens seems to have wanted to translate his characters and situations faithfully to the stage — uncanonical interpretations deeply upset him, as his letter to Forster on 21 February, 1844, suggests.

In his (or the Keeleys') choice of Albert Smith for his adaptor Dickens was most fortunate. It was with the versatile Smith that Dickens dramatized attained the zenith of popular success with *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845) and *The Battle of Life* (1846) at the Lyceum, under the management of the Keeleys. Certainly, the star-system influenced the composition (and success theatrically) of the works that Dickens wrote for Smith's adaptation, the writer making sure that there were strong comic parts for Robert and Mary Ann Keeley in both *The Cricket on the Hearth* and especially *The Battle of Life*. It may be argued that Browning's lack of knowledge about this system doomed *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* from the start, since he rejected the vastly popular Macready in favour of the unknown Phelps. Dickens' "one or two expensive notions. . .about Scenery" (*Letters*, IV, 662) contributed to the success of *The Battle of Life* while a fine cast and interesting effects were even able to rescue the static, undramatic *The Haunted Man* from failure on stage.

Another compensation for lack of external action in the Adelphi's 1863 revival of *The Haunted Man*, as in the Surrey's 1819 production of Home's *Douglas* was spectacle. The gimmick of Professor Pepper's optical illusion made the play, despite its static talkiness, acceptable entertainment once again. See Malcolm Morley, "Pepper and *The Haunted Man*," *Dickensian* 48 (1952), 185-190.

Generally speaking, however, spectacle was an adjunct to rather than a replacement for dramatic action in the sanctioned Christmas Book plays. Since the dramatisations were, in part, realisations of the illustrations in these novellas, the dramatists' tableaux were based on the plates by Leech, Doyle, Stanfield, and Maclise. However, Dickens, despite his manifest interest in visual effects in *The Battle of Life* felt that an adaptation ought to be more than simply a realization. To Dickens the actors' understanding of the dialogue was essential to the success of the production. Smith seems to have possessed the happy knack, which Lemon and A'Beckett did not, of balancing the dramatic requirements of spectacle, dialogue, and action. Dickens's great contribution to early Victorian drama was his placing character and motivation (which Browning neglected) above contrived incident, and internal conflict above the tension between idealized innocence and unredeemed villainy. As a novelist sensitive to contemporary taste Dickens taught the dramatists of his age how to utilize contemporary life, with its characters, problems, and settings, as the basis for a new, realistic type of drama which simultaneously could reveal Character in Action, as well as Action in Character.

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The Ring and the Book cemented Browning's reputation as one of the foremost poets of Victorian England. Critical Reception. Contemporary critical acclaim evaded Browning for many years.Â Considerable critical discussion of Browning's work pertains to his murder mystery, The Ring and the Book. The twelve dramatic monologues, delivered by different characters, have led critics to question which, if any, of these characters serves as the moral authority, or center, of the poem.Â Robert Browning. A Blot in the 'Scutcheon. Robert Browning. A Death In The Desert. Charles Dickens, The Christmas Books, Popular Taste, and Robert Browning's Verse Tragedy A Blot on the 'Scutcheon (1842-43). Dickens's "Hunted Down" (1859): A First-Person Narrative of Poisoning and Life-Insurance Fraud Influenced by Wilkie Collins. Power and Love in Aurora Leigh and Little Dorrit. Allegorical settings in Phantastes and Little Dorrit.Â See also the Great Expectations literary relations overview, which contains materials on this novel and Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Carlyle, Lewis Carroll, Harriet Martineau, George MacDonald, Ann Radcliffe, Graham Swift, and Alfred Lord Tennyson.