The Drama and the Dramatic

AS HE DID with both fiction and poetry, Carlile offered some of the strongest condemnations of performance drama of any working-class writer. In an 1826 article in the Republican, “The Theatre,” he described his visits to four theaters, concluding “I am heartily sick of them, and shall go no more. The solitude of a Gaol has charms for me; but the theatre has none” (13 Jan. 1826: 55). Carlile simply could not understand why a sane society would endure plays in the first place and drew some despairing conclusions about a society that does need theaters: “A play-going people must be in some measure a depraved or unhappy people. It must be a flight from domestic misery, or a depraved taste for an amusement which a well-formed mind cannot enjoy, and which is not needed by they who seek mental and moral improvement. It is a waste of time; in addition to which a great expence is incurred and nothing good is gained for the health of the body or the mind” (56). But as far as the state of the British theater was concerned, Carlile was not a curious, solitary iconoclast from whom later working-class critics differed greatly in their views, as he was in the case of both fiction and poetry. On the contrary, Carlile set the tone for subsequent criticism of the theater. Although later critics had a sense that the theater could serve positive ends,
from 1816 to 1858 working-class critics distrusted performance drama, seeing it in its present state as useless or even dangerous.

I make a careful distinction here between drama as a whole and "performance" drama, or drama as presented in the theaters of the day. From the start, most working-class journalists approved of drama as a printed literary form. Both Cobbett and Wooler wrote dramatic scenes for their own periodicals. And, as we have seen, Wat Tyler, Cain, and Shakespeare's dramatic works were continuing and important parts of the working-class literary canon. But neither Wooler's Dialogue between the Ghosts of Mr. Pitt and Lord Castlereagh nor Cobbett's Big O and Sir Glory; or "Leisure to Laugh" were ever meant to be performed. Neither were Wat Tyler or Cain. Many working-class critics thought that Shakespeare's works as well were better read than seen. A critic in the Northern Star, for example, wrote of Hamlet: "the drama is more suitable for the closet than for the stage" (30 Dec. 1848: 3). Almost all the generic comments I have found about the great poetic dramatists appear not in reviews of performances but in essays about printed texts.

Working-class journalists did not ignore the theater. Indeed, several working-class periodicals are stuffed with reviews. But rarely does any statement appear in those reviews about the play as a work of literature. Reviews generally focused almost exclusively on the depiction of a work and very little on the inherent value of the play itself. Thus Wooler, for example, when he reviews a revival of Philip Massenger's A New Way to Pay Old Debts, tells us next to nothing of his opinion of the play as literature but a lot about the actors: "Mr. Booth has appeared as Sir Giles. Some of our co-temporaries [sic] will have it that he does not copy Mr. Kean; although every action, tone, and attitude come as nearly to the original, as the force of imitation can make it" (12 Mar. 1817: 110).

This type of review was the norm in working-class periodicals. The Northern Star carried hundreds of reviews in its fourteen-year run, but though it ran many reviews of Shakespeare's plays, for example, we learn very little in any of them about Shakespeare's Hamlet or Macbeth, but a great deal about Mr. Kirkland's or Mr. Barry Sullivan's Hamlet, or Mr. J. W. Wallack's or Mr. Macready's Macbeth. Apparently, few writers saw the theater as anything more than a means to a night's entertainment.1

There are a couple of reasons for the low value that working-class critics placed on performance drama as a useful genre. For one thing,
presenting a work on stage involved at least one intermediary between the writer and his audience: the manager or director, whose views of what plays were worth producing and the way a work should be produced often did not accord completely with the views of working-class critics. Subsequently, productions often reflected a distorted sense of reality to these critics. As Wooler in *Black Dwarf* writes of the theaters, “they are institutions . . . intended to reflect the face of nature; but nature never had such features as stage managers often mask her in” (6 Aug. 1823: 206). Jones, writing in 1847 in the *Labourer*, notes the same distortion, with a stronger sense of the class interests involved:

> Can no new fire be infused into what is called the “expiring drama?”—expiring, because it has been the pander to wealth and fashion, instead of the vindicator of manhood and industry. . . . We have had the misfortunes of younger sons, the mishaps of injured daughters of noble houses, but when has the Bastile victim, when has the lost child of labour, when has the hapless operative, (the martyrs of the nineteenth century,) when have these been brought before the public eye in the drama, or when will they? while a dramatic monopoly is kept up, in keeping with all others, that, while a censorship of the press is declared contrary to the constitution, establishes a censorship of the drama in direct violation of its recognised principle? (Aug. 1847: 94)

A similar sense that there was nothing in the contemporary theater of any social relevance whatsoever led a writer in the *London Phalanx* (1841–43), a periodical promoting the ideas of Charles Fourier, to complain that, “we are almost ashamed to say a word about the Drama, for, at present, there is none in London” (18 Apr. 1841: 45). It is a “dramatic monopoly” that John Watkins complains about in *Northern Star*. Watkins was the writer of a play, *John Frost*, that he called “an attempt to illustrate Chartistism itself,” which he could not get anyone to produce. He notes bitterly the difference between what the theaters actually were like and what they could have been: “I chose the dramatic form, because I agree with my friend Elliott, that the theatre (yet what theatre will bring this piece forward while the present censorship exists?) might be made the ‘most powerful of state organs’” (2 Apr. 1841: 7). Interestingly, Watkins’s complaint about “censorship” preceded by two years the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, which removed the monopoly over serious drama held
by the patent theaters—Drury Lane and Covent Garden. That monopoly over drama, however, had been eroding for decades (Rowell 10–13); by 1841 it alone would not have presented much of an obstacle to the production of a play such as John Frost. Moreover, working-class views about performance drama did not change noticeably after 1843. Censorship, therefore, was more that of the marketplace and theater managers than of the government.

Carlile, despite his disdain for performance drama in 1826, showed that the monopoly could be defied. If the hostile middleman, the manager (or director), could be removed or replaced, he reasoned, then performance drama might indeed serve the working class. In early 1830 Carlile leased a building, the Rotunda, that featured frequent dramatic performances. The Rotunda, with its two large halls, library, and several smaller meeting rooms, was the center of London radicalism in 1830 and 1831, and its many activities—lectures by a variety of speakers and meetings, as well as shows—reflected the eclecticism of working-class radicalism during those years. On Sunday evenings Carlile and Rev. Robert Taylor staged "elaborate theatrical performances"—radical, freethought sermons (of which more in a moment)—and plays (Wiener, Radicalism 164–65). One of these plays was Swing, or Who Are the Incendiaries?, written in "consciously Shakespearean" blank verse by Taylor (McCalman, "Irreligion" 57). Swing concerned the agricultural disturbances occurring at that time in the southern counties of England. In a "review" of the play he produced, Carlile shows a change of heart about drama—or at least about the drama that he had control over: "On Friday evening, 'SWING' was performed before a large and respectable audience, and gave high satisfaction. This is the most popular bit of public political proceeding and entertainment that has ever been provided. It is an entire novelty; in which, without fear or disguise, the whole question of popular grievance and desired reform is dramatised" (Prompter 19 Feb. 1831: 254). But putting on a serious play either written or produced by members of the working class was difficult, as Watkins discovered, and as Cooper realized when he and a group of Leicester Chartists put on two performances of Hamlet. Though the hall was packed on both nights, "the income," Cooper noted in his autobiography, "hardly covered expenses" (228–29).

There was another reason why working-class critics placed little value
on the performance drama of the day. It was a reason working-class jour-
nalists cited infrequently, but it may go further toward explaining why
pro-working-class dramas not only played badly at Drury Lane but also
bombed at the local “penny gaff”—those “shops which have been turned
into a kind of temporary theatre (admission one penny),” in which the
stage, “instead of being the means for illustrating a moral precept, is
turned into a platform to teach the cruelest debauchery,” according to
Henry Mayhew in his *London Labour and the London Poor* (36–37). Audi-
ences—including working-class audiences—and their collective taste
were largely to blame for the state of the drama in the eyes of working-
class journalists. Managers, after all, were only catering to popular inter-
est. A writer in *Northern Star* points out how questionable taste is
preventing serious drama from being performed:

> Opera, burlesque, and melodrama may be safely said to have been ob-
taining for some years, to the prejudice of tragedy and comedy; and
though it is beyond our limits analytically to discuss the why and the
wherefore of this, it must be evident to the most commonplace under-
standings, that those who are the convenient scape-goats for all theatri-
cal grievances—managers, are not in this instance the individuals who
have brought about this change. A few general observations are suf-
cient to show that lessees are blameless in this matter, and that the *vox
populi* has decreed, at all events for a time, the suspension of any repre-
sentation of the poetic drama;—whether a reaction in its favour may
take place, is quite another question. (26 June 1847: 3)

Many working-class intellectuals would argue that indeed a reaction in fa-
vor of “good” drama would come in time, believing that with the ad-
vancement of the working class would come the elevation of dramatic
taste, and therefore of the theater. For the time being, though, the stage
was corrupt. Drama that served the working class had to be found else-
where, either through published works of literature—poetry, fiction, or
plays that could target the individual working man or woman who sought
a greater political and social consciousness and that could therefore indi-
rectly serve the whole class by appealing to some—or, as we shall see,
through the drama of working-class activity itself. The theater of the day,
in trying to appeal to everyone, could serve class interests little.

Although few working-class journalists throughout this period
defended the stage as a place where the laborer could have any sort of valuable literary experience, it is not quite accurate to say that there was no change at all in attitudes toward performance drama. Such drama was dead or dying, but a few later journalists showed a heightened belief that it could revive at some point in the future to serve a rising working class. Jones was one of these journalists. His confidence in the future of the theater is as great as his confidence in the class he serves. In the *Labourer* he writes “let our dramatic talent be on the look out. Chartism is marching into the fields of literature with rapid strides; the precincts of the drama it has not yet passed” (Aug. 1847: 95). Clearly, Jones believed that a successful invasion of the drama by the working class was inevitable. He, and others, struggled toward making fiction and poetry a power for the working class. But for performance drama, they could only offer hope.

Focusing exclusively upon attitudes toward the established theaters and inseparably connecting the theater with the dramatic suggests little or no sense of the utility of or fulfillment gained by drama and the dramatic for the working class and working-class journalists. Actually, from first to last, working-class periodicals bear witness to a powerful and thriving dramatic aesthetic on the part of that class. Most of the evidence in these periodicals, however, is not to be found on the literary page, but on every page—in the leaders and editorials, in the records of working-class “holidays” such as the anniversary of Peterloo or Paine’s birthday, in transcripts of speeches, or reports of meetings, debates, trials, and elections. All of these clearly suggest an awareness of theater in the broadest sense—of performance to an audience for a purpose.

Bamford, in his autobiography, describes the procession of more than three thousand people from his town, Middleton, to St. Peter’s Fields on 16 August 1819.

First were selected twelve of the most comely and decent looking youths, who were placed in two rows of six each, with each a branch of laurel held presented in his hand, as a token of amity and peace; then followed the men of several districts in fives; then the band of music, an excellent one; then the colours: a blue one of silk, with inscriptions in golden letters, ‘Unity and Strength,’ ‘Liberty and Fraternity’; a green one of silk, with golden letters, ‘Parliaments Annual,’ ‘Suffrage
Universal'; and betwixt them, on a staff, a handsome cap of crimson velvet with a tuft of laurel, and the cap tastefully braided, with the word "Libertas" in front. Next were placed the remainder of the men of the districts in fives.

Every hundred men had a leader, who was distinguished by a sprig of laurel in his hat; others similarly distinguished were appointed over these, and the whole were to obey the directions of a principal conductor, who took his place at the head of the column, with a bugleman to sound his orders.

He continues, describing the merging of his group with other groups from other towns, the singing and dancing along the way, and the coming upon "that chasm of human beings" at Peterloo (2: 150–54).

Obviously, such a procession called for a great deal of forethought and organization. But what was the purpose of all this work? Who was watching? Who was this procession intended to impress—to cheer or dismay?

Bamford notes that on the morning of the sixteenth, the whole town was "on the alert"—including those who would watch, but not join in, the procession (150). The procession was, first of all, for these bystanders, those who could not (or would not) go to Peterloo. This ceremony allowed these Middletonians to feel a part of the excitement of the meeting; cumulatively, such processions served to include many more individuals within the gathering than the estimated 30,000 to 200,000 actually attending at St. Peter's Fields (Belchem 106), involving the entire region in the events of the day. But more than this, the procession was a performance intended for the edification of the marchers themselves, for every marcher was both participant and observer. The experience of marching among first 3,000 others, then 10,000, then even more, everyone with a common goal—reaching St. Peter's Fields in the short term, achieving working-class autonomy in the long term—and marching in careful order toward that goal, must certainly have promoted within each individual an awareness of the awakening power of the working class and a strong sense of the role of the individual in contributing to that power. Eric Hobsbawm's point about later processions surely applies to this one as well: "The major form of public ritual in modern mass societies, increasingly tended to be a sort of public drama, in which the distinction between participants and spectators, actors and spear-carriers,
was attenuated, and where the mass itself acted as its own symbol" (81). To support this point, Hobsbawm cites plans to create ramps during a mass march in Vienna, so that every individual in the procession could have an opportunity to see the procession as a whole. The impulse behind that idea and the march to Peterloo is the same: the contribution to the education of the participant is as important as the lesson in power given to the bystander.

In a speech to the Middleton marchers, Bamford noted a third audience for his procession: he told them "I hoped their conduct would be marked by a steadiness and seriousness befitting the occasion, and such as would cast shame upon their enemies, who had always represented the reformers as a mob-like rabble; but they would see they were not so that day" (150). In other words, this march, characteristic more of a drilling army than a rioting horde, was intended as a display of the humanity, control, and conscious solidarity of the class they represented. The power of the mob might be great but it is always short-lived; the marchers of Middleton wanted their enemies to understand that their power was of a different sort, and of longer life. This was not a swinish multitude. The march to Peterloo demonstrated, as E. P. Thompson puts it, "the translation of the rabble into a disciplined class" (Making 748). Those people Bamford termed "enemies" can hardly consist only of the few antiradical citizens of Middleton: the marchers were playing their allotted roles to catch the attention of Sidmouth, Castlereagh, and anyone else who refused to acknowledge the political legitimacy of the working class.

The marchers knew that their actions would be textually transmitted to observers miles away from Middleton or Manchester, and therefore they were well aware of the most important audience for this procession and others like it. Through the medium of the press, the ordered, converging phalanxes depicted for the working class as a whole an idealized image of that class. The marchers' actual power and highly disciplined organization tangibly represented the potential discipline and power of the entire class. Their transformation, from relatively powerless individuals to a powerful body, encouraged class transformation, and, in turn, the transformation of society. In this sense, the march itself was a victory, a "public self-presentation of a class, an assertion of power, indeed in its invasion of the establishment's social space, a symbolic conquest"
(Hobsbawm 76). By writing and publishing detailed (and, to be sure, dramatic) accounts of such events, working-class journalists played the parts of textual “theater managers,” middlemen between performance and audience.

The history of the working class in the first half of the nineteenth century is a history of dramatic events—of public theater played out again and again, in which participants of all classes took on a variety of recognizable roles: hero, leader, martyr, traitor, villain. Class ritual and class theater were not new; E. P. Thompson, in his *Customs in Common*, ably delineates the many forms of public drama in the eighteenth century, noting “the sense in which rulers and crowd needed each other, watched each other, performed theatre and countertheatre to each other’s auditorium, moderated each other’s political behaviour”(57).

What was new, from 1816 on, was the establishment of a sympathetic means to project those dramatic acts to a mass audience—textual playhouses, if you will—a medium whereby journalists as participants, became producers. Carlile became just such a producer: he was present at Peterloo, and published his eyewitness description in the last issue of *Sherwin’s Weekly Political Register* (20 Aug. 1819) and the first issue of his own *Republican* (27 Aug. 1819).

Processions were one form of public theater among many that were transcribed into working-class periodicals. A quick glance at the *Poor Man’s Guardian* or *Northern Star*, or any number of working-class periodicals, is enough to see that they were filled with “scripts”—reports of debates or meetings of local or national working-class organizations. *Poor Man’s Guardian*, for example, faithfully summarized the meetings of the National Union of the Working Classes, with which the periodical was closely allied. And one of the primary reasons for the existence of *Northern Star* was to act as a clearing house for reports of meetings of National Chartist Association and Working Men’s Association branches, as well as those from national Chartist conventions.

Also often presented, in script-form, summary, or commentary, were the many trials of both leaders and the rank and file, recurrent dramas that, in the working-class press, pitted the worthy individual against the terrible power of the state. Occasionally these trials ended with acquittal and celebration (as was the case with William Hone and Wooler in 1817); more often they were passion plays demonstrating moral force and truth
crushed by the power of the government (as, for example, many of the persecutions of Carlile and the trials of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834 or John Frost in 1840). Publication of the transcripts in periodicals and in books offered each reader a model of individual courage against a great and hostile power; courage that was a triumph in itself, whatever the trial's verdict. Typical is Wooler's assessment of Hone's defense of himself on charges of seditious libel: "Before the firmness of Mr. Hone, the Attorney-General shrunk into himself, and felt how contemptible is judicial chicanery, when met by the firm collected reason of courageous innocence" (Black Dwarf 24 Dec. 1817: 783)." Courtroom dramas were a common feature of working-class radicalism.

No survey of the appetite for the dramatic within working-class culture would be complete without a look at two figures who owe much of their success to their ability to satisfy that appetite: Henry "Orator" Hunt and O'Connor, who, between them, were the most popular speakers to the working class for four decades, and whose presence alone virtually guaranteed a huge draw at any mass gathering. The popularity of both men relied less upon what they said than upon how they said it. Both were demagogues. O'Connor embraced the designation, writing in Northern Star, "I say, I am a Demagogue, the word is derived from the Greek words, 'demos, populos', the people; and 'ago, duco', to lead; and means a leader of the people" (17 Feb. 1838: 7; rpt. in Epstein 90). Both cultured a dramatic oratorical style, combining rhetoric and action for powerful effect. John Belchem, Hunt's biographer, offers a superb analysis of several of Hunt's rhetorical devices: his assertions of his relentless efforts on behalf of the people, his "consistency by contrast"—contrasting his fidelity with his rivals' perfidious, his pride in his origins as an "independent country gentleman," his ridicule of the government's stance on any issue, his often-professed willingness to die for the cause—the last "one of his favourite rhetorical devices" (Belchem 63, 68–69). Besides effective scripting and delivery, Hunt buttressed his image with props—his distinctive white hat, for example, which became a symbol of radicalism—and with gestures, perhaps most notably his showing the scars he received at Peterloo, "like Mark Antony, exhibiting the mantle of Caesar," at a meeting several weeks afterward (Belchem 113 n, 119–20)." O'Connor often called himself a Huntite and used the same rhetorical devices Hunt employed: complete devotion to the working class,
“consistency by contrast” (O’Connor’s term), and powerful ridicule of the oppressor. He combined these with a striking stage presence: “a charismatic vitality which placed him outside the ranks of ordinary speakers and which charged any meeting with a sense of expectancy and excitement.”

Hunt and O’Connor, despite their privileged origins, shared the ability to embody the aspirations of the crowd and to symbolically depict class struggle on the platform. As James Epstein writes of O’Connor, “As a personification of the working-class movement he regularly engaged the class enemy in a form of mock battle from the platform in which the people’s oppressors were vanquished in a theatrical prefigurement of their eventual defeat in society at large” (112). Their histrionics and emotionalism had an appeal for audiences that was feared, at times, by allies and enemies alike. G. S. R. Kitson Clark, writing of O’Connor and his “physical-force” allies Joseph Rayner Stephens, Peter Murray McDouall, and Harney, notes that they “provide interesting examples of romantic oratory” (234). In this way they, and their audiences, are a part of, and not an exception to, the romanticism of the time, at least insofar as “romanticism” suggests the importance of the emotional. Hunt’s and O’Connor’s popularity testifies to a deep need for emotional excitement on the part of the British working-class—in spite of the many attacks on romances and the romantic in the teens, twenties, and thirties. That apparent contradiction does not necessarily suggest that working-class journalists were out of touch with the needs of their audiences, or that members of those audiences were confused about the value of emotions. The romantic “histories” of Scott, to journalists and many readers alike, were completely detached from nineteenth-century working-class reality, and in their eyes, at times, his ideas were hostile to their class. O’Connor and Hunt before him—and, it might be added, Cobbett and Carlyle, both noted attackers of “romance”—all used the emotional in their speaking and writing in the service of the working class. Unlike Scott, their romanticism was securely grounded in hard working-class reality—a romantic realism if you will—in contrast to Scott’s romantic “lies.” When certain novels began to ground themselves in this reality, working-class critics began to allow that fiction, too, could be both romantic and valuable.

The speeches of all of the orators mentioned above, reprinted in
working-class periodicals, are best read aloud—and they were read aloud, at working-class meetings, small and large, throughout the country. Of course there were other extremely popular orators throughout the period: John "Major" Cartwright, Henry Hetherington, William Lovett, Henry Vincent, Jones, and hundreds of other regional and national speakers, many of whose scripts were published in the working-class press and read—and recited aloud—by thousands. One speech could form the text for a hundred performances.

Most of these orators were also leading working-class journalists, and therefore it is not surprising that the same oratorical style can be easily discerned in the written articles in the working-class press. Many of the articles, too, were composed as if they would naturally be read aloud. Here, for example, is a sample from Cobbett, in his "Address to the Journeymen and Labourers":

You have been represented by the Times newspaper, by the Courier, by the Morning Post, by the Morning Herald, and others, as the Scum of Society. They say, that you have no business at public Meetings; that you are rabble, and that you pay no taxes. These insolent hirelings, who wallow in wealth, would not be able to put their abuse of you in print were it not for your labour. You create all that is an object of taxation; for even the land itself would be good for nothing without your labour. But are you not taxed? Do you pay no taxes? (2 Nov. 1816: 448–49)

Cobbett's heavy emphasis, through capitalization and italicization, upon key terms, his repetition and alliteration for effect, his use of rhetorical questions that beg a resounding response, all point to a public, group reading of the text; Cobbett has all but inserted the stage directions. Moreover, his comfortable use of "you" in reference to his audience serves to deny the barrier of print and distance, and to put him, sympathetically if not physically, amid his audience.

Cobbett's style—like Paine's before him—served as a model for hundreds. The leader to the Poor Man's Guardian, written during the heat of the crisis over the passing of the first Reform Bill, exhibits many of the same devices and also was clearly intended for public readings:

"The Bill," as has been shown to you over and over again in the pages of the Guardian, will not benefit the degraded mob. It is a partial, and must be an unjust measure, and therefore it cannot be beneficial to the
whole of the people. It may perhaps benefit a few, but it will still be at
the expense of the many. It will benefit none but the proud and arro-
gant "shopocracy." My friends, you know what use they make of their
power. Will adding to the power they already possess to oppress you,
benefit you? You are not ignorant enough to think so. We have then
our battle still to gain. And will you, with the effects of Union displayed
before your eyes for the past three weeks, relax for one moment in
your peaceful efforts to obtain your Rights? No—no!—you will not—
you cannot do so. You must go forward!—you must vindicate your-
selves as men!—and continue your exertions till success shall crown
your efforts with the same triumphant victory which the "Bill" men
have achieved. (26 May 1832: 401)

Working-class journalists, by and large, knew how to appeal to and
rouse the emotions of the audiences they spoke before; much of their
most powerful periodical writing conveys that oratorical knowledge and
energy.

Others clearly realized the working-class thirst for drama: perform-
ers who combined showmanship with politicking so thoroughly that it is
hard to tell whether they were popular for their performances or their
messages. Rev. Taylor is the most striking example of such a performer.
According to Iain McCalman, Taylor enacted "a form of collective ritual
that allowed his congregation to discharge powerful emotional yearn-
ings" ("Irreligion" 62). His performances at the Rotunda (and else-
where) were high drama, with elaborate costumes and sets, combining
comedy, blasphemy, and radicalism, and inverting church and govern-
ment ritual for dramatic effect. McCalman describes one of these shows,
"Raising the Devil," which Taylor performed a number of times in the
winter of 1830. The show
customarily began with a reading of the lesson, after which Taylor was
summoned onstage under the titles of "The devil's chaplain, Arch-
bishop of Pandemonium and Primate of All Hell." Dressed in full can-
onicals, he swept into the darkened theatre, pledging solemnly to
raise the Devil and put him down again without endangering his audi-
ence. Hell, he promised, would be turned into heaven, and every step
of this cosmic inversion would follow true scientific principles. Satan
himself was introduced by means of a dramatic materialization. After
muttering the Lord's Prayer backward in accordance with English folk
superstition, Taylor would incant the words, "Satan, Beelzebub! Baal, Peor! Belial, Lucifer, Abaddon, Apollyon, thou King of the Bottomless Pit, thou King of Scorpions, having stings in their tails to whom it is given to hurt the earth for five months—Appear!—Appear!" Instantly, the large glove lit up to reveal a hideous caricature of the Devil. Then, with a flick of his wrist—"Behold Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light." Both devil and angel, he later explained, had originally been zodiacal representations of the seasons formulated as a teaching device by ancient scientists, teachers, and poets. Gradually the physical allegory had been obfuscated by the Christian priesthood in order to exploit and enslave the common people. ("Irreligion" 55–56)

Such shows were incredibly popular; according to McCalman Taylor regularly drew crowds of a thousand people twice a week to the large theater in the Rotunda (56)—three or four times as many as Carlile was able to attract to his lectures (Wiener, Radicalism 167). No one can deny Taylor's serious intent in presenting such a performance. Nonetheless, it must largely have been the elements of burlesque and the special effects that attracted so many to the Rotunda. That Taylor's performances were theatrical, and not simply extravagant lectures, is made clear by the unsuccessful attempts to continue them after he was jailed, with different "actors" playing his role (Wiener, Radicalism 181). Another speaker at the Rotunda, Elizabeth Sharples, attempted to tap into the same dramatic vein with her lectures, given during the first part of 1832. Under the name Isis, Sharples "wore a 'showy' dress for the occasions and stood on a floor strewn with white thorn and laurel" (180–81). Both performers' lectures were reprinted in periodicals—Taylor's in the Devil's Pulpit, Sharples's in Isis.

As McCalman details in his Radical Underworld, Taylor and Sharples were not alone among radical/free-thought performers. Especially interesting as a precursor of Taylor is Robert Wedderburn, Spencean and son of a slave, whose 1819 "sermons" at his London "chapel" aimed to shock with blasphemy and profanity and "whether consciously or not . . . echoed styles, themes and motifs fashionable in contemporary English and French melodrama" (149). Wedderburn was assisted in his improvisations by another Spencean, Samuel Waddington, who played pantomime to Wedderburn's melodrama. His small stature (he was a midget)
allowed him to take on the pantomime role of "imp of mischief"—and at
times, he brought to life Wooler's black dwarf (43, 148–49).

If the radical press could not recreate such performances as Taylor's
(even though periodicals printed transcripts and accounts of them),
what evidence we have gives us a sense of every-day working-class theater
and countertheater. In what they read and heard, and in their political
rituals—in other words, in their daily lives exclusive of the theaters—the
working class had a number of sources to feed their appetite for the dra-
matic. They looked less to Drury Lane for drama and more to their
leaders and writers, and to themselves.