Chapter Ten

"Harlequin without his mask is known to present a very sober countenance, and was himself . . . a man full of cares and perplexities like the rest of us, whose Self must always be serious to him, under whatever mask or disguise or uniform he presents it to the public," declared Thackeray to the first audience gathered for his lectures on the humorists of the eighteenth century.1 "And as all of you here must needs be grave when you think of your own past and present, you will not look to find, in the histories of those whose lives and feelings I am going to try and describe to you, a story that is otherwise than serious, and often very sad." So Thackeray prepared readers for Henry Esmond, which grew out of these lectures (and in which a number of the "humorists" appear), for his own metamorphosis from fantastical clown on a barrel top to frock-coated "week-day preacher" on a platform, and for a voice of deeper plangency than they had been used to from him.

It may well be that at this time Thackeray was taking his cue from one of the then most distinguished members of this audience, his friend and neighbor at Kensington, Leigh Hunt. Some months before Thackeray announced to his mother that he had a "better subject . . . than any I've yet had," Hunt's one novel, Sir Ralph Esher; or, Memoirs of a Gentleman of the Court of Charles II, first published in 1832, was briefly revived through Bentley's Standard Novels.2 In its genesis Sir Ralph Esher is similar to that of Esmond. As Hunt recalls in his "Advertisement to the Reader" that introduces the 1850 edition, his original intention had been to compile a book
on the wits of the age of Charles II, but, discouraged by the licentiousness of the wit of the "gentry" of the age, he decided to use the material he had gathered as the basis for a fictitious memoir. In the novel that resulted, Hunt indicates that "... while it is hoped that the animal spirits of the times are not absent, and divers of the scapegraces are to be found, an attempt has been made to portray the good-heartedness that was still beating in the bosoms of some of their associates, and the wisdom which a more serious and suffering nature had produced in some of their friends, notwithstanding the pangs that caused it by the mistakes both of levity and bigotry."³

The novel itself illustrates both the "levity" and "bigotry" of Caroline England, an aspect of the clash of Miltonic mirth and melancholy. Its young hero (of whom more later), in reaction against a strict religious upbringing, tries to steer a middle ground between Cavalier laxity and Puritan rectitude. These dual impulses in the English character of hedonism and morality ("pleasure warring against self-restraint")—what Matthew Arnold was later to identify as Hellenism and Hebraism—surge also through Thackeray's lectures on the eighteenth-century wits. As he remarks, for example, on the comedies of Congreve and contemporaries who bridge the period from the Restoration to the Age of Anne:

Reading in these plays now, is like shutting your ears and looking at people dancing. What does it mean? The measures, the grimaces, the bowing, shuffling, and retreating, the cavalier seul advancing upon those ladies—those ladies and men twirling round at the end in a mad galop, after which everybody bows and the quaint rite is celebrated. Without the music we can't understand that comic dance of the last century—its strange gravity and gaiety, its decorum or its indecorum. It has a jargon of its own quite unlike life; a sort of moral of its own quite unlike life too. I'm afraid it's a Heathen mystery, symbolising a Pagan doctrine; protesting ... against the new, hard, ascetic pleasure-hating doctrine whose gaunt disciples, lately passed over from the Asian shores of the Mediterranean, were for breaking the fair images of Venus and flinging the altars of Bacchus down.⁴

 Appropriately the "music" with which our humorist of the nineteenth century is to quicken the "comic dance of the last century" into life is to be rich, but not solemn. Other writings, recalled for the audiences of his lectures, provide him with the dancers and their backdrops: "As we read in these delightful volumes of the Tatler and Spectator the past age returns, the England of our ancestors is revivified. The Maypole rises in the Strand again in London; the churches are thronged with daily worshippers; the beaux are gathering in the coffee-houses; the gentry are going to the Draw-
ing-room; the ladies are thronging to the toy-shops; the chairmen are jostling in the streets; the footmen are running with links before the chariots, or fighting round the theatre doors." And quite typically he turns to the "ephemeral repertories" of the age to supply its special "jargon": "I have looked over many of the comic books with which our ancestors amused themselves. . . . The slang of the taverns and the ordinaries, the wit of the bagnios, form the strongest part of the farrago of which these libels are composed."

In seeking the proper tone for his historical romance, Thackeray looked also to the trend of historical writing in his own time. "It takes as much trouble as Macaulay's History almost," Thackeray remarked in a letter to his mother while he was at work on Esmond. It was the function of the historian to make us see "ordinary men as they appear in their ordinary business and in their ordinary pleasures," Macaulay had affirmed in an early essay. "[He] must mingle in the crowds of the exchange and the coffee-house." In a famous passage of his History that did so much to popularize this study among mid-Victorian common readers, Macaulay declared: "I should very imperfectly execute the task which I have undertaken if I were merely to treat of battles and sieges, of the rise and fall of administrations, of intrigues in the palace, and of debates in parliament. It will be my endeavour to relate the history of the people as well as the history of government." So Henry Esmond's famous query was pertinent: "I wonder shall History ever pull off her periwig and cease to be court-ridden? Shall we see something of France and England besides Versailles and Windsor?" Shall we, in other words, see something of the last century besides what can be gleaned from Captain Jesse's Memoirs of the Court of England from 1688 to the Death of George II, Boyer's Annals, or James Macpherson's Secret History of Great Britain—to mention but a few of Thackeray's primary sources? Among Thackeray's rivals, Harrison Ainsworth, in his romance Saint James's; or, The Court of Queen Anne (1845), had treated this period almost exclusively as a succession of rises and falls of the mighty—Marlborough, Bolingbroke, and Oxford—interspersed with a series of female palace intrigues, but in Esmond these notables become supernumeraries, not the chief actors. Thackeray thought his hero Henry overly grave at times ("I wish the new novel wasn't so grand and melancholy," he wrote to his mother while he was writing it, "the hero is as stately as Sir Charles Grandison—something like Warrington—a handsome likeness of an ugly son of yours"), but he makes him far from stuffy or
humorless in his opening remarks where he describes his task as chronicler of the past: "Why shall History go on kneeling to the end of time? I am for having her rise up off her knees, and take a natural posture: not to be for ever performing cringes and congees like a Court-chamberlain, and shuffling backwards out of doors in the presence of the sovereign. In a word, I would have History familiar rather than heroic." Henry adopts in general what Thackeray had called in Barry Lyndon a "near" view of history. A few years before, Archibald Alison, another highly respected historian of the time, although asserting as one requirement of the historical romance "that the subject should be of an elevating and ennobling kind," added that "we by no means intend to assert that the author is always to be on stilts, that he is never to descend to the description of low or even vulgar life, or that humour and characteristic description are to be excluded from his composition. We are well aware of the value of contrast in bringing out effect; we know that the mind of the reader requires repose even from the most exalted emotions; we have felt the weariness of being satiated with beauty." Henry Esmond echoes him in the more sonorous manner of his own age:

The actors in the old tragedies, as we read, piped their iambics to a tune, speaking from under a mask, and wearing stilts and a great head-dress. 'Twas thought the dignity of the Tragic Muse required these appurtenances, and that she was not to move except to a measure and cadence. . . . The Muse of History hath encumbered herself with ceremony as well as her Sister of the Theatre. She too wears the mask and the cothurnus, and speaks to measure. She too, in our age, busies herself with the affairs only of kings; waiting on them obsequiously and stately, as if she were but a mistress of court ceremonies, and had nothing to do with the registering of the affairs of the common people.

In Henry Esmond, Thackeray does not actually "descend to the description of low or even vulgar life," having already done so in Catherine, aptly described by a reviewer when it was concluding its run in Fraser's as "strong, coarse, literal painting of men and manners in the profligate classes of the profligate times of Queen Anne." In the later novel we get a subdued, stylish picture of the upper classes of this period, but one that illustrates how "the great historical figures" of Queen Anne's Court "dwindle down into the common proportions as we come to view them so closely," to quote one of Thackeray's own early reviews. In keeping with Henry's conviction that history be "familiar rather than heroic," he gives us a brief glimpse of Queen Anne herself, unperiwigged and unlaced, "a hot, red-faced woman, not in the least resembling that statue of
her which turns its stone back upon St. Paul's . . . neither better bred nor wiser than you and me, though we knelt to hand her a letter or a wash-hand basin.”

For his somewhat irreverent attitude toward the high and mighty Thackeray could lean also on the precedent of Scott, at the time still preeminent among historical romancers. Unlike contemporaries, notably Bulwer, who tended to think of the Waverley Novels as picturesque fustian, to Thackeray,

[Scott] was, if we mistake not, the first romantic author who dealt with kings and princes familiarly. Charles and Louis are made to laugh before us as unconcernedly as schoolboys; Richard takes his share of canary out of the cup of Friar Tuck; and the last words we hear from James are, that the cockaleeky is growing cold. What is it that pleases us in the contemplation of these royal people so employed? Why are we more amused with the notion of a king on the broad grin than with the hilariousness of a commoner? That mingling of grandeur and simplicity, that ticklish conjunction of awe and frivolity, are wonderfully agreeable to the reader.

He carried this “ticklish conjunction” to its absurd extreme in Rebecca and Rowena, his long-threatened parodic sequel to Ivanhoe published in the year Esmond was begun, where Richard the Lion-Hearted is caught unhorsed, as a fat, blustering, ill-tempered, vain, quite undivine monarch. As we have seen, Henry Esmond too deals with “kings and princes familiarly.” As the story progresses, we find that his opinion of Marlborough and the “rogues” who surround Queen Anne does not differ from that of Ikey Solomons. Prince James the Pretender is shown up as just that in more than the political sense. “Would you know how a prince, heroic from misfortunes, and descended from a line of kings . . . was employed, when the envoy who came to him through danger and difficulty beheld him for the first time?” asks Henry, and gives us the answer. “The young King, in a flannel jacket, was at tennis with the gentlemen of his suite, crying out after the balls, and swearing like the meanest of his subjects” (bk. 3, chap. 8). The next time we glimpse the prince through Henry’s eyes, he is visibly in his cups and playing cards with Miss Oglethorpe, his mistress of the hour.

“We must paint our great Duke . . . not as a man, which no doubt he is, with weaknesses like the rest of us but as a hero,” affirms Henry’s literary friend Joseph Addison (bk. 2, chap. 11). In his poem The Campaign, Addison feels compelled to “follow the rules of my art, and the composition of such a strain as this must be harmonious and majestic, not familiar, or too near the vulgar truth.” Addison, however, is writing a commemorative ode,
whereas Henry is writing a memoir, which Victor Cousin defined as “the vulgar part of these great destinies . . . the ridiculous and comic part of the majestic drama of history.” Thackeray showed an inclination toward the “vulgar part” in his series on the eighteenth-century humorists. Certainly his various wits fell short of “The Hero as Man of Letters” as visualized in the more idealistic historiography of Carlyle—another fellow writer in attendance at the opening lecture on Swift. Much earlier, in reviewing *The French Revolution*, Thackeray had contrasted Carlyle, “our mystical poet” for whom “the little actors of this great drama [of history] are striving towards a great end and moral,” with his rival “sharp sighted and prosaic Thiers” for whom “the whole story is but a bustling for places.” By temperament Thackeray was inclined more toward the worldly Thiers, “the valet de chambre of this history, he is too familiar with its déshabille and its offscourings; it can never be a hero to him.” To remove a distinguished figure from the aura of public glory is often to diminish him, Thiers’s compatriot and fellow historian Cousin had pointed out. “Every individuality, when it is detached from the general spirit which it expresses, is full of what is pitiful,” reads a passage from his lecture on “Great Men”; “When we read the secret memoirs which we have of some great men, and when we follow them into the details of their life and conduct, we are always confounded to find them not only small, but, I am compelled to say, often vicious and most despicable.” So Thackeray discovered about Marlborough, the most conspicuous of the fallen idols in *Esmond*, whom he indicts for treachery and fraud on the basis of his reading of Torcy’s *Memoirs* and *The Secret History of Great Britain*. Cousin distinguishes the memoirist from the historian who, like the classic dramatist, tries “to place in a clear light the idea which a great man represents,” and therefore “ignores the purely individual and biographical side of man . . . [neglects] the description of weaknesses inherent in their individuality.” As he incorporates history into fiction (through his alter ego Henry Esmond), Thackeray leans more toward the “romantic drama” as defined by Cousin, which “takes man as a whole, not merely on his ideal side, but on the individual side; hence scenes the most burlesque and comic succeed scenes the most heroic and most pathetic, and heighten the effect.”

A by-product of the newly emergent social and cultural history, the historical romance had come of age since the Waverley Novels and generally had gained acceptance by both critics and the public.
In the year when Queen Victoria came to the throne, the French critic Jules Janin observed in one of a series of articles he contributed to the *Athenaeum*: "From History to Romance we have but one step to make. History has descended so far from the pedestal on which she stood of old—and at the same time Romance has so elevated herself,—that, ere long, if care be not taken, History and Romance will stand face to face upon the same level. . . . History which formerly put on the lofty airs of majesty, has descended in our day to the character of a sprightly girl:—Romance, which was once, properly speaking, the mere running chronicle of our domestic manners, breaks out of its sphere, erects itself into a legislator—into a politician—into an historian—sways men and rebukes them—moralizes them—corrupts them." An anonymous writer for *The Court Magazine and la Belle Assemblée*, commenting on Janin's article, declared that the historical novel had already achieved status as "the most prevailing class of fictions," was in fact "the bent of the age," and that consequently, "not a moment should be lost in analyzing its scope and tendency." 

The mingling of fact and fiction in the historical novel continued to meet with resistance in mid-century as it did in Scott's time. Carlyle once scoffed at the form as "nothing but a pasteboard Tree, cobbled together out of size and waste-paper . . . altogether unconnected with the soil of Thought . . . or at best united with it by some decayed stump and dead boughs." Disraeli made a character refer to historical novels as "insipidities . . . as full of costume as a fancy ball, and almost as devoid of sense." As late as 1851, when Thackeray began work on *Henry Esmond*, the eminent archivist and historian of medieval England Sir Francis Palgrave denounced historical novels as "mortal enemies to history," attacked *Ivanhoe* in particular as "out of time, out of place, out of season, out of reason, ideal or impossible," and blamed writers of historical fiction in one sweep as responsible for the tendency of the common reader to look on history as "a splendid melodrama, set to the sound of kettledrums and trumpets." Macaulay, on the other hand, was among the enthusiastic admirers of Scott, and no less a figure than the aforementioned Archibald Alison, writing for *Maga* in the mid-forties, welcomed the historical novel as an education both of the character and of the mind. In Alison's opinion, the two genres in vogue during the previous decade (to which Thackeray had made his contribution)—the "Almack" school, dealing with fashionable life, and its more sensational opposite number, the "Jack Sheppard" school—had pretty much exhausted themselves. Alison
believed with Sir Joshua Reynolds that the province of the artist (pictorial or literary) lay not with any particular class of society, but with "general or common nature," and with Dr. Johnson that "whatever makes the Past or the Future predominate over the present, exalts us in the scale of thinking beings." As far as Alison was concerned, the historical romancer, having all of time at his disposal as the travel writer had all of space, was better able to expand the reader's knowledge and human sympathies than was the novelist of contemporary life, confined to the temporal and the topical.

However historians may have argued over what some of them regarded as the bastard child of Clio, it is evident that the public took it to their bosoms. "The gods give them joy to their taste!—There are authors enough and to spare who write books regulationwise," comments Mrs. Gore's coxcomb hero Cecil Danby; "As to your historical three volume novels per rule and compass, with a beginning, an end, and a middle, it strikes me that there is beginning to be no end to them, and they are all middling." This observation is confirmed several years later by George Henry Lewes in a critical article. "To judge from the number yearly published, one may presume that there is a great demand for historical romance," complained Lewes, "and to judge by the quality of those published, one may suppose the readers very good-natured, or very ignorant; or both. We believe they are both." Lewes's criticisms, however, are leveled not at the genre of the historical romance, for which he had high regard, but at the all too typical writer of it who assumes that "he needs no style, no imagination, no fancy, no knowledge of the world, no wit, no pathos: he needs only to study Scott and the historical novelists; to 'cram' for the necessary information about costumes, antiquated forms of speech, and the leading political events of the epoch chosen; and to add thereto the art, so easily learned, of complicating a plot with adventures, imprisonments, and escapes." Lewes was opposed in general to the practice by writers of dragging in history to prop up a sagging tale, and to give their work adventitious prestige. The historical novel must stand on its own, he argued, meaning that it must be good history and a good story fused. Moreover "good" history for him did not mean simply accurate facts and straight chronology. Scott was criticized in his time, he points out, for mere "errors of detail" by the Dr. Dryasdusts of his time, unable to appreciate how he had "divined important historical truths which had escaped the sagacity of all historians." It is significant that whereas Scott himself had
professed no greater intention than to provide an "amusing vehicle" for the conveyance of history to the ordinary reader, Lewes sees a larger function for the historical novelist: "When . . . a writer has so familiarized himself with the inward spirit and outward form of an epoch, as to be able to paint it with accuracy and ease, he may make that epoch a very useful and entertaining scene for his story. . . . Unfortunately it is only the outward form that most writers study; thinking with this outward form to compose splendid accessories. But, after all, what are accessories? Very much what splendid processions, gorgeous scenery, numerous attendants, and spangled dresses are to a tragedy: a panoply of ennui."26

Lewes's review indicates that more was hoped for from a historical novelist at this time than to furnish a colorful tableau as an aid to the teaching of history. Nor did potted knowledge suffice. M. Janin, in his Athenaeum piece, had already pointed to his countryman Alexis Monteil, "the very embodiment of patience, erudition, and exact and minute research . . . the learned half of Sir Walter Scott," who has "constructed an admirable theatre amid the history of France:—scarcely anything is wanting to it; palaces, cottages, churches, monasteries, fortresses, all are there—it wants only living men and their passions." Janin wondered if "the art of enchaining the interest, of putting the passions in play, of constructing a story at once true, chaste, simple and varied, out of the bloody and miry wrecks of real history" had been lost with the death of Scott.27

The chief inheritor of Scott's mantle in England was that "teeming parent of romance," G. P. R. James, not only the most prolific historical novelist of the Victorian age, but, with his appointment under William IV as Historiographer Royal, the most prestigious. A writer of omnivorous, if not always well digested, reading, James was widely regarded for his erudition—the "cram" parts of his books, in Lewes's phrase. In dedicating his Saint James's; or, The Court of Queen Anne to James, Harrison Ainsworth testified that "the amusement and instruction they have derived from your writings have endeared you to hosts of readers." So heavy was the demand, apparently, that in this same year, 1844, Smith, Elder (who were to be the publishers of Henry Esmond) commenced a collected edition of James's work to date, carefully revised by the author, and, as their advertisement reads, "got up in that superior style and size of type which renders it fit for every age and for every library."28 The edition was successful, to judge by contemporary evidence. Smith, Elder's catalogue of 1845 quotes a comment in the
Literary Gazette on "the rapid absorption of a very large first edition," with a second moving fast: "This is as it should be, with a writer whose vraisemblance is always so perfect; and even what he invents so like truth, that we can never fancy we are reading fiction, nor, indeed, are we, in the historical portions of his publications,—and these form the far greater division,—which are all drawn from diligent research, deep study, and elaborate comparison." But for Lewes, as we have seen, diligence was not all, and the novels of James were in fact singled out in his review as conspicuous examples of uninspired task work. Before Lewes, another critic, R. H. Horne, raised a dissentient voice in the midst of the chorus of praise that greeted the Smith, Elder edition, in his A New Spirit of the Age (1844)—a book that Thackeray reviewed. Horne conceded that James's books, thanks to his conscientious research, are "admirable novels of costume; they may even lay claim to the higher distinction of being capital illuminations worthy of being set into the margins of history," but he added that "they must not be confounded with that class of historical or real-life novels in which all other considerations are subservient to the delineation of human nature." "Accessories" and "outward form" did not make a novel for Horne any more than for Lewis.

James's pedantry and humorlessness made him a ripe candidate to hang in Thackeray's gallery of Punch's Prize Novelists, where his mannerisms are perfectly embalmed in "Barbaze. By G. P. R. Jeames, Esq., Etc." A lead-in to "Barbaze" is provided by an anonymous piece that appeared in Cruikshank's Comic Almanack the year before entitled "Hints to Novelists, for 1846," with a thumbnail parody of the "Read-up or Jamesonian" style that especially suggests Thackeray's hand. It begins with platitudinous moralizing on the lessons taught by the records left by the past, proceeds with the description of the two solitary horsemen that became identified as James's trademark, interrupted by the note: "At this point search the British Museum, and get up the costumes from pictures." In "Barbaze" we take up the "two cavaliers" where we left them in the Comic Almanack, and by now their author has indeed "got up" the costumes ("Both were caparisoned in the fullest trappings of feudal war. The arblast, the mangonel, the demi-culverin, and the cuissart, of the period, glittered upon the neck and chest of the war-steed; while the rider, with chamfron and catapult, with ban and arrière-ban, morion and tumbrel, battle-axe and rifflard, and the other appurtenances of ancient chivalry, rode stately on his steel-clad charger, himself a tower of
Thackeray was no one to scoff at painstaking research. While at work on *Esmond* he himself practically lived at the British Museum, reading up on the Age of Anne, and, particularly in the oft-quoted impression of Beatrix descending on the staircase at Walcote House, described down to the silver clocks in her scarlet stockings, shows himself to be quite exact in details of costume. However, in previous chapters we have noted how he joins his pictorial and dramatic skills to invigorate his portraits. It is evident too that for Thackeray clothes are important mainly as they make the man (as with Father Holt, a man of many disguises) as well as the woman. In fact, one of the more favorable of the early reviewers of *Esmond*, complaining that with the successors to Scott, accurate as they are in period dress, “no breathing, tangible body fills out these trophies of accoutrement . . . the plumed casques enclose only shadows,” found Thackeray’s novel refreshing by comparison. “Here are no laced coats and hoops enclosing names and no more,” observed this reviewer. “His business lies mainly with men and women, not with high-heeled shoes and hoops and patches, and old china, and carved, high-backed chairs,” wrote another.

Contemporaneous reviewers of *Esmond* also made due note of Thackeray’s success in suggesting the speech of a bygone century without archaism—idiomatic simplicity, vigor, and grace all combining “to transport us irresistibly to the days of Addison and Steele,” in the words of one of them. The convincing representation of the conversation of a past age remains the stumbling block of historical novelists even in our day, and Thackeray was quick to pounce on James’s “antiquated forms of speech” (part of the stock in trade of the hack romancer, according to Lewes):

“Boy,” said the elder, “thou hast ill tidings. I know it by thy glance. Speak: shall he who hath bearded grim Death in a thousand fields shame to face truth from a friend? Speak in the name of heaven and good King Botibol. Romané de Clos-Veugot will bear your tidings like a man!”

“Fatima is well,” answered Philibert once again, “she hath no measles: she lives and is still fair.”

“Fair, ay, peerless fair; but what more, Philibert? Not false? By Saint Botibol, say not false,” groaned the elder warrior.

“A month syne,” Philibert replied, “she married the Baron de Barbazure.”

With that scream which is so terrible in a strong man in agony, the brave knight Romané de Clos-Veugot sank back at the words, and fell from his charger to the ground, a lifeless mass of steel.
We can easily gather that this parfait knyghte was pretty much a lifeless mass of steel even before his fit overcame him. With the example of James before him (and Scott did not fare too much better in Ivanhoe), Thackeray was probably well advised to abandon his attempt at a medieval romance, "The Knights of Borsellen." In the Age of Anne, at any rate, he had the advantage of a period that had left behind a record of its colloquial language. When James came to set novels in the eighteenth century, it is true that he shared Thackeray's high regard for the prose stylists of the age, but his model was Dr. Johnson, not the "various, easy and delightful" conversation of Addison admired by Thackeray in common with Henry Esmond, along with the letters of Steele, "as artless as a child's prattle, and as confidential as a curtain lecture." In the lecture on Steele, Thackeray called particular attention to the "naturalness" of his writing: "He had a small share of book-learning, but a vast acquaintance with the world. He had known men and taverns. He had lived with gowmsmen, with troopers, with gentle­men ushers of the Court, with men and women of fashion; with authors and wits, with the inmates of the spunging-houses, and with the frequenters of all the clubs and coffee-houses in the town." Quite possibly Thackeray's imitating the conversational mode of the period, rather than its more formal writing, contributes to our feeling that we are really overhearing Lord Castlewood, for one example, discoursing on the very subject that agitates the breast of the knight in "Barbazure"—the infidelity of women: "D—n it, Harry Esmond—you see how my lady takes on about Frank's megrim. She used to be sorry about me, my boy (pass the tankard, Harry), and to be frightened if I had a headache once. She don't care about my head now. They're just like that—women are—all the same, Harry, all jilts in their hearts. Stick to college—stick to punch and buttery ale: and never see a woman that's handsomer than an old cinder-faced bedmaker. That's my counsel" (bk. 1, chap. 11). As Henry has informed us earlier, My Lord "was by no means reserved when in his cups, and spoke his mind very freely, bidding Harry in his coarse way, and with his blunt language, beware of all women . . . and using other unmistakeable monosyllables in speaking of them. Indeed 'twas the fashion of the day, as I must own." With a sense of decorum proper more to the audience of the next century than of his own, Henry manages to suggest the raciness of this gentleman's speech, if not in all its pungency.

Along with Thackeray's lively employment of period detail to enhance his narrative, and his adroit use of authentic-sounding
eighteenth-century speech, we can infer from the early reception of *Esmond* that he satisfied reviewers with the “delineation of human nature” that R. H. Horne for one had found wanting in G. P. R. James. The reviewer for *Fraser’s Magazine* noted “the predominance . . . of analysis and description over the dramatic element.” Another critic elevated Thackeray above Dickens and Bulwer, his chief rivals at this time, as an author who does not merely “picture life,” but has “seen into the mechanisms of life.” Lewes had praised some of the authors treated in his review article for their ability at “painting characters,” but added: “We confess, however, that a little less painting, and a little more Shakesperian revelation of the ‘inner being’ would have charmed us more. But that is a gift few novelists possess. Scott wanted it. . . . The mass of novelists content themselves with ‘objective’ delineations.” Along these lines an early reviewer of *Esmond* observed: “Scott’s heroes do not, like Esmond, tell their own story, or fill so large a portion of the canvas; neither are they endowed with those attributes of matured thoughtfulness, those ripened habits of calm reflection, with which Esmond is invested.” Even where critics felt that Thackeray carried introspection too far, or thought his hero overly melancholic, there was general agreement that he had advanced the historical romance intellectually beyond his greatest predecessor.

Whatever new that Thackeray brought to the historical novel, he also carried over much that was, by mid-century, old—and hence readily accessible to that legion of readers that Lewes deplored. Among the stock devices of the romancer according to Lewes was, as has already been mentioned, “the art, so easily learned, of complicating a plot with adventures, imprisonments, and escapes.” Any reader of *Henry Esmond* is aware that Thackeray did not scorn this art, nor any of the other ingredients of the historical romancer’s recipe as Lewes sets them out: “As for character, he need give himself no trouble about it: his predecessors have already furnished him with *types*; these he can christen anew. . . . If he has any reflections to make, he need only give them a sententious turn. . . . Sprinkle largely with love and heroism; keep up the mystery overhanging the hero’s birth, till the last chapter; and have a good stage villain scheming and scowling through two volumes and a half, to be utterly exposed and defeated at last—and the historical novel is complete.” Though meant in disparagement, Lewes’s formula describes not only a host of inferior novels, but that tale of “love and heroism” *Henry Esmond*, with its moral reflec-
tions, its hero who carries the stigma of the bar sinister, and its "stage villain" Lord Mohun, responsible directly for the murder of Lady Castlewood's husband, and indirectly for that of Beatrix's fiancé, himself eventually brought to an ignominious end. Among the fascinations of *Esmond* is Thackeray's ability to freshen up what had become the clichés of historical fiction, turning the "mystery overhanging the hero's birth," for example, to a moral rather than melodramatic purpose in making it the occasion for Henry's act of renunciation.

At the time when *Esmond* came out, its hero was characterized accurately by a reviewer as "a very noble type of the cavalier softening into a man of the eighteenth century."\(^4^0\) Having depicted a typical gentleman of his own age in *Pendennis*, Thackeray, by an easy association, transferred his interest to the gentleman of the previous century, and the record makes clear that his predecessors among novelists had, as Lewes put it, "furnished him with types." The Stuart cavalier certainly was a familiar figure to mid-Victorian readers. Their parents had read Scott's *Woodstock; or, The Cavalier. A Tale of the Year Sixteen Hundred and Fifty-One* when it first came out in 1826, and this dramatic story of Prince Charles's intrigue-laden escape to the continent was still in print.\(^4^1\) Other romances kept the events of 1651 and after before the reader of 1851, a year during which appeared in particular two works by the much lauded and lampooned G. P. R. James—*Henry Masterton; or, The Adventures of a Young Cavalier*, a Parlour Library reprint of a romance first published in 1832 that shared the limelight with *Henry Smeaton; a Jacobite Story of the Reign of George the First*, a new offering from the press of T. C. Newby.

Unlike some of James's popular works parodied by Thackeray in "Barbazure" that are set in medieval France (e.g. *Darnley; or, The Field of the Cloth of Gold*, where the "solitary horseman" makes his first appearance, *Corse de Leon, Philip Augustus, Henry of Guise*, and *Agincourt*), the two Henrys are concerned with later English history, the periods in fact immediately before and after the events narrated in *Henry Esmond*. Similarities among the respective heroes moreover extend beyond their names. The young cavalier-soldier in *Henry Masterton*, the earlier of James's romances, is caught up in a struggle between rival factions, in his instance the Puritans and the Roundheads, and the counterpart of Marlborough in his military career is George Goring, Lord Norwich. Lady Castlewood even is anticipated here by Lady Fleming, a widow who has been unhappily married and nourishes a repressed passion for the
brother of the hero. Henry Smeaton, the hero of the later novel, is an earl (stepson of Bolingbroke) disguised as a commoner because of his involvement in political intrigue. "His clear hazel eyes, not without fire, nor even keenness, appeared to beam with a high generous soul," James tells us of this paragon. Thackeray did not make Esmond a twin of Smeaton—his hero has dark hazel eyes rather than light ones—but both physically and spiritually they could be brothers. Esmond seems to have been cut from the pattern that produced James's ideal gentleman, fusing puritan seriousness with cavalier grace: "... in his whole demeanour and carriage, was that sort of chivalrous aspect which had generally, in former days, distinguished the party called cavaliers; with a touch of their free and careless gaiety, but no appearance of their reckless licentiousness. There were moments... when he could be calm, thoughtful and grave enough; but the general tone of his conversation was gay, and even playful, with no touch of satire or persiflage—one of the great vices of the day. Much dignity, at times, was evident, but never any haughtiness of demeanour."  

Rachel Esmond's eulogy of her father that makes up the preface to his memoir embodies most of these traits. Certainly she does all she can to impress us with his generosity of soul, his "perfect grace and majesty of deportment," and particularly his dignity without haughtiness ("Though I never heard my father use a rough word, 'twas extraordinary with how much awe his people regarded him. . . . He was never familiar, though perfectly simple and natural; he was the same with the meanest man as with the greatest, and as courteous to a black slave girl as to the Governor's wife"). His own life history demonstrates that he is able when occasion demands to temper gravity with gaiety. His natural disposition is well brought out by his recollection of the "shade of melancholy" cast over his youth that has accompanied him through life (bk. 1, chap. 7). He refers to himself at one point as Our Knight of the Rueful Countenance; his fellow students at Cambridge nickname him Don Dismallo; his Dulcinea, Beatrix, dubs him My Lord Graveairs, and the Pretender later refers to him as Le Chevalier Noir. Yet Henry assures us that he "had his share of pleasures too, and made his appearance along with other young gentlemen at the coffee-houses, the theatres, and the Mall" (bk. 2, chap. 5), and several episodes represent him at these resorts of relaxation. His lighter side is brought out in his enjoyment of the humor of Fielding, his banter with the scholar-libertine Dick Steele, his literary jousts with Addison, and eventually his own mock Spectator paper.
His daughter Rachel sums up this dual nature neatly as her father's "grave satiric way."

Henry Esmond shares some of the adventures of Henry Smeaton as well as some of his moral character. James's hero, like Thackeray's, becomes embroiled, contrary to his own convictions, in a plot to depose William of Orange in favor of the pretender James III. Both are marked men as a result, but Esmond manages to avoid capture by escaping to Brussels, whereas Smeaton is imprisoned and saved from execution at the zero hour by a pardon from King William. Both young rebels come to accept the mandate of the people favoring the Hanoverian Succession, but themselves choose to emigrate. Thackeray's way with G. P. R. James is typical of his eclectic tendency (noted previously with Hook, Lever, and Mrs. Gore) to take what suits his purposes of an author's matter and reject excesses of manner. Obviously James's fine writing and pretentious platitude were not for Thackeray ("And what Briton can read without enjoyment the works of James so admirable for their terseness," he wrote in *The Book of Snobs*, a bit of sarcasm best appreciated by his contemporaries). There are, however, more fundamental differences in the handling of their similar subject matter that reflect the divergent temperaments of the two writers. Much of James's three volumes, for example, is taken up with the "battles and bruises" that the pacifistic Thackeray compresses into his second volume. We learn nothing, on the other hand, about Henry Smeaton's mental and moral development—his childhood or education—the central concerns of the opening chapters of *Henry Esmond*. As opposed to the emotional sensitivity of Esmond's relationship with Lady Castlewood, only politics and war stand in the way of Henry Smeaton's eventual union with his beloved Emmeline, a love interest otherwise treated rather perfunctorily. Generally in his preoccupation with historical minutiae at the expense of narrative and character, James reminds us of a minor character in *Henry Smeaton*, the sculptor Van Noost, before whose eyes "monuments and carvings were seen in various different directions; and with true antiquarian enthusiasm, [he] soon forgot what was passing above in the examination of all that surrounded him." James can be called the Jonathan Oldbuck of the historical romance, as Thackeray became its John Evelyn.

An unlike likeness can be recognized too between *Esmond* and *Devereux*, a fictitious autobiography, set in the time of Swift and Bolingbroke, by Bulwer, another rival whom Thackeray parodied and respected. When Bulwer's novel first appeared in 1829,
Thackeray professed a strong dislike for it, asserting that he could do better. Eventually he proved that he could, but in some ways *Devereux* was a jumping-off place for *Esmond*. Bulwer's intention “to portray a man flourishing in the last century with the train of mind and sentiment peculiar to the present” apparently was suggestive to Thackeray. The two novels also are linked by a similar didactic framework. *Devereux* is supposedly a posthumously published memoir dedicated to “children of an after century” by an ancestor whose life has been passed “in a stirring age, and not without acquaintance of the most eminent and active spirits of the time. . . . War—love—ambition—the scroll of sages—the festivals of wit—the intrigues of states—all that agitates mankind, the hope and the fear, the labour and the pleasure—the great drama of vanities, with the little interludes of wisdom;—these have been the occupations of my manhood; these will furnish forth the materials of that history which is now open to your survey.” Henry Esmond's memoir too is exemplary autobiography addressed to posterity (“Master Grandson, who read this. . . .”) for their benefit.

To be sure, in another of *Punch's Prize Novelists*, “George de Barnwell. By Sir E. L. B. L., Bart.,” an eighteenth-century cloud-land revisited, Thackeray exaggerates certain features he did not like about the baronet's picture of the period. Again he comes down hard on intellectual pretension: “His [George's] bosom swells with ambition. His genius breaks out prodigiously. He talks about the Good, the Beautiful, the Ideal &c, in and out of all season, and is virtuous and eloquent almost beyond belief—in fact like Devereux, or P. Clifford, or E. Aram, Esquires.” Thackeray, as we have noticed, was drawn to the graceful, unbookish talk of Addison and Steele, from which nothing could be further removed than the pseudosophical jargon of Bulwer's alter egos. Also he was more interested in those who practiced the moral virtues than in those who merely talked about them. With his deep awareness of human limitations and self-delusion, Thackeray aims his shafts more at overblown characters than at inflated language. Bulwer's Augustan beau ideal Devereux “mingles in the world, which he is destined to ornament . . . outdoes all the dandies, all the wits, all the scholars, and all the voluptuaries of the age—an indefinite period of time between Queen Anne and George II—dines with Curll at St. John's Gate, pinks Colonel Charteris in a duel behind Montague House, is initiated into the intrigues of the Chevalier St. George, whom he entertains in his sumptuous pavilion at Hampstead.” Thackeray places his hero in a definite time as “Col-
onel in the Service of Her Majesty Queen Anne” and does all else he can to make him credible, rather than “beyond belief.” Rachel Esmond’s description of her father as “of rather low stature, not above five feet seven inches in height” does not leave a very imposing picture in our minds, and Henry’s own modest recital of his accomplishments tends to cut him down to mortal size. He mingles with some of the celebrities of the time, as does young Morton Devereux, but hardly shines as an “ornament” in their company. He also engages in his share of dueling, and is “initiated into the intrigues of the Chevalier de St. George,” but with reluctance, it is made clear, and out of love for Beatrix and loyalty to the Castlewoods, for at heart he is a recluse. Generally Esmond’s social sphere and range of travel both are more contracted than those of Bulwer’s peripatetic hero (whose adventures carry him as far as St. Petersburg), in line, one suspects, with Thackeray’s desire to keep his history more familiar and more domestic.

Far apart as Thackeray and Bulwer were in literary practice, they were close together in their conception of the historical romance—and together indicate the shift in emphasis the genre had taken since Scott. Bulwer thought that he was departing from Scott in his determination to write “fiction which deals less with the Picturesque than the Real,” an aim Thackeray certainly could sympathize with, though, as has already been observed, he found Scott’s characters more “real” than Bulwer’s. However well he thought Bulwer succeeded at it, Thackeray could hardly quarrel with the principle announced in the dedicatory epistle to Devereux that the historical novelist should strive to achieve “that marked individuality of character which distinguishes the man who has lived and laboured from the hero of a romance.”46 Fundamentally the two writers agreed in their emphasis on characterization and in their subordination of history to human interest. In his prefatory remarks Bulwer wrote that “the historical characters introduced [in Devereux] are not closely woven with the main plot, like those in the fictions of Sir Walter Scott, but are rather . . . designed to give a greater truth and actuality to the supposed memoir,” and serve mainly as “an autobiographer’s natural illustrations of the men and manners of his time.” As against Scott’s way of slipping his characters into history or making them representative of historical tendencies, Thackeray, with his interest in “men and manners,” was more inclined toward Bulwer’s practice of intruding history from time to time into lives of his fictitious characters who occupy central stage.47
Of all the fictitious historical memoirs that Thackeray was aware of, the one that seems to point most clearly in the direction he moved with *Esmond* is *Sir Ralph Esher*, by Leigh Hunt. Here we find the stately swashbuckling characteristic of *Esmond*, a turbulent age represented through a refined and sensitive mind (Hunt prided himself on his "reflecting exhibition of character"), the strong literary ambience to be expected from this "species of unconcealed forgery, after the manner of a more cultivated and critical Pepys," and the overall subordination of politics and war to society, culture, and religion. Ralph Esher, like Henry Esmond, is an orphan who is entrusted to the care of relatives and becomes a page to an aristocratic family. Both young cavaliers, though peace-loving by nature, endure battles by sea and land, and eventually denounce their country's wars. Both also mingle in high society, become embroiled in political intrigues in the course of which they shift allegiances, and achieve happy marriages after prolonged love trials. The two loves, profane and sacred, in Henry Esmond's life, moreover, have their counterparts in Esher's gay cousin Miss Warmestre—who to him embodies "the spirit of mirth"—and one of his guardians, the more dignified Miss Randolph, who eventually supersedes Miss Warmestre in his affections when Ralph becomes convinced that "the power of gravity in love promised a greater charm than mirth." Ralph is also influenced by the other central character of the book, Sir Philip Herne, whose Jesuit education has left him with a "serious and suffering nature," a man "of mixed temperament...in which sociability of disposition gave a playful discourse to his very melancholy." Herne's reading of Saint Theresa "produced in him a confusion respecting earthly and heavenly love" foreshadowing Esmond's "Dea certe" Lady Castlewood, whom he surrounds with a golden halo in his adolescence. Hunt's two heroes merge in Thackeray's Henry Esmond, a source of the complexity of his character.

On his religious side, Henry Esmond carries over an asceticism and spirituality, a sublimated sexuality that manifests itself in the beatification of women, associated more with the period dominated by Crashaw, Milton, Marvell, and the great Anglican divines, into the more robust Age of Anne and the Augustan wits. On his literary side he is more akin to the dilettantish Sir Ralph Esher. Young Ralph believes himself (like his creator) to be "a hearty and a judicious admirer of wit and poetry," and virtually every literary worthy of the time makes an appearance, from "merry St. Andrew" Marvell to the learned Dr. Sprat. He also puts pen to paper himself,
and although aware of his friend Sir Philip's idols Bunyan and Milton, he models himself on the playwrights and wits of the time, as does Henry Esmond. He writes a play (which has no more commercial success than Esmond's), short poems in imitation of Butler, and long ones in imitation of Dryden, whom he admires as much as Henry Esmond esteems Addison.

One of the few readers that Sir Ralph Esher has had in our century praises it for its portraiture of men and manners between the Commonwealth and the Restoration, commends Hunt for his ability to bring historical figures (like Lord Clarendon) to life, but finds his fictitious heroes Esher and Herne little more than "bundles of qualities." On hindsight one agrees with the judgment that Hunt's lone novel "excels after the manner of [the memoirs of] Grammont and of his own books on the Town, and not after the manner of Scott and Thackeray." Nevertheless, Thackeray had before him the example of a "sham history" conveyed in the form of a colorful panorama, such as suited his own temperament as social historian, setting an adventure story against a large cultural milieu. Hunt also offered him as a character a model gentleman who manages to acquire some of the panache of the cavalier without the corruption. However, what Hunt turned into a literary pasticcio becomes with Thackeray a living memoir, owing to his superior ability to absorb his material into the developing consciousness of his hero.

We can gather from all the novels discussed so far that personal and familiar history were well established by the time Thackeray took up the writing of Esmond. It is evident furthermore that historical romancers at this time were sticking close to England for their inspiration, but this had not always been so. Among other observations made by Archibald Alison on historical romances in his Maga article, he deplored the tendency of novelists to seek exotic sources, turning to such remote areas as Persia, Russia, Poland, even the prairies of North America, when Scott had demonstrated what could be done with "events of national history," a source which was by no means exhausted. Presumably the Bulver of Devereux was to be emulated rather than the Bulver of The Last Days of Pompeii, Rienzi; or, The Last of the Tribunes, and Leila; or, The Siege of Granada. From all evidence there were plenty of writers in readiness to respond to Alison's call for more national novels. Symptomatic perhaps is the turning of the shrewd and prolific G. P. R. James more and more during the 1840s to home soil for the scenes of his
novels, after having oscillated between France and England, as well as his shift from medieval to modern history. His *Russell, a Tale of the Reign of Charles II* (1847) came out in the midst of an avalanche of tales dealing with various phases of Stuart history, such as Emma Robinson’s *Whitefriars; or, The Court of Charles II*, her *Whitehall; or, The Days of Charles I*; G. W. M. Reynolds’s *The Rye House Plot*; and Captain Marryat’s *The Children of the New Forest* (taken up with the plight of a Royalist family near Lymington, one of Prince Charles’s places of imprisonment). The beginning of the next decade brought forth such titles as Elizabeth M. Stewart’s *Royalists and Roundheads; or, The Days of Charles the First* (1850) and the anonymous *The Royalist and the Republican: A Story of the Kentish Insurrection* (1852), both of which, along with *Henry Esmond*, employ the Scott formula of the hero torn between conflicting allegiances. Filling in the period between the Restoration and the Old Pretender were Joseph Sheridan Lefanu’s second novel, *The Fortunes of Colonel Torlogh O’Brien* (1847), whose dashing hero is caught up in the Glorious Revolution and participates in the Battle of the Boyne; Isaac Butt’s *The Gap of Bannesmore; a Tale of the Irish Highlands and the Revolution of 1688* (1848); and James Grant’s *The Scottish Cavalier* (1851), which recalls the Battle of Killiecrankie. Most of this history is recapitulated in *Henry Esmond* through the successive generations of the Castlewood family. Scott correctly surmised that the novel was supplanting the drama in the nineteenth century as a means of teaching history to the large public. From the perspective of the 1850s, *Henry Esmond* stands at the crest of a wave of historical romances recreating the half-century from the Civil War to the Hanoverian Succession, just as Shakespeare and his contemporaries had staged the pageant of the establishment of the Tudor dynasty.

If to some of its first readers *Esmond* may have seemed, as a recent scholar puts it, “but one more in a long line of ‘authentic’ memoirs foisted on the reading public over the preceding decade,” there is some reason to believe that it also filled a need at this time not adequately met. “Many are the tales of the present day; many are the tales of Cavaliers and Roundheads; many are the tales of the days of Chivalry,” accurately observed another minor novelist contemporaneous with Thackeray, adding “but few, very few, are the tales of the ‘talons rouge.’” These words appear in the dedicatory preface of *The School for Fathers* (1852), an offering of Thackeray’s publishers, advertised in the first edition of *Henry Esmond* as “a story of the Tatler and Spectator days... very fitly as-
associated with that time of good English literature by its manly feeling, direct, unaffected manner of writing, and nicely managed, well-turned narrative." The time evidently was ripe for Thackeray's own "red-heel" story. The author of *The School for Fathers*, appealing to those interested in "the polished days of swords and powder," sounds a nostalgic note: "In those days the difference between Town and Country manners, and Town and Country gentlemen was far greater than in these railway days: these days of rapidity, electric and submarine telegraphs." Her cautionary tale of the corruption of a young country squire in London, in pale imitation of Fielding and Goldsmith, anticipates *Esmond* only in its quaint trappings—"old face" typography and dedication to a patron—and in modeling its style after the *Spectator*. Interest, however, had been aroused in the social history of the eighteenth century in its more everyday aspects, which Thackeray was obviously in a good position to satisfy.

One of the first readers of *Henry Esmond*, Charlotte Brontë, complained to the editor whom she and Thackeray shared that the first and second volumes contained "too much history—too little story." This criticism she did not have of the concluding part. "I have read the third volume of 'Esmond.' I found it both entertaining and exciting to me," she wrote to Williams a few days later; "it seems to possess an impetus and excitement beyond the other two; that movement and brilliancy its predecessors sometimes wanted never fail here." The romantic events connected with the ill-fated attempt to make the Chevalier St. George King James III, involving Henry, Beatrix, Lady Castlewood, and the young Lord Castlewood, strike most modern readers too as more "story" than "history." If for this section of his novel Thackeray seems to have allowed freer play to conjecture and his imagination, one good reason is that the sources then available to him failed him at this point. In one of his lectures he complains that Swift's history, which furnished him with some political and military background, "scarcely mentions, except to flout it, the great intrigue of the Queen's latter days, which was to have ended in bringing back the Pretender." Even Macaulay made only the vaguest mention of the incident. Under the circumstances Thackeray made ingenious use of various fictitious sources to fill in the hiatus left by the records. Scott's *Woodstock* offered a prototype for the libertine displaced prince taking refuge in a castle and the plot to restore him to the throne, in which his hosts join. Other aspects of this part of the narrative—the cloak-and-dagger atmosphere, the incident of Frank Castlewood's breaking his sword
in the presence of Prince James, a certain resemblance of Beatrix Esmond, aesthetic and moral, to Louise de la Vallière—make one understand why Robert Louis Stevenson dubbed the climax of *Esmond* "pure Dumas." Thackeray’s admiration and envy of G. P. R. James’s principal continental rival is well known. "O Dumas! O thou brave kind gallant old Alexandre!" he exclaimed in one of the *Roundabout Papers*, looking back over the reading of his boyhood and youth. His spoof of the creator of D’Artagnan in “The Legend of the Rhine” did not prevent him from borrowing the sword and cape when it suited him.

Echoes from France, never very far off in Thackeray’s fiction, resound more loudly than usual in the climactic chapters of *Esmond* for the good reason that the chevalier comes from there. This courtly figure speaks mainly in French ("Assez, milord: je m’en-nuye à la preche") or in "Franglish" ("That which you do is unworthy, Monsieur": "I repose myself upon your fidelity"; "Eh! I know my history, Monsieur, and mock myself of frowning barons"). The prince is the Gallic gallant down to his final *beau geste* toward Frank Castlewood after the breaking of the sword:

> "Thus to lose a crown . . . to lose the loveliest woman in the world; to lose the loyalty of such hearts as yours, is not this, my lords, enough of humiliation?—Marquis, if I go on my knees will you pardon me?—No, I can’t do that, but I can offer you reparation, that of honour, that of gentlemen. Favour me by crossing the sword with mine: yours is broke—see, yonder in the armoire are two . . . . Ah! you will? *Merci, monsieur, merci!*
> " . . . *Eh bien Vicomte!* . . . *il ne nous reste qu’une chose à faire* . . . We have one more thing to do . . . you do not divine it? . . . *Embrassons nous!*" (Bk. 3, chap. 13)

It has been pointed out, among Thackeray’s historical lapses in this section of the novel, that there is no factual basis for Prince James’s foreign speech and inflection. One doubts really whether the words Thackeray puts in the pretender’s mouth were ever spoken anywhere on earth, except in unidiomatic translations of French *drames*—with which we could expect Thackeray to have been very well acquainted. The histrionic talk of the chevalier, together with the heightened emotions, melodramatic incidents, and dramatic confrontations characteristic of the episodes he figures in, impart a stagy atmosphere to them, of which the narrator is well aware. At one point Henry informs Beatrix “what her part of the comedy was to be”; the prince is called “the chief actor in it” and later Beatrix is admonished that “[Prince James] is here
on a great end, from which no folly should divert him; and, having nobly done your part of this morning... you should retire off the scene awhile, and leave it to the other actors of the play” (bk. 3, chaps. 9, 10). Historical drama, we are reminded, was still being staged at this time, and it is not surprising that history should have come into fiction by way of the proscenium arch as well as out of annals and chronicles. Scott utilized not only Shakespeare, but the German historical dramas of his day, notably those of Goethe and Schiller; Thackeray, for reasons of his own, turned to the popular Parisian stage, in which he had steeped himself the decade before as reviewer for the Foreign Quarterly Review.

In one of these articles, “English History and Character on the French Stage,” Thackeray expressed his irritation with naïve misrepresentations of Englishmen by French writers, and it is possible to see the Chevalier St. George as his perverse return in kind. He also uses the prince and the intrigue participated in by Henry and Beatrix to ridicule what he regarded as simplistic notions of history reflected in some of the plays he had reviewed. The play that bears most directly on Henry Esmond is Scribe’s Le verre d’eau; ou les effets et les causes, which also takes place during the reign of Queen Anne, with the fortunes of the Duke of Marlborough in the foreground. The drama is set off by the quite unhistorical rivalry between Queen Anne and the Duchess of Marlborough for the affections of young Arthur Masham, who is married to the queen’s favorite lady-in-waiting. Scribe utilizes this petticoat war to exemplify the maxim pronounced by Bolingbroke that gives the play its subtitle: “Les grandes effets produits par les petites causes... c’est mon système.” Accordingly the plot is so contrived that the trifling incident of the Duchess of Marlborough’s spilling a glass of water on Queen Anne’s robe brings about not merely the fall from favor of the duchess, but the duke’s loss of command as well, along with the overthrow of the Whig party, and concurrently the rise of Bolingbroke. This drama particularly annoyed Thackeray, among the group he reviewed, and he denounced it in no uncertain terms as “in its conception... vulgar, and in its incidents, outrageously unnatural and absurd... a lie against history, as it is a lie against morals.” Convinced in his own mind that “trivial circumstances are in this life pretexts, not causes,” Thackeray pronounced Scribe “as bad a teacher of morals as he is an unwise and unsafe illustrator of history,” and if he had his way would have removed him from the platform of the Comédie-Française to dispense his “sentimental opium” to the masses at the Gymnase.
When he came to dramatize this period in *Henry Esmond*, Thackeray shows us that great events are propelled by more substantial causes than cat fights and petty jealousies. In so doing, he makes clear that he had not put Scribe or *Le verre d'eau* out of his mind, particularly in the episode where we are introduced to the pretender: "The impetuous young lad [Frank Castlewood] was for going down on his knees again, with another explosion of gratitude, but that we heard the voice from the next chamber of the august sleeper, just waking, calling out: 'Eh, la Fleur, un verre d'eau'; his Majesty came out yawning:—'A pest,' says he, 'upon your English ale, 'tis so strong that, ma foi, it hath turned my head'" (bk. 3, chap. 9). Previously we have overheard this exchange between Swift and Bolingbroke (Scribe's grand manipulator), deep in his cups also:

"Drink no more, my lord, for God's sake says he [Swift]. I come with the most dreadful news."

"Is the Queen dead?" cries out Bolingbroke, seizing on a water-glass.

"No, Duke Hamilton is dead: he was murdered an hour ago by Mohun and Macartney . . . ." (Bk. 3, chap. 5)

So Thackeray calls attention in his devious way to the fatefulness of this obscure episode of history, when almost simultaneously the hopes of the pretender were crushed and Bolingbroke ascended to the ministry. The detail of the water glass exposes James's moral flabbiness and the opportunism of Bolingbroke while it mocks Scribe's catchpenny theory of history ("the fortunes of England in the balance; the fate of France too as a nation; all depending upon the tremor of a hand which offered a glass of water," as he tauntingly remarked in his review). This motif returns briefly in an episode located in the very throne room where the crucial incident of *Le verre d'eau* takes place. Here Beatrix witnesses the sudden collapse of the Queen during the presentation of Prince James: "[Beatrix] came into the drawing-room in a great tremour and very pale; she asked for a glass of water as her mother went to meet her, and after drinking that and putting off her hood, she began to speak:—'We may all hope for the best,' says she, 'it has cost the Queen a fit'" (bk. 3, chap. 10). At this turn of events it appears that Prince James is destined for the crown, with a due reward for Beatrix as his current favorite. But such is not to be. The glass of water signals false hopes for Beatrix—just as for Bolingbroke, whose triumph proved short lived.

The incident that Swift reports to Bolingbroke—the violent murder of the Duke of Hamilton in Hyde Park by Lord Mohun—is
analogous to the *verre d’eau* of Scribe’s drama in its extended ramifications. Its immediate effect in Esmond’s circle is to deprive Beatrix of her aristocratic fiancé, but its consequences reach throughout the realm by removing Prince James’s principal champion in England. So it may seem that “les grands effets” arise out of “petites causes,” as Scribe’s Bolingbroke affirms, but Thackeray puts an effective rejoinder in Henry Esmond’s mouth: “Men have all sorts of motives which carry them onwards in life, and are driven into acts of desperation, or it may be of distinction, from a hundred different causes” (bk. 3, chap. 5). And indeed the conflux of motives and cross-purposes that propel the prince’s return, and eventually his failure—the timidity of his sister Anne, the self-seeking of her ministers, the ineffectualness and division among the pretender’s supporters—emphatically refutes Scribe’s elementary notions of historical causation. “We are willing to allow a very wide license to writers of fiction, when they take up incidents of history not clearly determined, or motives of character not positively ascertained,” Thackeray wrote in his article “English History and Character on the French Stage.” He thought that Scribe overindulged this license, which he himself uses to probe the hidden roots of sin and virtue. “Fortune, good or ill, as I take it, does not change men and women. It but develops their characters,” affirms Henry (speaking, one assumes, for his only begetter), and later he asks himself in the lonely darkness of his prison cell: “Who hath not found himself surprised into revenge, or action, or passion, for good or evil; whereof the seeds lay within him, latent and unsuspected, until the occasion called them forth?” (bk. 2, chap. 1).

In illustration of this theory of character, Henry is prompted against his better judgment to aid Prince James in what proves a foolhardy plot by a mixture of motives, selfish (to prove himself to Beatrix) and altruistic (his devotion to the Castlewood family). The downfall of Prince James in turn is brought about by a combination of human failing and circumstances—the Prince’s own weakness of will, joined to evil companions, and abetted by “fate’s surprises.” “If ever a match was gained by the manliness and decision of a few at a moment of danger; if ever one was lost by the treachery and imbecility of those that had the cards in their hands, and might have played them, it was in that momentuous game which was enacted in the next three days, and of which the noblest crown was the stake,” as Henry sums up these crucial events from the vantage point of forty years later (bk. 3, chap. 12). In this episode of “The Great Drama of the World,” private history becomes absorbed into public
history as Henry's disillusionment in love is linked with the falls of princes, betrayal in human and domestic relations related to betrayal writ large in politics and war. *Henry Esmond* is indeed a departure from "our orthodox history books" where "the characters move as on a gaudy playhouse procession; a glittering pageant of kings and warriors, and stately ladies, majestically appearing and passing away." Rather than deck out his captains, kings, and ladies-in-waiting in the stilts and headdresses of the "old tragedies," he has conceived them in the image of the French drama of intrigue, at the same time teaching M. Scribe and company how to illustrate character through historical example. If Scribe could retort that Thackeray himself has perpetrated "a lie against history," Thackeray took care at least that his version of these events was not "a lie against morals."

With all his efforts to fix his fictitious memoir in its time—aided, as we have seen, by records as well as by the historians, historical romancers, and historical dramatists of his own time—Thackeray also endeavored, through his hero's vision, to view life under the aspect of eternity. "What can the sons of Adam and Eve expect, but to continue in that course of love and trouble their father and mother set out on?" sermonizes Henry as his chronicle gathers to its close. "Oh, my grandson! I am drawing nigh to the end of that period of my history, when I was acquainted with the great world of England and Europe; my years are past the Hebrew poet's limit" (bk. 3, chap. 5). We are constantly reminded of Henry's piety. The bells of Castlewood church ring in his ears when, as a boy, he is first introduced to Rachel Esmond and her husband, Lord Castlewood; virtually the last words of his memoir are a thanksgiving to God for the happy autumn of his life. Biblical cadence heightens his prose style, just as he finds biblical analogies in his own life—his years of waiting for Rachel Castlewood, for example, likened to the ordeal of Jacob and his Rachel in the Old Testament. Memorable episodes of the novel take place amid ecclesiastical surroundings, such as Henry's reconciliation with Lady Castlewood in Winchester Cathedral (bk. 2, chap. 6) and his meeting with Father Holt in the Church of Ste. Gudule in Brussels where he learns that he is legitimate (bk. 2, chap. 13). "So this is the little priest!" exclaims Lord Castlewood instinctively upon first seeing young Henry (bk. 1, chap. 1), and indeed for a time it seems that he is destined for the pulpit. As Henry sums up his vocational progress: "To please that woman [Beatrix] then I tried to distinguish myself as a soldier, and after-
wards as a wit and politician; as to please another [Rachel] I would have put on a black cassock and a pair of bands, and had done so but that a superior fate intervened to defeat that project” (bk. 3, chap. 5).

Inevitably church as well as state intrudes into the life of the times Thackeray sets out to portray. Macaulay, upon whom he modeled himself to an extent, had defined as the province of the historian “the progress of useful and ornamental arts . . . the changes of literary taste . . . the manners of successive generations, and . . . even the revolutions which have taken place in dress, furniture, repasts, and public amusements”—all of which form part of the background of *Henry Esmond*, together with “the rise of religious sects,” 63 that Macaulay added to the secular aspects of life. The religious dimension makes *Henry Esmond* too, like many another Victorian historical romance, a novel of past and present. Religious disputes were no less rife under Queen Victoria than they had been under the Stuarts and Queen Anne, so that for its first readers *Henry Esmond* could have borne the subtitle Kingsley later pinned on *Hypatia*: “New Foes with an Old Face.” With some exercise of empathy young men of the nineteenth century could have felt themselves reenacting Henry Esmond’s religious experience.

“Page Esmond . . . good Father Holt will instruct you as becomes a gentleman of our name,” Henry’s aunt the Viscountess Castlewood informs him when he enters her service (bk. 1, chap. 3), thus introducing us to the earliest, and most significant, formative influence on Henry’s religious sensibility. At first the impressionable young Henry, inspired by Father Holt’s accounts of the courage and dedication displayed by the order, “thought that to belong to the Jesuits was the greatest prize of life and bravest end of ambition” (bk. 1, chap. 3). The mature Henry (like a number of his literary brothers, notably Morton Devereux and Philip Herne) wrenches himself free of Jesuit influence as he learns to think for himself on religious matters. Nevertheless Father Holt, even when removed from direct supervision over Henry’s education, remains a presence in his life—turning up in Brussels when Henry is in the service of the Duke of Marlborough, in England once more when the conspiracy is afoot to place the Catholic pretender on the throne (just as he had aided Henry’s aunt and uncle in their abortive attempt to restore James II), and he is even seen in America after Henry emigrates there.
The ubiquity of the disciples of Saint Ignatius had already been brought to the attention of Thackeray's generation. A book that Thackeray himself reviewed during the previous decade (and among those advertised in the first edition of *Henry Esmond*)—*The Novitiate; or, A Year among the English Jesuits*, the memoir of an ex-novice Andrew Steinmetz—was written in part as a caution to "pious young people ... yearning after change, desirous of novelty, uncertain what to do with their souls." They were put on their guard. "Let them not suppose that the Jesuits will be inactive spectators of any movement that takes place in the religious or political constitutions of the world," Steinmetz warned. "They are spread abroad over the earth; they are mixing in all societies; they have their institutions in the most crowded marts of life." Despite repressive measures, he was convinced, "the hydra will put forth more heads than have been lopped off; and ... I will venture to predict machinations of the redoubtable conspirators will, before very long, be found to have given them a pretty solid foundation even in this country, the bulwark of Protestantism." Young Arthur Pendennis, for one, is concerned; among his juvenile enterprises is the beginning of "a 'History of the Jesuits' in which he lashed that Order with tremendous severity, and warned his Protestant fellow-counymen of their machinations" (chap. 3).

*Henry Esmond* was written in the wake of the stir caused in 1850 when Pope Pius IX appointed Nicholas Wiseman a cardinal and first archbishop of Westminster in the newly organized English Catholic hierarchy. This move, popularly known as the Papal Aggression, must have seemed to some to confirm Steinmetz's prophecy. Thackeray commented on this event in *Punch*, and alluded facetiously to Catholic missionary zeal in his "Plan for a Prize Novel" that first appeared there. Among novelists with a purpose, whom "the eminent dramatist Brown" writes of to the aspiring novelist Snooks, is the sort who "with the most delicate skill insinuates Catholicism into you, and you find yourself all but a Papist in the third volume." Snooks himself cannot be so accused. "By the way, the scene in the 200th number between the Duke, his grandmother, and the Jesuit Butler, is one of the most harrowing and exciting I have ever read." Brown writes in praise of Snooks's current sensation in parts, now concluding its run. Significantly, Thackeray's own variant on Snooks's "200th number" in *Henry Esmond* (bk. 1, chap. 5) finds young Henry himself in the midst of a conspiracy to depose William of Orange involving the Viscount and
Viscountess Castlewood along with their Jesuit chaplain Father Holt. This episode is exciting enough, but Holt, far from the sinister influence he would have been in the novels of Sue and company, is made an object of respect. 

"By love, by a brightness of wit and good-humour that charmed all, by an authority which he knew how to assume, by a mystery and silence about him which increased the child's reverence for him, he won Henry's absolute fealty," recalls the hero, "and would have kept it doubtless, if schemes greater and more important than a poor boy's admission into orders had not carried him away" (bk. 1, chap. 4). As for those who feared the "insinuating" effect of the Jesuits and their literature, by the "third volume" of Henry Esmond, to be sure, Frank Castlewood has married into a German Catholic family, but the fact that Henry remains proof against Father Holt's silky persuasion to the very end should have been sufficient testimony to the power of free will.

For the conciliatory tone toward Jesuits, so evident in Henry Esmond in reaction against anti-Catholic writing of the time, Thackeray had the precedent of the Steinmetz memoir that he reviewed. In his review Thackeray noted that Steinmetz's revulsion from the fanaticism and furtiveness of the Jesuit order did not preclude his praising of individual members of it, or his respect in general for their intellect and moral courage. Steinmetz thought of himself as one who "has wrestled with the angel... gone through the fires of temptation," and hence could "look back dispassionately on the process through which he has passed; and, perhaps, instruct his fellow creatures with the narrative of his experience, without indulging any ill-will towards those who permitted him to try their method." One essential aim of this exemplary autobiography addressed to "serious and earnest minds" was to retrieve what Steinmetz felt worth retaining from his Jesuit education, while abjuring what he regarded as deleterious to mental or moral health. A strong personality emerges in The Novitiate, self-described as a soul endowed "with the keenest sensibility, the most passionate admiration of the beautiful in nature, in art, and, I will add, in woman" which felt itself stifled in the hampering atmosphere of the Jesuit monastery. 

The interest that Thackeray took in it leads one to infer that this heartfelt confessio aided him in limning out the religious aspects of Henry Esmond's character.

Steinmetz makes much of the lasting effect of his novitiate on his habits of thought just as Esmond testifies to the continuing subliminal influence of his early Jesuit training. "Mr Holt obtained an entire mastery over the boy's intellect and affections," recalls Henry
in later years (bk. 1, chap. 4). One recurring theme of his “history" indeed is the indelible trace left by early impressions: “It [a past love] becomes a portion of the man to-day, just as any great faith or conviction, the discovery of poetry, the awakening of religion, ever afterward influence him” (bk. 3, chap. 6). The mental and moral traits fostered by Jesuits that Steinmetz considers desirable—“self-restraint, self-command, the habit of thoughtfulness, the prostration of the will, and perfect familiarity with the themes of religion”—are easily recognizable in the make-up of Henry Esmond, with his introspection, constant self-examination, humility, and subordination of himself in devotion to others. His ultimate act of renunciation—giving up his claim to the Castlewood title in favor of his cousin Frank, thereby retaining the burden of the bar sinister—represents a complete conquering of pride and ambition, which incidentally has the full approval of Father Holt (bk. 2, chap. 13).

Steinmetz’s candid appraisal of the cloistered life provides the key to what Esmond rejects as well as to what he chooses. In his final chapter, where he assesses the losses and gains of his religious education, Steinmetz concluded that “the labour for the body, occupation for the mind, and the stimulants for the heart or sentiment” are achieved at the cost of one’s becoming “totally estranged from the common feelings of human nature.” However elevating spiritually, to submit oneself to the Jesuit rule, he contends, is to starve the affections: “As a novice, the Jesuit lives in community without enjoying the heart’s friendship: in the midst of many he is alone.”69 In his review Thackeray openly sympathized with the writer’s antipathy toward monastic celibacy, and it is evident too that Henry, with all his self-abnegation, will not renounce the “common feelings of human nature”—friendship, love, and community. “As I think of the immense happiness which was in store for me, . . . I own to a transport of wonder and gratitude for such a boon—nay, am thankful to have been endowed with a heart capable of feeling and knowing the immense beauty and value of the gift which God hath bestowed upon me,” his narrative concludes. “Sure, love vincit omnia; is immeasurably above all ambition, more precious than wealth, more noble than name. He knows not life who knows not that: he hath not felt the highest faculty of the soul who hath not enjoyed it. . . . To have such a love is the one blessing, in the comparison of which all earthly joy is of no value; and to think of her is to praise God.” In the eclectic spirit of the author, Henry retains the Jesuitical spiritual zeal, while giving up its
asceticism. We learn furthermore that his union with Lady Castlewood has been blessed with a child, who becomes his biographer and eulogist, testifying to his exemplary paternal love, bounty, and charity. “All praise to the civilizers of humanity!” proclaimed the renegade novice Andrew Steinmetz in commending the Jesuits for their mission work to “mankind in its most degraded condition.” Henry Esmond, by converting a Virginia wilderness into a habitable plantation, and becoming a master of “negroes, the happiest and merriest, I think, in all this country,” seems also to carry forward this hallowed tradition.70

“Is the glory of Heaven to be sung only by gentlemen in black coats? Must the truth be only expounded in gown and surplice, and out of those two vestments can nobody preach it?” Thackeray inquired of the audience at his lectures, in connection with his much admired Addison.71 At the time when he leaves Cambridge, Henry Esmond announces that he has given up any intention to take holy orders, claiming that he lacks a “devout mind.” However, sharing Thackeray’s admiration for the author of the Spectator papers, after whom he models his life style as well as his literary style, he too can be described as “a preacher without orders,” a “parson in the tie-wig,” in whom “a sense of religion stirs through his whole being.” As such he serves appropriately as surrogate for the author himself, who had characterized himself as a “week-day preacher” in his opening lecture. Esmond, like Thackeray, is led to seek God in the world, rather than out of it, owing in his instance to influences that supersede the instruction of Father Holt.

“After that first fervour of simple devotion, which his beloved Jesuit-priest had inspired in him,” Henry recalls, “speculative theology took but little hold upon the young man’s mind” (bk. 1, chap. 9). Appropriately for his future destiny, his religious direction is taken over subliminally by his “Dea certè.” Lady Castlewood, we learn through Henry, is “a critic, not by reason, but by feeling,” with the “happiest instinctive faculty . . . for discerning latent beauties and hidden graces of books.” Among the books that Henry reads under Rachel’s tutelage are “famous British Divines of the last age,” inherited from the library of her father the Dean, “who had been distinguished in the disputes of the late King’s reign; and, an old soldier now, had hung up his weapons of controversy.” The writers mentioned were significant in their times both as defenders of the Anglican faith and for their ecumenical spirit. Simon Patrick, for one, was author of Friendly Debate betwixt . . . a Conformist and a Non-Conformist (1669) and promoted the idea
of the *via media*. Edward Stillingfleet, another of Lady Castlewood's favorite writers, was the most eminent and erudite divine of the seventeenth century, author of *Irenicum, a Weapon Salve for the Church's Wound* (1659), intended to reconcile the Church of England with Presbyterianism, and became famous moreover for his friendly debates with men of all persuasions from atheists to Roman Catholics. The motto from the Epistle to the Phillipians, "Let your moderation be known to all men," that appears on the title page of *Irenicum* seems to be part of the message that Henry Esmond tried to convey to his grandchildren. At a time when the established church was being assailed from both within and without, when, as Newman reminded them in a series of lectures at the Oratory, the Anglicans were having their difficulties, Thackeray's main purpose in tracing "the rise of religious sects" was to eschew sectarianism.

Lady Castlewood "hath admitted a certain latitude of theological reading which her orthodox father would never have allowed," observes Henry. Thackeray himself apparently was spiritually most at home among the Latitudinarians. It has been said of him that his was "a somewhat undogmatic Christianity. It would be difficult, if not quite impossible, to determine from his writings what precise tenets he held," and a relative who lived in his mother's household for a time referred years later to his "aspiration towards a religion that should be beyond the creeds." His most explicit statement of belief, as expressed to a clergyman friend, is basic and elementary enough, if somewhat unsettling: "I want . . . to say in my way that love and truth are the greatest of Heaven's commandments and blessings to us; that the best of us, the many especially who pride themselves on their virtue most, are wretchedly weak, vain, and selfish, and to preach such a charity at least as a common sense of our shame and unworthiness might inspire to us poor people." In the long run, as that scholar-libertine Dick Steele puts it: "'Tis not dying for a faith that's so hard, Master Harry. . . . 'Tis the living up to it that is difficult, as I know to my cost" (bk. 1, chap. 6). That this jolly backslider knows himself only too well is brought out in Thackeray's lecture on him where he is described writing his "ardent devotional work* The Christian Hero* while "deep in debt, in drink, and in all the follies of the town," and Henry tells us that Ensign Dick is the laughingstock of his fellow Guards for "the Christian Hero was breaking the commandments constantly" (bk. 1, chap. 14). Even Henry, who comes closer to the ideal of the Christian Hero than its promulgator, sees himself as a lapsing
one ("I look into my heart and think I am as good as my Lord Mayor, and know I am as bad as Tyburn Jack"). "The humorous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness—your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture—your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy," declared Thackeray in the first of his lectures on the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{76} His vocation was united with "the parson's own" by the spirit of charity. "I hope men of my profession do no harm who take this doctrine out of doors to people in drawing-rooms and in the world" he declared later to a clergyman friend. He allied himself with Steele's friend and collaborator, another "preacher without orders," who brought philosophy out of the closet and religion out of the cloister.

"I take up a volume of Doctor Smollett, or a volume of the \textit{Spectator}, and say the fiction carries a greater amount of truth in solution than the volume which purports to be all true," affirmed Thackeray in his lecture on Steele. "Out of the fictitious book I get the expression of the life of the time; of the manners, of the movement, the dress, the pleasures, the laughter, the ridicules of society—the old times live again and I travel in the old country of England. Can the heaviest historian do more for me?"\textsuperscript{77} So he maintains his defence of "sham histories." He went even further in the notebook he compiled for his later series of lectures on the four Georges, where, under the heading "Lies in History," one comes upon this sentence: "Most histories with the exception of Holy Writ are just as false as romances with this exception that the latter are longer & more pleasantly written."\textsuperscript{78} His attitude toward the "heavy" historians is best summed up perhaps in a caricature he drew in his copy of Rollin's \textit{Ancient History}, known to many a Victorian schoolboy, representing Clio as a bird-beaked, bonneted, blue-stockinged spinster standing on a pedestal made up of historic tomes, at the bottom of which is visible the name of Baron Münchausen.\textsuperscript{79}

Actually, by the time that \textit{Henry Esmond} came out, the climate was more favorable for historical romance than it had been when Scott began writing. Historians themselves were beginning to challenge the authority of history. At the end of the decade, the historian Prescott was quoted in a literary magazine, raising the question: "Who is there that does not derive a more distinct idea of the state of society and manners in Scotland from the Waverley novels than from the best of its historians; of the condition of the Middle Ages
from the single romance of Ivanhoe, than from the volumes of Hume and Hallam?" In this article the historical novel is regarded not simply as the adjunct to the teaching of history that Scott and his disciples considered it, but as an essential "complement to history." It is noteworthy that not only Carlyle and Macaulay, but also such distinguished historians as Prescott, Hallam, and Motley attended Thackeray's lectures, and that on the basis of *Esmond*, Thackeray was invited by the editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to contribute the article on the Age of Anne.  

Not only were the accredited historians ready to admit that there were aspects of the past that eluded them, but, as a writer for a popular weekly in the late sixties put it: "The increased taste for imaginary stories may have been considerably stimulated by the doubts which have been thrown during the past twenty or thirty years on so many that were accepted as real ones." History, like religion, was becoming less dogmatic as the century moved on. With the pedestal of Clio resting on shifting sands as new sources and documents came to light and old cities were newly discovered, the historical novelist came to be recognized as a collaborator with
the formal historian in the revision of history. The writer just quoted suggests another favorable development—the fact that history writing had become “graphic and entertaining” thanks to Macaulay, Prescott, Froude, Motley, and their generation. As a result, this writer concludes, “persons who had an unexpressed idea that novels were trash because they gave a reader pleasure, and Hume, Robertson, Roscoe were improving because they bored him, got fairly puzzled. When the British public found itself taking precisely the same sort of interest, only intensified, in historical men and women that it did in the hero and heroine of a novel, the great barrier between Fiction and History was removed.” From his side of the wall, Thackeray too helped to remove the barrier, by giving fictitious characters the reality of historical ones.

“Thackeray, in his heart, does not value political or religious intrigues of any date. He likes to show us human nature at home, as he himself daily sees it,” was Charlotte Brontë’s reaction on reading the first chapters of Esmond in manuscript.83 A number of the early reviewers echo her opinion, one observing that “the main interest of the narrative is not dependent upon the progress of historical events, nor do the historical personages much advance the dramatic action of the piece”; another characterized it as “more like a family memoir than a novel,” and thought that “the pathos is that of a secret home-sorrow, the incidents such as were happening everyday.”84 Such critics undoubtedly were not surprised to see Thackeray turn from historical memoirist to family chronicler in his next novel, The Newcomes. Moreover, when next we meet the Esmonds in The Virginians it is more in their home surroundings on both sides of the ocean. However, for him the domestic circle was a microcosm of society at large. Whatever form of “sham history” in which he chose to present his wisdom—“comic history” as in Vanity Fair, personal history as in Pendennis, or historical romance, as in Henry Esmond—his matter essentially remained “that strange and awful struggle of good and wrong which takes place in our hearts and in the world.”

Of all the reviews that Henry Esmond received, obtuse and perceptive, there is no gainsaying the one that predicted that it “will endear itself to every reader of taste by an indescribable charm; and will probably survive in our literature almost every similar work of its time.” It has survived but not quite as the same book, since it slipped out of its original “periwig and embroidery . . . beautiful type and handsome proportions”85 into buckram boards and paperback. “Different classes of persons, at different times, make, of
course, very various demands upon literature," as one of its later Victorian admirers, Walter Pater, remarked. He himself found in *Esmond* "a sort of cloistral refuge from a certain vulgarity in the actual world," the kind of appeal many of his generation found in the incense-laden atmosphere of its spiritual successor *John Inglesant*. Others read *Esmond* more as an adventure story on the order of *The Master of Ballantrae* and *Micah Clarke*. In our times, with Proust and Virginia Woolf behind us, it can be welcomed as an "attempt to capture the feeling of experience as it flows, to suggest the continuum of events by which we are carried along, shaped, or destroyed." We are far removed from the time when it commended itself to "the attention of the thoughtful by its instructive exhibitions of the pathology of the heart, by many a grave lesson eloquently uttered." Like the ordinary people of his "novel without a hero," those of Thackeray's "novel without a villain" hang on to "the skirts of history" rather than stride through her corridors of power, but through his most introspective hero he recapitulated for his first readers their collective past—its mingling of coarseness and refinement, its conflict of puritanism and joy of life, conservatism and revolution, and tried to aid them to reach a politics and religion of tolerance—the culmination for him, as for Victor Cousin, of the trial and error of history.


3. Hunt makes much of the painstaking accuracy of the scholarship embodied in the book, recalling with satisfaction that a purchaser mistook it for an authentic memoir of the period. His name did not appear on the title page of the first edition. In a memorial tribute his son Thornton wrote, just after his death: "Of his one novel, *Sir Ralph Esher*, suffice it to say, that he had desired to make it a sort of historical essay—a species of unconcealed forgery after the manner of a more cultivated and critical Pepys; and that the bookseller [Colburn] persuaded him to make it a novel" ("A Man of Letters of the Last Generation," *Cornhill Magazine*, January 1860, p. 93).
8. For a list of his primary sources, see the edition of T. C. Snow and William Snow (Oxford, 1912), p. xxvi. The manuscript (Trinity College Library, Cambridge University) has a long footnote that does not appear in printed editions, documenting the unscrupulousness of Marlborough with quotations from Macpherson’s "Original Papers" and the memoirs of the Marquis de Torcy (Colbert).
12. Review of Private Correspondence of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, Times, 6 January 1838.
14. Victor Cousin, lecture 10, Course of the History of Modern Philosophy, trans. O. W. Wight, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1852), p. 203. It is amusing that Thackeray refined his presentation of Addison himself somewhat from manuscript to book. In the manuscript version of bk. 2, chap. 11, where Addison is introduced, he is first espied by Steele as he “came out of a little tavern near to Saint James’s Church,” but the passage is lined out and the present reading “was poring over a folio at a bookshop” substituted; some other diverting matter was deleted from the manuscript, including a slightly ribald exchange between Steele and Westbury in bk. 2, chap. 2 relating to Steele’s wenching, and a taunt at Alexander Pope’s opportunistic Catholicism by Mrs. Steele in bk. 2, chap. 15.
16. Times, 3 August 1837; Works (Furniss Ed.), 12:3-4.
18. Ibid., p. 204. See above, pp. 44–45.
26. Ibid., p. 37. “This false erudition,” Lewes remarked “joined to a false imagina­tion, produces an abortion, to which we prefer the flimsiest of novels.”
28. Inserted in the first edition of Andrew Steinmetz’s The Novitiate, which Thackeray reviewed (discussed later in this chapter). The Smith, Elder catalogue quotes other favorable endorsements from the Scotsman and the Atlas. John Sutherland contends, however, that by the time of the publication of Henry Esmond the firm had found itself “badly out of pocket” in this deal with James (see “Henry Esmond.”
HENRY ESmond


30. The Comic Almanack. An Ephemeris In jest And Earnest, Containing Merry Tales, Humorous Poetry, Quips and Oddities. By Thackeray, Albert Smith, Gilbert A' Beckett, The Brothers Mayhew. With many Hundred Illustrations By George Cruikshank And Other Artists (London: Hotten, 1846), p. 127. None of the items is signed, but evidence points to Thackeray's authorship of this item. It is attributed to him by Harold C. Gulliver in Thackeray's Literary Apprenticeship, pp. 127–30.


32. British Quarterly Review 17 (1853): 267; Spectator, 6 November 1852. This reviewer, George Brimley, seems to have been familiar with Catherine, whose phraseology he echoes ("Our business is not with the hoops and patches, but with the divine hearts of man, and the passions which agitate them"). According to Gordon Ray, Thackeray considered this review "the best of many that appeared" (see his introduction to the Modern Library College Edition of Esmond [New York: Random House, 1950], p. xviii).

33. British Quarterly Review 17 (1853): 267. A reviewer in America wrote: "In point of style and skill in composition, Esmond is fully equal to its predecessors. The archaisms . . . are exquisitely managed" (New York Times, 19 November 1852, p. 2).

34. According to Ellis, as a schoolboy James amused himself during holidays "with analysing and reconstructing some of the papers in The Rambler" (The Solitary Horseman, p. 31).

35. Works, 7:510.


37. Lewes, "Historical Romance," p. 45.


40. Spectator, 6 November 1852, p. 1067.

41. Parallels with Henry Esmond are pointed out by Andrew Lang in his introduction to Woodstock in the Illustrated Cabinet Edition of Scott's works (Boston, 1894), pp. xiv–xv. In "Scott and Henry Esmond," Notes and Queries, 17 June 1944, pp. 288–89, John Robert Moore points out what he believes to be a more striking parallel with St. Roman's Well, in which the hero, Francis Tyrrel, foregoes his claim to legitimate birth, a title, and an English estate for the sake of a woman he loves, and goes into exile.

42. G. P. R. James, Henry Smeaton (1851), chap. 6.


44. This point is made by John Loofbourow in his Thackeray and the Form of Fiction (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 161—mainly to the detriment of Bulwer. For Thackeray's references to Devereux, see Letters, 1:95. 98. Actually, Thackeray felt that Bulwer's novel was "full of thoughts strong and deep, but that the author "has strung his pearls on a poor & fragile thread."

45. Punch, 3 April 1847 (continued 10, 17 April); Works, 6:471. John Sutherland discusses this parody in relation to Esmond in his introduction to the Penguin

46. First published in 1829, in Colburn's Standard Novelists series, *Devereux* was reprinted in 1852, the year *Henry Esmond* came out, with an additional introductory note by the author, on which I have drawn.

47. Among modern critics, Georg Lukács has commented on Thackeray's obsession with "private manners" as against public events in dealing with history. He contrasts Thackeray's tendency to show us great people, institutions, and events in their "everyday manifestations" with Scott's tendency to make his characters stand for various historical movements or changes (see *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell [London: Merlin Press, 1962], pp. 201-2.

In "Michael Angelo Titmarsh and the Knebworth Apollo" (*Costerus*, n.s. 2 [1974] pp. 75-76), Anthea Trodd links *Esmond* with Bulver's *Devereux* as figures withdrawn from public life looking back over the past in retirement, rather than as participants, in a meditative mood.

48. The characterization of Lady Castlewood could have been suggested also by Lady Vavasour, whom Philip Herne loves and eventually marries, the beautiful wife of a nobleman considerably older than she is, who is widowed after the Restoration. A historical character introduced in an early episode, incidentally, is Lady Castlemain, a favorite at the time of Charles II, whom Ralph admires from a distance in a parade.


50. Alison, "The Historical Romance," pp. 348-49. Among the varied fare that Alison could have been referring to were Jane Porter's *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (first published in 1803, but revived in 1831 in Bentley's Standard Novels); Mrs. Gore's *Polish Tales* (1833); Morier's still popular *Hajji Baba of Isaphan*; Colonel Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) and *Tippoo Sultan: A Tale of the Mysore War* (1840); Thomas Colley Grattan's *The Heiress of Bruges; a Tale of the year 1600* (1844, concerned with the Indians of the Ohio Valley after their defeat by General Wayne; also reprinted in Bentley's Standard Novels); and Charles Augustus Murray's *The Prairie Bird* (1844, concerning the Indians of the Ohio Valley after their defeat by General Wayne; also reprinted in Bentley's Standard Novels). One of the romances reviewed by Lewes, Thornton Hunt's *The Foster Brothers*, centered on a war between Venice and Genoa.

51. James C. Simmons, “Thackeray's *Esmond* and Anne Manning’s 'Spurious Antiques,'” *Victorian Newsletter* 42 (Fall 1972): 23. Simmons compares *Esmond* with two fictitious memoirs of Anne Manning in vogue at this time, *The Maiden and Married Life of Mary Powell* (1849) and *The Household of Sir Thomas More* (1851), as well as with Mrs. Rathbone's *Diary of Lady Willoughby* (1844), dubbed, with other works of the kind, "spurious antiques" by a Fraser's reviewer. The books already mentioned by Hunt, Bulver, and G. P. R. James seem closer analogues to me, but it is significant that the *Diary of Lady Willoughby* was printed in "old face," like *Esmond*—instituting the so-called Caslon Revival. (For further discussion of the vogue for the revival of quaint typography at this time, see Andrew Sanders, "Clio's Heroes and Thackeray's Heroes: *Henry Esmond* and The Virginians," *English* 26 [Autumn 1977]: 212, n. 7.) Simmons gives the misleading impression that the contemporaneous reception of *Esmond* was predominantly unfavorable. Most of the reviews I have examined considered it superior to others of its kind.

52. Quoted from the review in the *Examiner*. The author was Josepha Heath Gulston, writing under the pseudonym of Talbot Gwynne. Michael Sadleir indicates that Gulston's next book, *Life and Death of Silas Barnstarke: A Story of the Seventeenth Century* (1853), was published exactly uniform with *Henry Esmond* by Smith, Elder (*Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 1:159).


57. According to T. C. and William Snow, the Prince knew no French until he was seven; his tutors were English, and "his letters show no trace of the French idiom which Thackeray makes him use." They consider Thackeray unjust also in making the Prince a libertine, conjecturing that in the absence of records, he had to reconstruct James's character a priori, and "naturally he has constructed it on the models of his father, and his uncle, and his son" (Henry Esmond, ed. T. C. and William Snow, rev. ed. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915], p. 570).

58. See also "French Dramas and Melodramas," Paris Sketch Book.

59. Calling for a glass of water is a secret signal agreed upon by the queen and Masham to indicate that the time is ripe for a private meeting, but the duchess learns of it through Bolingbroke, and this embarrassing accident occurs as the result of the shaking of her hand when she answers the queen's request. The title of the English version, "freely adapted" by W. E. Suter, is A Glass of Water: Great Events from Trifling Causes Spring. This version, first produced at the Queen's Theatre on 2 May 1863, is printed in Lacy's Acting Editions of Plays, vol. 79. In the introduction Bolingbroke's maxim is said, on the authority of Sainte-Beuve, to have originated in a theory of Voltaire. A more recent English version by De Witt Bodeen is anthologized in Camille and Other Plays, ed. Stephen S. Stanton (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957).

60. See above, pp. 93-95.

61. Foreign Quarterly Review, April 1843, p. 147. Another Scribe play adversely reviewed here, Le fils de Cromwell, seems to have given Thackeray suggestions for Henry Esmond. To Thackeray the title character, Richard Cromwell, who turns away from his father's politics and church, illustrates "early religious impressions acting upon a naturally amiable nature," and in the case of General Monk, another leading figure of this drama, "love of a gentle fair one . . . converted the old Roundhead into a cavalier, and so brought about the restoration" (ibid., pp. 140, 149). Incidentally, Thackeray's strictures on Scribe did not inhibit him from seeking out the man himself during a Paris visit, as recorded in a letter to Mrs. Brookfield of 17-20 January 1851 (Letters, 4:428).

62. Review of Correspondence of Duchess of Marlborough.


64. Andrew Steinmetz, The Novitiate; or, A Year among the English Jesuits (London: Smith, Elder, 1846), pp. 3-4. Thackeray's review appeared in the Morning Chronicle, 11 April 1846; Contributions, pp. 123-27.

65. Steinmetz followed up his memoir with a History of the Jesuits, from the Foundation of Their Society to Its Suppression by Pope Clement IV (1848).

66. Punch 20 (January-June 1851): 75: Works, 6:535. Another by-product of Steinmetz's memoir was his tale The Jesuit in the Family (1847), also published by Smith, Elder. "In 'The Novitiate' was exhibited the Jesuit in training. The present work is to display the Jesuit in action," wrote Steinmetz in his preface, and accordingly he demonstrates the depths of "perjury, fraud, equivocation, falsehood" they will perpetrate in the name of their faith, and to win converts.

67. In a centenary tribute a Catholic writer commended Thackeray's portrait of Father Holt: "When it is remembered what the Jesuit figure was in English fiction up till his time," he wrote, "we can see how such a character that is merely human, and no mere Guy Fawkes night effigy, marks advance." He was pleased to note that though "Father Holt is shrewd and clever, he is not a monster of cunning, such as
Eugène Sue furbishes up. He has his limitations and weaknesses like other men; but he is amiable, adroit, supple, courageous, and entirely sincere in his devotion to his cause” (P. J. Gannon, “The Religion of Thackeray,” *Dublin Review*, January 1912, p. 41). In reviewing Lever’s *Saint Patrick’s Eve*, Thackeray himself complained against various tendentious religious novels, specifically naming Sue’s *Rodin*, which “has lately set all France against the Jesuits” (*Morning Chronicle*, 3 April 1845; *Contributions*, pp. 72–73). A popular English novel of the time was the Reverend William Sewell’s *Hawkstone* (1845), depicting a depraved member of the order who eventually is eaten by rats.


69. Chap. 20. At one point Thackeray has his hero recall: “Esmond thought of his early time as a novitiate, and of this past trial as an initiation” (bk. 2, chap. 1—the prison episode).

70. The conclusion of *Esmond* seems also to reflect contemporaneous literature of emigration, e.g. Charles Rowcroft’s *Tales of the Colonies*; or, *The Adventures of an Emigrant* (London, 1843), where it is pointed out that the growing difficulty of maintaining a family in England “has excited among all classes a strong attention towards the colonies of Great Britain, where fertile and unclaimed lands, almost boundless in extent, await only the labour of man to produce all that man requires” (p. v).


72. William Sherlock and William Wake, also mentioned here, were other prominent divines of the time known for their latitudinarian disposition. Sherlock became prominent in the controversy attending the succession of William and Mary, at first a part of the resistance, eventually signing the oath of allegiance. Richard Baxter and William Law, also in Rachel’s library, were noteworthy nonconformists. A lucid background for the religious controversies of this period, tending toward toleration, is provided in Gerald R. Cragg’s *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1966).

Thackeray himself attended Newman’s lectures at the Oratory in 1850. For his interest in Newman’s career and in the controversy over the issues arising out of the Papal Aggression, see Ray, *The Age of Wisdom*, pp. 121–22, and p. 452, n. 10.

73. Gannon, “The Religion of Thackeray,” pp. 30–31; Blanche Warre-Cornish, “An Impression of Thackeray in His Last Years,” *Dublin Review*, January 1912, p. 21. In his lecture on Swift, Thackeray complained that his sermons “have scarce a Christian characteristic; they might be preached from the steps of a synagogue, or the floor of a mosque, or the box of a coffee-house almost” (*Works*, 7:441). He wouldn’t carry latitudinarianism that far, nor was he one, like Swift, to write a paper on religion that is “merely a set of excuses for not professing disbelief.”


75. *Works*, 7:497. In one episode of *Henry Esmond*, Steele quotes from another nondogmatic religious thinker of the seventeenth century, the Cambridge Platonist, Ralph Cudworth: “A good conscience is the best looking-glass of heaven” (bk. 1, chap. 6).


80. “Of Novels, Historical and Didactic,” p. 42.

81. The Fales Library, New York University, has an unpublished letter to the editor, Adam Black, dated 20 May 1853 from Paris, thanking him for the offer, but turning it down because of the pressure of other engagements.
82. "History and Fiction," *Once a Week*, 12 February 1868, p. 108. The writer of this article may have been E. S. Dallas, who was the editor at the time.


84. "'Esmond' and 'Basil,'" *Bentley's Miscellany* 37 (1862): p. 577; *British Quarterly Review* 17 (1853): 266.


