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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Claire Connolly

Theater and Nation in Irish Romanticism: The Tragic Dramas of Charles Robert Maturin and Richard Lalor Sheil

Charles robert maturin's gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) describes religion as "the national drama" of Catholic countries (I, 95). Maturin explains the inter-penetration of drama and religion that appears throughout his writings in an 1817 review essay, taking the form of an anonymous response to Richard Lalor Sheil's tragedy *The Apostate* (Covent Garden, 3 May 1817).[1] Arguing that drama originates in religion, the article traces the history of theater in relation to that of "religion and morality" in Europe—from the "false mythology" and "moral desert" of the Greeks, through the "rude form" of medieval mystery plays, to romantic-era depictions of the Inquisition. Maturin's article suggests that during the Reformation period, theater accepted and absorbed the energies of religion itself: "the key of knowledge was wrested from the jealous and tenacious hands of the Romish priesthood, the doors of the temple were thrown open, all were invited to enter, and multitudes

1. Maturin disguises his authorship to the extent of even promising future notices of his own plays. The review was written with the assistance of William Gifford, editor of the *Quarterly Review*. Gifford wrote to the publisher, John Murray, describing Maturin's article in unflattering terms: "I enclose the Apostate for Rowarth [the printer]. A more potato-headed arrangement I never saw—or rather derangement. I have endeavoured to bring some order out of the chaos. . . . I have reduced its bulk from 19 to about 14 pages." For quote and attribution, see Cutmore. For a further discussion of Maturin's review in the light of Sheil's drama, see Saglia 249–50.

obeyed the call" (Maturin and Gifford, "The Tragic Drama" 254). Sensitive to the religious dimensions of stage culture and simultaneously aware of the theatricality of sectarian disputes, Maturin makes theater itself at once the scene, figure, and ground of confessional confrontation.

Maturin and Sheil represent the two major sides of the denominational divide in early nineteenth-century Ireland: the former was a controversial Protestant clergyman of Huguenot origin whose chief literary allies were the Tory circle associated with Walter Scott and the *Quarterly Review;* whereas the latter was a Catholic barrister best remembered for laying aside his ambitions as a dramatist and joining with Daniel O'Connell to co-found the Catholic Association in 1823. What unites Maturin and Sheil is, however, just as significant as what divides them. Both made their dramatic reputations on the London rather than the Dublin stage. Both wrote plays that thematize characteristically Irish political concerns (violence, suffering, hunger, religious tolerance), but never adopt Ireland as their setting or make it part of the world of their drama. Maturin's as well as Sheil's plays, however, were reviewed and read in relation to metropolitan debates about Catholic suffrage and issues of political representation. Significantly, both wrote powerful literary tragedies that examine the tragic fates of societies and individuals scarred by history—especially by histories of conflict realized in religious terms—in a period when major Romantic writers struggled to forge tragic dramas from the confusion of contemporary life.

The result is a shared repertoire of images and styles that serve to unite at the levels of form and reception the dramatic work of figures divided by politics and religion.[2] In Maturin's and Sheil's plays, fate is experienced less as a metaphysical force and more as a set of material consequences that attend upon inequality and injustice. A dramatic investment in extremes of power moves the plays into a Gothic idiom, whereas the tendency to focus on intensely private dilemmas played out against a backdrop of heated public scenes

2. In 1817, the *Monthly Review* discussed Sheil's *The Apostate* and Maturin's *Manuel* as linked productions: "As these rival plays have been *coevally famous* at each of the Royal theatres, it is but fair to let our readers see what the audience has been admiring at Drury-Lane and Covent-Garden in the year 1817, and of how kindred a feather are the birds which have here flocked together!" (qtd. Saglia 250).

results in a further downward drag into the "lower genre" of melodrama.[3] Each of these stylistic junctures (tragic, Gothic, and melodramatic) involves an encounter with ideas and images associated with religion, resulting in a dramatic oeuvre realizing its tragic vision within a clearly confessional context.

A shared investment in religious hatred and intolerance (political, cultural, psychic) leads Sheil and Maturin to incorporate Catholic-associated forms, modes, and topics within the folds of their dramaturgical practices. This tendency is visible both in style (a focus on suffering statues and bodies in pain, as well as on ritualistic and liturgical uses of language) and in content (absolutism, martyrology, intolerance). The reception of the plays filters and processes contemporary debates about the admission of Catholics to British public life in the years leading up to Emancipation (1829). Catholicism is crucial to three major aspects of Maturin's and Sheil's dramatic productions: genre, through their contributions to the romantic redefinition of tragic forms at the moment of a breakdown of theistic tragedy; dramaturgy, through a shared pictorial aesthetic drawing on the cultural repertoire of Catholicism; and reception, in relation to debates about stage and suffrage occurring throughout the 1810s and 1820s.

Any analysis of the connection between these tragedies and the contemporaneous world of Irish politics must be routed via religion. Rather than simply re-imagining Irish confessional conflicts in foreign dress, these texts register a set of anxieties concerning the admission of Catholics to public life at the level of style. Maturin's and Sheil's dramas were written and performed in the period when Irish Catholic hopes were lowest, in the aftermath of the broken promises of the Union (1801), and in the years immediately preceding the great renewal of Catholic energies in the 1820s. The plays belong to the emergence of a "traumatic paradigm" in Irish literature (Connolly "Tales of Ruin"), and their turn to tragic forms must be understood in these terms. Associated with bardic forms in Irish

3. The elevation of melodrama in recent film theory, argues Rita Felski, has helped to destabilize the difference between tragedy and melodrama. As a consequence, we can see how the inclusion of certain topics (her example is the mother/daughter relationships in the films of Douglas Sirk) "has the effect of dragging a text downward, ensuring its inclusion in the 'lower' genre" (viii–ix).

language poetry, a literary tradition allied with distress and injustice took on new shapes within the English-language culture of Irish romanticism. The plays also have as their backdrop a post-1641 Anglican tradition that associated Catholicism with horror, violence, and fear, and which was to bear as its fruit an important genre of Gothic writing.[4] Finally, the reception of Maturin's and Sheil's dramatic works suggests that despite their temporal and spatial settings—at a remove from both Ireland and their own time—these plays were read in contemporary terms.

Irish Drama on the London Stage

In Jane Moody's account of the close connection between drama and politics on the British stage between 1776 and 1843, play going, criticism, and theatrical allusions contributed to a "fervent excitement surrounding the description and judgement of theatre performance and the relationships between theatre and a modern society" ("The Theatrical Revolution" 215). Such excitement was as true for Ireland as for Britain. From 1800, Dublin playhouses, operating in the midst of a lively critical culture, took tentative steps toward staging stories from Irish history (Connolly, "Irish Romanticism" 428–29). By the 1820s, with the arrival of larger playhouses with new lighting effects and the unraveling of the "mutually beneficial relationship with the Lord Lieutenant," a sense of the Irish theater as contested institution began to emerge (Morash 102). When a performance of Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* at the Theatre Royal in Dublin in 1822 resulted in an Orange protest against the "vaguely pro-Catholic" Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Marquis Wellesley (Bartlett 328), the Irish theater became, at least in part, "a place of resistance to direct British rule" (Morash 102).

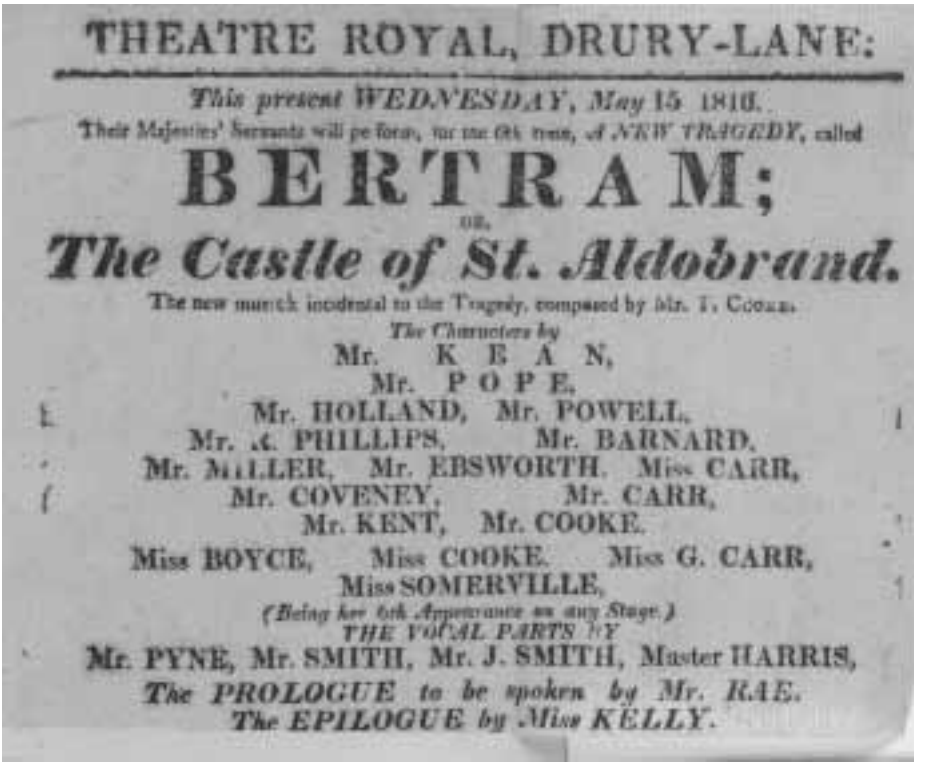
Maturin's and Sheil's dramatic reputations flourished in the decade prior to the Orange disturbances in the Theatre Royal (known as the "Bottle Riot") and at least two decades before Irish playwrights began to look to America for theatrical opportunities; thus the conditions to which they adapted their dramatic vision were

4. On Gothic and atrocity, see Kilfeather and Killeen.

those of the London stage. Their careers exemplify the complexities of Irish professional and cultural life under the union when the lure of London was strong. Sheil first went there for his professional legal studies, and both he and Maturin were undoubtedly drawn by the promise of financial success beyond what might be achieved in Ireland. With plays performing in prestigious London venues between 1816 and 1822, both playwrights reorganized and reshaped their religio-political preoccupations for the legitimate theaters of Drury Lane and Covent Garden—but in productions that borrowed techniques from the illegitimate stage.[5] Although Maturin's and Sheil's tragedies can be located on the side of legitimacy, they diverge from classical definitions of the genre in a number of ways. Falling off from an Aristotelian "magnitude" of plot and protagonist, they compound that offense by including musical airs and elaborate sound effects against a backdrop of stage spectacle.

Sheil's and Maturin's adoption of tragedy is weighted with a sense of a tradition as a "mode of feeling" that incorporates, in Seamus Deane's view of that term (86–87), a catastrophic vision of a fall from wholeness into the shallow world of modernity—as in Sheil's depiction of the aftermath of the French Revolution in *Adelaide*, the breakdown of social order in *The Apostate*, or in the characterization of a hero traumatically cut off from his own history in Maturin's *Bertram; or, the Castle of St. Aldobrand* (Drury Lane, 9 May 1816; see fig. 1). Both playwrights invoke tradition through a slow-paced reverence for past forms, often figured by Catholicism (monks, altars, prayers, and chants). On stage, these images gain a dramatic life of their own, moving the plays from legitimate tragedy toward melo-

5. Illegitimate drama refers to plays other than tragedies and comedies that were performed in unpatented theaters (i.e., venues other than Covent Garden or Drury Lane) that proliferated across the burgeoning metropolis. Moody points out the extent to which the cultural-political categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy originate in the heated political climate of the 1790s and the influence of Burkean cultural nationalism (*Illegitimate Theatre* 52). Shakespeare, as well as Irish dramatists Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, figured as touchstones for legitimacy, with Edmund Burke as its foundational theorist. A division between legitimate and illegitimate theater endured until the effective abolition of theatrical monopoly in 1833 (officially 1843). Debates about legitimacy and illegitimacy contributed to a much broader debate about cultural democracy in late Georgian Britain.



THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY-LANE:

This present WEDNESDAY, *May* 15 1816.

Their Majesties' Servants will perform, for the 6th time, a NEW TRAGEDY, called

BERTRAM;

OR,

The Castle of St. Aldobrand.

The new music incidental to the Tragedy, composed by Mr. T. Cooke.

The Characters by

Mr. KEAN,

Mr. POPE,

Mr. HOLLAND, Mr. POWELL,

Mr. C. PHILLIPS, Mr. BARNARD,

Mr. MILLER, Mr. EBSWORTH, Miss CARR,

Mr. COVENEY, Mr. CARR,

Mr. KENT, Mr. COOKE.

Miss BOYCE, Miss COOKE, Miss G. CARR,

Miss SOMERVILLE,

(Being her 6th Appearance on any Stage.)

THE VOCAL PARTS BY

Mr. PYNE, Mr. SMITH, Mr. J. SMITH, Master HARRIS,

The PROLOGUE to be spoken by Mr. RAE.

The EPILOGUE by Miss KELLY.

Figure 1. Original Drury Lane playbill for *Bertram*. Reproduced from *The Life of E.K.*, 2 vols. (London, 1835), I, 158–59. BL shelfmark 10825.bb.1. © The British Library. All Rights Reserved.

drama—as in the closing scene of Maturin's *Fredolfo* in which the bloody dénouement occurs on an altar before assembled monks.

Ignoring Irish landscape or history for setting, plot, or theme, this drama did little to reinvigorate the political cause of Irish Catholics in the decade before Emancipation. *Adelaide,* Sheil's first play, was initially performed in Ireland, but subsequent works discussed here premiered in London. Sheil explores confessional difference as it animates historic conflicts between Islam and Christianity: Moorish Spain under the yoke of Phillip II (*The Apostate*, 1817); Muslim piracy and slavemongering in sixteenth-century Tunis (*Bellamira; or, the Fall of Tunis* [Covent Garden, April/May 1818]); and rule by a weak sensualist in Renaissance Naples (*Evadne; or, the Statue* [Covent Garden, 10 Feb. 1819], adopted from James Shirley's *The Traitor)*. Maturin's *Bertram* (1816), *Manuel* (Drury Lane, 8 March 1817), and *Fredolfo* (Drury Lane, 12 May 1819) deploy the stage trappings of Gothic anti-Catholicism to depict vaguely realized rebellions, distant in space and time.

These plays engage in that spatio-temporal translation of contemporary concerns commonplace within the cultural politics of Romanticism.[6] Mapping political ideology onto formal development in this drama means exploring and interrogating key relationships: between Ireland and Britain, theatrical form and political content, the religious politics of the 1810s and 1820s, and the Gothic realization of Catholicism on the early nineteenth-century stage. Sheil's and Maturin's plays present a series of linked tableaux, generating historical perspectives in which distant times and places come into clear focus. These works belong to a theatrical culture

6. William Torrens McCullagh argues of Sheil's *The Apostate*, for example, that "the eager spirit which chafed daily at Catholic disenfranchisement in his own land, gladly sought occasion to depict in unsuspected verse, the hatefulness of intolerance, as exhibited by a despot professing the Catholic creed" (I, 92). Diego Saglia goes further, relating a number of Sheil's stylistic choices to his standpoint on contemporary politics, especially the Catholic question. In the 1810s Sheil sided against O'Connell with those who favored granting some measure of royal control over the appointment of Catholic episcopacy in Ireland. Sheil subsequently renounced his "Vetoist" position when he joined with O'Connell in 1824, thus healing the great split in Catholic politics and laying the ground for future success. For Saglia, the tendency toward compromise evident in Sheil's Vetoist views provides a key to the playwright's propensity for theatrical as well as political conciliation (252–53).

unconcerned with the staging of contemporary realities (whether British or Irish)[7]: thus the origin of their dramatic vision, contemporary London, does not itself form part of the stage spectacle. Read in these terms, Ireland is located somewhere between the hazy and remote spectacles of Gothic and Orientalist drama and the busy, yet to be focalized, realities of everyday metropolitan experience. Religious conflict is rendered foreign by setting and generic affiliations, but this distancing fails to disguise the proximity of such conflicts to conditions within the recently created United Kingdom.

Conventional representations of Catholicism, intervening in the space between Gothic and domestic drama, appear in modes seemingly locked within theatrical traditions; these representations, however, obliquely signify the pressure of contemporary realities. No stable social world underlies these tragedies, for instead they all share a backdrop of divided societies with either current or recent experience of armed conflict—with sharp religio-political cleavages integral to the tragic vision elaborated in the plays. In *The Apostate*, for example, Hemeya attempts to cast aside religious prejudices in the name of romantic passion; his tragedy emerges from the perception that such prejudices inescapably shape the fate of those residing in societies divided by religious belief and sharp asymmetries of power and privilege. Locating stage versions of Catholicism within such a mixture of dramatic conventions opens a space for what Saglia identifies as a "contemporaneity" borne of confusion (267). Thus the very absence of a clearly defined order—of the world depicted or the conventions deployed—marks the modernity of these plays.

Modes of Feeling: Tragedy, Affect, and Terror

The plays develop a dramatic language and style that fit into a developing but still (at least in public terms) shapeless and placeless Catholic nation. Characterized by inertia at the level of official pol-

7. The first play to represent domestic life on the British stage—W.T. Moncrieff's *The Lear of Private Life*—appeared in 1820. Sheil's and Maturin's dramas were thus performed as the trend for comedies of fashionable life (with their staple stage Irishmen) was on the wane and domestic melodrama on the rise.

itics, the 1810s culminated in the formation of Sheil's and O'Connell's Catholic Association, which in turn benefited from great changes that took place in Ireland. The period between 1813 and 1823 forms a key phase in the "rise of the Catholic nation"; by 1823, writes Thomas Bartlett, "an intensely politicised peasantry, volatile, disaffected, sectarianized, conscious of its strength in numbers and thoroughly aware of its grievances, had developed in varying degrees from one end of Ireland to the other" (311). Maturin's and Sheil's drama, although at several removes from official politics, nonetheless represents a cultural development contemporary with and connected to this rise of the Catholic nation. Debates about the readmission of Catholics to civil, religious, and political equality (the official business of the Catholic Association) co-existed in these years with a burgeoning sense of confessional identity. The role of culture was crucial, both at the level of everyday activities described by Bartlett as central to Catholic socialization and politicization (wakes, patterns, hurling matches) and as a literary resource to be drawn on by the Catholic Association (332–33).

Unlike authors of borderline or second-order genres such as the national tale, who might mold new forms in the image of contemporary concerns, Irish writers of tragic drama found themselves treading on hallowed cultural ground. Moody notes that tragedy had long been conceived of as "the cultural apex of late Georgian drama," the genre that was to revitalize the degraded state of Drury Lane and Covent Garden theaters in the romantic period (*Illegitimate Theatre* 2). Maturin's *Bertram* was sponsored by Walter Scott and taken up by a Lord Byron-led Drury Lane committee seeking to restore a legitimate drama and save the British stage from newly popular illegitimate forms such as hippodrama, burlesque, pantomime, and aquadrama. A controversial and popular success, *Bertram* nevertheless became subject to stringent criticisms that targeted, in particular, its loose grasp on the structures of traditional tragedy and its slack moral standards. Most notably, Maturin's manuscript features a supernatural figure known as "the Dark Knight." Largely cut from the staged version of the play (at the insistence of Scott and George Lamb), the unexplained supernatural surfaces in the shape of uncanny presentiments and strange rumors, and survives as an eerie off-stage threat.

The very lack of overarching providential structure and the promiscuous mix of generic conventions that characterize romantic tragedy help us analyze the violence and chaos of these dramas. George Steiner's influential thesis concerning the death of tragedy in the aftermath of Jean-Jacque Rousseau's philosophy has been countered by revisionist work in Romantic-era theater studies, which argues that the breakdown of theistic structures itself constitutes an essentially romantic plight. Rather than becoming mired in the moment at which transcendence fails, Romantic tragic drama

> begins in the chaotic world that follows the collapse of traditional order and explores the protagonist's struggle to break through to a world remade in the light of an imaginative ideal, a struggle which fails as the protagonist embraces the limited self and not the imagination, violence and not vision. (Cox, *In the Shadows of Romance* 15–16)

The protagonists of Maturin's and Sheil's plays are haunted by what Cox terms "the problem of historical violence," finding themselves "torn between the siren songs of the self and the call to revolutionary violence" (20, 24). In Maturin's *Bertram* and Sheil's *The Apostate*, heroic protagonists forsake the "imaginative ideal" of their "country," turning instead to an affective void characterized by agitation and violence. Depicting tragic heroes with "no country," both playwrights invoke a rootless alienation allied to a fatalistic view of the future; in these dramatic works lingering national feelings express themselves only through painful negatives. In *Bertram* the eponymous hero, returning to his native land following long exile, discovers Imogine married to his enemy, who is just returning from the Crusades; thus the former lovers find themselves cut off from each other and their shared past. To Imogine's demand to know "thy race and country," Bertram replies

> The wretched have no country: that dear name
> Comprizes home, kind kindred, fostering friends,
> Protecting laws, all that binds man to man—
> But none of these are mine;—I have no country—
> And for my race, the last dread trump shall wake
> the sheeted relics of mine ancestry,
> Ere trump of herald to the armed lists

In the bright blazon of their stainless coat,
Calls their lost child again.— (337)

Invoking the call of dead generations, Bertram presents himself at once as adrift in history and as living manifestation of the past. Imogine shakes at the sound of the "awful thrilling in his voice," which brings with it the "soul of other days."

If the pressure of past loyalties proves unbearable in Maturin's and Sheil's plays, the present promises only a community of dead or suffering bodies reminiscent of post-rebellion devastation in Ireland. The leader of a robber band, Bertram suffered exile in consequence of a failed uprising against the Count Aldobrand, now husband of Imogine. Maturin depicts Bertram as criminal seducer, political rebel, "lost child," and solitary soul, as the personification of a rootless spirit of Romantic agony shadowed by melancholy reflections of past commitment to his "race" and "the sheeted relics of mine ancestry" (337). Such references, in conjunction with the religious terms characterizing his transgressions ("false idol," "his voice of blasphemy," "apostate," and "fallen archangel") invoke the language and affect of Irish politics. The passionate Bertram recalls glamorous Irish insurgents such as Lord Edward Fitzgerald and Robert Emmett, as well as the military prowess and charismatic public persona of the Duke of Wellington. Significantly, Bertram casts his claims on the past in the mode of transgression, realized through a range of Gothic effects. What Cox describes as the play's failure to establish a "society of two" (*In the Shadows of Romance* 123) suggests how, in locating destruction at the heart of domestic life, Maturin alludes to the formation of national community as domestic violence releases widening circles of destruction. The reactivation of Bertram's desires proves fatal, finally catapulting him into a bleakly realized present: the play concludes with the hero bent over the corpse of his enemy:

I am amazed to see ye living men,
I deemed that when I struck the final blow
Mankind expired, and we were left alone,
The corse and I were left alone together,
The only tenants of a blasted world

Dispeopled for my punishment, "and changed
Into a penal orb of desolation." (368)

Like Maturin's *Manuel* and *Fredolfo*, *Bertram* decisively rejects redemption. In the manuscript version of the play, Bertram does not even die but departs, vampire-like, in the company of a "dark form." Definitions of romantic tragedy revolve around the plight of a hero like Bertram, trapped within a world of chaos and confusion. No longer invoking the closed world of classical tragedy, romantic aesthetics envisages the heroic imagination shadowed by failure, loss, and isolation. Joanna Baillie's *Plays on the Passions* (1798) similarly presents protagonists (notably in her *De Montfort*) that vacillate between heroic and vicious acts. Unlike Baillie and his other contemporaries, however, Maturin focuses not on the protagonist's wickedness or criminality, but on comprehending his role within a tragic narrative. The play presents the plight of its villain-hero as tragic despite his scandalous behavior toward Imogine, her husband, and her child; ironically, *Bertram*'s repeated invocations of religious imagery—opening on "Relic, and rosary, and crucifix" and closing in a call for prayer (320, 374)—appears to license its controversial refusal of remorse.[8]

With their themes of exile and emigration, Sheil's dramatic works echo Bertram's elegy for home, friends, race, and ancestry. In *The Apostate,* Hemeya renounces his Muslim faith in order to marry a beautiful Spanish woman. On the brink of apostasy, he rejects the attempts of the old Moor, Malec, to remind him of duty to his country:

Hem. We have no country!
Mal. Thou hast, indeed, no country.

8. Rather than seeing this reliance on religion, critics of the play tend to assume with Daniel P. Watkins that *Bertram* rejects Catholicism as a component part of the aristocratic system that the play wishes to overthrow (102). Watkins' reading does, however, worry over the "odd combination of integrity, fear, coldness, deceit, warmth, and confusion" evident in the depiction of the monks and their Prior (107). It is worth noting here that the relationship between Bertram and the Prior is depicted as an intimate one, with the priest making repeated efforts to save Bertram's soul. The Prior finally offers to exchange his "ghostly power" (373) for a secular and psychologized plea for salvation that is nonetheless framed by preceding scenes of confession and meditation.

Hem. Are we not bound to earth? The lordling Spaniard
Treads on our heads — We groan beneath the yoke
That, shaken, gores more deeply! —
Resistance will but ope new founts of blood
To gush in foaming torrents. (II, i, 20–21)

"Country" here figures as an ideal affiliation, implicitly opposed to earthly and material ties that are figured in the oppressive and bloody rule of Phillip II of Spain, and realized on stage in the shape of Inquisition cells. Maturin's and Sheil's protagonists thus give powerful rhetorical expression to the romantic attachment to home and nation even as they evoke them as violent abstractions:

. . . when fame
Has told abroad, that Philip will blot out
The very name of Moor, and has decreed
To rob us of our faith, our nation's rites,
Our sacred usages, and all that men
Hold dearer far than life. (II, i, 20–21)

The menace to cultural identity in Sheil's drama is experienced as a threat to the outward signs of religious belief (faith, rites, and usages). Observing that romantic tragedy originates in an inability to separate inner from outer world, Cox notes how ". . . hierarchies of the inner life have collapsed with those of the outer world" (20). Sheil's tragicomedy *Evadne* offers a striking metaphorical image of a marble pillar to invoke the confusion of interiority and exteriority. The context for this metaphor provides one of Sheil's most powerful rhetorical indictments of corrupt power, as the virtuous Colonna warns his king of his subjects' seething dissatisfaction:

Do not think
Because you load your people with the weight
Of camels, they possess the camel's patience.
A deep groan labours in the nation's heart:
The very calm and stillness of the day
Gives augury of the earthquake. All without
Is as the marble smooth, and all within
Is rotten as the carcase it contains;
Tho' ruin knock not at the palace-gate,
Yet will the palace-gate unfold itself
To ruin's felt-shod tread. (I, i, 4)

Just as the smoothness of the marble cannot be distinguished from its rotten interior, the threat of ruin and destruction exists both in "calm and stillness" and in uproar: both presage destruction. Sheil's image recalls the New Testament invocation of scribal hypocrisy, with the Pharisees compared to "whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness" (Matthew 23:27).

Maturin's and Sheil's plays contain repeated reference to marble and monuments, always closely linked to pain and death. In Sheil's *Bellamira*, one slave compares the miserable Manfredi and Montalto to statues:

> But we are almost blest, when, in the scale
> Of human misery, our woes are weighed
> With yonder silent statues, that despair
> Seems to have touch'd to marble, "and design
> As monuments of her terrific power,
> To stand in her own dwelling-place." (V, i, 63)

Marble monuments here signify suffering, and, as in Thomas Moore's popular melody, "I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls," statuary evokes painful recollections of the past. David Punter's analysis of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, a novel written in the same post-union period as the drama discussed here, suggests that Maturin's novel imagines Catholicism in terms of an imagination "succoured . . . by false monuments." A Protestant distrust of exteriority assumes a Gothic dimension within a narrative connecting Catholicism with "the impossibility of separating the mind from the external manifestation of its guilt" (Punter, 116, 117).

The characteristic movement of romantic tragedy toward exterior circumstances becomes intensified in these plays through a confessional conflict cast in the Gothic idiom; simultaneously the aggression associated with the public turn of the genre expresses itself in terms associated with Irish political life. For Cox, rebellion is the mode that "dominates the action of romantic tragic drama," as "revolt seeks transformation but brings destruction" (22, 23); the French Revolution thus provided the romantics with their most vivid example of tragedy. With frequent realizations of terror, often through depictions of torture, Sheil deploys the shock tactics of con-

temporary Gothic drama even as he invents a form of historical tragedy. In *The Apostate*, Florinda, a noble Spaniard, falls in love with Hemeya, descendant of the Moorish kings and leader of a planned rebellion against Philip II. On the very point of converting to Christianity at Florinda's behest, Hemeya encounters Pescara, Governor of Grenada, who also wishes to marry Florinda and who vows to punish the Moor according to a "prophecy" (II, i, 34). Hemeya's speech echoes the vision conventions of bardic verse but replaces Jacobite allegory with a highly contemporary picture of religious intolerance and punishment that echoes popular predictions concerning the destruction of Protestantism in Ireland according to the prophesies found in the Book of Revelation.[9] In the case of *The Apostate,* however, such extreme and oppressive power is represented by Pescara, a Catholic who can summon the full force of the Inquisition to his aid:

> Methought I saw the am'rous Moor
> In all the transports of exulting passion;
> And I stood by, chained to a fiery pillar,
> Condemned to gaze for ever; while two fiends
> Did grin and mow upon me.—
> Senseless I fell with rage.—As thus I lay,
> From forth the yawning earth a figure rose,
> Whose stature reach'd to heaven—his robes appear'd
> Woven out of solid fire—around his head
> A serpent twin'd its huge gigantic folds;
> And on his front, in burning characters,
> Was written "Vengeance!" (II, i, 33)

Florinda is later forced to watch Hemeya's torture: "The wheel goes round—See, the red froth of blood!—/ His hair stands up, and drips with agony!—" (IV, iii, 69–70). The play ends with their double suicide.

In Sheil's *Adelaide*, the action centers on a family of emigrants, forced to leave France because of the monstrosities of revolution.

9. In particular, the Pastorini prophesies. Pastorini was the pen name of an English Catholic bishop, Charles Walmesley, whose prophecies claimed that the biblical Book of Revelation could be used to fix the date of the extirpation of the Protestant heresy in 1825.

Driven mad by his daughter's sexual misconduct, Count St. Evermond presents his wife with a roll call of horror finding its moment of origin in regicide and the guillotine:

> Thou shalt not pray: the angels laugh at thee.
> I dwelt in palaces, and ruled in courts:
> Thou wert my wife. Oh! I was very happy.
> Hark thee, and wither! I beheld the blood
> Reek from my consecrated monarch's head,
> And then I prayed: I saw my house in flames:
> Thy frenzied shriek is still within my brain:
> At morn I knelt me on the smoking pile,
> And still I prayed: I saw thee shrink away
> Beneath the pelting of the warring tempest,
> And still I prayed: at last I found a friend
> Who did receive my sorrows, soothed my grief,
> And robbed me of my child. I'll pray no more.
> (II, ii, 32)

In such a scene, a private relationship with God is tragically shattered by public events, releasing a torrent of language on stage. The repetition of "then I prayed" has itself a quasi-liturgical effect, with the on-stage rejection of prayer now replacing (rather than simply rejecting) ritualized devotion in private.

Cultural Catholicism: Performance, Pictorialism, and Corporeality

Maturin's and Sheil's reliance on religious themes and tropes reveals their adherence to Gothic conventions that flouted cultural and critical assumptions concerning the representation of the spiritual on stage (Cox, "English Gothic Theatre" 132). Even given the lingering popularity of Gothic forms—at its height around the turn of the century—and the endurance of anti-Catholic stereotypes and themes, the Irish playwrights notably mobilize religious imagery on stage. If Maturin's and Sheil's dramatic works reveal only indirect connections to the political immediacies of their day, they fully inhabit their contemporary confessional milieu at the level of atmosphere, mood, and tone. These tragedies yield images of a threatened yet expressive Catholicism, where altars are at once sanctuary and scene of violence

(as in Maturin's *Bertram* and *Fredolfo)* and where marble statuary bears the marks of a traumatic history (in Sheil's *Evadne* and *Bellamira*). The plays were performed on London stages undergoing revolutionary change in size and shape, as well as in performance styles—changes resulting in a dislocated and conflict-oriented theater in which, as Moody observes, the pre-eminence of rhetoric began to give way "to a corporeal dramaturgy which highlighted the expressive body of the performer" (*Illegitimate Theatre* 242).

Both playwrights make full use of the topography of the Gothic stage, with its arches, pillars, and enclosures. Since action was no longer confined to the flat apron in front of the proscenium arch, actors in the Georgian theater began to move up-stage, away from the audience. Set designers developed a more complex stage topography, with sets of double shutters allowing for scene changes in full view. When the curtain opened on *Bertram*, the audience first encountered the characters through a Gothic window, with the exterior of a convent building glimpsed in the background. The fenestration was set into a groove that parted at the end of the scene to reveal "tangible rocks over which monks clambered with torches" (Ranger 33). The framing of the scene in a church or confessional encouraged the comparison of internal security with outdoor peril. This creation of private spaces on the public stage in scenes of confession or prayer suggested a privacy that nevertheless encroached on public space: as in the case of blessings that take the forms of exhortations or the performance of religious rites. In Sheil's *Adelaide*, the heroine is deceived by a representation of marriage that she takes to be a performance of it. Adelaide realizes that amidst the "abbey's mouldering altars" (i, ii, 18), she has been betrayed by "religion's rite" (iii, ii, 48).

> The book, the altar, and the man of God—
> I saw them with these eyes: these ears have heard
> The holy form of prayer that made me yours,
> Made me forever yours—your wedded wife.
> (III, I, 39)

The distinction between representation and performance has both theological and dramatic resonances. Maturin's *Five Sermons on the Errors of the Roman Catholic Church* (1824) aligns Protes-

tantism with a restrained and beneficial form of "representation" and Catholicism with more outrageous claims made in the name of "performance." Arguing about the sacrifice of the mass and its relation to the Last Supper, Maturin asserts that whereas Protestant ceremonies represent (or "commemorate") Christ's sacrifice, the Catholics claim to re-enact it: "we Protestants rationally and scripturally hold, that Christ, by the distribution of the bread and wine, *represented* his death to his disciples"; Roman Catholics, on the other hand, assert that "[t]he sacrifice of the Mass . . . was not represented but actually *performed*, at the Last Supper" (Maturin, *Five Sermons* 48).

Maturin's *Bertram* explores this distinction between performance and representation, for in the playwright's own terms, the play aesthetically (if not doctrinally) sides with Catholic values. The staging of *Bertram* carefully frames tragic speeches as scenes of aesthetic spectacle or performance; subsequent plays like *Manuel* even more self-consciously aim for visual effect. *Bertram* is organized around a series of highly dramatic tableaux, as in the stage directions given at the end of Act IV when Bertram stabs Aldobrand with a dagger. As the dying man begs for mercy, the scene concludes in dramatic montage: "*Imogine at the name of her son, rushes off;—Bertram stands over the body holding the dagger with his eyes fixed on it;—The band fill up the back*." As the play concludes, Bertram repeatedly calls attention to the spectacle of his own mangled body (343, 369). A series of exaggerated gestures and starts become the means of realizing Imogine's final madness; pictured kneeling, she strikes the air, raising clasped hands and extended arms.

Edmund Kean, whose acting made the role of Bertram famous, became a key figure in the "intrusion of illegitimate dramaturgy" on the contemporary stage.[10] According to Moody, Kean "had per-

10. Kean spent some months in Ireland in 1809–10, together with his Waterford-born wife, Ann Chambers, and the rest of his traveling company. His biographers describe the time spent there as characterized by violence and excess:

> "Besides 'moistening his clay' with the 'dew' for which Ireland is so famous (and he did this with great regularity), he occasionally enjoyed a holiday with some friends. These friends, to say truth, were some gentlemen privates in the Irish militia, who loved tippling almost as well as the tragedian. He drank with them, partook of their pastimes (one of which

fected those hyperbolic gestural codes, expressive signs and muscular performances which characterised illegitimate performance" (*Illegitimate Theatre* 231)—as when Bertram kisses Imogine's child and effects "a sudden, melodramatic transition from angry vitriol to wordless gentleness" (233). Such sudden transitions served to break dramatic illusion; the very theatricality of Kean's long pauses or sudden starts fractured the relationship between audience and the stage.

The romantic period witnesses a move from a dramaturgy that was "transitive and rhetorical" to an intransitive style that strove for what Martin Meisel describes as "an achieved moment of stasis, a picture" (38). Sheil and Maturin can be usefully read in terms of Meisel's analysis of the interplay between verbal and visual realizations: "The play creates a series of such pictures, some of them offering a culminating symbolic summary of represented events, while others substitute an arrested situation for action and reaction" (38). Sheil regularly halts the action of his dramas to produce moments of tableau. Such "pictorialism" relies on what Donohue has called "the affective drama of situation," the logic of which is a kind of serial discontinuity between a set of scenes (qtd. Meisel 39).[11]

The "pictorialism" that theater historians Donohue and Meisel associate with drama in the age of revolution arguably becomes fused with cultural (as opposed to doctrinal) Catholicism: an example being the image of Evadne in prayer. In *Evadne,* Sheil replaces the conventionally tragic ending with a scene in which the heroine conducts her king through a hall containing statues of her ances-

> was putting a skeleton in motion and frightening people into fits), and went out with them, night after night, scouring the countryside in search of arms. He made acquaintance also with some of the disaffected Irish (they were the 'Croppies,' if we remember rightly, in those days), and wished to become their leader!" (Hawkins I, 129–30).

11. Meisel describes the pictorialism of romantic drama as follows: "Plays of this sort have a structure based upon a series of circumstances and events unconnected by a strict logic of causality; their situations are deliberately brought out of the blue for the purpose of displaying human reactions to extreme and unexpected occurrences. In these plays the intelligible unit is not the thematic part, placed within a coherent series of other parts, but . . . the scene, which exists in effect for its own sake" (38).

tors. Although he is on the point of forcing Evadne to become his mistress, the effect of the statues and the stories she tells reminds him how the men of her family strove to protect their daughters' honor. The statues also invoke fond memories of her father, who had saved the king's life. This visually striking scene (Evadne clings to the neck of her father's statue and defies the king to "unloose" her) serves as a powerful meditation on injury, memory, and generational responsibility. The king promises to "repair" his "injuries" to Evadne's honor in language reminiscent of frequent allegories of Ireland's suffering.[12] The final scene presents Evadne kneeling in prayer with white hands crossed across her breast. When originally performed by the Irish actress Eliza O'Neill, the scene became an image for religious worship and "idolatry," with Evade figuring, at once, as Gothic heroine, Virgin Mary, and wild Irish girl (V, i).

Indebted to contemporary Gaelic sources, Sheil's plays exploit the cult of the Virgin Mary and its developing association with Irish femininity.[13] Marian imagery appears, for example, in the early Irish Gothic novel, Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey* (1798), lending drama and pathos to a depiction of threatened virginity. Roche's persecuted Amanda, described by her lover as having "the soft expression of a Madonna," becomes, like Sheil's heroines, at once spectacle and the object of quasi-religious veneration (Roche I, 96–7). By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a vigorous Marianism (foreshadowing the Mariolatry that was to become dominant in the late nineteenth century) had already gained a foothold in the south of Ireland. In *The Apostate* Sheil draws his audience's eyes to the sacralized form of Florinda standing statue-like above flames:

> Your daughter has appear'd
> Amid the flames at last, and at her casement

12. This tradition begins in Anglophone writing with Jonathan Swift's allegory, *The Story of the Injured Lady* (1746). In Irish-language literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the poetry of Aogán Ó Rathaille did much to popularize an *aisling* tradition in which a female figure is used to express political grievances and disappointments.

13. Thanks to Angela Bourke, Breandán Ó Buachalla, and especially Breandán MacSuibhne for discussing this aspect of Sheil's drama with me.

Stands with her face and arms to heaven uplifted,
And seems a suff'ring angel—while below
The multitude in speechless horror stand.
(I, ii, 5)

Later she is compared to a statue: "you, whose eyes / Are bent upon the ground,—whose yielding form / Doth seem like sculptur'd modesty." Hemeya addresses her as "bright angel," claiming that her very form arrests the murderous hand of Malec, who plans to punish Hemeya's apostasy with death "in obedience to the prophet's law" (II, i, 28):

He could not strike—thy beauty, like a charm,
Unnerv'd his grasp!—Heav'n sets its seal upon thee,
And consecrates thy form!—Oh! what bright wonders
Are gathered in thy face, when e'en the prophet
Could not compel him to the bloody deed,
And Malec's hand could shudder!
(II, i, 29)

The Apostate closes with a final tableau: the image of Florinda in Mary Magdalene mode, bent over the body of the dead Hemeya, staunching his blood with her hair.

The Irish actress Eliza O'Neill, appearing as heroine in almost all of Sheil's productions, shared an Irish Catholic upbringing with the playwright. As a key representative of the illegitimate performance style associated with the power of gestures to produce visual effect, O'Neill was famously attacked by William Hazlitt for her depiction of a body convulsed by sexual and political passions. Hazlitt sees O'Neill as a figure of frail beauty threatened by her own alarming power of gesture and all too corporeal presence on the stage. Her "tears, sighs, sobs, shrieks, and hysterics" cause the critic to "half begin to suspect that she represents the bodies, not the souls of women . . . deal[ing] only in the pantomime of discourse, in gesticulation and the byeplay of the senses" (qtd. in Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism* 198, 169).

Stage and Suffrage: Representation, Religion, and the Material Sublime

Under the sign of their shared Irishness, a contemporary notice linked Eliza O'Neill's dazzling stage presence to the luster of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's debating style: "What Pitt told the British Senate, after hearing the most brilliant display of Sheridan's eloquence, the critic may here say to Miss O'Neill's audience—"You are under the wand of the enchanter!" ("Scottish Drama" 156). The reception of plays became framed by contemporary debates about parliament, particularly in regard to Catholic suffrage. From 1809, in the aftermath of the Old Price riots,[14] the legitimate theaters of Covent Garden and Drury Lane began to be condemned "as the cultural symbol of an unreformed Parliament: aristocratic, corrupt and unrepresentative of a modern nation" (Moody, "The Theatrical Revolution" 209).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's critique of *Bertram* demonstrates how theater became "instrumental in negotiating changes in forms of representation and representability" (Carlson, "Hazlitt and the Sociability of Theatre" 147). The review opens with an explicit analogy between representation on stage and in parliament, linking Samuel Whitbread's management of the Drury Lane theater to his sponsorship of Whig efforts to introduce parliamentary reform. From the example of theatrical production (*Bertram* was commissioned by the new Drury Lane committee), Coleridge draws a lesson about the desirability of executive rather than group rule: "the right of suffrage may be too widely diffused, and the representatives in consequence too promiscuous" (257–58). Maturin's play now becomes symptom of a worrying extension of the cultural franchise, as the critic connects it to debates about representation in parliament that contemporaries would understand in relation to Catholic rights.

Coleridge's blistering attack was later attached to the final section of his *Biographia Literaria*, earning Maturin's *Bertram* a place in the

14. Covent Garden Theatre burned down in 1808. After it was rebuilt with a pit and five galleries seating 2,800, the manager, John Philip Kemble, sought to reclaim the high cost of the rebuilding by abolishing the shilling gallery, a decision leading to the Old Price Riots. After disturbances every night for about two months, Kemble was forced to restore the shilling gallery.

canons of theater criticism. Regularly cited in studies of Romantic-era drama, Coleridge's review condemned the play's morals, in particular its combination of "Ignorance" and "Jacobinism." Less often noticed, however, are the religious references threaded throughout. Pointing to the depiction of Imogine in the fourth act, Coleridge asks readers to note "the low cunning and Jesuitical trick with which she deludes her husband into *words* of forgiveness, which he himself does not understand." For the critic, *Bertram* evokes ideas of forgiveness but fails to convey the spirit of "a sincere, religious penitent" (Coleridge 231).

In the course of his review, Coleridge figures the "British audience" as sober respectability under attack: "And did a British audience endure all this?—They received it with plaudits, which, but for the rivalry of the carts and hackney coaches, might have disturbed the evening-prayers of the scanty week day congregation at St. Paul's cathedral" (231). Recording astonishment that the viewers "could remain passive under such an insult to common decency," Coleridge's review recalls attacks on Maturin's *Fredolfo* and Sheil's *Adelaide* for their pernicious effects on English audiences. Producing an exemplary figure of British decency to underscore the effects of Maturin's crimes against taste, Coleridge complains that only he and "a plain elderly man sitting beside me" noticed the offense (229). These strictures reflect aspects of the critic's own religious concerns: essentially, a journey from a High Church upbringing, through Unitarianism, and toward a "Broad Church" Anglicanism from about 1814. Unwilling to countenance any but a providential and traditional religion, Coleridge attacks Maturin's unconventional religious thinking and the cultural flexibility of his dramatic imagination. Fearing that play-going distracts from genuine religious expression, he censures the simulation of religious rites on stage: "the profane representation of the high altar in a chapel, with all the vessels and other preparations for the holy sacrament. A hymn is actually sung on stage by the chorister boys!" (Coleridge 231–32). As Cox suggests, "[i]t is as if there were a concern that the staginess of the theatre would wear off on the performances of religious practice and thus compromise their power" ("English Gothic Theatre" 133).

Comparing the shipwreck in *Bertram* (fig. 2) to a similar scene in Shadwell's *The Libertine*, Coleridge notes how the providential



Figure 2. "Count Bertram's Shipwreck." Originally appeared as a colored vignette on the title page of Hone's popular cabinet edition, *Bertram; or, The Castle of St Aldobrand, Being the Romance of the Tragedy by the Rev. R. C. Maturin (*London, 1816). Engraving by George Cruikshank. Reproduced from *The Life of E. K.,* 2 vols. (London, 1835), I, 158–59. BL shelfmark 10825.bb.1. © The British Library. All Rights Reserved.

framework of *The Libertine* allows the audience to admit of a natural wonder without threatening belief in God.

> But what is there to account for the prodigy of the tempest at *Bertram's* shipwreck. It is mere supernatural effect without even a hint of any supernatural agency; a prodigy without any circumstance mentioned that is prodigious; and a miracle introduced without a ground, and ending without a result. (Coleridge 222)

Here the critic evinces what Simon During describes as a general Protestant "suspicion of visual entrancements (in the form of Catholic spectacles and votive images . . .) [. . .] This disassociation of image from supernature in Protestant cultures led to images and shows being regarded less as religious and more as magical" (9). The staging of the shipwreck and miraculous saving of the lives of

Bertram and his men add an additional and unwelcome gloss of magic, underlined by the famously melodramatic staging of this scene.[15] Magic can be understood both in terms of an excessively visual form of religion and the operations of theater itself. This connection can be contextualized by turning to Maturin's sermons and his lengthy pen-picture comparing the Roman Catholic church to a sinking ship from which "the strong blast of the Reformation hath rent away mast and mainsail, rope and rudder" (*Five Sermons* 150–51).

In striving after effects that are all too literally realized on stage, both Maturin and Sheil endorsed a literary style that Coleridge elsewhere described as "the material Sublime"(qtd. in Meisel 167).[16] Defined in opposition to the mental theater of romantic poetry where the imagination roams freely, Coleridge's term identifies writing that fails to shed the cumbersome mechanics of affectivity. Dramas that were brought to life on the stage rather than merely existing on the page were thought to be particularly prone to this problem—leading, for example, to the suggestion that Shakespeare's plays ought to be preserved from the operations of the theater. Meisel summarizes this view when he argues that "[t]he nature of the stage and its means simply ran counter to a fundamental romantic endeavor: to free the sublime from material causes and correlatives and to claim it as subjective terrain" (167). In the case of *Bertram*, one reviewer complained that the dramatic effect of Imogine's madness was disrupted by an absurd and all too evident change of costume. Following the murder of her husband, she is pursued by Bertram's robber band; the next scene sees Imogine arrive in the monastery "habited in a totally different dress; even her shoes are changed" ("Theatrical and Literary Chit-Chat" 279).

15. The opening of *Bertram* replaces music (characteristic of melodrama) with "a collage of sound-effects as a background: there was the roar of the sea, signals of distress from a doomed ship, and the regular rhythm of the tolling of the monastery bell. An octagonal drum containing shells, peas and shot made wave-like sounds when revolved and the distress signals were suggested by hitting a large tambourine with a sponge fitted to a whalebone spring" (Ranger 33).

16. Coleridge turns to Schiller for "the material sublime; to produce an effect, he sets you a whole town on fire, and throws infants with their mothers into the flames, or locks up a father in an old tower. But Shakespeare drops a handkerchief, and the same or greater effect follows" (qtd. Meisel 167).

Sheil's and Maturin's failure to dematerialize dramatic moments or allow extremes of emotion to transcend their representations on stage connects their dramas to the Burkean sublime,[17] and with it to a related feature of Irish culture of the romantic period. This trait was that obstinate attachment to what Lord Byron (discussing an Irish tragedy submitted to him for Drury Lane) called the "*matter of fact*" (Moore 161). The context for the phrase, recurring in writings by Sydney Owenson, Thomas Moore, and others, is Byron's "Detached Thoughts" on the state of the theater and the "*five* hundred" plays he received at Drury Lane. Describing the—unintentionally—hilarious denouement of a tragedy that deals with the Viking conquest of Ireland, written by an author who signs himself "Hibernicus," Byron tells Moore: "Now this is *serious, downright matter of fact*, and the gravest part of a tragedy which is not intended for burlesque. I tell it to you for the honour of Ireland" (160). For Byron, "*serious, downright matter of fact*" comes laughably close to "burlesque." His remarks implicitly warn how the generic and formal instabilities of Sheil's and Maurin's dramas can become dangerously amplified when Irish history is at stake.

Romantic Theater, Romantic Nation

Sheil's and Maturin's abstract evocations of distant geographical spaces and stories that are never fully realized within the developing romantic registers of place and past may be seen in critical relation

17. Burke's theory of the sublime seeks to "establish a correspondence between external events and internal events and associations" (Meisel 167). In particular, Sheil's scenes of torture may be related to Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), which imagined stage dramas as inevitably inferior to real-life events such as public executions:

> Chuse a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy" (43).

to emerging fictions of Irishness.[18] The abstract space of the stage mirrors the particular problems of post-union Ireland: its status both as country (site of an affective identification increasingly invoked by Irish romanticism) and no country (a site with its legal status swallowed up by the Act of Union). The plays open up affective possibilities at the level of spectacle, evident in highly wrought scenes of tragic suffering: the injured child in *Bertram* or the tortured bodies depicted in Sheil's plays. Sheil's and Maturin's dramas thus draw on, interrogate, and bolster what Thomas Addis Emmett called the Irish Catholic "community of insult" (qtd. Nolan 93). Concurrently, however, their distance from that community—in terms of both space and time—suggests how the performances discussed here retain a difficult and ironic relationship to the very idea of national theater.

The concept of "the material sublime," and in particular the movement between externality and interiority, offers a model for thinking about the complex relationship between theater and nation found in Maturin's and Sheil's dramas. Bertram tells Imogine that in "what e'er I do there now is crime" (357). No external framework, whether providential or social, supports the self; the play is characterized by a highly unstable movement between public and private forms of transgression. In Sheil's plays, forms of tyranny (sexual, social, religious) penetrate the very souls of his protagonists, whose inner resources disintegrate under bodily and psychological forms of torture. This inter-penetration of inner and outer worlds is repeatedly realized in religious terms: scenes of prayer and confession take their place alongside dramas of forced conversion and what in *The Apostate* Sheil calls "the spectacle of human pain" (IV, i, 54).

A problematic overlap between public and private forms of identification, coupled with a lack of distinction between outer substances and inner states, returns this essay to the question with which it began: how to connect dramatists separated by differences

18. It should be noted that all of the major novelists of Irish romanticism (Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson, Maturin, John Banim, and Gerald Griffin) wrote plays for performance, with varying degrees of success (Connolly, "Irish Romanticism" 426–27).

in religion and politics yet joined by location, genre, and style? Confessional identities undoubtedly matter, especially in early nineteenth-century Irish and British culture in the years leading up to Emancipation; at the same time, however, those identities can be made and remade in the crucible of theatrical experimentation. In Irish history we are too often asked to assume that literary texts are best categorized under the religious views of their authors. Maturin's and Sheil's dramas enable the contrary case to be made: they show how religion yields to the pressure of cultural forms. Denominational difference does not dissolve; rather it mutates and metamorphoses, producing strange shapes and troubling alliances.

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