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ROBERT BROWNING, PLAYWRIGHT

An Analysis of "Strafford"  
and  
Suggestions for its Revaluation.

A thesis presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in English  
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## ABSTRACT

Browning wrote Strafford at an early stage in his career. He was twenty-four. He had not long completed Paracelsus, and was working on the composition of his most difficult poem, Sordello. The play did not outlive its premiere season on the stage, playing only four nights to moderate but by no means completely discouraging acclaim and critical review. Like the remaining plays in the canon - there were seven in all - it has fallen into disregard as a closet drama. The play is thus, definitionally, a failure.

A reevaluation of the play appears timely. Such a reevaluation would not necessarily demand its reinstatement on the boards, or as mandatory reading within the closet, but would certainly seek to establish its place within the Browning canon.

The exercise would also be worthwhile because it would go some way towards explaining why Browning continued to write for the stage, and towards illuminating the dramatic elements that are characteristic of his "best" poetry : character - specifically

'Character in Action'  
devices of characterisation  
diction  
imagery  
the substitution of process  
for action.

In some respects, Strafford was ahead of its time. William Charles Macready at his prime, for instance, might have been better equipped to direct it, and might thus have secured for it more immediate acceptance. Browning's approach might have been more in accord with stage requirements. In the realm of fact, however, the play was mounted in a time at which the theatre was in decline. Too little work has been done in considering Strafford in the context of the contemporary theatre, and some space is devoted here to a brief survey of English theatre in the 1830's and '40's.

Again, elements can be isolated that point to problems and attempts at solving them in the development of theatre to our own time. Included here might be those of poetic diction in dialogue, motivation of characters, the isolate character, and departures from the Aristotelian norms. In this area, Browning has had little or no influence, and suffers some measure of undeserved neglect.

The present intention is to show, in examining Strafford, how Browning approached the theatre: not only the sort of play he wrote, but, by implication, the sort of writing he considered appropriate for stage presentation. This will lead to some estimate of the strengths and weaknesses of the play in performance. It ought also to open up an area of speculation about modern trends in thought and practice in the theatre.

Early Victorian theatre presents a paradox. It is at once in a state of grievous decline and sprawling vigour. Some understanding of its conditions and status is necessary to a balanced view of Browning's plays, and will be attempted under the difficulties imposed by access to a plethora of data and a dearth of authoritative judgment.

Finally, the major criticism of Browning's theatrical ventures will be reviewed, and this, with the questions raised above, will point towards a reevaluation of Strafford in particular, and the remaining plays that Browning wrote, generally.

## PREFACE

I do not want to resuscitate the Browning Society. If I did, I should like its membership to include not only the following, who well understand that the terseness of my thanks bears no relation to the depth of my gratitude, but many others within my own family, the English Department, and the Library, and not in those places only, whose kindnesses to me during a lengthy studentship make them feel they are included.

Dr Warwick Slinn, to whom I am indebted in the first place for the main part of my appreciation of Robert Browning's poetry, oversaw with great patience the start of this thesis.

Dr John Dawick, whose help has extended back over a number of years and a number of areas.

Dr G. Crosson, who kindly threw himself into the gaping breach of its completion.

Miss Ailsa Hilson, who has again co-operated with the typing, and Mrs Val Darroch, who has done much to order chaos. They would not, of course, join. They like Browning too much.

Peter Flynn

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1.

INTRODUCTION.

XI

"And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence  
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or agonised?  
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?  
Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should be prized?  
Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,  
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe:  
But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;  
The rest may reason and welcome: 't is we musicians know."

- Abt Vogler.

(After He has Been Extemporising  
Upon The Musical Instrument Of His  
Invention) (1964)

The esteem of critics and the response to his poetry that was in a large measure denied to Robert Browning in his own day, has grown steadily and continues to grow. Fresh insights appear in critical essays, to illuminate his mastery over words and rhythms, and his sensitive awareness of the processes of thought, and the effect on these processes of emotions, motives, and situations. The British public to which he felt himself impelled to appeal in the greatest and most dramatic of his poems, The Ring and the Book, has been augmented by readers in many parts of the world. The growing audience has undergone changes in outlook, to which the passage of time and events, shifts in social structures, developments in literature, science and philosophy, the growth of psychology, increasing literacy, and changes in moral and aesthetic outlook, have all contributed.

In his own day, Browning the poet was read, understood, and admired by a small group, misunderstood and vociferously attacked by a larger number of readers, and ignored by most. The main weapon in his critics' armoury was the charge of obscurity, and its immediate effects were to deter many readers from opening a book of Browning's, and to discourage others from proceeding beyond a page or two. His reputation as an "obscure" poet persisted through the first two decades of this century, but weakened progressively as the focus of literature, reflecting developments in the social sciences, turned on human motivation, and on the expression or imitation of subjective responses, and as experiments in literary genres have broadened and in some cases dispensed with the concept of decorum, or have explored or attempted to explode the theory of communication.

Nevertheless, there are sections of his voluminous canon which remain slightly regarded, going almost unread, and escaping critical attention. One of the most significant of these comprises the six plays he wrote, or seven, if the better known, and most frequently misunderstood Pippa Passes is included. For, while Browning's reputation as a poet has grown considerably over the last half-century, his dramatic reputation has remained virtually unchanged. His plays have been conveyed to a literary limbo. On the one hand,



theatrical tradition holds them to be unactable, and they are thus not read with any view to performance. On the other, literary tradition tends to view them as cabinet dramas of inconsiderable interest or merit. Has Robert Browning the dramatist been treated as unjustly as it now appears Robert Browning the poet was, at least for the first thirty years of his writing career?

The answer to this question is obscured by a number of considerations. Among these is, either to begin or end with, the formation of some sort of evaluation of the plays both as literary works and as theatre pieces - to ask, in fact, on what grounds they could be considered, in Browning's time, and how they should today be reconsidered, as "good theatre", and to define their literary qualities.

Three of the plays - Strafford, A Blot on the 'Scutcheon, and Colombe's Birthday, - enjoyed fleeting seasons. Pippa Passes, King Victor and King Charles, The Return of the Druses, and Luria were never seen by their author on the boards. The reason may lie partly with the condition of contemporary British theatre, with the tastes of theatre-goers of the time, with the spectrum of entertainment available to them. It may lie, partly, with the degree of access any playwright had to the stage in the early and middle years of the nineteenth century. It ought to include the tastes of contemporary dramatic critics, and the sort of power they wielded. Most importantly, it will be found in the essence of dramaturgy - an unquantifiable blend of what is "box office" and what substantial, what appeals to audiences in the time and circumstances of the play's first production, and what continues to appeal over a period of time and over a range of circumstances. The dramatist must be constantly aware that audiences need to have something to look at, something to hear, and something to think about. At any given moment, his play should be providing all of these things to as many persons in his audience as possible. He will succeed to the degree to which he is able to generalise his audience.

There is also, indeed there has been since Greek times, a cyclic process by which a "good" play ensures its own continuity by being at the same time "good" literature. Having seen a play, one can read its script with a keener appreciation stemming from heightened associations, increased expectations, and added insights. Having read a play, one looks forward more to seeing it on stage, anticipating lines and situations, finding deeper meanings and increased satisfactions.

To what extent can such a process be discerned in Browning's plays?

He remained a committed poet before, during, and after the relatively brief nine year period beginning in 1837 in which he interested himself in the stage as a medium. One can, then, look for elements of poetry, and indeed, the poet's vision, in his plays. This raises the possibility that they are poetic rather than dramatic. At the same time, it must be remarked that, as a poet, he excelled in the dramatic monologue form, in the analysis and subsequent portrayal of what he called "Action in Character".

Yet concentration on character may not be sufficient. The dramatist must communicate at second-hand (at third-hand, really, if the medium of print is to be included) through the actors with his audience, who must still, if they are to appreciate it fully, observe the literary bones of the play.

On occasion, a play that fails in this sort of transmission may still have considerable literary merit. It becomes a "closet" drama, in a lengthy and valued tradition that stretches back to Seneca.

In whatever light Browning's plays are to be regarded, the argument remains that they ought to be the subject of considerably more attention.

Changing tastes in theatre have made them more worthy of consideration, though very probably no more palatable, as stage presentations. Developments in dramatic criticism, the proliferation of dramaturgical theory, and an increasing interest in the theatrical history of Browning's time have given them an importance and an interest that might have been contemptuously denied them even a generation ago. In them may be discerned an awareness of, and an attempt to approach, problems like the design of a natural and effective poetic dialogue, or the representation of a psychological process, or the isolate character, that have since become major foci of interest for both the playwright and the student of drama.

Finally, the plays represent a stage in the development of Browning's poetic technique. This is recognised, say, by D.S. Hair in the chapter he devotes to the plays in his book Browning's Experiments With Genre (1) but would prove a fruitful field for further investigation and discussion.

The present intention is to examine his first dramatic venture, Strafford. This will show, first of all, how Browning approached the theatre: not only the sort of play he wrote, but, by implication, the sort of writing he considered appropriate for stage presentation. That he held his own theory about what a playwright could require of both actors and audience has been demonstrated in a series of statements beginning with his own preface to the play, and with those of its first-night reviewers, and continuing through the comparatively slight body of criticism of the play to the present day. How successful this theory was, and how it relates to contemporary thought and practice, will also be a subject for comment.

Some estimate of the strengths and weaknesses of the play in performance can also be made here.

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(1) University of Toronto Press, 1972. Ch.2. pp.43-72

An area of increasing interest to critics and theatrical historians alike is centred on the study of the conditions obtaining in the theatre about the time Browning was writing. Very little work has been done in setting *Strafford* in the context of its first performance, so a brief survey of the influences and events of early Victorian theatre will be made, in an attempt to take a wider and more balanced view of the play than is the practice with its reviewers.

A review will also be attempted of the major criticism of Browning's theatrical ventures, which, with the questions raised above, will lead towards a revaluation of *Strafford* in particular, and the plays generally.

2.

STRAFFORD IN PERFORMANCE.

"But are mankind not real, who pace outside  
My petty circle, the world measured me?  
And when they stumble even as I stand,  
Have I a right to stop ears when they cry,  
As they were phantoms, took the clouds for crags,  
Tripped and fell, where the march of man might move?"

- The Ring and the Book.

Book X. The Pope. Lines 1660-1666.

Strafford has a poor history of review and criticism. At the beginning of the range are the contemporary magazine critics, who, conditioned by a theatre in decline, looked for a little more of what Galsworthy calls "Punch and Go" (A) and a little less of the novel features of the play, notably its dependence upon irony, its demands on the audience's intellectual processes, and its static intervals, devoted wholly to dialogue. The middle of the range can be exemplified by the somewhat polemical Lounsbury, whose attack is directed as much at the Browning Society as at the play. Nearer the end are the established critics, like De Vane, who, after detailing the play's acting history, says little more, leaving the judgment to time, or D.S. Hair, whose view is rather wider, but whose concern is summarised in the title of his book : "Browning's Experiments With Genre". Allardyce Nicoll accedes to the early view: the play is obscure.

The generalisations made above will be refined in fuller discussion in Section Four. But they throw up two points of immediate interest. The first is that critics of the play have tended to follow a single interest. There is a lack of criticism where the play has been discussed from a broad viewpoint, which would encompass, for example, its structure and development, the language it uses, the devices of language, its actability as well as its readability, its dramaturgical content, or its appeal to an audience, both in the past and in potential.

The second point is that Strafford has accumulated condemnation: once labelled a failure, adverse criticism or neglect of the play have become something of a tradition.

Is the label it bears justified? The brief answer is, not entirely. The play has a number of weaknesses. It has some strengths. It contains or suggests a large number of points of interest. It can be defended against outright condemnation. It can be shown to be undervalued. But what of the other stigmata it bears, that it is unreadable, that it is unactable, that it is obscure?

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(A) In a lovely little (one-act) curtain-raiser written in 1906 with that title.

The answer involves a complex of related arguments and observations, and it is best found by adopting a multiple viewpoint. Thus, in the following analysis of the play, the strategy adopted will be to assess the effect or effectiveness of the play as it develops, not only from a literary point of view, but from that of drama and the theatre. It is, of course, necessary that the interplay of the words themselves be seen from the reader's viewpoint. But it is also possible to assess their effect on an audience, to suggest movements and groupings of actors that may be implied from the text, or detailed in the few stage directions, and thus to build up a picture of the stage during performance. Acting on the evidence summarised in the following section on Victorian Theatre, it should be possible to reconstruct the first performance of some scenes.

The above involves adopting, in part, the viewpoint of the stage director, and in part that of the theatre historian. However it is described, the intention is to provide as broad a base as possible for the discussion of the play, while taking the calculated risk that the fine order of argument may suffer some dislocation.

In the course of the analysis, attention can be focussed on the script. Browning is, admittedly, not easy to read. What difficulties does he pose for actors in working out character interpretations, or in projecting meaning? How fitted were the actors of his day for such a task? Can it be concluded that bad acting contributed to the meagre stage history of *Strafford*?

Attention may next be directed to the audience. Is the play doomed to fail in transmission? Is it, indeed, obscure to the point where no audience can generate interest in it? Is it enhanced, redeemed, or completely unenlivened by the use of artifice, and if so, what artifices are employed? What indications of Browning's knowledge of stagecraft can be gained by referring to the stage directions, for instance?

Finally, there are aspects of the play that are currently of great theatrical interest: isolation and failure to communicate, problems of audience response, self-revelation and identification, the problem posed by adopting a setting unfamiliar to the audience.

It is intended to discuss the above questions in that order, so as to show that there are large areas in its conception, in its composition, and in its first performance at least, where "Strafford" has been neglected or undervalued.

\* \* \* \* \*

Browning's first play, *Strafford*, was presented to the public from the stage of Covent Garden, one of London's two patent theatres, on May 1st, 1837, its season extending through the 2nd, 3rd and 5th of the month, when the actor Vandenhof, who played Pym, withdrew from the play. The circumstances of its writing are fairly well known. Almost exactly a year before, Browning had been present at a supper celebrating the first performance of Thomas Talfourd's *Ion* with its author and its leading actor, William Charles Macready, a man already of some stature in theatre, and for whose benefit the performance had been held. (B) Browning, at 24, was beginning to make his mark. He had published *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, and was at work on *Sordello*. This may have prompted Macready's invitation, "Write a play, Browning, and keep me from going to America". (1) He was taken at his word. Browning met the provocative challenge by providing a manuscript (since lost) by October.

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(B) April 29th, 1836

(1) Downer, Alan S., *The Eminent Tragedian, William Charles Macready* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1966.), p.155. (Hereinafter referred to as *Em. Trag.*)



He took as his subject the life of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford. He had been interested in, and had had some hand in the writing of, John Forster's Life of Strafford. (2)

The script was approved, rather more enthusiastically than by Macready, who appeared to be having second thoughts about the project, by Osbaldiston, the manager of Covent Garden, late in November. With the collaboration of their mutual friend, John Forster, Macready set about cutting and altering the play for stage presentation. Some compromise was necessary. Browning was more than willing to learn theatrecraft at the hands of a contemporary master like Macready, and was able to suggest further effects that might contribute to the stage success of the play. At the same time, he became increasingly distressed by the number of alterations that his two mentors considered necessary, and finally, in March 1937, after a dispute with Forster, he wanted to withdraw the play. (3) At this point Macready, who had just experienced a failure with Bulwer's (afterwards Lord Lytton's) The Duchess of La Vallière, and who was becoming more and more apprehensive over the possibility of another failure, would have been only too happy to agree, but Osbaldiston had already hired extra cast, and remained enthusiastic, the actors remained acquiescent, and rehearsals were well advanced.

The play went forward, and in spite of poor support acting and niggardly costuming and setting - Osbaldiston's enthusiasm did not reach very far down his pockets - it met with moderate success. Macready and his leading lady, Helen Faucit, were popular with theatregoers. Browning's fresh approach to historical tragedy and in particular his avoidance of lengthy moralising speeches were commended, and he was held up as a playwright of some promise. The praise, though faint, was by no means damning.

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(2) In The Statesmen of the Commonwealth of England (London, 1840) rpt. King, R. et al., (eds) The Complete Works of Robert Browning (Athens, Ohio, U.P. 1970.) Vol. 11, p.340. (Hereafter referred to as CW) (Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Strafford are taken from this text.)

(3) Em. Trag. p.155

"It acts even better than it reads, for this reason, that action is substituted for description, and more poetry made subservient to the sterner business of the drama. Still it is by no means the highest effort of which Mr Browning is capable. We are convinced he can do better - work out his ideas more fully - develop (sic) his characters in a more subtle, analytical spirit. The good stuff is in him, but patience and diligent habits of thought are requisite, to enable him to work out the conceptions with which it is evident his imagination teems, even to overflowing. ... Mr Browning must set to work again, for if anyone can revive the half-extinct taste for the drama, he can". (4)

"The Earl of Strafford was the character; the picture of a man ever falling and ever retaining his loyalty was admirably drawn. His position is made what the German critics call truly 'tragic', that is to say, he does not fall on account of any individual, but on account of the natural chain of events against which he is compelled to struggle. This is Mr Browning's first dramatic effort, and it is one of no little promise." (5)

"This is the work of a writer who is capable of achieving the highest objects and triumphs of dramatic literature. They are not achieved here, but they lie, 'in the rough', before every reader." (6)

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- (4) Unsigned review, The Sun, May 2nd 1837, rpt. Litzinger, B. & Smalley, D., Browning: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p.51 (Hereafter referred to as CH).
- (5) Unsigned review, The Times, May 2nd 1837, p.5., rpt. in CH p.52
- (6) John Forster, The Examiner, May 7th 1837, pp.294-5  
rpt. in CH. p.54.

Two charges in particular were levelled at the play by the first-night critics. The first was that it was obscure to the point of being esoteric. There are a number of grounds on which such a charge could be laid. The most obvious is that Browning demonstrated an inability to express himself clearly, or to provide clear-cut dramatic situations. This begs the question whether Browning was concerned with expressing himself clearly, if by "clearly" one means unambiguously. The play will be found to abound in ironies, which may have gone unperceived by the audience, either because they were not attuned to them, or because they failed in transmission, owing to lack of understanding or lack of technique on the part of the actors, or because of the subtlety and pervasiveness of Browning's sense of irony. It will also be found to contain situations that appear deliberately confused, to serve the author's ironic purposes.

The charge of obscurity might also be based partly on what Browning expected his audience to know. Did he overestimate their knowledge of history, or underestimate the importance of a prior knowledge of Caroline politics to an appreciation of the play? As has been pointed out, a complex of factors ought to be considered in forming a judgment, including an assessment of the play at different points of its development both as closet drama and as a stage piece.

The second charge laid by the reviewers was that, except in the principal roles, Strafford was indifferently acted.

Concerning its presentation, Browning wrote, in a letter to F. J. Furnivall (1886):

"You see the judicious remarks of the Critic in this morning's Daily News: not a doubt as to whether the bankrupt management of that day did what was requisite for the success of the piece, whether the wretched acting of the inferior people might not have done harm (a stone-deaf Charles, a silly simpering Carlisle, etc) ... He (Macready) acted very finely - as did Miss Faucit.

Pym received tolerable treatment, - the rest, - for the sake of whose incompetence the play had to be reduced by at least one-third of its dialogue, - non ragionam di loro!" (7)

It ought first to be established how closely related these two charges are. Harley Granville-Barker wrote,

"An essential quality of any work of art is its homogeneity. For a staged play, then, to make good its claim to be one it would seem to follow that the actors must continue what the dramatist has begun by methods as nearly related to his in understanding and intention as the circumstances allow. And it is probably true that the staged play is a satisfying work of art to the very degree that this homogeneity exists." (8)

A discussion of the text of the first few scenes of the play, and of some of the evidence available concerning the conditions and theatrical environment of its first production, will suggest that Browning provided a script which presented a number of difficulties for the acting company, which more sophisticated acting techniques might in some cases have overcome. With the exception of the two principals, the company appears ill-equipped technically to have handled it. The result was a compounding of faults.

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(7) rpt. CW, Vol.11, p.339

(8) Harley Granville-Barker, "Diversity into Unity", in Cole, T. & Chinoy, H., eds), Directors on Directing (London, Peter Owen, 1963), p. 198.

The fact remains that, in a play which bears more than a little pretence to historical accuracy, the actors have nearly all to look beyond their own lines, and indeed, even outside the text, for their interpretations of character, a task made more difficult by the acting conventions of the day, according to which each actor was employed to play a certain type of role in his own way. Many of the professional actors were close to being illiterate. There was, as will be shown below, a lack of consistent direction, and of regular, disciplined rehearsal. There was a predilection for exaggeration in voice, gesture, and facial expression that often amounted to stylisation. Actors, particularly supporting actors, were often type-cast, or hired to fill stock roles, so that they tended to give standard performances, developing their own characterisations, which might or might not accord with the demands of the play.

Mr Dale, who played Charles I, and of whom Forster wrote, " someone should have stepped out of the pit and thrust Mr Dale from the stage," (1) would have had to read everybody else's part more closely than his own, in order to establish a character. This practice would have been unusual on the stage at the time. Charles' lines give an actor - even if he is not a walking gentleman thrown on his own resources to interpret his part - little to cling to. His speeches tend to be terse. During Act II Scene ii, for instance, where Strafford is loyally protesting the King's intransigent oversetting of his plans and advice, arguing for a rule of Parliament, and urging reduced bloodshed in the realm, the King takes 19 lines, mostly broken, out of a total of 139. From lines 26-69, his speeches, in order, are:

"Hear me, Strafford!"	(26)
"So disrespectful, sire?"	(34)
"My Strafford!"	(41)
"Need the Parliament?"	(46)
"I've undone you, Strafford!"	(50)
"My friend of friends!"	(54)
"Good Strafford!"	(62)
"Alas! ... Strafford!"	(69) (2)

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(1) Review in the Examiner, May 2nd 1837, in Em Trag.p.54

(2) Text: CW

The difficulties of delivering such lines, although they can be overcome by a thoughtful and experienced actor, are fairly obvious. Despite the brevity of his lines, the actor portraying the King has a great deal of information to impart to the audience. He must project the image of a man who deceives himself, who is confident, unwittingly rash in his decisions, knowledgeable, yet not fully informed, and able to shrug off his mistakes, which touch him, sometimes deeply, but always briefly.

In Act 1 Scene ii, Charles meets Strafford's impassioned requests with reassuring yet evasive or non-committal answers. Then he turns to his Queen and says:

"I do not, love, - I do not so confide! (in Strafford)  
 The Parliament shall never trouble us  
 ... Nay, hear me! I have schemes, such schemes: we'll buy  
 The leaders off: without that, Wentworth's counsel  
 Had ne'er prevailed on me. Perhaps I call it  
 To have excuse for breaking it forever,  
 And whose will then the blame be? See you not?  
 Come, dearest! - look, the little fairy, now,  
 That cannot reach my shoulder! Dearest, come!" (11.289-297)

The last two lines call for a sudden and difficult change of pace and attack from the actor. The first six call for very careful delivery. They are key lines in considering the function of Charles' rôle within the structure of the play. They say a good deal, and all of what they say, an audience must be given the chance to understand. They are deeply ironical. For they are the leaders of the Parliament who buy Charles off, who break Strafford, and who still his counsel, and it is Charles - accept it or no - who must take the blame, as the sympathies of the audience are aroused. These lines and what they imply should be contrasted with the King's defence of Strafford, which he addresses to Pym in Act IV, Scene III (3), and with his conclusion:

"God forsakes me, I am in a net  
 And cannot move. Let all be as you say". (82-3)

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(3) Lines 37-49 and 51-59: the longest period in the play when he holds the stage.

In his last futile attempt to buy Strafford's freedom (V,i.184-192), he confuses Royal position and privilege with real power, and again, the rapid shifts of emotion and understanding leave the actor with a difficult task of communication to an audience. Mr Dale, it appears, was not up to this task. At the same time, it can be seen that, in Charles, Browning has written in a character whose relatively few lines are charged with a number of ironies. The King constantly mistakes his own position and powers. He makes decisions which are at variance with the situations that call for them, and that are then overborne by events. He makes decisions which appear unfeeling, yet are based on emotional states, and sometimes quite powerful ones. There is a danger that any actor, unless of great sensitivity, in studying the lines Browning has written for him, and in their delivery, will make the King appear what he is not: foolish and passionless.

There is something passionless, from another point of view, about Lady Carlisle. There is a determined decorum in the way in which she espouses Strafford's cause. In its first night review, the Times (4) provided a succinct insight into both the role and the actress:

It is possible to suggest some of the factors which combined to lead Browning to write the part in the way he did. It is not possible to give each factor its due weight.

In the first place, it is probable that the part was written with Helen Faucit in mind. Though just 20 years of age, she was a seasoned actress, established as Macready's leading lady, and popular with audiences. Browning would have had a clear idea of her stage manner, and some familiarity with the parts she played well.

In the second place, Browning's association with both Forster and Macready, continuing through the period in which the play was written, became more frequent once the decision to present it was made. Forster's work had already influenced the delineation of the main characters.

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(4) Unsigned Review, The Times, May 2nd, 1837, p.5. rpt. CH p.52.

Macready wrote of Browning, about the time the play went into rehearsal, "He seemed to think much of the objections and suggestions I had offered." (5) And indeed, Lady Carlisle is more the stage heroine than any other of Browning's female characters.

Lady Carlisle appears, in addition, as a composite character resulting from further reading (Browning quotes Matthew, Voiture and Waller in the 1937 Preface to the play) and from structural and theatrical requirements as he saw them. It becomes more satisfying to the audience that a sympathetic observer relays to Strafford, torn between the Royal demands and decisions, and the implacable attack of Parliamentary leaders, the latest shifts in the forces that press on him. At the same time, the scenes with Strafford serve as a device to clear the stage, isolating him so that the audience is better able to perceive and understand his predicament. In terms of structure, Lady Carlisle's role is concerned with clarifying issues, interpreting events, and focussing the attention on the subject of the play. In terms of theatre, it "lacks fullness", because it appears too much like a surrender to contemporary prejudice about what a heroine should be like.

It is essentially, but by no means entirely, a stock part. Lady Carlisle is not given any mannerisms. She speaks clearly and directly. Her lines to Strafford, for example in Act 11 Scene ii, contain some of the most succinct and comprehensible summaries in the play:

"Have you no eyes except for Pym? Look here!  
 A breed of silken creatures lurk and thrive  
 In your contempt. You'll vanquish Pym? Old Vane  
 Can vanquish you ... " (11.187-190)

.....

"But go not, Strafford: But you must renounce

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(5) The Diaries of William Charles Macready, 1833-1851 Vol.1 p.387,  
 rpt. Joseph Reed, Jr., P.M.L.A. LXXV 1960, p.597.



This project on the Scots! Die, wherefore die?  
Charles never loved you." (11.212-214)

She is possessed of an unusual political acumen, alert to events and personalities, particularly as they affect Strafford, and sensitive to the atmosphere at Court. Her regularity of mind leads her to say invariably only what she ought.

Conventionally, her great love for Strafford is made known to the audience through asides, indicating that she is too modest to declare it openly, and too noble not to bear it in concealment, for the sake of a Higher Purpose, to use a phrase relished by the Victorians.

"(Ah, no -  
One must not lure him from a love like that!  
Oh, let him love the King and die. 'Tis past.  
I shall not serve him worse for that one brief  
And passionate hope, silent for ever now!)" (11,ii, 242-246)

.....

"( ... My Strafford, I can save,  
Nay, I have saved you, yet am scarce content,  
Because my poor name will not cross your mind,  
Strafford, how much I am unworthy you!)" (IV,i, 138-141)

Her love begins to appear to be as much a love of the cause as love of the man. Strafford says of her, with an irony that perhaps Browning did not intend:

"That voice of hers -  
You'd think she had a heart, sometimes." (11,ii.268)

If it is a heart that holds "passionate hope", it is a heart, also, subject with suspicious ease to dictates of nobility in action. The part could, with a few cuts, beginning with the lines quoted, almost be played by a man.

At the same time, it is the part of the play that most seems to be written for a live audience. Lady Carlisle is young, beautiful, dignified, noble and courageous. She is at once the flower of titled English womanhood and the stock heroine of nineteenth-century tragedy. There is a subdued element of melodrama in her selfless, hopeless, and, to all intents, sexless love for Strafford, and in her sublimation of it in her determination to do all in her power to save him.

The minor characters are undistinguished, yet not quite to the point of being undistinguishable. Browning evidently expects his audience to bring to the theatre a knowledge of the shades of their religious and political opinions, for their speeches in Act 1 scene 1 are allusive more than either direct or explanatory. The Roundheads quote the Old Testament, and Cavaliers talk of the parlous state of Mother England. The solution to both their problems seems to lie in opposition to Strafford. Partly because it is uncertain whose side anybody is on, the motivation for seeking Strafford's downfall is weakened. It is, indeed, Lady Carlisle, in the following scene, who does most to set the political scene in perspective. The supporting actors, again, must look beyond the script to establish their characters. So must the audience, if they are to escape a minor confusion in the first act. Until he receives his earldom, (Act 1 Scene ii l.241), Strafford is known, and indicated in the script, by his family name of Wentworth.

With one exception the minor actors have little to do but say their lines. This is a state of affairs that could be remedied by imaginative direction, but Macready was not yet an actor-manager, and it was after this period that he developed into one of the most sensitive directors of his time. The exception is Pym, the voice of Parliament and a man who had held a strong friendship for Strafford:

"Wentworth - he's gone now! - has talked on whole nights,  
And I beside him: ..."(IV,iii,63-4)

but who saw his downfall, even his death, as a necessary sacrifice for the good of the country.

"But I have made myself familiar, Fiennes,  
 With this one thought - have walked, and sat, and slept,  
 This thought before me. I have done such things  
 Being the chosen man that should destroy  
 The Traitor. ... " (IV,ii,156-60)

The part holds some powerful lines, notably Pym's entrance (Act I scene i), his confrontation with Charles (Act IV, scene iii), and the closing of the pay (Act V, scene ii) which he shares with Strafford. It calls for strong acting, and has enough matter in it to offer an alternative interpretation. Pym can be projected as genuine, idealistic enough to sacrifice a close friend of his young days for the good of his country, at whatever expense of conscience or sorrow to himself. Or he can be played as a cynical politico, whose noble-sounding speeches disguise a hunger for power through any means, and regardless of the rights or feelings of others. His final recourse, the Bill of Attainder, Fiennes finds "monstrous" (IV, ii,119) and Rudyard, "Horrible! ... Too horrible!" (IV, ii,113,115). Either interpretation could result in a valid performance, serving to highlight Strafford's position without affecting his final sacrifice, which, of course, rests in the end on his own choice. The first, which slightly indulges the nineteenth-century love of pathos, adds dimension to Pym's character, for although his dilemma is suppressed by his sense of duty, there is a blurring of his motives, and he becomes a more believable character. The second interpretation might be favoured by a modern actor or director, since it would focus attention more on the events which led Strafford to choose political martyrdom, bringing out in him the old Greek element of the daimon, the man changed and purified by suffering, meeting an inescapable fate with heroic virtues. This might be even more possible, if it were decided to tidy up a potentially anticlimactic ending by cutting the last 83 lines of Act V scene ii, which contains Pym's apologia, and finishing with:

STRAFFORD: "Not by this gate! I feel what will be there!  
 I dreamed of it, I tell you: touch it not!"

LADY CARLISLE: "To save the King, - Strafford, to save the King!"

(V,ii,265-267)

(As Strafford opens the door, PYM is discovered with HAMPDEN, VANE, etc.

STRAFFORD falls back: PYM follows slowly and confronts him.) (S.D.)

There is a difference between parts that are undefined and those that contain elements of ambiguity. Savile, the Vanes, Rudyard, Fiennes, and Loudon, even Hollis, who makes a strong appeal to the King in Act IV scene i, are undefined, containing little within the text to help in establishing character, beyond some biblical or political allusions. But Pym, whose motives are mixed, and could, by changes of gesture and inflection on the part of the actor, be shown to be suspect, becomes quite an exciting character, whose words and situations are charged with irony.

To this point, it has been shown that Browning, in delineating minor characters, may well have been guilty of some neglect, and certainly of lack of craft. At the same time, his scripts demand of the minor actors in the company skills and understandings that they were unable to supply. The playwright's indirect appeal to the audience, through the whole medium of the production, would thus have been more than a little tinged with confusion. His direct appeal is through the structure of the play, and its language: the invariables that the audience perceives, no matter what the production. It is in the character of Strafford himself.

It is from a discussion of the character of Strafford himself and of the relation of the character to the play, that we can best obtain an insight into Browning's methods of evoking audience response, and his ideas of what kind of response it ought to be. It will be shown that he demanded close attention from the audience, but even then, he causes the play to move too fast. He demanded a sharp awareness of verbal and situational irony. He promised in return

the satisfaction of observing the process within that turns a man into a hero. Where the audience has some inkling of this bargain, the play was rewarding. Where they do not, it is depressingly obscure.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is *Strafford's* play. Perhaps it is too exclusively *Strafford's* play. The part was almost certainly written with William Charles Macready in mind. But it was written primarily as a contribution to an impoverished English stage. It set out, not merely to chronicle the downfall of the mighty, but to demonstrate how a man in high position might feel and think when all that he stood for, and all that he strove for, stood in danger of being swept away by forces that were becoming steadily more implacable.

Contemporary tragic practice would have been satisfied had *Strafford* been seen to be bludgeoned by fate: Browning was dissatisfied with this sort of external spectacle, and wanted to make a more sensitive analysis of his hero's character. Theoretically, it ought to be possible in production to trace *Strafford's* mental and emotional responses to the reversals in his fortune by "providing a series of insights leading steadily but intermittently to the kind of perception that has always been part of the tragic hero's experience: an awareness of the inexorable mystery of the human lot, the sense that he has come close to the ultimate scheme of things." (1)

In practice, it required sophisticated theatrical techniques that Browning's inexperience denied him, and that were not available on the stage in his day, even in forms that could be adapted for the purpose.

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(1) D.S. Hair, *Browning's Experiments with Genre* (University of Toronto Press, 1972) p.47

Shakespeare, with a more flexible conception of what a desirable audience reaction might be, and indeed, writing to appeal to the whole range of denizens of the theatre, from pit to galleries to stage benches, was able to provide verbal clues and situational indicators that helped the audience generate such insights, as a sort of by-product of his heroes' tragic concerns, but these insights are individually formed, and at best, only generally agreed in discussion of any tragedy. Part of Lear's greatness as a character, for instance, is that his words and actions are consistent with an irrationality that Shakespeare must have understood very well, and that the character is moulded around actual thought processes that its author then projected for it. Shakespeare's concern stops at that point. Having created a process of mind and emotion that proceeded in a satisfying way from an interesting aberration, and fleshed it out, he was content to set it upon the stage. Browning wanted to complete the circle: he wanted the audience to see through the flesh. The Shakespearian audience can become excited by glimpses of this process in operation, it can make satisfying guesses about the wellsprings of Lear's (or Hamlet's, or Othello's) behaviour, but it cannot be totally absorbed by them, or necessarily, find that others arrive at the same insights or interpretations.

It is a concern that is secondary with Shakespeare, and that Browning wanted to make a primary one. It is a concern that, by and large, held little appeal for nineteenth-century actors and audiences, with whom the emphasis lay on externals; on large movements, on strong visual contrasts, and on spectacle. It was in fact about mid-century that Macready became one of the leaders of a movement to restore Shakespeare, by returning to the study and consequent presentation of the complete text, which had, on the one hand, suffered brutal cuts in the interests of better "understanding" or "decency", and on the other, as G.B. Shaw wrote, been "butchered to make a stage-carpenter's holiday".

In *Strafford*, Browning set out to write a self-revealing character.

At the turn of the century, Chekhov was to tackle the problem head-on, with brutal simplicity, at times with brutal subtlety. His characters, through the media of dialogue, monologue, and aside, simply tell the audience, in some detail, how they think and feel, and if necessary how they come to think and feel that way, and what they expect to do about it, or the extent to which they expect to suffer by doing nothing. Such an approach, Browning would have considered indecorous.

He conceived that the audience must not be told outright what they can discover by attending closely to what is being done and said onstage, if the effect of the performance is not to lose one of its dimensions. It is by attending, by locating and interpreting signs, actions, phrases, situations, that the audience undergoes a process of discovery, and hence identifies more closely with the characters being presented. Ideally, the discoveries Strafford makes about himself should be made simultaneously by the audience, but on another level, and from another point of view.

There are ironies involved of two sorts in operation, the dramatic - wherein the audience is shown a more complete or a different view of the situation from Strafford, or is able to experience situations where Strafford is not present - and verbal ironies, which show up a difference between the way Strafford is able to explain himself, and the degree of credibility he is able to support, and between the judgments and decisions he makes, and the audience's perception of what those judgments ought to be, and how valid those decisions are, in the light both of common experience and the information Browning provides.

In Act 1 scene i, the disparate views held, and the sorts of statements that are made by members of the political parties show agreement only on the principle that Strafford poses a threat to the English realm - or at least to the political interests represented in the scene - and that he must in some way be broken as a political public figure, and muzzled as a close adviser to the King.

The result is to suggest that, even if the meeting were to be fully reported to Strafford (and in the next scene its feelings are reported to him, briefly and inaccurately), he would have no clear idea of who his enemies were, or the extent of their opposition to him. The characters lack definition. One reason for this may be merely the ineptitude of the young writer of a first play. This is not easy to disprove, which in part accounts for its persistence in criticism since the play opened. Two other related reasons must, however, be considered. They are that Browning wishes merely to create an impression of consensus arrived at by different paths, and that his interest in laying verbal clues for the following scene overshadows his interest in shading his characters more fully. Strafford in the character on whom attention is to be focussed. The confused impression the audience gets is paralleled by the confused evidence Strafford has to work on.

If the processes operating in the next scene and the structure of the play as a whole are taken into account, the above related explanation appears more reasonable.

In Act 1 scene ii the audience is introduced to the first of a series of ironies. Strafford, returned to England at the Royal behest, does not know why he has been sent for, and is unwittingly misinformed about affairs by Lady Carlisle. She sees him still as high in the King's favour, but warns that some in the court, "Nibble at what you do." (1.ii,41) She dismisses Parliament as being ineffective, where the audience has already been shown some indication that it is about to destroy Strafford's personal reputation and political career.

Pym, after his entrance, is seeking rather than giving information. He talks of reviving an old, deep friendship. He hopes Strafford will not proceed with the course that, it seems to him, Strafford is determined on.

In the next part of the scene, the King is noncommittal. His elevation of Strafford to an earldom appears to be a mark of confidence in his ability, as much as a token of royal favour, yet the whole is undercut, at the end of the scene, by Charles' speech to the Queen.



An attentive audience has been given hints of Strafford's peril. Three forces, the vigour and precise direction of which he is shown to be unable to estimate, press upon him. The court, as Lady Carlisle has informed him, is against him. On the face of it (Act 1 scene i) Parliament is on the point of moving against him. He appears to enjoy the King's favour, he is at the top of his powers, yet, as Charles hints (1.ii.289-295), he is a pawn in a game where the King has made the rules, and which he thinks to control.

An inattentive audience may have adopted the professed expedient of the Athenaeum reviewer of May 6th, 1837: "that we at last discovered the best way of obtaining an impression of what was going on was, to take care not to follow the speaker too closely, but to hear the opening of a sentence, and supply the remainder by imagination." (1)

Yet from this and the preceding scene emerge two clear expressions, unclouded by ambiguity and not motivated by self-interest: Lady Carlisle declares her friendship and loyalty to Strafford, and he casts his lot for unswerving loyalty to the King.

"Sir, I will serve you," he says, (1,ii.255) and is buoyed by the King's apparent concern:

"Strafford, spare yourself.

You are sick, they tell me." (1,ii,256)

Strafford's next lines express his relief at having made his commitment.

They indicate his confidence in his ability to serve wholeheartedly and effectively. They also suggest his misapprehension about the whole state of affairs, for if he is in close alliance with the King, then the court does not matter, and Parliament can be managed.

(1) p. 337.rpt. CH p.53.

"Tis my soul  
That's well and prospers now.

This Parliament

We'll summon it, the English one - I'll care  
For everything. You shall not need them much." (1,ii,256-259)

It can be seen that there are five major ideas or associations condensed into Strafford's lines. Two of them, that Strafford has the King's support, and that he is now safe politically, are mistaken. The reader of the play has very much the advantage over the audience. While it is true that the spoken language has added to it inflection and facial expression, as well, perhaps, as stance and gesture, it is also true that the audience may be slow to register all of these, or it may not register them at all, or they may be misinterpreted. It is likely, too, that where ironies and ambiguity abound, actors will misinterpret them, or lack the skill to project them.

Again, Charles' line,

"Strafford, spare yourself.

You're sick, they tell me.",

is platitudinous and ambiguous. It is, surely, an expression of concern. But it is trite, and rendered somewhat impersonal by its rider, "They tell me."

"Spare yourself" may, as well, be a euphemism - an indication that the King has no need of Strafford's services. It can also mean the opposite of what it says, that the King is being formally polite, acknowledging Strafford's illness, but expecting of him that he continues if not increases his efforts. Certainly the last lines of the scene indicate that Charles has a place for Strafford in his game, and one that will call heavily on Strafford's loyalty.

All of these are subtleties that it would be difficult, to say the least, to project in performance, especially by means of the highly stylised method in vogue in Browning's time. They are subtleties that can best be detected by close reading.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next part of the play - the development through Acts II, III and IV, - makes turgid reviewing but surprisingly adequate theatre. Its analysis is included for the sake of continuity, and to provide an opportunity to look more closely at some representative dialogue, the particular features being its rapid articulation and its compression. What emerges from it, most interestingly, both on the page and on the stage, is the rounding off of the character of Pym, which could become, for an actor, the prize rôle in the play. What also becomes more obvious is the deception and misinformation with which Strafford is surrounded. This illuminates Browning's empathy with his main character, and the fertility of his imagination in placing Strafford in situations to which he must continually and often blindly accommodate. That this accommodation approaches the process of sublimation is a vindication of Browning's attempt to portray psychological processes, and an indication of his depth of psychological insight. Increasingly, as the play develops, Strafford is the focus of events. Increasingly, he is the victim, but whether of the events themselves or of his own response to them, Browning leaves to the audience member or the unseen auditor to judge for himself.

The play is discussed, as much as anything, from the viewpoint of the producer, in an attempt to communicate its "feel" in production.

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In Act 11, scene i, Browning continues with his introduction. The confused situation in Parliament is summarised by Rudyard, following Hollis' defence of Strafford.

HOLLIS: "Pym, who knows Strafford ..."

RUDYARD: "Would I were sure we know ourselves!

What is for good, what, bad - who friend, who foe!"

(11,i.46-8)

Pym's entrance brings further apparent misinformation. His reading of the situation is that Charles has cast Strafford aside.

"Strafford is ours. The King detects the change,  
Casts Strafford off for ever, and resumes  
His ancient path: no Parliament for us,  
No Strafford for the King!" (11,i,103-6)

He is not to know that Strafford has committed himself wholly to the royal cause, nor yet how lightly his commitment is to be taken by the King. In Act 11 scene ii, Strafford finds that his faith in Charles is misplaced, that,

" ... for some little thing, my whole design  
Is set aside." (11,ii,27)

Strafford possesses evidence of collusion between influential courtiers and the King's enemies: he cannot now use it. He could advise terms that would ensure an acquiescent Parliament. The King will not listen. He has plans for a quick and relatively bloodless victory. Charles has upset them. He has already made his dispositions. Lacking faith in the King, Strafford reaffirms his loyalty, as if, in unquestioning loyalty, he can find something to cling to, something to take the place of the high hopes that have been so swiftly eroded. It is at this point that Strafford's tragedy begins. His relations with his sovereign have changed. It is too late to go back, as he says, 'too late to think about', without sacrificing his integrity. When the King upbraids him for disrespect, he says,

"My liege, do not believe it! I am yours,  
 Yours ever: 'tis too late to think about:  
 To the death, yours." (11,ii,35-7)

But it is true. Strafford has dedicated himself in loyalty to the King, but it is loyalty without respect. Suddenly confident of himself, he attacks the King for his intransigence, even more vehemently when he finds that Charles has removed the financial support for the botched campaign Charles has ordered him to undertake, and, by implication, underwrite with his own reputation, by dissolving Parliament. His outburst,

"You thought your perfidy profoundly hid  
 Because I could not share the whisperings  
 With Vane, with Savile? What, the face was masked?  
 I had the heart to see, sir! Face of flesh,  
 But heart of stone - of smooth cold frightful stone!"  
 (11,ii,121-125)

continues with a threat to reveal the King's manoeuvring, but is abruptly controlled with the entrance of Pym, Hampden, and Vane, and Strafford assumes responsibility for the haphazard policy he has been bequeathed. Strafford's covenant has been made on his own terms, but without reservations. He is prepared, in his loyalty, to offer his own reputation and political future as a shield to the King. His promise, "To the death, yours.", is deeply ironical: it has depths of tragic prophecy that no-one at this stage of the play can realise.

The scene concludes with the dialogue with Lady Carlisle, played on two levels. Strafford emerges from the royal interview with an assumption of muted confidence, which Lady Carlisle does not penetrate. She is moved to hint at, and then subdue the further expression of, her love for him (II(ii),242-4). She says again, with unconscious irony,

"I wish you well: you must be very sure  
Of the King's faith, for Pym and all his crew  
Will not be idle - setting Vane aside." (11,ii,248-250)

Underlying this is Strafford's realisation that, with Pym and the Parliament against him, and the King's protection withdrawn, he stands alone, in his "good fortune's eve" (1.266).

The metaphor of coming night and its first star is continued in Strafford's soliloquy. Having found, 'a foe/To close with, and a fight to fight at last/Worthy my soul!" (11,ii,277-9) he sees himself about,

" - To breast the bloody sea  
That sweeps before me: with one star for guide.  
Night has its first, supreme, forsaken star." (11.ii,294-6)

Act 111 scene i is brief, (60 lines) and tells of Strafford's defeat in the North, and Pym's call for "England's great revenge" (111,i,29) The Lords, locked out of the House, would have had Strafford destroy the power of Parliament for them, but Charles, with his flair for the untimely, has summoned a sitting against the wishes of Court, in Strafford's absence, and against his interests. This and the first 90 lines of Act 111 scene ii serve to show the audience the danger Strafford faces on his return to London, a danger he is to be unaware of, and that will be a source of the irony that infuses this next scene.

In the dialogue which opens Act 111 scene ii, Lady Carlisle affirms her faith in Strafford's love for the King, and determination to serve him, whatever the cost, and tries to enlist the Queen's help and protection. Obviously, it would be safer for Strafford to remain at York, but, Lady Carlisle insists, if the King has summoned him, he will come. Holland, Savile, and Vane bring news of his impeachment,

" ... they seek redress

On Strafford from his peers - the legal way.

They call it."

(111,ii,48-50)

Strafford enters soon after this, to find, despite the urgency, that the King is absent. He confides to Lady Carlisle that he has undergone a change of attitude.

"Sweet -

I tried obedience thoroughly." he says, then instances the King's fickleness, and continues,

"I took

The King's wild plan: of course, ere I could reach

My army, Conway ruined it, I drew

The wrecks together, raised all heaven and earth,

And would have fought the Scots: the King at once

Made truce with them."

(111,ii,149-155)

His next words show that his idealism has not blunted him to reality, and indicate that his continued service of the King is something he is committed to for his own sake, partly because he is the sort of man who must strive for an ideal, partly because he sees in what the King represents something that England cannot afford to lose, but not because Charles, as a man, is in any way deserving of it.

"Then, Lucy, then, dear child,

God put it in my mind to love, serve, die

For Charles, but never to obey him more!" (111,ii,155-7)

Strafford carries proof of the defection of certain of the Lords. He is confident that, with their power broken, he can deal with Parliament. And God has put it in his mind what his approach to Charles shall be. He is confident that he has moved from military defeat to political victory. In this delusion, he remains the tragic hero. Lady Carlisle does not tell him of the impeachment

proceedings. She explains to the audience,

"Ah, I have spared

Strafford a pang, ..."

(111,ii,231-2)

The scene is one of some movement and excitement. The dramatic irony has become obvious. The speeches are simple and forceful. Entrances are well timed, and the characters coming on stage bring information that the audience can readily accommodate. Attention is focussed on Strafford, although Lady Carlisle has to work for her share of the limelight, which she finally earns with a concluding soliloquy. This might be considered a little melodramatic, but it provides a satisfyingly theatrical minor climax to the scene. The whole section is one that should play well on stage, perhaps for the reason that Browning's attention is directed, somewhat disproportionately, on his main character, and this is one of Strafford's scenes.

Act 111 scene iii is also effective theatre, but for different reasons. It is a scene of action and, potentially, an actor's scene. A modern production would call for careful, but not static, grouping, some strong gestures and definite moves, and allow a number of lines to be thrown away, to point up the confrontation between Strafford and his followers and the leading members of the House of Commons, and to isolate Strafford as much as possible for his last speeches, which form the climax of the scene. The nineteenth-century tendency to play the scene as a sort of tableau vivant, using a number of extras and relying on its spectacle, would also have been "good" theatre, in that it catered to popular taste.

Browning sketches in another view of Strafford, as a commander of men in his true element, a forceful leader, bold in attack. He comes to effect an arrest. Once more, his fortune suffers reversal, and he has to allow himself to be taken under the terms of his impeachment. Here, he shows himself equally strong in defeat. It is a defeat he is confident will be a temporary one.



The following scene is marked by a transition of some magnitude, in time and in mode of presentation. The King, the Queen, Hollis, Lady Carlisle, Vane, Holland, and Savile occupy the stage, and Strafford's actions and reactions are reported. The audience may deduce that Strafford's trial is in its eighteenth day, and that he is pleading his own case vigorously and to good effect. Nevertheless, Hollis pleads for the King's intervention, and Lady Carlisle has evolved a plan, for which Charles may take the credit, to save Strafford by a show of arms.

As Act IV, scene ii opens, Strafford appears confident. He has defended himself without implicating the King. He can defeat Pym without Charles' intervention.

STRAFFORD. (to LADY CARLISLE) "Child, I refuse his offer;  
 whatsoe'er It be! Too late! Tell me no word of him!"  
 (IV, ii, 38-9)

There is a suggestion here, as well, of mistrust of the King, personally, and of his political effectiveness. Strafford is self-sufficient.

"What shall I do when they acquit me, think you,  
 But tranquilly resume my task as though nothing had intervened  
 Nothing had intervened since I proposed  
 To call that traitor to account!

.....

"To make amends,  
 You, Lucy, shall be here when I impeach  
 Pym and his fellows." (IV,ii,60-63; 66-8)

But "Pym and His fellows" have another deadly move on the board, and again, Strafford's speech proves deeply ironical. He has given himself up to the impeachment proceedings in good faith:

"Child, I'll tell you -

.....

Why I stood patient! I was fool enough  
 To see the will of England in Pym's will;  
 To fear, myself had wronged her, and to wait  
 Her judgment: ..." (IV, ii, 72:74-7)

He has learned to believe in the rightness of his own cause, and the necessity for his own course of action. He has seen his opponents as men motivated by personal and political gain, and not, as they claim, by thoughts of what is good for England. He is secure in his belief. He cannot fail.

"From this day begins  
 A new life, founded on a new belief  
 In Charles." (IV, ii, 101-3)

The scene concludes with a new twist. Strafford exits. The next entrance brings on Pym and Vane. The impeachment has, indeed failed. As Vane says,

"You cannot catch the Earl on any charge, -  
 No man will say the law has hold of him  
 On any charge: ..." (IV, ii, 123-5)

But Pym will not allow failure. He is resolved on a further drastic move. He is determined on a Bill of Attainder.

A great deal must be quoted in order to illustrate this scene. It is not one that can be summarised easily, because the words in it are more important than what also is happening on stage. It need not be static, but it must be carefully paced. If the audience is going to stay with it, the actor playing Strafford must assume a great deal of responsibility. He must arouse their interest, quickly and effectively, and he must pace himself to the rate and degree of their comprehension of the lines. Macready, in 1837, was prepared to assume such a responsibility.

There are rather more theatrical opportunities in Act IV scene iii, which is brief, but clearly and tautly written. In it, the characters of Pym and Charles, whose dialogue occupies most of the scene, are given a higher relief. Pym persuades the King to grant his consent to Strafford's execution if and when the Bill of Attainder is passed. Pym talks of his past friendship for Strafford, of the Good of England, and subtly threatens Charles with popular reaction. The King defends Strafford strongly, vacillates, and concedes. The scene is interrupted by Lady Carlisle, who discovers their purpose, and resolves that in herself alone lies Strafford's only salvation.

At this point, the action of the play may be said to end. Act V is concerned almost totally with Action in Character, because it is centred on Strafford, on his responses, and on what they reveal. He is observed adopting a firm attitude, secure in some belief, that is suddenly changed or upset as he has to deal with new and conflicting information with yet another blow, another disappointment. The whole process is one in which deception, misinformation, the truth misconstrued, lead into and out of self-deception, and into and out of decision. Some reliance is placed on the spectator to compare his experience of events as they are portrayed with Strafford's, to compare what Strafford says he knows or believes with what the onlooker judges he ought to know and believe. The scene is set by Act V scene i, which is almost an entr'acte. It is the day of Strafford's execution. Strafford's friends, Lady Carlisle and Hollis, hold the stage. Lady Carlisle has an undisclosed plan to get Strafford to France. Hollis is to intercede with the King, from whom Strafford confidently expects a reprieve, but who has already signed the death warrant. The scene runs to only 40 lines. It reads easily, but would have to be played slowly if an audience is to perceive even its broad implications.

Act V scene ii opens to reveal a new, and possibly too unexpected, side of Strafford. He is in the Tower with two of his

children. There is an Italian song, talk of Venice, and an air of sadness. Then Hollis enters. Strafford will not hear his sentence, but talks of the King, surmising that after his pardon, he might be secluded at Wentworth. Hollis at last breaks the news that he is to be executed. Strafford is at first disbelieving, and produces a letter of reassurance written by Charles. Then the King enters, remorseful:

"You would not see me. Strafford, at your foot!

It was wrung from me! Only, curse me not!" (V,ii,158-9)

He turns in a hopeless burst to Balfour,

"The Parliament! - go to them: I grant all

Demands. ..."

(V,ii,185)

But it is too late. Strafford is resolved to die, if by his death the King shows in a better light. He suggests:

"The King was sorry. 'Tis no shame in him:

Yes, you may even say he wept, Balfour,

And that I walked the lighter to the block

Because of it. I shall walk lightly, sir!" (V,ii,201-4)

Lady Carlisle enters. She has arranged an escape to France. Strafford can have none of it.

"Leave me, girl. Humour me and let me die!"

Finally, Pym presents his apologia. Strafford can do nothing but entrust the care of the King to Pym, and there is a final ironic suggestion in the lines that Charles, too, will meet Strafford's fate. There is a sense of increasing dignity in the last 100 lines of the scene, that lifts it above the level of a man who has gambled with fate and lost, to the tragic stature of a great man who has chosen a cause, and in meeting the exacting demands of that cause with courage and integrity, made it a worthy one.

Strafford's tragedy is partly that he is a hero - a great man who chooses his path because he believes it to be a necessary one to follow, and accepts with dignity what lies at its end. The path he chooses is that of loyalty, and it is another part of his tragedy that it is not blind loyalty, that he is aware of the faults, and that he cannot accommodate to the intransigence, of the King in whom he reposes that loyalty.

He encounters not one reversal of his fortune, but a number of them. The play is so structured that the audience knows before him that each of these reversals has occurred. It is another part of his tragedy that he is, again and again, forced to make decisions, in situations where information that he might have turned to advantage, is unknown to him, or is withheld from him, or is, in the case of the King, given to him falsely or ambiguously. Throughout, he suffers greatly, because he is a practical man with high ideals, and he is able to see the practical disadvantages of holding to these ideals, and practical enough to realise that he cannot forsake them without surrendering his integrity, and perhaps even his identity.

It is the balance of all his other great qualities against his idealism that justifies what might, in a lesser man, be considered mere foolishness. It is the balance of his qualities that makes him a fascinating character.

If, at times, Strafford appears stiff, or colourless, it is because, at times, the medium through which he is presented, the play, is stilted or mechanical. Browning, in shifting his appeal from the reader to the audience, employed a number of artifices, and they work with varying degrees of success.

In the 1837 preface to Strafford, Browning calls it a play - "which is one of Action in Character rather than Character in Action". This departure from Aristotle is readily justifiable, not only from the point of view of playwright's license, but because it is potentially interesting and exciting. It is the sort of thing that succeeds

in plays, say, by Arthur Miller or Edward Albee, and that can be detected, towards the end of the century, in the work of Ibsen. It is one of the parallels that can be drawn between the technical problems faced by Browning and T.S. Eliot.

Browning's first mistake, however, is to confine his statement of aim to the Preface, and to give no hint of his procedure in the first two or three scenes of the play. That he was quite capable of doing something like this he showed much later (A) in Book 1 of The Ring and the Book, where the reader is cleverly introduced, not only to the story and its sources, but the demands that the author is about to make on him in reading it.

Act 1 scene i is a set piece. The decisions are already made, the characters are arriving at a consensus, in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish individual characters. There is no marked idiolect, and the impression is of a growing concert of opposition to Strafford, for his unpredictability and the danger he represents. In production, presumably, the audience would be helped by differences in casting (although Browning complained of the weakness of the supporting characters), costuming, and position on stage.

"Action in Character" implies a movement of ideas and emotions, in response to a situation, possibly requiring a decision, and certainly leading to a resolution in terms of modifying or redirecting the character. A play which is one of "Action in Character" requires that this movement be exteriorised, be represented, not only in terms of language, intonation, and gesture, but also in terms of observable stimulus and response within a given dramatic situation. We ought to be able to perceive, and we ought to be encouraged to attempt to predict, what is happening and what might happen, to the character within the framework of the plot. None of the characters in the first, or indeed, the second scene, represent any such movement, or introduce us, even tentatively, to any such process. The dozen characters on stage in Act 1 scene i summarise convictions and viewpoints to the present moment, and give little indications of the directions they are likely to move in as individual characters.

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(A) in 1868

In Act 1, scene ii, Browning concerns himself further with setting the scene. Lady Carlisle and Strafford show us, not so much a method of dealing with a situation, as merely what the situation is.

Browning's second mistake is, again, not to explain enough: this time in another order. The demands an author can legitimately make of his readers differ in degree from those that can be made of a theatre audience. When reading, we can pace ourselves. We can take our time to reread or review. We can even, if we want to, read the back of the book first. But in the theatre impressions, responses, and understandings have to be immediate, or they are lost.

It is perfectly legitimate for a playwright to set the action of a piece in a time or a place unfamiliar to his audience, so long as he explains (or implies, or demonstrates) what it is necessary for their understanding of the play for them to know about the setting. If something matters within the context of the play, the audience has a right to know. Paradoxically, if something does not matter, they ought in some way to be told that, too.

Where, and exactly what sort of place, Illyria is, for instance, Shakespeare is careful to suggest that his audiences form their own generalisations about. (A) Brecht, who also departs from the Aristotelian idea of the mythos, deliberately chooses exotic and highly generalised localities, to point up the unreality of the play and to force the audience to concentrate on what the actors have to say.

Peter Schaffer, in The Royal Hunt of the Sun, is less concerned with the historical details of the conquest of Peru, than with representing the sort of man Pizarro might have been and the sort of culture he might have represented, in conflict with the sort of man (or god) Montezuma might have been, and the sort of values he represented. It is, in fact, a disadvantage for a member of Schaffer's

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(A) "As I prepared the script, it seemed to me that if, following Stanislavsky's rule, one were to say in a single word what Twelfth Night was about, that single word would be Illyria. It chimes through the text nostalgically as if Shakespeare would make us desirous of a place we had visited only in dreams" - Ngaio Marsh, "A Note on the Production of Twelfth Night", in Shakespeare Survey 8 (Cambridge, the U.P., 1955), p.70.

audience to be too knowledgeable about the Conquistadores. Schaffer wants him to form judgments about people.

Unfortunately, the characters in *Strafford* cannot be separated from their politics. They are people about whom Browning wants his audience to form judgments, for it is in part on these judgments that they will base their judgment of *Strafford*. It is a disadvantage if they are not knowledgeable about Whitehall and the Houses of Parliament in the time of Charles, since these things are very much a background to the judgments they might make. Their world is not nostalgic, or exotic, or immaterial. It is impulsive, pragmatic, devious. Browning has no right to make it unfamiliar as well.

In Act V, Browning has used a series of stock Victorian dramatic - even, by stretching the definition, tragic - situations with his own idea of the development and display of character. The concentration is, of course, on the character of *Strafford*, who need hardly move from his place on the stage as event after event occurs. He is to be seen as condemned man, as loving father, as loyal servant, as tender friend, as forgiving enemy. He is to be seen in the end, as pathos mounts, as tragic hero. Throughout, the dialogue has been compressed, self-revelatory.

The argument that follows is that this single-minded concentration on character gives the play strengths in imaginative and emotional appeal that exceed the expectations aroused by the critics. Perhaps this is because a number of modern ideas on motivation and on the representation of character are quite close to Browning's conception of 'Character in Action'.

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An analysis of what might almost be called the rôle of the play in "Strafford" shows that Browning was aware that some theatrical artifices had need to be added to the poetical techniques he was developing in order to pursue his fascination with representing the processes of mind and emotions in his characters. We cannot know a person except by responding, in turn, to our responses to him, a process which involves our forming and modifying a series of judgments. We do this sort of thing best by observing the things he says, and the things he does not say, and by relating them to our own experiences and views. In his poetry, which includes the poetry of the plays, Browning prevails on our interest in - even our unconscious habit of - judging, by providing us with a series of statements, in which ironies are discernible, although not always readily apparent, and in which typically we are presented with a psychological structure represented by statements that conflict with what we know, believe, and feel. In other words, once we begin to attend to one of Browning's characters, we automatically begin to accommodate their statements to our own experiences and views, rehearsing, as it were, an encounter with a real person. Such a process is both too elaborate, and necessarily, too meticulous, for an audience to comprehend more than partially in the context of a stage presentation, which offers, at the same time, another range of perceptual experiences.

An audience sees the actor representing the character he is portraying, not only at certain times directly to the audience, but also as that character responds to other characters on the stage, as well as to situations and events contrived by the playwright, and possibly involving all the characters in the play, whether on or off stage. Strafford, for example, is faced with arrest and execution, is shown weary of his lengthy trial, is observed in dialogue with Charles I, with Lady Carlisle, with Pym, and with his children. On all of these occasions, the facial and bodily gestures of the actor can provide the audience with important clues to the interpretation of character, many of them ironical. But the audience also derives - generally subconsciously - a good deal of information

- generally associative in nature - from the actor's position on stage. Here, the audience is responding to a convention that dates back at least to Greek times, that the actor's moves should be orchestrated (choreographed might be a more strictly accurate word, in view of the primitive relationship that existed between, and still underlies, the drama and the dance) in relation to one, or all, of the audience, the other character or characters on, and sometimes off, stage, and the set, which may include stage furniture and various acting levels. By extension of this idea, groupings of actors on stage may also provide an audience with important associational clues.

Exits and entrances, which provide points of relatively high interest in the movement of the plot, need to be carefully regulated, since, if they are not sensitively provided by the playwright, or skillfully made by the cast, they can as easily distract an audience from the action of the play as direct its attention to points in its progression.

"Strafford" provides equivocal evidence of Browning's sensitivity to the conventional, or even effective, use to which his apparent knowledge of stagecraft could be put. He makes some use of its devices, according to the theatrical conventions of the day, both to advance the action of the plot, and to provide visual interest. But he also uses these devices, as he does the language of the play, to focus attention on, and in an attempt to add to the audience's knowledge of, the Earl of Strafford. He does this in a way that diverts attention from the fact of Strafford's execution in Act V Sceneii, the conventional focus of an heroic tragedy, to the process of demonstrating Strafford's thoughts and feelings, as the events of the play, and his own decisions and actions, propel him towards his fate. What is important to Browning is not how a man can be seen to live his life, but how he can be shown as, and therefore conceived as, thinking and feeling about the way he lives - or dies.

The unusual feature of the play, and the area in which artifices had to be adapted, lay in the mode of its concentration on the main character. It is, certainly, one of the characteristics of tragedy

that its heroes are not as other men, but that they stand apart from or beyond them. In the classical Greek tragedies of AEschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, as in classical French theatre, which modelled itself on them, the hero becomes increasingly isolated, as human resources fall in the face of impending fate. This tradition continued through French theatre, and had its effect, through translation and imitation, on the English stage of the nineteenth century. In modern times, Jean Cocteau, adapting the classical tradition, wrote in the Prologue to The Infernal Machine, a contemporary version of Sophocles' OEdipus Tyrannos,

"Watch now, spectator. Before you is a fully wound machine, Slowly its spring will unwind the entire span of a human life. It is one of the most perfect machines devised by the infernal gods for the mathematical annihilation of a mortal."

Cocteau is restating the Aristotelian analysis of drama that follows the classical tragic model. Aristotle observes that plot and incident are all-important, moving toward a terrifying end in such a way that, "... the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed or disturbed." This somewhat inexorable plot construction provides an obvious means of directing the emotions, and can have a powerful effect on them. In Browning's plays, the "logically necessary or probable connection" that Aristotle requires incidents in the plot to have with succeeding incidents, is between incident and character. In "Strafford", incidents are directed to, or reflect, Strafford's decisions and actions, and the attempt to direct is aimed, not so much at the audience's emotions, but at its perceptions of the represented operation of mental and emotional processes in response to changing situations.

This can be compared with the plays of Shakespeare, for instance, where there is also an appeal, although in a less structured manner, to a complex of responses. Shakespeare's main characters, for example

Lear and Othello, whose tragedies begin with some crippling irrationality, or Hamlet, who from the beginning of the play stands outside the corrupt Danish court, and, in a sense, removed from the action of the play, are already isolated, and their actions become the focus of the audience's attention. The mode of presentation is oppositional - subplots engage interest and invite a progression of varied emotional responses. Nevertheless, if the main plot is dissected out, it will be found to conform roughly to the classical, linear model.

Browning arranged incidents around his hero, to provide fresh perspectives and intuitions. In doing so, he used or adapted the theatrical artifices of his time. To a modern reader, his stage directions appear sparse. Since the turn of the century, publishers have provided acting editions of plays, in which they have arranged to have the notes and directions from the play's first performance added to the author's text and notes, unless the playwright follows G.B. Shaw's model of supplying an abundance of his own requirements for setting, movement, business, and interpretation. (A).

Including setting directions at the beginning of each scene, there are less than one hundred and twenty stage directions in *Strafford*: one-fourth of them are devoted to identifying characters to whom lines are directed (e.g. (to CHARLES) (11,ii,135)), one-fourth to business (such as shouting (1,i,215) moving papers (11,ii,40) or going down on one knee (11,ii,130)) and the remainder largely to entrances and exits. (B). There are only seven stage directions which indicate actors' moves.

A number of reasons can be found to underly what seems to the modern reader to be a lack of stage direction, not the least of which is connected with changing conditions in the theatre over the last century. Relationships between the author, the actor, the director, and, in some cases, the growing and increasingly specialised technical and artistic personnel of the theatre, have changed as the problems

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- (A) cf. e.g. Shaw, G.B., *Androcles and the Lion* (Penguin, 1913 (rpt. 1949)), pp. 128-132. The extract comprises 182 lines, of which 63 contain stage directions. There are 41 separate S.D.s for 63 speeches.
- (B) The twelve scenes of the play include 26 entrances and 10 exits. They are summarised in Appendix A.

involved in production have become more diverse, if not more acute. There no longer exists a consensus of opinion as to how a play should be presented, and there is a tendency for avant-garde movements or experimental techniques to be absorbed into the mainstream of theatrical activity, and to provide directors and designers with options that may be called on in the presentation of any piece. Naturalism, Realism, Expressionism, Constructivism, have proved to be more than passing fashions. An author may write a play that he feels suited to one of these forms, or a director may be left - and is indeed free - to adapt a play to one of them, or to adapt the form to the play.

Audiences are far less homogeneous than a century ago, and again, the playwright tends to be more specific in suggesting the effects that he thinks will appeal to an audience. That these suggestions may be taken up by the play director or actors is another matter, and the reader of plays is apt to find himself caught up in what at times amounts to an ideological conflict.

As well, the readership of plays has changed. By and large, plays are read by those who have a strong, and usually practical, interest in the theatre, and who tend to view the play as a theatre-piece rather than a literary work, and who may prefer to read it in the acting edition.

Thus, readers are accustomed to editions in which theories and techniques are suggested by either the author or the publisher.

"Strafford" follows an earlier model, in which the emphasis has been placed by its author on the words, on the text of the play itself, and in which the mechanical details of presentation have largely been left to the acting company. This might imply that the playwright does not see it as any function of his to become involved in the performance of the play, a view that is echoed, for instance, by the stage director Gordon Craig; writing about his craft:

"What is his craft? I will tell you. His work as the interpreter of the play of the dramatist is something like this: he takes the copy of the play from the hands of the dramatist and promises faithfully to interpret it as indicated in the text (remember I am speaking only of the very best of stage-directors). He then reads the play, and during the first reading the entire color (sic) tone, movement, and rhythm that the work must assume comes clearly before him. As for the stage directions, descriptions of scenes, etc., with which the author may interlard his copy, these are not to be considered by him, for if he is a master of his craft, he can learn nothing from them." (1)

It might also imply that Robert Browning, in attempting to 'elevate and ennoble our degraded British theatre', was absorbed by it.

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(1) Gordon Craig, "The Artist of the Theatre", Directors on Directing, ed. Cole, T, & Chinoy, H.K. (London, Peter Owen, 1955)

3.

EARLY VICTORIAN THEATRE

## "Attack

The use and purpose of such sights! Alack  
Not so unwisely does the crowd dispense  
On Salinguerran praise in preference  
To the Sordellos: men of action, these!  
Who, seeing just a little as you please  
Yet turn that little to account. - engage  
With, do not gaze at, - carry on a stage  
The work o' the world, not merely make report  
The world existed are their day!"

- Sordello (1840)

Book 111, lines 916-925

Strafford represents a response to the theatre of its time. In the last section, that response was outlined. There can be no doubt that, conversely, the Victorian theatre exercised its influence on the play and its author.

This section suggests some of the forms that influence took: not all, for space can not be devoted to the development of stage scenery and effects, or to costume and makeup, for instance. What will be commented on is the decline of the two Patent theatres, at war with a proliferation of thriving minor theatres, the Actor-Manager/Star system, which produced men and women of great talent and ability, whose performances contrasted strongly with minor actors playing stock parts, the taste of the audiences, which ran to sentiment and sensation, and the lack of a system of stage direction or regular rehearsal, until the first steps were taken in the early 1840's.

All of these things are in some way relevant to, and usually omitted from, an assessment of the play.

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It would be interesting to speculate on what might have happened if either the production or the writing of Strafford had been delayed by twenty or so years. Macready in his prime, for instance, would have been far better equipped to direct the play. In his biography (1) A.S. Downer traces the actor's development from actor to actor-manager to regisseur, and it is in this phase of his career, as a director increasingly concerned with ideas of unity in production, and particularly with the conduct of the cast at



rehearsals, that Macready might have been able to exploit the play more fully than in 1837, when he had to rely more on his own acting skill, and on his judgment in excising lines that might prove difficult or unappealing.

Browning, too, might have had the theatrical sense either to relate his characters more closely, or to isolate them more definitely. An earlier biographer, Dowden, defines one of Browning's chief characteristics as a playwright:

"The dramatic genius of Browning was in the main of the static kind; it studies with extraordinary skill and subtlety character in position; it attains only an imperfect or a laboured success with character in movement. The dramatis personae are ready at almost every moment, except the culminating moments of passion, to fall away from action into reflection and self-analysis. The play of mind upon mind he recognises of course as a matter of profound interest and importance; but he catches the energy which spirit transfers to spirit less in the actual moment of transference than after it has arrived. Thoughts and emotion with him do not circulate freely through a group of persons, receiving some modification from each. He deals most successfully with each individual as a single and separate entity; each maintains his own attitude, and as he is touched by the common influence, he proceeds to scrutinise it. Mind in these plays threads itself dexterously in and out of action; it is not itself sufficiently incorporated in action." (2)

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(1) The Eminent Tragedian, William Charles Macready

(2) Dowden, E. Robert Browning. (London, J.M. Dent & Co., 1905.) pp.53,54.

Had the characters been more closely related, the result would have been more immediately believable characters - and immediacy is one of the qualities essential to stage presentation - in whom the predisposition to either intelligence or emotion could have been better demonstrated by playing off characters one against the other in deeper contrast, and greater tension within the plays achieved. On the other hand, more definite isolation of the characters might also have achieved bold dramatic effects, prefiguring the experiments of, say, Pinter, whose characters subscribe as often as Browning's to something of an illusion of action, and to a growing emotional tension, revealing themselves to the audience, but failing to communicate with one another. The finely drawn personae of the later poems - say Men and Women (1855) might have appeared on stage as unique and fascinating minor characters, the major ones richer, fuller, more relaxed and hence more immediately comprehensible in their soliloquies.

But this is speculation. The theatre of the late '50's was at least as diverse and violent as that of the late '30's, and the facts were that the young Browning was ambitious to be a playwright and confident in his ability with words, and Macready equally ambitious. He wanted to re-establish a national theatre of artistic worth. It would not have occurred to either man to await a more opportune time. Neither the playwright nor the actor could do more than hope to succeed. It says much for their respective abilities that neither was an unqualified failure.

Into what sort of world was Strafford thrust? What sort of picture can be drawn of the theatre in 1837? The answer might be an impressionist attempt at a Hogarth cartoon: a canvas of sprawling life and furious and diverse activity, with a concentration on a few important details, and a suggestion of where others might be sought. Clive Barker, (3) introducing a symposium on Nineteenth Century British Theatre, points out that the mass of evidence available vastly overwhelms the conclusions that have been drawn from it, and that, "the day has gone when one man could sit at his desk and write

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(3) Richards, K., & P. Thomson (eds) Essays on Nineteenth Century British Theatre (London, Methuen & Co.1971) pp. 3,5

definitively about nineteenth-century history." (p.5) He regrets (p.3) that "a very high proportion of the standard works of reference on the theatre seem to have been written by popular theatre historians and not scholars.", and continues:

"There is an imperative need for theatre studies which go beyond the theatre. As theatre studies move away from textual criticism to the study of the play in performance as the only way of understanding any dramatic work and the evaluation of its content and effect, so they must continue to move towards the study of the play in performance in the movement of society in its time, for the precisely the same reasons."

While it is beyond the present scope to carry out such a study in any depth, a number of things ought to be said, or at least suggested, about certain aspects of theatre in that period, because they directly affected or were indeed part of the first performances of *Strafford*, or because they reflect upon the degree of success Browning met with as a playwright.

Browning's concern was to make a significant contribution to the legitimate theatre, at a time when that phrase carried a meaning and a number of connotations that no longer apply to it. Until the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, only two theatres, the Theatres Royal at Covent Garden and Drury Lane, held licences for the performance of plays in London, but, since the 1780's, the rights of these two Patent Theatres had been the subject of a number and variety of challenges. Apart from legal, political, social and moral attacks on their monopoly, they continued throughout the century to be victims to what might be called, in some cases with considerable elasticity of definition, the artistic competition of a number of minor theatres, saloons, and dukeries, where the laws regarding performance or censorship were often either broken outright or evaded by various occasionally ingenious plays.

The entertainments offered in these houses ran the gamut, through crudity, both in material and execution, and, not as frequently as

might be imagined, bawdry, to sensationalism of all kinds, low comedy, farce, burlesque, to, increasingly, melodrama, to adaptations of Continental, and particularly French, plays to the classics and Shakespeare. More importantly, they offered a range of prices, from the admissions charged by the penny theatres, to the three or five shillings demanded by the Patent Theatres.

It is difficult to be certain what their number had grown to by 1837, but there must have been thirty theatres of some note in the London area, each commonly specialising in an area of entertainment, or catering to a particular type or class of audience. As an example, the Adelphi (Strand) opened in 1825, and became famous for a brand of sensational melodrama known as "Adelphi screamers." , while the Royal Coburg, later known as The Old Vic, was fairly named "The Blood Tub." Sadler's Wells was the scene of sensational aquatic melodramas, having a 90' by 40' stage which could be flooded to a depth of five feet, to show naval engagement, or heroines rescued from drowning, deserted islands, or desperate leaps over a waterfall, by kindly boatmen, upright heroes, and, in the course of one season, by a trained dog. Variety - songs, juggling, patter, burlesque, acrobatics - was to be encountered at, for instance, the Eagle Saloon (later renamed the Grecian or the Olympic Theatre) the Britannia - one of the best managed and most successful theatres of the century - or the Prince of Wales (later the Queens Theatre), known to its clientèle as "the Dust Hole". Astley's Amphitheatre specialised in equestrian spectacles, the St John's in visiting French companies, and in French plays. (A)

The challenge that these theatres offered was generally not so much artistic as technical. As the century progressed, more use tended to be made of lighting and stage machinery and effects, so that play settings became more ingenious and extravagant. The successive managers of Covent Garden, which had been gaslit since 1817, and, after its rebuilding in 1808-1809, contained some of the best stage accommodation and stage machinery in Europe, were forced increasingly to exploit these assets, usually at great expense, in order to compete for

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(A) A fuller list of theatres can be found in Appendix B.

audiences, in whom the love of novelty and sensation which was one of the characteristics of the Victorian era, once met by some theatrical managements, was being demanded of all others.

Well-equipped as were both patent theatres, the history of their management is a chequered one. As well, their size and location made them unsuited to compete. Both had a seating capacity of about 3,000 people, many of whom, from the recesses of the auditorium, were unable to see clearly the faces of the actors, and certainly not able to register eye movements or smaller changes of expression, or to hear their voices at normal projection. Further difficulties were introduced by the frequent unruliness of patrons frequenting the lower-priced sections of the auditorium, particularly the pit,, which was close to the stage, and where a commotion could easily overwhelm, in the noise and movement,the efforts of the actors.

Macready was in the vanguard of a new generation of actors who owed their portrayals less to a repertoire of acting tricks and techniques than a thorough study of the script, resulting in an attempt to communicate to the audience an interpretation rather than a merely theatrical representation of each of the characters he played. G.H. Lewes wrote in reminiscence of him,

"Macready had a voice powerful, extensive in compass, capable of delicate modulation in quiet passages (though with a tendency to scream in voilent passages), and having tones that thrilled and tones that stirred to tears. His declaration was mannered and unmusical; yet his intelligence always made him follow the winding meanings through the involutions of the verse, and never allowed you to feel, as you feel in the declamation of Charles Kean and many other actors, that he was speaking words he did not thoroughly understand." (4)

The patent theatres were his home territory, so to speak, and he had tuned his performances to them. All the same, unless the audience was extremely attentive, he, and actors like him, would be throwing away much of their subtlety in such large spaces.

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(4) G.H. Lewes, "On Actors and the Art of Acting" (1875), rpt.Rowell, George, (ed), Victorian Dramatic Criticism (London, Methuen, 1971) p.10

Besides being too big, the two theatres, which after all represented and catered for the Establishment, were, as Cliver Barker writes, "obnoxiously sited". (5) He is talking of an "exodus of families from Central London" in response to the deteriorating standard of life in the city, brought about by the overcrowding, lack of sanitation and water, and the "sulphurous fog from coal fires" that resulted from the urban drift that quadrupled the population of the city in the early years of the century. He continues:

"I want to advance on further argument for the decline of the Patent Houses. They were obnoxiously sited. Engels in his list of urban horrors singles out the area.

'In the immediate neighbourhood of Drury Lane Theatre, are some of the worst streets in the whole metropolis, Charles, King, and Park Streets in which the houses are inhabited from cellar to garret exclusively by poor families.' (6)

Standing immediately to the west of the Patent Theatres were the two worst 'rockeries' in London - St Giles, teeming with starving Irish, and Seven Dials, characterised by Dickens as the worst area in London. Drury Lane itself in the 1830's was hardly any better, and the area suffered badly during the cholera epidemics of 1831 and 1832. The concentration of beggars, prostitutes and criminals in the area obviously made theatre-going at these theatres a hazardous and most unpleasant activity. Perhaps Mr Macready was wasting his time. Small wonder the prosperous and well-to-do patronised the Opera and the Haymarket." (7)

In the matter of the inevitable transfer of the allegiance of their genteel clientèle, C.J.L.Price writes:

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(5) Essays on Nineteenth Century British Theatre.

(6) F. Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England - 1844.  
(Edition of 1892) p.28.

(7) Essays on Nineteenth Century British Theatre.

"Attendance at the old Patent houses, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, was still socially possible, and Victoria herself encouraged the work of Charles Kean, manager of the Princess Theatre; but the minor theatres, homes of melodrama and burlesque, were left to the 'fast' and the raffish. Arthur Machen put the position clearly: - 'In the days of Thackeray, the theatre lived not for itself, but as a symbol of gaiety' (Far Off things, 1923, p.50) and we have to remember that the word 'gay' had a strongly pejorative effect, and was obviously at the other extreme from the prevailing admiration for earnestness. Refinement, respectability and religious zeal, all kept people away, and the theatre suffered, as Matthew Arnold suggested (Letters of an Old Playgoer, 1919, pp.23-24) because it did not attract an audience really representative of the society of its day. Opera alone retained social favour, partly because of the idea that music could only have an elevating effect and partly because of Victorian delight in the ostentatious." (8)

In fact, Covent Garden gave up the struggle in 1847 (April 6th)

when it became the Royal Italian Opera House.

Respectability, refinement, and religious zeal had their strongest effects, as well, on the repertoires of the Patent Theatres. Much that was contained in the great theatre of the past was considered lewd, perverted, morally dangerous, or, equally reprehensible, undignified.

The sensitivity of the actor-managers to the tastes and demands of their audiences, and to the pronouncements of a growing body of dramatic critics, led to an emasculation of Shakespeare and the revenge tragedies, with lines excised, substituted, or transposed, scenes written into or out of the production, or their playing order changed, or even complete adaptations of the plays. A dozen or so plays from the Shakespearian canon remained relatively inviolate, although there

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(8) English Literature, Vol.6, Ch.XIV, p.387.

was as well a tendency to tailor them to throw the focus on a particular part, or to suit a particular actor. Those chosen by Macready - who was one of the leaders of the movement back to the First Folio texts - are a fair illustration of the 'safe' choices, which were presented frequently and attended reverently. They consist of: Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice, A Midsummers Night's Dream, Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Merry Wives of Windsor", The Tempest, King John, Richard III, Julius Caesar and Antony & Cleopatra.

It took a brave manager, however, to cry a performance of, say, All's Well That Ends Well. In his production of this play in 1852 in what was close to being an avant-garde theatre, and at a time when the movement to restore the texts was well under way, Samuel Phelps still retained Kemble's acting edition of 1811. (B) Kenneth Richards, discussing the revival of the play, gives a good idea of the fate of contentious dramatic material:

"The adaptation is, as one would expect, a very professional one, but for all that, in preparing his 1811 All's Well That Ends Well Kemble had disembowelled Shakespeare's text with the efficiency of a Samurai, pruning it of everything likely to offend the most delicate taste. By careful elimination, and by the re-disposition of scenes, he shaped the play into a romantic and sentimental melodrama, with Helena its focus as the pathetic victim of scorned love who finally and triumphantly, but with the utmost of decorum, wins her man. References to her aggressive pursuit of Bertram, the aggression that so commended her to George Bernard Shaw, are drastically reduced as immodest, and what is brought to the fore in her selfless (one might almost say sexless) love for the wayward but basically decent young hero. The comic elements of the play are severely curtailed, diminishing the parts of Parolles and the Clown, and the roles of the Countess, the King, and Lafeu are correspondingly cut to size to maintain dramatic balance. Words and phrases are substantially

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(B) The text used was the reprint of 1815, with few alterations.



"altered throughout, much of the figurative language of the play disappears, and reference to the bed-trick and to Helena's conceiving a child are eliminated." (8) (C)

The tragedies of revenge fared as badly. For instance, Macready collaborated with Knowles in completely rewriting the Maid's Tragedy, which was presented by him in 1836 as The Bridal, and which enjoyed some success.

Official censorship was ruthless, prurient, and lay at the centre of a complex of abuses. (D)

Allardyce Nicoll writes:

"Most characteristic of all, however, is the moral sentiment of the time. Exemplified among critics, dramatists, and spectators, this "Victorianism"<sup>1</sup>" (E) which subtly differs from the sentimentalism of the preceding decades, must be taken fully into account when we consider the failure of contemporary tragedy and comedy. ... The "Victorian" morality exercised an influence more negative than positive and succeeded rather in killing free expression than in producing something new. ... The Double Dealer was revived, almost certainly in an altered form, at Drury Lane on Saturday, February 27th, 1802, and The Theatrical Repertory on the first of the following month came forth with weighty fulminations:

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(8) Richards, Kenneth, "Samuel Phelps's Production of All's Well That Ends Well", Nineteenth Century British Theatre, p.184.

(C) cf. also Macready's revision of Colley Cibber's 'improved' acting version of Richard III, which incorporated, among its substitutions, lines from Henry VI:

"Cibber's play consists of more than	1990 lines
Of which Cibber's own composition amounts nearly to	1100
Leaving of Shakespeare about	900
In very many of which Cibber has made alterations.	
The play now printed consists of	1960 lines
Of which are Cibber's not more than	200 lines
Making an acquisition of about	860 lines
of Shakespeare	

(rpt. Em Trag. p.86)

'Such a trough-full of villainy and lewdness was surely never before kneaded together ... down, down with it to the lowest pit of hell; and there let devils act the parts, and devils only be the auditors!' (The Dramatic Magazine (1829)p.194.)" (9)

Thus muzzled, the playwrights could do little more than write to order, which is, in fact, largely what happened. Controversial actions and motivations were to be avoided. Sex and obscenity were tabu. Noble sentiments - honour, patriotism, and those in defence of virtue - were to be what moved men and women to great deeds. The demand for melodramas, farce, extravaganzas, particularly those including a novelty 'turn', such as an infant prodigy or trained animals, or those incorporating spectacular special effects - a fire, an explosion, a naval engagement - was insatiable. As attempts were made to meet it, the rewards, the reputations, and the status of playwrights became devalued. The putting-together of plays became an exercise in mass production carried out for meagre reward - fifty pounds a play - by literary hacks, who even then ran a not inconsiderable risk of being hardly treated by a niggardly theatre management or swindled by a publisher. To these troubles must be added the difficulty of policing the Copyright Regulations first passed in 1833, which made the practice of pirating plays illegal, but only a little less common, and gave no satisfaction to the author who discovered one of his works playing in a "freely adapted: form in a rival house.

Finally, because it had profound effects on the conception and brief life of Strafford, mention ought to be made of the actor-manager star system, under which the theatre was dominated by a handful of actors whose glamour and technical skill drew large houses, and who were able to build up a considerable public following. It became the practice to write plays specifically for such actors, who might be earning in one week twice the sum that was paid to a playwright for as much as several months or even years' effort. At its worst,

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(9) Nicoll, A. A History of English Drama 1660-1900 Vol. IV (Cambridge V.P. 1955), p. 15, (Hereafter referred to as Hist. E.D.).

and the worst is what came to obtain commonly, this meant that a plot was adapted or another play reworked for a particular actor, and, sometimes, for performance by a particular company in a particular theatre.

The system was superficially attractive. It was immediately satisfying to audiences, and it drew the attention of the critics to the best talents of individual actors. It could be adapted to exploit fully the scenery and effects that could be contrived by a particular house. In the longer term, however, its effects were insidious, reflex, and erosive.

The leading actor was not only the focus of the play, but also he tended to become accustomed to stealing scenes, and to cutting lines from the speeches of other characters, in order to lengthen monologues or give himself stage space. John Vandenhof, who played a 'sadly prosy' Pym in *Strafford*, says of Macready:

"When he played *Othello*, Iago was to be nowhere! ... Iago was a mere stoker, whose business it was to supply *Othello's* passion with fuel, and keep up his high pressure. The next night, perhaps, he took Iago; and lo! presto! everything was changed. *Othello* was to become a mere puppet for Iago to play with; a pipe for Iago's master skill to 'sound from its lowest note to the top of its compass'." (10)

Macready also took pains with his own theatrical costumes, frequently designing them and ordering them made himself.

The remainder of the company comprised less either seasoned actors, intent on working their way to the top, and hence generally part of a highly mobile group that followed the main chance, or undistinguished second - and third - raters who still followed the traditions of the older stock companies, taking jobs where they could and for as long as they could, and specialising in the playing

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(10) W. Archer, W.C. Macready (1890), pp. 210-11, rpt. Hist. E.D. pp.48-9

of a particular role. (F)

This they did, with a minimum of interpretation. A heavy was a heavy, and a villain a villain, whatever the play.

Allardyce Nicoll writes:

"If, however, the styles of acting were becoming more and more conventionalised, the audiences as a whole, probably because of the general weakness in dramatic effort, looked rather towards the histrionic performance than towards the piece presented." (11)

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(11) Hist. E.D., p.51

(F) Dr Alfred Hennequin, in his book The Art of Playwriting (1890) described by A C Sprague, points out that, 'although the conditions of dramatic production admit the possibility of an infinite variety of characters', the history of the stage shows the prevalence of a small number of general types, and actors are chosen with their representation in mind. The following is his classification:

<u>MALE</u>	The Star	<u>FEMALE</u>	The Star
	The Leading Man		The Leading Lady
	The Heavy		The Emotional Actress
	The First Old Man		The First Old Woman
	The Second Old Man		The Second Old Woman
	The Comedian		The Comedienne
	The Light Comedian		
	The Low Comedian		
	The Eccentric Comedian		
			The Soubrette
			The Ingénue
	The Villain		The Adventuress
	The Juvenile		The Juvenile
	The Walking Gentleman		The Walking Lady
	The Utility Man		The Utility Woman
	The Super or 'Supe'		

- from "Dr Hennequin and the Well-Made Play", q. A.C. Sprague, Nineteenth Century British Theatre, pp. 147-50. To this may be added G B Shaw's definition of the Character Actor: "a technical term denoting a clever stage performer who cannot act, and therefore makes an elaborate study of the disguises and stage tricks by which acting can be grotesquely simulated." - The Saturday Review, 16 March 1895 q. Victorian Dramatic Criticism, p.240.

and points out that this state of affairs had a reflex effect on dramatic authorship, in that minor roles became even more stereotyped. He continues,

"... but it was not until the late thirties and the forties of the century that any general movement could be traced towards a more naturalistic style of performance. This newer naturalistic style, of course, must be closely associated with changes in stage settings and costume designs." (12)

A.S. Downer writes:

"Until the management of Macready, rehearsal had been generally a tentative affair, little more than a walk-through to refresh the actors' recollections of their stage positions. There was almost no attempt to fit the characterisations together, to concentrate on the development of scenes - after all, the older plays were star vehicles, and the audience had been taught to look only at the leading personages, to listen to their impassioned speeches, and wait for their big moments, their "points". It was a good deal like going to the opera.

The rehearsals, too, were somewhat operatic. Lesser players moved listlessly according to the instructions of the stage manager; major players, if present at all, spent most of their energy in seeing that they remained always "in focus", that attention was concentrated on them. Even actors who intended sensational new effects for one reason or another did not think it necessary to acquaint their fellows of their intentions."

(13)

It must be said, however, that in seeking unity in his productions by calling full rehearsals, Macready was opposing convention, and the theatre is one of the places where convention dies hardest: his efforts met with bewilderment or resentment, were obstructed or ignored, until, over a period, his methods proved their worth. Their immediate effect was to "rubber-stamp" the performances of his cast, who tended to copy his own intonations and gestures.

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(12) Hist. E.D., p.52

(13) Em. Trag. pp. 241,242

When Strafford was played, Osbaldistone was the manager at Covent Garden, and Macready had little opportunity to do other than take certain actors aside and suggest improvements in their portrayals. The result was a sadly uneven performance of the play, in the older tradition.

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This brief review of the contemporary stage concludes the analysis of Strafford and the conditions and environment of its performance.

The intention in the next section is to review the play's critical history. This is comparatively slight - an indication that Strafford is generally held to be not worth reviewing. The intention is to proceed roughly chronologically, abstracting from major critics what are judged to be the main points they advance.

The tenor of the present argument is that the play has not been, and indeed could not now be, a success, but that its condemnation as a failure has often been either too forthright, or over-hasty in view of the evidence adduced, or has proceeded from an insufficiently broad point of view.

There are a number of features of considerable interest that redeem the play from outright failure, and certainly demand at least a little more critical esteem than it has so far enjoyed.

4.

## REVIEWERS AND CRITICS

"He knew the signal, and steeped on with pride  
Over men's pity;  
Left play for work, and grappled with the world  
Bent on escaping:  
"What's in the scroll,' quoth he, 'thou keepest furled?  
'Show me their shaping,  
'Theirs who most studied man, the bard and sage, -  
'Give!' ...

A Grammarian's Funeral. (1855) lines 43-50

After writing of Knowles, Talfourd, Byron and Bulwer in a chapter of his History of English Drama, 1660-1900 entitled "The Legitimate Drama", Allardyce Nicoll says,

"And then we reach Browning, who, at first sight, like Byron, might have been expected to do so much for the fortunes of the English stage. Browning was, above all other things, interested in life. His Portraits of Men and Women shows a greater catholicity of interest and a greater profundity than is to be found elsewhere in the whole poetic sphere of his time. His attitude towards style is different from that of many of his contemporaries, for his sole purpose was the expressing, as directly and as vividly as possible, what for him was truth. No purely artificial leanings towards the Elizabethans were likely to over-rule his saner judgements; no over-extravagant romanticism or over-chill classicism was likely to sway his mind. If the poetic drama were to be made something truly great, it seemed as if the person who alone could make it so was Browning. Yet Browning's dramas are, like the others, mostly unacted and perhaps unactable. We turn to Strafford (C(ovent) G(arden) May 1837), written at the request of Macready, and we come away from a perusal of it with a vague, indeterminate impression. The loyalty of the title character stands out, as does the resolute, fixed purpose of Pym, but there is no true dramatic atmosphere here. We seem to be floating over a sea of words, words that may express personality. Most of Browning's dramas are even more verbose than Strafford, for many were written purely for the press and not for the stage. Moreover, with the passing of the years, his style grew harsher and his meaning less clear, so that A Blot in the 'Scutcheon (D(rury) L(ane) Feb. 1843), in spite of its unquestionably affecting scenes, is difficult to follow and often definitely obscure. Browning was not destined to be the leader of the new poetic drama."

(1)

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(1) op.cit. (Cambridge, U.P. 1955), p.178.



The above quotation is given in full, and departs from the promised chronological order, for a number of reasons. In the first place, it represents pretty fairly a commonly held assessment of Strafford. It also summarises views of Browning's place in the dramatic literature of his own period. Even granted that, within the scope of his book, Professor Nicoll has set himself limits of space, the brevity of the extract provides a further comment on the literary worth and the theatrical importance of the play.

His judgment that Browning's plays are "perhaps unactable" will be left for discussion in the next section. His impression of Strafford as being "vague and indeterminate" is his own, and it is a pity that he does not allow himself space to explain it more fully. It must be said that the structure of the play, although apparent to the reader, is more of a logically - psychologically might be a better word - than theatrically or emotionally appealing kind. For, as has already been pointed out, it may be described as concentric, with the protagonist at its centre, instead of the conventional alternatives of linear - progress along a series of events - or appositional - what Brecht attempts in and means by 'Epic' theatre. It has, also, been pointed out that Browning's verse dialogue, although sufficiently clear to the attentive reader, is both too compressed and too liable to failure in the interpretation and projection for the spectator.

To fight metaphor with metaphor, one does not merely float on a sea of Browning's words, for, even in his best poetry, which the dialogue in Strafford is not, the waters are never still: it is a choppy sea, with many currents.

Professor Nicoll's observation that, "the loyalty of Strafford stands out" is subject to two further arguments. The first is that it is an oversimplification, with the necessity of making a succinct statement as its probable justification. The second is that what is important, and what in fact introduces the elements of heroism and tragedy, is the whole process of being and remaining loyal that is embodied in the conception and in the perception of the character of Strafford.

This emerges from a reading of the play, but it could also be demonstrated on the stage.

Similarly, the character of Pym is more complex than he suggests. This point has already been discussed. The character lends itself to no definitive interpretation. Pym can be shown in a range of portrayals from soulless predator to selfless visionary. Lady Carlisle, in the context of the play and of the era it was written and performed in, is too important a character to escape even passing mention.

The final reason for beginning this section with Professor Nicoll's observations is that they serve as an excellent type for the argument that Strafford, although in many ways defective as a play, is undervalued.

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Reviewers of the first performance of Strafford come to a general agreement on one point: the play was a success. Each then qualifies his judgment by pointing out defects in the play that, taken together, suggest that this success was no more than moderate. Generally, the play was taken to be a promising start to its author's dramatic career. If its mistakes could be rectified, his next contribution to the stage would be both substantial and welcome. In the event, their hopes were not destined to be justified.

It is a measure of the play's qualities that the prestigious Edinburgh Review (lxv, July, 1837) found it worthy of notice, and published an article contributed by Herman Merivale. This contains a stricture on the "affected, fondling tone" in the "general phraseology" of the play and on the "bad taste and affectation with which the play abounds", but, the indecorousness of its language aside, finds that, "For the rest, his success is a proof that his work affords striking situations and dramatic interest." (1)

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(1) pp. 132-151, rpt. C.H. p.58.

John Forster, a friend of Macready and Browning, their adviser and occasional mediator in the preparation of Strafford for performance, and Browning's continuing champion in the press, put aside his partisanship to write, in an unsigned review in The Examiner:

"This is the work of a writer who is capable of achieving the highest objects and triumphs of dramatic literature. They are not achieved here, ...

We will at once say in what we think the error of the tragedy of Strafford consists. The author has suffered himself to yield too much to the impulses of the pure poetical temperament in delineating the character of Strafford ..." (2)

Unsigned reviews, from which a further sample of opinion can be taken, appeared also in The Morning Chronicle (2 May 1837), The Sun (2 May) La Belle Assemblée (VI, May 1837), and the Metropolitan Magazine (XIX, May 1837), and The Times (2 May); The Athenaeum (6 May), John Bull (7 May).

All commented on the freshness (or the brashness) of Browning's approach to the problem of writing a play in verse in which the language was at the same time poetic and natural.

To a generation of reviewers accustomed to acting versions of the classic plays, or to bombastic contemporary imitations of them, Strafford provided a strong contrast. Some were grateful: it was written in The Sun,

"The language throughout is spirited, sententious, and dramatic; never inflated - never tame - never sinking below the level of mediocrity. Above all, mere poetry - poetry we mean that encumbers dialogue, and bids actions halt - is carefully avoided." (3)

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(2) 7 May 1837, pp. 29405, rpt. C.H. p.54.

(3) p.4. rpt. C.H. p.51.

while The Times commented,

"One great secret Mr Browning has discovered, which is, that the language of the drama should be concise and pointed, instead of being diffuse and florid. There is not through the whole piece a useless declamation introduced for the sake of displaying poetical beauties; each character says what is has to say, and no more." (4)

Herman Merivale writes,

"He has developed his matter with breadth and simplicity of purpose, instead of breaking it up into highly-wrought details and insulated scenes; and this is the first great requisite in order to produce effect on miscellaneous readers and spectators.", then, adverting to the author's "corrupt taste in theatrical matters", and continues,

"Even his style ... is, on other occasions, wanting in neither power nor richness." (5)

Others found the shock too rude. John Bull accused him of having, "rudely discarded the grace of diction" (6), while the Metropolitan Magazine found the play, "unadorned by poetry, the blank verse is

"occasionally rough and halting, the sentiments and opinions are few and commonplace ..." (7)

Time has weakened the force of this argument. Audiences have become accustomed to prose plays, and to dialogue more commonly representative of ordinary speech. Spectators - and therefore, now, readers - of plays are more attuned to brevity and forcefulness of expression, to ellipsis and allusion. Verse-drama is out of fashion. Its exponents - notably T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry - have tended to follow courses that parallel that which Browning took, in establish-

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(4) p.5. rpt. C.H. p.52.

(5) Edinburgh Review lxxv. 132-51, rpt. C.H. pp. 59-9

(6) p. 225. rpt. C.H. p.54.

(7) pp. 50-1, rpt. C.H. p.57

ing a register of language. Eliot in particular strives for simplicity in expression, although he uses elements of ritual, which are quite strong in Murder in the Cathedral, and levels of allusion, which are pervasive throughout The Cocktail Party. Christopher Fry's language is direct, and has much the same richness and humour that Browning developed in his later poetry. (A)

Although the response to the poetic style and diction of the play was mixed, condemnation of the great number of broken lines was general. (B) The Athenaeum reviewer goes farther than most in a statement that contains a certain amount of self-incrimination:

"... the speeches generally contain so many broken sentences, that they become quite unintelligible; indeed, to so extraordinary and unusual an extent was this last fault carried, that we at last discovered the best way of obtaining an impression of what was going on was, to take care not to follow the speaker too closely, but to hear the opening of a sentence, and supply the remainder by imagination." (8)

The Times, rather more moderately, complains that,

"... he has here and there introduced such a number of broken sentences that it is difficult to understand him." (9)

Two things may be said about this. The first is that short or broken lines suited Macready's style of delivery, as La Belle Assemblée points out:

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(8) p. 331, rpt. C.H., p.53

(9) p. 5., rpt. C.H., p.52

(A) The only other poet-playwright of note is James Elroy Flecker, whose Hassan, which owes something to the Romantics, and even more, I think, to the Pre-Raphaelites, is becoming more and more of a curiosity.

(B) V., e.g., the summary of Charles' speeches from 11.ii above(p.15)

"Not only does the principal part seem to have been written to suit Mr Macready's style of acting, but the whole play is penned in a series of abrupt, broken sentences, expressly suited to that style of delivery for which our eminent tragedian is so famous!"(10)(C)

The second is that such freedom with dialogue as Browning displays is no longer regarded askance. Audiences have come to appreciate briskly paced dialogue, and good actors have developed the skills necessary to deliver it.

A more serious fault that the critics found in Strafford, and one that has, if anything, aggravated over the last century, is summed up by The Times' reviewer:

"The play is very historical: it would be almost unintelligible to one who has not made himself acquainted with the minutiae of the eventful period to which it relates, and hence we almost fear its not becoming so popular as its intrinsic merits deserve," (11)

and echoed in The Athenaeum, The Sun, which found it, "in a great degree, obscure, we might almost say unintelligible to those who are not well acquainted with the stirring period of which it treats..." (12), and the Metropolitan Magazine, who denied any understanding of it to "those unread in English history; ..." (13).

The last major point of criticism of the play, and one in which more recent criticism, and certainly the present thesis, would indicate a reversal of opinion, is that the play acted better than it read. The Edinburgh Review credited it with "stirring scenes, full of dramatic interest." (14)

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(10) vi. 324-5, C.H. p.56

(11) p.5. rpt. C.H. p.52

(12) p.4. rpt. C.H. p.51

(13) xix. 50-1, rpt. C.H. p.57.

(14) C.H. p.58

(C) The Times, however, implies that Mr Macready found such lines a handicap, which he had to overcome in order to rescue the play from some of its obscurity.

The Morning Chronicle has, "Mr Browning ... seems to have formed a tolerably correct estimate of the real difference between a dramatic poem and a play, and it was this, and not a want of inspiration, which made the tragedy so dry in the perusal." (15)

The Metropolitan Magazine, commenting on the plainness of the play's language, predicted rather optimistically:

"As an acting play, Strafford will undoubtedly hereafter occupy a prominent place on the British stage, but will never, we think, be a favourite in the closet." (16)

In summarising the above reviews, it should first of all be noted that they represent the judgments of critics whose methods and criteria are those of their own era. Internal evidence suggests that it was their practice to read the plays that they saw, and more importantly, heard, in performance. Their literary standards were exacting, being set by Shakespeare at his most poetic, by Aristotle (Ars Poetica) and possibly by Dryden (in Essay on Dramatic Poesy) (D). Their standards for presentation were influenced by the state of the theatre of the day, with rowdy audiences, poor lighting and setting conditions, and leaden minor actors the rule rather than the exception.

With these things in mind, we can quarrel with those who found the language of Strafford indecorous, and, to some degree, with those who objected to its broken lines. We can appreciate the point of view that it was Macready's play. Not only was it written at his request, but its style was adapted to his technique. He let it slip through his fingers at a time when he could have secured for it at least a moderate, and certainly a longer-lasting, reputation. He must take some of the blame for the poor performances of Mr Vandenhof, Mr Dale and Mrs Dale and the miscasting of Miss Vincent. He must take all of the blame for not reviving the play.

(E)

(15) p.3., rpt. C.H. p.50

(16) xix. 50-1. rpt. C.H. p.57

(D) v., e.g. John Bull, xvii. 225, rpt. C.H. p.54

(E) This argument is developed from Reed, J.W. Jr., "Browning and Macready: the Final Quarrel", in P.M.L.A. LXXV, 1960, pp. 597-603, q.v.

Then there is the argument for the relative merits of the play as a performance piece, as opposed to closet drama. It has been shown in Section Two v., e.g., p.28 above that this judgment ought to be reversed. The dialogue is too compressed, and the verbal ironies too abundant, for an audience to be able to perceive them in the immediacy of a performance, or to appreciate them fully. This task must be left to the reader of the play. On this point, The Athenaeum has the last word:

"This style of writing might answer very well, if an author could be sure that the whole audience would be of one mind; but as that is not very probable, we prefer the old-fashioned way of addressing yourself direct to the understanding." (17)

Finally, the argument that the play is historically unintelligible is the one which most applies today. This point has already been raised (v. p 20 above), and reinforces the opinion that the reviewers in The Times, The Sun, The Athenaeum and the Metropolitan Magazine were no more forthright than they had need to be.

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Thomas Lounsbury, whose series of lectures was delivered just prior to, and published in, 1911, reflects the older, polemical, tradition of criticism. His arguments are directed in part, and at times with unscholarly fervour, against the uncritical attitudes of mind that led to the excesses of the Browning Society, now happily extinct, towards the end of the nineteenth century. Some of the points he makes are a valuable reflection, also, of the more serious criticisms Browning and his works were subject to during the latter part of the Victorian period, and the early years of this century.



Professor Lounsbury's thesis is that nothing but the acting of W.C. Macready and Miss Faucit kept the play from utter disaster on the stage, citing as evidence the former's diaries, and the poor press it received. He remarks,

"Forster was indeed the only leading critic who remained faithful to the drama while it was alive, and praised it after it was dead." (1)

This is not the impression to be gained from the eight contemporary reviews quote above, and is, as well, a begging of the question of the play's demise.

Reading the play is also condemned as a profitless exercise.

"It is to be kept in mind here that we are discussing the play here not as a specimen of English literature, but as a contribution to the acting drama. Yet in the former capacity, it is no more a success than it was in the latter. On the stage, Macready and Helen Faucit could not keep it from being a failure. It is equally a failure in the closet. As the men concerned in it did not find it interesting, so did not those who set out to read it. The inability has continued. The enjoyment of its perusal is confined mostly to those devotees of the poet whose cardinal principle is apparently to admire that portion of his production which the rest of the world deems unendurable. Men read it now, so far as they read it at all, from a sense of duty; they do not read it for pleasure. The main difficulty with it is its utter lack of interest. We care little for the characters in the tragedy or the fate that befalls them." (2)

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(1) Lounsbury, T.R. The Early Literary Career of Robert Browning (University of Virginia, Barbour-Page Foundation, 1911) (rpt. New York, Haskell House, 1966, hereafter referred to as "Lounsbury"), p.53.

(2) Lounsbury, p.58

Professor Lounsbury's rhetoric is assured, but his assertions lack authority, and slide easily into the argumentum ad hominem. Nor does his next remark show evidence of any penetrating insight into the structure of the play or the development of its main character:

"Strafford's devotion to the King who deserts him excites little respect. In one of his character it lacks dignity; for it is not the attitude of a man which is portrayed, but that of a woman whose conduct is under the control of her feelings." (3)

A point made earlier is that Strafford is not blindly devoted to the King: he commits himself to the King, knowing his intransigence. Strafford is, if anything, about the sacrifices a man will make in order to retain his personal dignity.

The only importance Professor Lounsbury will allow the play is that it marks Browning's entrance into dramatic composition, and since, he asserts, Browning was no dramatist, such importance is slight.

He makes another point of some interest, again overstated, but because of its nature, difficult to counter:

"I am doing no injustice to Browning in saying - for more than once he practically intimated it himself - that in his writing he went upon the theory that the reader has no rights which the author is bound to respect. It was the business of the former to comprehend. No duty rested upon the latter to make himself comprehensible, at least easily comprehensible."  
(4)

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(3) *ibid.* p.59

(4) Lounsbury, p.62

One wonders how this critic would have approached the works of Ionesco, say, or Beckett, or Weiss, or how close Browning was to modern theory in this respect, as he was close to it in so many others. (A)

Professor Lounsbury's final major point is that Browning's drama fails also, because it defies the Aristotelian prescription:

"But action is a cardinal distinction of the drama proper: it is essential to its very existence. Herein Browning failed completely. The characters in his plays are as a rule so taken up with talking that about everything in general that they have hardly leisure left to do anything in particular." (5)

Again, the case is overstated. There are very few long self-revelatory speeches in *Strafford*, and, if anything, a tendency for minor characters to do something rather than stop for a moment to explain their actions.

Professor Lounsbury's review is valuable, because it represents a fashion in opinion and in method of argument. As an opinion, it has too much of an air of finality - it is unnecessarily destructive. As a method of argument, it shows rather more prudence in the selection of evidence than in the use to which such evidence is put.

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(5) *ibid.* p.65

(A) In this context, Harold Clurman, e.g., writes:

"As a director, critic and above all as a playgoer, I prefer by far the attitude of a Gorky to the productions of his plays to that expressed by the kind of playwright who is eminently satisfied when he has dumped the bare bones of his play on the stage. In 1935, Gorky's play Yegor Bulichev was done at two different theatres in Moscow. At one theatre the play was interpreted as the drama of a dying man seeking the truth in a world of liars; at another the play became the drama of a man with the inability to understand a truth which was new and unfamiliar to him. When Gorky was asked which was the true interpretation, he answered, "Both - and perhaps there are more."

Gorky knew that a really live play has within it the possibilities of almost as many meanings as there are creative people to find them." - Harold Clurman, "In a Different Language", in Cole, T., Chinoy, Helen (eds), Directors on Directing, (London, Peter Owen, 1953 (rpt. 1963)), p.278

A year after The Early Career of Robert Browning was published, Sir Arthur Pinero contributed an essay entitled "Browning as a Dramatist" to the Royal Society of Literature, as part of the celebrations for Browning's centenary. (B) (6)

In this respect, what he says is doubly valuable, because the bulk of criticism of Browning is literary, and because he speaks with the authority of an accomplished practitioner, albeit of his own time:

"Browning's plays are foreign to the very essence and nature of theatrical art. And why? The reasons are manifold, but they fall under two heads - technical and psychological. Browning never realised the conditions of the medium in which he worked; and his method of analysis, of unpacking the human heart with words, was wholly unadapted to the apprehension of the theatrical audience ...

His method is then to show us a number of characters, elaborately excavating the situation, so to speak - digging into it, and probing its intricacies in copious orations - before we have any idea of what that situation is." (7)

This love of intricacy, of allusion, this suggestion of action, have become the stock-in-trade of playwrights and film makers since Sir Arthur Pinero wrote, and their effect on audiences is still being explored. Again, it could be argued that the reputation for loquacity that has been imputed to Strafford is undeserved: certainly the thing that the contemporary critics found in its favour was the economy of its language. The review continues:

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- (6) rpt. "Transactions R.S.L." vol. XXXI Part IV. (hereafter referred to as "Trans"). I have to thank Dr J D Dawick for his kindness in providing these notes, from which the following quotations are taken. - P.H.F.
- (7) Trans. p.12.
- (B) Tuesday, May 7, 1912.

" ... it may be said that he does tell a story in the only truly artistic way - not by formal exposition, but by hints and allusions occurring naturally in the dialogue. Be it so; but as a matter of plain experience, these hints and allusions are not sufficient to convey the necessary information to a theatrical audience." (8)

This, with some modification, is the argument that has been posed in this thesis. He continues:

"I pass, in conclusion, to the second, the psychological reason for the failure of Browning's theatrical ambitions, It is, I suggest, that his whole method of analysis is discursive, and not really dramatic. He had a genius for conjectural digging into people's souls, but no talent, or next to none, for making his people express themselves characteristically. (9)

Again, this argument can be seen as being essentially true, but it requires some modification. Browning did succeed, in *Strafford* for example, in delineating a believable character. The audience is able to perceive, not only the movement in character shown by *Strafford's* self-revelations, but also the circumstances, the events and the information to which he is continually forced to adjust, if he is to preserve his identity. That much of this process is discursive is true: that there are no "dramatic" elements is not.

His final argument, and one of the major points of discussion of this thesis, is:

"To sum up, there is a delusion common among poets that because they are poets - because they exercise the poetic gift - it follows that they are capable of writing poetic drama. No greater delusion exists: and it was from this delusion that Browning suffered." (10)

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(8) Trans. p.12

(9) *ibid.* p.18

(10) Trans.p.20

One of the most respected of the modern critics is W.C. de Vane, who demonstrates, in A Browning Handbook (1) a very comprehensive, if not the most penetrating, knowledge of the author's works. In his survey, de Vane provides a great deal of information about the publication, text, genesis and composition, and acting history of Strafford (A). He includes a lengthy discussion of Browning's historical sources, as well as his association with Forster in the writing of the Life of Strafford (B) concluding that, in its details, the play does not pretend to any great historical accuracy. He suggests that Browning's studies of the career of Strafford had the effect of developing and making definite a set of political opinions that were to emerge in two later plays, King Victor and King Charles, (1842), The Return of the Druses' (1843) and Colombe's Birthday (1844). The author's liberalism, his espousal of the cause of the people against the great nobles, says de Vane, reached its highest expression in the poem The Lost Leader (1843).

His only mention of the substance of the play is indirect.

It is to be found in two summaries of opinion contained in a footnote to page 70 of the Handbook. The first is the comment of Arthur E. DuBois, who "sees Strafford ... as the first step towards the irony of A Soul's Tragedy. Each play pictures a great figure motivated by an ideal outside himself; Strafford, by his faith in a worthless king's prerogative, is lost between the ideal king and the real. Browning's failure, among others, was that in a play

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- (A) the sort of material covered in pp. 10-11 above  
 (B) v. p. 11, above  
 (1) de Vane, W.C., A Browning Handbook (F.S. Crofts 1935, 2nd ed: New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955)

where society was involved, he could not go beyond irony to laughter. He could not laugh at the ideal and the real abstractly." (2)

The second refers to an article by H B Charlton, who "points out Browning's temperamental blindness to the group as an organic unit, and shows that the poet seldom recognises that a society of men has a reality equal to that of the individual on one side and God on the other. This was fatal, since the theater (sic) is a corporate thing, needing corporate emotions and language. It is unfortunate that Browning's first two plays were political in theme, for in his hands principles as motives disappear in the presence of single moral giants, or preferences or animosities. Strafford's devotion to the king is a case in point." (3)

To summarise de Vane's contribution, he is authoritative and informative concerning the circumstances under which Strafford was conceived, written and produced, and the play's after-history. But he is uncharacteristically non-committal about the play's merit and importance. It is almost as if he finds Strafford an embarrassment, and himself in forced agreement with the two authorities he quotes, that Browning was unable to generalise his appeal to an audience, or to relate his protagonist to the other characters in the play.

Donald S. Hair, in Browning's Experiments With Genre, (4) is not as negative in tone as de Vane, perhaps because he begins by taking into consideration the problems confronting Browning in finding idiosyncratic expression in a new medium, and under the confused conditions prevailing in his time. He writes,

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(2),(3). de Vane's references are:

DuBois, A.E., "Robert Browning Dramatist". Studies in Philology 33, 626-55 (1936).

Charlton H.B., "Browning as Dramatist", in Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 23: 33-67 (1939).

(4) Hair, D.S., Browning's Experiments with Genre (University of Toronto Press, 1972) (Hereafter referred to as E/G.)

"Browning, whose avowedly dramatic Pauline had been criticised as morbidly subjective, and whose characteristic conflict between speaking of himself and concealing himself was already developing, was undoubtedly attracted to a genre which was often defined by its impersonal nature." (5)

Being ambitious, Browning found a challenge in the theatre of his day, which D S Hair describes as "being pulled apart by the conflicting demands of the audience, the managers, and the dramatists themselves ..." (6)

Browning "greatly disapproved of dramatists who wrote only to please an audience", yet, in allying himself with the Legitimate theatre, he found himself involved with an institution struggling to succeed financially, and thus unable to ignore in practice what it decried in theory - the popular demand for action and spectacle.

"It was chiefly in the matter of characterisation that Browning's aims in writing plays clashed with those of his contemporaries. His primary interest in the drama was no different from that in Sordello: ' my stress lay on incidents in the development of a soul.' For Browning these incidents are usually moments of choice when the individual determines or significantly alters the course of his life. The portrayal of the alternatives, of all the factors he must take into consideration, of all the subtle pressures put upon him, could not be hurried. At the same time, however, Browning wanted to satisfy Macready, and to make such a portrayal suitable for the stage, which demanded an uncomplicated swiftness in the unfolding of the drama. For nearly ten years Browning believed he could reconcile his interests with those of Macready, and the plays reflect his struggle to do so." (7)

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(5) *ibid.* p. 43

(6) p. 44

(7) E/G., p.45



Hair points out that this 'portrayal of the alternatives' makes demands on the audience:

"Each member must constantly compare speeches, weigh them, and judge them. He must become aware of the discrepancies among different points of view, and of the gap between illusions and reality. He must, in short, sense the irony that is frequently the chief aspect of the kind of play Browning was trying to write." (8)

He observes that Browning did not entirely dispense with 'Character in Action'. Strafford is based on a more or less historical sequence of events, and has the traditional tragic shape, in that it follows the fall of its hero from his high position.

"'Action in Character' complements the traditional shape of tragedy by emphasising, not the suffering and the final disaster, but the reaction of the tragic hero and his struggles to understand his lot. 'Action in Character' does not mean that the basic personality of the hero undergoes striking changes, for that would destroy probability or a consistency of character. Rather, it is composed of a series of insights leading steadily if intermittently to the kind of perception that has always been part of the tragic hero's experience: an awareness of the inexorable mystery of the human lot, the sense that he has come close to the ultimate scheme of things."(9)

Strafford's struggle to understand his lot is particularly difficult, because of the complex political situation, and because he can never be sure that the King trusts him. Caught in a web of mixed motives and uncertain loyalties, he tries to simplify his life in a way that precipitates his tragedy: through unquestioning loyalty to the King. In spite of this, he is constantly aware of the discrepancy between his ideal view of the King and Charles' weak nature. Efforts made by other characters - particularly Lady Carlisle - to disillusion Strafford are mis-directed, since he is fully aware of his situation, and fully responsible for his actions.

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(8) E/G. p.46

(9) E/G., p.47

"In literary terms, this awareness corresponds to the difference between romance and irony. Romance presents us with a simplified view of the world, where motives are relatively unmixed, and friends and foes clearly distinguishable. Irony, on the other hand, makes the most of complexities and shifting ambiguities, and delights in the discrepancy between illusion and reality." (10)

In theatrical terms, it is romance that the audience wants. Hair then goes on to discuss Browning's provision of "some elements which he must have hoped would make up for the theatrical disadvantages of such a subject." These are, frequent exits and entrances which give the impression of action, settings and crowd scenes to provide spectacle, and the domestic sentiment provided by the children in V ii, in a direct appeal to popular taste. Of this last, Hair writes:

"It is only when Strafford examines his motives in act v that he mentions for the first time his love for his children as well as for Charles when refusing to escape from prison (v ii 165), and makes it clear that his heroic self-sacrifice is also a father's proud and rather stubborn attempt to leave to his children a reputation for honour." (11)

Hair believes that this introduces an element of confusion of effect which weakens the play. He judges, too, that because Browning's concern was with character, he paid little attention to plot, although 'an external machinery of incidents' was necessary for the stage, and that,

"Browning's analysis of Strafford's heroic determination is so thorough that it often seems a portrayal of weakness, and Strafford's loyalty to the crown is sometimes indistinguishable from an obsession with the person of the king." (12)

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(10) E/G. p.48

(11) E/G., p.50

(12) E/G., p.50

This statement must be balanced by another of D S Hair's insights:

"His determination points to the curious ambivalence that surrounds the death of the tragic hero. On the one hand he can take comfort from the thought that he has remained loyal to the end; on the other hand, he now knows that the choice he has made could have no other outcome ... Strafford's understanding, his responsibility for his actions, and the inevitability of his fate, are all necessary to the tragic effect."(13)

This critic finds a good deal in the play that merits discussion. An audience armed with even some of his insights would find a good deal of worth in the play, just as a reader armed with all of them would be in a very happy position indeed. He makes a fair summary of the weaknesses in the play, and concludes, looking back over Browning's dramatic career,

"The conflict of intentions which characterizes all of Browning's attempts to write for the stage was never resolved, largely because Browning realized that the demands of the stage, for action, a swiftly moving plot, and simple characterisation, placed intolerable restrictions on him, and made it all but impossible for him to portray the inner action in which he was chiefly interested. If he were to use the dramatic mode, he could be no more conventional than he had been in *Paracelsus*."(14)

D S Hair has been quoted at some length and without comment because much of what he says reinforces observations that have already been made in this thesis, or could become part of the reevaluation of Browning's plays that will be called for below. What he omits from his appraisal of *Strafford*, and what could be of increasing interest, is a fuller discussion of the dramaturgical problems that Browning faced. For, in a sense, the conflict of intentions that Browning faced has continued to confront serious writers for the stage, and remains largely unresolved today, even when, from one "good" or "successful" play to another, experiments no bolder than Browning's have ignored the conventional demands for 'action, a swiftly moving plot, and simple characterisation'.

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(13) E/G., p.49

(14) E/G., p.72

Ian Jack, who sees Browning as a poet of some stature, but reserves his praise for the shorter poems, finds against the play.

"In the preface to Paracelsus Browning had argued forcefully against the conception of the 'Dramatic Poem' in which 'the canons of the drama' are submitted to in spite of the fact that such 'restrictions' are only advantageous 'so long as the purpose for which they were first instituted are kept in view'. As Strafford was intended for 'stage representation', these restrictions should have been accepted because of the advantages they bring with them. In fact, however, the 'canons' of the drama are violated in Browning's first play, or observed only in the most half-hearted manner, and the result is a work that is little more dramatic than Paracelsus itself. The most interesting passage is the monologue which Strafford addresses to Balfour as he is about to be led away to execution." (15)

W D Shaw is neither as summary nor as severe in his condemnation of Strafford and the other plays, but he does accept, almost as a truism, Browning's inability to communicate with an audience. Because his interest is in Browning's use of rhetoric, he tends to focus his attention on this aspect of the plays, which he sees as representing a stage in Browning's search for the degree of objectivity that he desired, and for which he found expression in the dramatic monologues. Nevertheless, W D Shaw points out, in writing for an oral audience, Browning is encouraged to concentrate on the rhetorical art of engaging his audience and controlling its responses.

"To make the play easier to follow, Browning mirrors Strafford's main action from different points of view. The first act dramatizes the failure of the Cavaliers and Roundheads to unite as a nation. It wins sympathy for Strafford and Pym, who rise above factional differences to envisage unity from opposite sides. Though the first scenes of the next two acts seem merely to repeat the historical events of the first act, they illuminate the search for unity from new perspectives." (16)

(15) Jack, I. Browning's Major Poetry (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973) p.60.

(16) Shaw, W D, The Dialectical Temper / The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning (New York, Cornell U.P., 1968), p.41.

In practice, however, Shaw finds this process to be too complicated for an audience to grasp. He quotes Park Honan to reinforce his view that Browning's characters are 'too intricate for the stage', and writes:

"A few plays can accommodate characters as complex as Hamlet, but Hamlet is a simple character compared with Strafford. Despite Browning's attempts to provide his audience with clear repetitions of the main action, no spectator can of a play can grasp so many conflicts on so many planes. Instead of finding traits that "act" well, and giving Strafford only such traits as suit him for the action, Browning offers a complex psychological study. Without the opportunity to reread, the spectator of a play is only bewildered by subtleties that might delight the reader of a dramatic monologue. Because, Strafford is generally confused himself, there is too little sharpening of audience understanding. Only when the issues clarify, as in the ritual of the reversed kneeling, where the king in disguise begs Strafford's pardon, does the action become dramatically effective." (17)

Two arguments might be adduced against this general statement. The first is that a number of first-night reviewers appear to have been able to disentangle at least some of the subtleties of the play, although, as we have seen, there has been something of a reversal of their opinion that it acts better than it reads. The second is that W D Shaw might see the solution in rewriting the play in what D S Hair would describe as "romantic" terms.

His comments conclude with the opinion that the stage - contrivances prevent the poet from exploring the psychology of his characters, but that they help Browning remedy the rhetorical, dramatic and dialectical defects of his early plays.

"Though the stage plays make what they handle actual - objective, authoritative, and public - Browning's desire to represent "Action in Character, rather than Character in Action" prevents him from analyzing the action of each actor as an analogue of the main action and fitting him for a proper place in the whole.

"Unlike the accomplished playwright, Browning is not sufficiently aware of an audience's impulse to rebel against the postulates of his work ...

In his stage plays, ... Browning too often determines his characters' conduct by their real-life psychology rather than by the kind of action that the play requires of them." (18)

Shaw's avowed interest is in the development of Browning's rhetoric. It may be partly for this reason that he dismisses the plays so lightly. Even so, his comments on the use of language and argument are valuable.

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What emerges from the brief survey of criticism of Strafford in this section is evidence of a shift of opinion. Contemporary critics were able to accord the stage presentation of Strafford moderate praise, although their opinions of Browning as a poet were generally not high. The turn of the century saw the play treated with general condemnation. More modern critics have a higher opinion as of Browning as a poet - certainly as one of the leading poets of his time, - but neglect his plays because either their interests in his poetry are specialised, or because they subscribe to the myth that his plays are 'unreadable and unactable'.

This modern point of view will be discussed in the next section.

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5.

TOWARDS REVALUATION.

"Such, British Public, ye who like me not,  
(God ove you) - whom I yet have laboured for,  
Perchance more careful whose runs may read  
Than erst when all, it seemed, could read who ran -  
Perchance more careless whose reads may praise  
Than late when he who praised and read and wrote  
Was apt to find himself the self-same me, -  
Such labour had such issue, so I wrought  
This arc, by furtherance of such alloy,  
And so, by one spirt, take away its trace  
Till, justifiably golden, rounds my ring."

- The Ring and the Book. Book 1. lines 1379-89.

No-one could rightly claim that Strafford was a great "hit" in theatrical terms, nor predict for it a sudden succès fou on the strength of the play's sudden rediscovery by an artistic genius, or in response to a revolution in audience demand. On the other hand, the contemporary reviews quoted above do not support the assertion that the play is unactable, unintelligible, and uninteresting. This currently popular assessment of Strafford follows a tradition that goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, a tradition based, as much as anything, on Macready's disaffection as on the defects that the play undoubtedly possesses.

Similarly, in the body of criticism of Browning's works, there can be found little encouragement to read Strafford, the common judgment again being that it is both obscure and boring. Once more, it would be foolhardy to predict that a sudden change in literary taste might focus interest and attention upon Browning's plays. Nevertheless, the foregoing analysis of Strafford will serve to show that the play holds wider interest than it is fashionable to give it credit for, for those who read, enjoy, and study the poet's works, for those with an interest in the theatre, and for those whose area of study is to be found in the complex period in the history of theatre in which Browning wrote.

To a reader accustomed to Browning's style - or styles, if one accepts the argument that there are two major styles that he adopts (A) - Strafford presents little technical difficulty and a great deal of interest. Such a reader will anticipate difficulties of some sort, and might be prepared to acquire the background of historical knowledge necessary for a fuller appreciation of the play. The rewards lie in tracing the development of an unusual but credible tragic hero of some stature, in resolving, one way or another, the enigma of Pym, and in the reading of several finely written scenes. (B).

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- (A) v., e.g., Preyer, R.O., "Two Styles in Browning", in Preyer, R.O., (ed.), Victorian Literature (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1966.), pp. 78-102. Preyer speaks of the "simple" style of, e.g. "Cavalier Tunes", "Flight of the Duchess", "Christmas Eve and Easter Day" and a 'difficult' style: Saul, "Saul", "Karshish" "Bishop Blougram's Apology". Strafford is written in the "simple" style.
- (B) A personal choice might be I ii; II ii, IV iii; and much of V ii.



The reader familiar with the dramatic monologues will also be interested to contrast their personae with the characters that Browning intended to people a stage. (C)

To those whose concern is for the theatre, Browning can offer a number of interesting reflections. Confronted with the problem of writing a play in which the dialogue was simple, flexible and colloquial, yet retained its verse form, and, more importantly, its poetry, he arrived at a solution which, in his own day, was novel, and in ours, retains its interest. There is no doubt that T.S. Eliot's plays, for instance, reveal his influence, a point that is seldom raised when Eliot's dramatic style or the question of verse plays generally is discussed. Similarly, Browning's idea of 'Action in Characters, and the way he attempted to put it into effect, receives scant mention at a time now when various experiments aimed at modifying or nullifying the aristotelian norms are presented or discussed. The contribution to dramaturgy and to dramatic theory implicit in Browning's plays is a neglected and potentially interesting and valuable point of reference. As suggested earlier, interesting comparisons with Browning's technique might be made in considering the isolate character, or characters represented as unable or failing to communicate with others.

The theatre historian ought also to be more interested in Browning as playwright than the evidence suggests he is, and for two reasons. The first is that, as more data is collated, and opinions and judgments clarify, it is becoming evident that the need for a reevaluation of the theatrical activity and dramatic achievements of the early Victorian period grows increasingly. The second is that Browning's plays, particularly *Strafford* and *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, emerge as major works of the first half of the nineteenth century, along with those of Byron, Lytton, and Talfourd. They do so by default, it is true, but they do represent the only real attempts at serious drama until the 80's and 90's brought forth Pinero, Shaw, debatably Wilde, and, by a sort of process of adoption, Ibsen.

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(C) cf. the line of argument of the modern U.S. scholars (Roma King, Park Honan, Donald Hair) that the plays represent a stage in Browning's poetic development, and that his dissatisfaction with the stage as a medium and arrival at a congenial degree of objectivity in characterisation led to the conception and writing of the dramatic monologues.

Thus the plays, of which Strafford has been taken as the type, deserve to be, and would amply repay being, more widely read from three major, and a number of minor viewpoints: those of the reader, whether for enjoyment or out of some more or less scholarly interest, of the artist or critic devoted to affairs of the concerns of the theatre, and of the historian. A wider readership of the plays would both contribute to, and in turn result from, a reevaluation of their worth and place in a number of contexts - the literary, that of performance, the dramaturgical, that of the history of theatre, or a combination of two, three, or all of these.

The aim of this thesis has been to put the case for such a reevaluation, just as the method chosen has been to attempt a synthesis of different viewpoints, interests and observations.

Several of the arguments that have presented themselves so far in this discussion might serve as a basis for such a reevaluation. The most obvious is a fresh look at the play's readability. As with Browning's poetry in the "difficult" style - to which it may be compared - Strafford is not a good introduction to his work for the reader unfamiliar with his idiom, particularly his use of shifting perspectives and of irony, as precisely-controlled mechanisms for the dissection and demonstration of character (D). The play's main defect, as has been pointed out, is that it is 'very historical'. The confusion that results on stage from its comparative lack of action, is compensated for by its psychological unity, which becomes very satisfying for the reader. Professor Lounsbury notwithstanding, Strafford in the closet is far from uninteresting, and, on second reading, offers points even of fascination.

Then, is it actable? In my opinion, it is no less so than Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida, or the Oedipus Tyrannos of Sophocles in a good translation. The first of these, besides being very lengthy, offers the audience areas of confusion that are easily as dark as any to be found in Browning. The second contains subtleties and ironies that, in spite of their almost mathematical calculation, can escape an audience, and require a second or third reflective reading. Both plays illustrate the point that, if a

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(D) This implies an answer to the question that is sometimes put: "Does Browning hold an ironical view of the universe?" - No - his view is, at best, discovered by a series of inferences. Irony is no more than its 'focussing artifice'.

modern director is skilled and confident enough, a number of technical difficulties can be overcome, and an appreciative audience can be found. Productions of both plays in the 1950's are now generally regarded as definitive (E). Strafford, it must be admitted, is not in their class, but it could be argued that it is, in many ways, not greatly inferior. A production would present much the same technical problems. Under stage conditions that show some surprising parallels with those of the 1830's Strafford is no less worth attempting than much of the material that reaches the contemporary stage.

Its recondite historical allusions, and the flatness of the minor characters, are defects that can be largely overcome, while careful pacing and some changes of emphasis in the interpretation of the major main characters would do much to illuminate ironies that would otherwise be left to the reader to detect, and to highlight the paradox of Strafford's tragic heroism. Even then, the director would be taking a gamble. A modern audience, used to and conditioned by what is now called 'total theatre', is not as attuned to the spoken word, or as perceptive of literary values, as its Victorian counterpart. On the other hand, playgoers are now more accepting of unorthodox speech forms, and more sensitive to psychological subtleties.

A reevaluation of Strafford from the point of view of theatre in performance, then, might well suggest that somewhere, some time, a modern definitive production of the play could prove to be an attractive object with a skilled and ambitious director.

The third area in which reevaluation is proposed is that of the history of theatre. Here, Browning's responses to the prevailing state of the theatre, to the promptings of his own ambition, and to Macready's famous suggestion, come into question. As we have seen, an increasing number and variety of technical stage effects and

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(E) O.T.: Tyron Guthrie, Stratford, Ontario, 1955.  
 T & T. & C.: Byam Shaw (Stratford) with Lawrence Harvey,  
 Muriel Pavlow, Anthony Quayle, & Leo McKern, 1954.

technical contrivances, was at once meeting and creating a demand for more and more spectacular - even bizarre - productions, to an extent not equalled again until electronics and plastics opened new vistas in stage setting in the 1950's and 60's. Shifts in population, the redistribution of labour, and increasing literacy led to an explosion in the demand for popular theatre, and with it, popular theatrical reviews. Any attempt at serious drama would be influenced by these factors, even if an author did not consciously take them into account. In his own case, Browning relied, to a certain extent, on Macready's knowledge of stagecraft and experience of audience tastes and demands to see him safely past the box office.

Strafford embodied a fresh approach, that looked both to the past and to the future. Browning's debt to the traditional theatre, and his endeavour to come to terms with the rigid Establishment critics, lay in his choice of tragic-heroic theme, in the five-act structure of his play, and in his attempts to provide diction that was flexible and representative of ordinary conversation, that avoided bombast and unnecessary elaboration, and that yet retained its dignity, poetic form, and poetic content. It was a deliberate attempt to re-establish a drama of depth and substance.

He attempted, too, to conform to current theatrical practice and taste by his inclusion in the play of a certain amount of movement about the stage, the provision of tableaux and an affecting family scene, and by a certain amount of tailoring of parts to fit the acting styles of W.C. Macready and Miss Faucit.

At the same time, he looked forward in his conceptions to certain later movements in the theatre. This can be seen in the search for truth, the psychological definition of his main characters, rather than a depiction of tragic necessity. Attempts by T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry to revive verse drama follow the same set of formulae as Browning did. In the plays of, say, Pinter, Williams, and Schaffer can be perceived self-deception, the struggle for identity, the concern for the processes of decision, that the reader of Browning is already familiar with. Browning goes some way towards defying the

classical arguments for a decorum in plot, character and action in a way that looks forward to Ionesco and Brecht.

Where Strafford fails, perhaps, it fails because it is too revolutionary in its conception, because its author attempted too much at once, so that it became confused both in its aims and its execution. Browning's break with tradition was too abrupt. His noble sentiments were too finely conceived and too complex in their presentation, his noble language too plain, in places too elliptical, and everywhere too loaded with allusion and reference, for an audience to take in, in the immediacy of performance. His was not so much a response to the stage conditions of his time as a surrender - to Macready, to the star system, to the sentimental and histrionic demands of the audience for which he makes a token provision.

It is becoming clearer, on the other hand, that in Strafford Macready had on his hands a fairly well-received play which he let slip through his fingers. Yet Byron's Werner, superficially a play of equal merit, and, it is true, in a savagely excised form that brought out his 'points', remained part of Macready's repertoire throughout his career. Macready's adoption of Strafford might have done much to enhance the play's reputation, which, as we are beginning to realise, is much worse than the play itself.

The consignment of the play to a literary limbo has left a vacuum filled by a circular argument: the play is unread and unacted because it is a failure, and it is a failure because no-one reads or acts it. Because discussion of Strafford has been thus limited, Browning has had an almost imperceptible influence on the writing, the criticism, the theory or the techniques of drama in our time. Wider discussion of his plays in these contexts would, it is certain, produce some interesting comparisons.

The final conclusion to be drawn is that, although Strafford is not greatly successful as a play, and is certainly not 'good' theatre, it is not either irredeemably bad. It, with the other plays

he wrote, is overdue for the sort of revaluation that has, thanks to writers like Roma A. King, Park Honan, and Robert Langbaum, raised Browning's status as a major poet.

As a minor - but in many ways highly significant - playwright, it may well be agreed that, though he does not succeed very well in his primary function of capturing and holding an audience, he is fertile in provocative ideas and rich in expression. Perhaps he will be given the credit owing him for innovative techniques, and for his attempts to solve problems that went largely unrecognised until in the flurry of experiment that promises to provide the theatrical history of our own time with a number of outstanding works and theatrical contributions, these problems were rediscovered and attacked.

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Reader . .

"Thy pardon for this long and tedious case,  
Which, now that I review it, needs must seem  
Unduly dwelt on, proluxly set forth.  
Nor I myself discern in what is writ  
Good cause for the peculiar interest  
And awe indeed this man has touched me with."

- An Epistle / Containing the Strange Medical  
Experience of Karshish, The Arab Physician.,  
11.283-8.

APPENDIX A.

ANALYSIS OF STAGE DIRECTIONS IN STRAFFORD

Act/Scene	Entrance	Exit	Move	Business	Line Adress
1 i	1.135			U.215,255,shouts	
1 ii	105	87			
	184	185	1.184 hand move		
	263	263			
II i	15				
	67				
II ii	130	165	150	40 papers	135
			154	74 pause	142
				88 papers	154
				130 kneel	
				150	
				258 medal	
III i	50	127		110	66
III ii	33	227		163 papers	72
	37				93
	47				99
	90				112
	150				116
					119
					122
					126
					127
III iii	16		65	33	
	33		68	45 door opens/light	15
	52		97	52 doors open	20
				65 blocking moves	25
				75)cries	26
				87)"Strafford"	67
				90 tears off the	70
				George	
				95 cries /disarms	83
IV 1,		96	88		2
					47
					122



Act/Scene	Entrance	Exit	Move	Business	Line Address
IV ii	1.33				
	48	48		33	32
	107	107		35 arrange table	37
	111			48 sits to write	56
				54 summons messenger	57
				77 whispers	
IV iii	11			91 S.sees Pym	
	84				
V i	55	103		55 children sing	160
V ii	182			133 turns-companion	223
	223			612 voices off	224
	265			223 door opens on tableau	
				265 S. confronts Pym	
TOTALS					
12 scenes	26	10	7	30	30
103/S/D's					

APPENDIX B.

LONDON THEATRES PLAYING BETWEEN 1835-1855.

\*Note: 1737-1835: Covent Garden and Drury Lane held the only patents to Legitimate theatre.

<u>THEATRE:</u>	<u>MANAGERS/ACTORS</u>	<u>REMARKS</u>
Adelphi (Strand)	F.H. Yates (1825-42	Sensational melodramas: "Adelphi screamers".
Albion 1832-1836		Later called The New Queen's Theatre
(Royal) Albert Saloon	(Hoxton) 1840's ..	Concerts, ballets, vaudeville
Astley's Amphitheatre	(1803-95) Andrew Ducrow 1830-41	Hippodrama, Spectacle
The Bower Saloon (Royal Stangate)	(1839-78)	Variety
Britannia	Lane Family 1841-99	Successful minor theatre
City of London	(1837-68)	Domestic and temper- ance melodramas
(Royal) Coburg	(In 1833 became The Royal Victoria: "the Old Vic")	"The Blood Tub" - sensational melodramas
Colosseum Saloon	(1837 - )	Variety Theatre - occasional plays
Covent Gardens	Macready: 1837-9 Vestris-Matthews 1839-42	Legitimate. 1947 - : Opera House
Drury Lane; Theatre Royal	(1663- 1833-9, 1843-50; Alfred C ("Poet") Bunn 1841-3 W.C.Macready	Concert Hall - circus arena
Ducrow's New National Arena	(1834- )	
Garrick's Subscription Theatre Lemon S.t.E.	(1831-	
Globe Theatre (The Rotunda)	(1833-8)	Concert Hall
The Grecian (Hoxton) (Old Eagle Saloon)(Olympic)	(1832 - )	Variety Theatre Ballets. Lavish Christmas pantomimes

APPENDIX B. continued

<u>THEATRE:</u>	<u>MANAGERS/ACTORS</u>	<u>REMARKS</u>
Haymarket (King's Theatre) Opera House		Opera. Used by patent companies during re-building
Lyceum (Strand)	(1833- (third re-building) 1847-35: Vestris-Matthews; 1863-7: Fechner)	Opera and musical drama 1843- : legitimate
Marylebone (formerly Royal Pavilion West; New Royal Sussex Theatre)		Undistinguished house: pantomime and melodrama
New City (1831 - )		Respectable minor theatre
Olympic		Reforms in production and staging
Orange St. Theatre	1831 -	
(Royal) Pavilion (1828-1856)		"Newgate" melodrama
The Prince of Wales Theatre 1831 - (formerly The Queen's Theatre)		Variety, "The Dust Hole"
The Princess's 1840 -		Promenade concerts. Opera
The Rotunda	Charles Kean 1850-9	v. "Globe"
The Royal Borough	1834-6	
The Royal Clarence	1831-2	
The Royal City of London		v. City of London
The Royal Kent	1834 -	Small, fashionable. Patronised by Duke of Kent
The Royal Manor House	1835-41	
Royal Panharmonium Subscription Theatre	1831	Renamed "The Royal Clarence"
Sadler's Wells	(Samuel Phelps: 1844-62: Shakespearian revival)	Sensational aquatic melodrama
St James	1835	1842 - Visiting French plays and companies
Soho 1840 -	(Royalty: New English Opera House)	Principal centre of amateur activity
Tottenham St. (Royal West London)	(1830. - )	

APPENDIX B. continued

<u>THEATRE:</u>	<u>MANAGERS/ACTORS</u>	<u>REMARKS</u>
(Royal or New) Standard, Shoreditch		Stock company of high quality. Visiting 'stars'
Strand (New Strand Sub- scription Theatre)		1858-72: House of burlesque: later, Dickens' novels adapted
Surrey (Blackfriars Road)		Transpontine melodrama
Vauxhall Gardens		Dramatic spectacles Operettas, Vaudevilles.

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The above information was abstracted largely from:

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Again, elements can be isolated that point to problems and attempts at solving them in the development of theatre to our own time. Included here might be those of poetic diction in dialogue, motivation of characters, the isolate character, and departures from the Aristotelian norms. In this area, Browning has had little or no influence, and suffers some measure of undeserved neglect.

The present intention is to show, in examining Strafford, how Browning approached the theatre: not only the sort of play he wrote, but, by implication, the sort of writing he considered appropriate for stage presentation. This will lead to some estimate of the strengths and weaknesses of the play in performance. It ought also to open up an area of speculation about modern trends in thought and practice in the theatre.

Early Victorian theatre presents a paradox. It is at once in a state of grievous decline and sprawling vigour. Some understanding of its conditions and status is necessary to a balanced view of Browning's plays, and will be attempted under the difficulties imposed by access to a plethora of data and a dearth of authoritative judgment.

Finally, the major criticism of Browning's theatrical ventures will be reviewed, and this, with the questions raised above, will point towards a reevaluation of Strafford in particular, and the remaining plays that Browning wrote, generally.