

Unheroic and Yet Charming – Alternative Heroes in Nineteenth-Century Historical Plays

It has been claimed repeatedly that unlike previous times, ours is a post-heroic age (Immer and van Marwyck 11). Thus, we also find it difficult to revere the heroes and heroines of the past. Indeed, when examining historical television series, such as *Blackadder*, it is obvious how the champions of English imperial history are lampooned and “debunked” – in *Blackadder II*, Elizabeth I is depicted as “Queenie”, an ill-tempered, selfish “spoiled child” (Latham 217); her immortal “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury” becomes part of a drunken evening with her favourites (Episode 5, “Beer”). In *Blackadder the Third*, Horatio Nelson’s most famous words, “England expects that every man will do his duty”, are trivialized to “England knows Lady Hamilton is a virgin” (Episode 2, “Ink and Incapability”). While more recent¹ filmic versions of the past, such as *Elizabeth* (1998) or the *Tudors* (2007-2010), are rather kinder towards their subjects, Elizabeth I and Henry VIII, respectively, the strong concentration on their private lives and loves does much to undermine the exceptionality of these national heroes and heroines (Latham 270). This challenges a central precondition of heroism (Immer and van Marwyck 19-20) and calls this status into question.

In high-brow genres such as historical drama, the anti-heroic stance which has emerged here prominently since the 1960s is even more obvious (Palmer). Indeed, it has been argued that hero-worship is today largely an element of popular rather than high-brow culture.² John Arden and Margaretta D’Arcy’s *The Hero Rises Up* (1969) thus emphasizes Admiral Nelson’s personal failures – his bodily and sexual weakness and particularly his hollow striving for glory: “EMMA. If you weep in your uniform all your medals of honour / Will be stained and corroded by the fall of salt water” (Arden and D’Arcy 43). Frank McGuinness’s *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985) and Stephen

MacDonald’s *Not About Heroes* (1982) show the impossibility of heroism in modern warfare. In recent years, a series of bio-dramas featuring artists, amongst them Peter Shaffer’s *Amadeus* (1979) and Sebastian Barry’s *Andersen’s English* (2010), have cut their “artist-hero” (Huber and Middeke 134) down to size by emphasizing the clash between personal action and high-minded artistic idealism.

The debunking of great historical figures in recent drama is often interpreted as resulting particularly from a postmodern influence.³ Thus, as Martin Middeke explains: “Postmodernism sets out to challenge the occidental idea of enlightenment and, especially, the cognitive and epistemological values which the concepts of an historical past, a cultural heritage, or tradition have conveyed right into our present” (Middeke 1-2). This challenge, of course, also affects historical heroes and their position, as “postmodern concepts of the individual (as, for example, fragmentation, role-playing, diffusion of character)” (Huber and Middeke 135) seem adverse to the idea of an active, self-determined and extraordinary hero. Similarly, as postmodernism calls into question the meta-narratives of the past – such as imperialism, nationalism, or the “Whig-interpretation of history” (Herbert Butterfield) – it also destroys the narratives in which historical heroes have been created.

Stressing the postmodern influence on the recent, anti-heroic historical drama, however, several studies emphasize the strong tendency for hero-worship prevalent in earlier plays. Thus, Mark Berninger contrasts the modern, “innovative” history play of the second half of the twentieth century with the “conventional” history play, which he characterizes as follows:

Interest in the central (mostly male) figures of history, concentration on political and military events [...], and a subscription to the dominant view of history and the prevailing interpretation of the historical events presented. Connected elements include: [...] ‘costume drama’, hero-worship, and tragic plot. (Berninger, „Variation“ 39, my italics)

As is evident from this quotation, a concentration on historical heroes and heroism is central to this definition of the “conventional” history play, which Berninger situates particularly in the nineteenth century. In this, he follows many previous studies, for Victorian historical drama is often criticized for its hero-worship. Thus, Hildegard Hammerschmidt writes:

In der viktorianischen Geschichtsdramatik wurde die Wahl des Stoffes wieder weitgehend von der Größe der historischen Gestalt und Bedeutung des Geschehens für die Geschichte der Nation abhängig gemacht. Die dramatische Idee entspringt dem Heroenkult und dem übersteigerten Geschichtsbewußtsein des gesamten Zeitalters. (Hammerschmidt 15; cf. also Watt 134)

The reverence for historical heroes, then, is seen as characteristic of nineteenth-century historical drama, and, by extension, of Victorian popular historical culture as a whole.

With this criticism, these studies implicitly mirror a previously widely-held prejudice that nineteenth-century theatre presented “popular culture”, that is, bad, formulaic and escapist entertainment for the working classes.⁴ Though recent studies agree that even in the nineteenth century theatre’s reputation was low in general and that it was frequently opposed to literature, that is, “high culture” (Marcus; Emeljanow 3-6), the negative assessment of the theatre has been called into question. Instead, recent studies have pointed to the centrality of the theatre to nineteenth-century culture as a whole. Thus, Nina Auerbach sees the theatre as the “dominant medium through which audiences understood the world” (Auerbach 4; cf. also Moody). As popular entertainment, it reached large parts of the population (Tönnies); indeed, as Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow have shown, audiences were much more mixed, socially, than had previously been assumed.⁵ Undoubtedly “popular”, theatre’s influence on nineteenth-century culture should thus not be ignored.

However, as Marc Girouard shows in *The Return to Camelot* (passim), although the reverence for historical heroes was indeed an important aspect of Victorian historical culture, a means by which the Victorians attempted to escape their own, domesticated times in favour of a more colorful and adventurous past, this was only part of the much more complex popular uses of history.⁶ The same diversity, as this paper hopes to show, is true of nineteenth-century historical theatre. Though history plays featuring successful military ‘heroes’ such as Admiral Nelson or Alfred the Great exist in large numbers, the ridiculing of historical hero worship was also an important feature, especially in burlesques and travesties. Moreover, the nineteenth-century stage also created historical characters as comic yet lovable domestic anti-heroes. King Charles II, an English monarch not traditionally considered a “hero” of English history,⁷ as his wars against the Dutch were unsuccessful and his domestic policy was dominated by political strife,⁸ features especially frequently in this role in the many plays on him written throughout the nineteenth century. In that they concentrate on the private life of an historical character and his personal charms, however, these plays also reflect a wider trend, for many plays of the nineteenth century showed their historical protagonists “at home” (Palmer 46), thus offering alternative views of them, some of them far from heroic, as will be shown.

As I will argue in the following on the basis of selected plays representing different dramatic genres by some of the most successful and prolific playwrights of the time (for instance Douglas Jerrold, Edward Fitzball, James Sheridan Knowles, Tom Taylor and Robert Brough), rather than showing a monolithic heroic version of the past, nineteenth-century plays with an historical setting,⁹ many of which would have reached a wide audience and thus would have been influential in their depiction of the past, thus display a multitude of different attitudes towards historical heroes and the heroics, anticipating trends prominent in twentieth-century plays. How, then, are heroism and historical “greatness” created in these plays, what counts as heroic, and how is the past used to create heroic and anti-heroic role models?¹⁰

Historical Heroism in Nineteenth-Century Plays

It cannot be denied that heroism was indeed an important feature of nineteenth-century plays, both of more popular genres such as melodrama and of more literary verse plays. When one goes through the play lists, Thomas Carlyle's famous definition of history as "the History of Great Men" (Carlyle 1) seems to be confirmed, for titles such as James Sheridan Knowles's *Alfred the Great; or, The Patriot King* (1831), Andrew Cherry's *Peter the Great; or, The Wooden Walls* (1807), and Edward Fitzball's *Nelson; or The Life of a Sailor* (1827) reveal the popularity of famous war heroes of English and European history. Admiral Horatio Nelson, the victor of Trafalgar, and King Alfred, who defeated the Viking invaders, each feature in a number of plays and are presented as paragons of English history who led England to its present (nineteenth-century) position as a world power.¹¹ By keeping these historical characters in the audience's mind, these authors at the same time confirmed their position as national heroes.

Historical greatness and heroism go hand in hand in these plays and consist largely of military success and thus the traditional field of heroism (Reiling and Rohde 10). In plays such as Edward Fitzball's melodramatic *Nelson; or The Life of a Sailor*, first produced at the "minor theatre" Adelphi,¹² the eponymous hero's greatness is taken for granted from the start, as the play begins with an adapted version of David Garrick's imperialistic navy song "Heart of Oak" (1759).¹³ It is sung by a group of "jolly tars", who now celebrate Nelson as the embodiment of British naval glory:

Then come jolly tars, we to glory must go, –
We must meet, fight, and conquer, the proud daring foe;
With Nelson to lead us, triumphant we move,
The champions of Freedom, of Justice and Love. (Fitzball 3)

Indeed, Nelson unfailingly meets the high expectations of the common sailors, for not only is he victorious and "bolt" (ibid. 17) in his fights against the Spanish (as even Don Ulloa, a Spanish officer, admits), he is shown to be easily successful in the Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife.¹⁴ Moreover, he also sacrifices himself for the good of England, for when he is wounded, he sternly admonishes his Cocksain: "Silence! You will find a cloak in the boat; throw it round me, and, when the Spaniards arrive, do you encompass me, nor let them see the havoc they have made" (ibid. 18). By contrast, his Cocksain Jack

Sykes, who presents the typical brave lower-class figure of much melodrama, cannot contain his excitement at seeing Nelson wounded and threatens to "blubber" (ibid.). Nelson, then, represents military heroism commonly associated with nineteenth-century historical drama: military success, self-sacrifice and the fulfillment of one's duty for the greatness of England.

Nelson's heroism is strengthened by the melodramatic conventions evident in the play:¹⁵ They include the contrast between Nelson's unquestioningly accepted heroism and the comic cowardice of the stereotypical lower-class sailors Ben Backstay and Sammy Suckling (who are also contrasted with the brave tar Jack Sykes).¹⁶ They join the navy because, like Nelson, they wish to achieve honour and glory: "Sam. Yes, and I means to go and share his laurels with him" (ibid. 3). However, they prove to be of no great help in battle and instead provide comic relief through their discussion of cowardice, which is in contrast to Nelson's (and brave John Sykes's) heroism: "Sam. Odds figs and prains! I'm not a coward. When I gets into haction [sic], you'll always find me, not running away from the enemy, but running arter 'them! I was always brave, ever since I was a Hinfant." (ibid. 4) As much nineteenth-century theatre also delighted in spectacle and used in particular history to this end (Booth, *Spectacular* Ch. 2 & 3), the play also makes the most of Nelson's famous battles. Though this is largely unconnected with the plot itself, the play thus ends with a depiction of the Battle of Trafalgar – Nelson's most famous victory – and ends with a tableau of Nelson surrounded by his officers:

"Nelson is seen moving in every direction, giving his commands, till, struck by the fatal ball, he sinks in the arms of his Officers, and the piece concludes with the fall of NELSON AT THE BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR" (Fitzball 24).

While this provides the opportunity to restage one of the most famous images of British military history, frequently painted throughout the nineteenth century, it also confirms Nelson's self-sacrificing heroism through nineteenth-century theatrical conventions.¹⁷

Plays featuring Alfred the Great's fights against the Vikings show a similar preoccupation with military heroism.¹⁸ In James Sheridan Knowles's *Alfred the Great* (1831), the Saxon king stands in melodramatic contrast to the evil Danes, who have conquered England, and who sacrifice prisoners in pagan ceremonies (Knowles 11) and mistreat women and children. Thus, Guthrum,

their leader, orders his men to remove the Saxon queen by force: “Hence with her! force her hence!” (ibid. 64). Alfred, by contrast, protects the “sacred person of a woman” (ibid.); he gives his own food to a weak old man and goes without (ibid. 26), and when he has beaten the Danes, he offers their leader “live / The friend of Alfred! Serve the God he serves!” (ibid. 84). As a truly great leader, he thus protects those weaker than himself and shows mercy to his enemies. Another key quality is that Alfred is shown to be a natural leader of men, whom all follow, even when they do not know his real identity and meet him in disguise: “What man is this, / That lacks all sign and title of command, / Yet all obey?” (ibid. 34), as a Saxon warrior remarks. It is his presence alone that makes the difference in the decisive battle: “The king among us / Would make our numbers treble!” (ibid. 80). The hero-king Alfred is thus truly exceptional as a warrior and as a man, and as a true hero, he alone can achieve great things.

The play also insists that Alfred – like Nelson – has prepared the way for England’s present role as a nation that rules the waves. Thus, he solemnly advises his followers (and at the same time the audience):

My countrymen!
Sons of the Sea – henceforth her restless plain
Shall be your battle field! There shall you meet
The threat’ning storm of war! There shall it burst
Its rage unfelt at home – its din unheard!
You’ve fought like England’s true-born sons, to-day!
You’ve taught a lesson to her sons to come! (ibid. 85)

The message here is clear: If present-day (i.e., nineteenth-century) Englishmen follow the example of past military leaders such as Alfred the Great, England need not fear for her position in the future. Again, it is particularly military prowess and preparedness that are seen as exemplary qualities of great historical leaders.

Yet Alfred’s great deeds do not end here. For once he has been victorious, he introduces a system of reforms which limit his own powers as king:

Alfred. Hold! This victory
I will perpetuate by such an act
As shall from future kings remove the power
To make their public functions pander to
Their private gust. Select twelve men, his peers,
And swearing them upon the book of God,
As they shall answer at His judgment day,
To try their prisoner fairly. (ibid. 84)

These and other reforms are also praised in de Redcliffe’s play and are interpreted as vital steps towards British glory and freedom: “Our race in after-years may head the world, / And render boundless service to mankind” (de Redcliffe 171). These unmilitary, political reforms are supplemented by Alfred’s willingness to sacrifice his private happiness for the sake of his country’s needs. When he discovers that his wife and son are in the hands of the Danes, he refuses to exchange their lives and freedom for England’s freedom from the Danes: “ALF. Your prince and queen! / [...] I might, indeed, / Have ransom’d them, but what he ask’d your king could not afford to pay. / OD. What was’t my liege? / ALF. My people, Oddune” (Knowles 81).¹⁹ Alfred’s greatness thus consists of more than mere military heroism, though this of course forms a vital part of it.

Great military heroes and their deeds, as these examples have shown, thus indeed played an important role in nineteenth-century plays. In particular, military glory and success were seen as important attributes of memorable historical figures of the British past, both in popular melodramas and in more elevated verse plays. Additionally, however, figures such as Nelson and Alfred the Great were celebrated for their self-sacrifice and their care for the weak, thus adding other aspects to their greatness. Moreover, in the case of Alfred, this also extends to his personal life and a willingness to sacrifice personal happiness for the sake of official duty.

Parodying Heroism in Nineteenth-Century Plays

As has been suggested above, the hero-worship of the historical plays and melodramas of the nineteenth century, which has been criticized in academic studies of historical drama, was already a point of critique in the nineteenth century itself, for instance in the genre of burlesque. This was a popular, ephemeral theatrical genre of the nineteenth century, which Richard W. Schoch defines as a “comic misquotation of original ‘legitimate’ plays and performances” (Schoch, *Introduction* xxxiii; cf. also Emeljanow 17-20). Parodying “Shakespeare, Greek tragedy, melodrama, classical mythology, English history, Arthurian legend, Arabian tales” and contemporary authors such as Sir Walter Scott, Henrik Ibsen and Oscar Wilde (ibid. xi), this meta-theatrical genre, which presupposed of its audience a knowledge of current events and performances as well as of theatrical conventions, presented a “critical

commentary” on Victorian theatrical culture and what were perceived as its excesses (ibid. xii). A central feature to this end was the inversion of high and low; burlesque thus “presents mean Persons in the Accoutrements of Heroes” or “describes great Persons acting and speaking like the basest among the People”, as remarked already by Joseph Addison (quoted in ibid. xiii).

Unsurprisingly, then, the great “heroes” of English history, too, like Elizabeth I or Henry VIII, found their place in the theatrical burlesque and were cut down to size. Thus, in William Brough’s *The Field of the Cloth of Gold* (1868), Henry VIII arrives in France terribly sea-sick from the crossing: “HENRY. Once more on shore, how ill I feel! / Fool that I was to tempt the ocean! / Still all around me seems to reel; / Still do I feel the horrid motion” (Brough 300). Thereupon, another Englishman remarks, critically: “This is King Hal, they call the Bluff; / Can’t e’en the Channel cross, the muff!” (ibid.). When Henry and Francis I have a boxing match later in the play, they show themselves to be decidedly unmartial: “*Each hits the other – both fall down.* [...] / FRANCIS. [Feebly.] Henry, old chap. / HENRY. [Feebly.] Francis, dear friend. / [...] Are you alive still?” (ibid. 332). In this burlesque, Henry VIII, the strong, active king, shows a very different, ridiculous face.

A burlesque like Robert B. and William Brough’s *Alfred the Great; or, The Minstrel King* (1859),²⁰ which bears a close similarity to the plot of Sheridan Knowles’s play on the same hero analyzed above, reveals some of the means by which the criticism of hero-worship was affected: The most obvious strategy by which this is achieved is that King Alfred is repeatedly referred to as a “minstrel king”. While this is an ironic comment on the fact that in the other plays (e.g., Knowles Act IV; Tupper Act III) much is made of the old legend of how Alfred visited the Danish camp in the disguise of a minstrel and discovered through this brave deed important information which would later help him in the decisive battle, in the burlesque this undermines his status as a warrior king from the very first. That this is also probably a reaction to too much reverence towards Alfred in other plays can be guessed from the comment: “so old and dear a friend, that we may safely venture a few harmless jokes at his expense” (Brough and Brough, *dramatis personae* 5). Similarly, several of the Saxon warriors, such as Oswith, Alfred’s aide-de-camp, who is described in stereotypical language as “a pure Saxon” (ibid.), are in fact played by actresses, and can thus hardly be taken seriously.²¹

In the following, key moments of both the serious plays on Alfred and of his legend are twisted around so that they lose their heroic and military significance: While Sheridan Knowles’s and all the other “serious” plays emphasize the famous myth of how Alfred burnt the cakes when hiding in a simple hut as a highly elevated scene that sees Alfred musing over his fate as king after initial military defeat,²² in the burlesque Alfred has resigned from his position as king and has in fact become a common and fairly incompetent baker. His thoughts on politics comically mix with those on bakery, turning them from high-minded idealism into nonsense and everyday worries:

Alfred. Yes! to a monarch in my situation –
The only policy is resignation. (*proceeds to put different articles of pastry into the oven, in a business-like manner*)
Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like this currant bun, though hard and dry,
and difficult to chew, howe’er you grind it,
Is worth a plum, (*inspects bun critically*) if one could only find it! (ibid. 23)

When a starving old man arrives, Alfred gives him some bread (as he does in Knowles’s play, 28), yet this is no longer a generous act of a king close to starvation himself:

Alfred. So poor as that? Then catch! (*throws him a loaf*) It’s my last brown!
But in your state of impecuniosity, (*coming down*)
’Tis yours *free gratis*.
Old M. [...] kind generosity!
A deed that shall perpetuate your name,
[...]
Alfred. Now, that’s kind.
Of course the circumstance need ne’er be known,
That the presented loaf was not my own? (ibid. 24)

Instead, his “generosity” takes place merely at the expense of others, and Alfred has turned from selfless patron of the poor to common crook.

This undermining of the heroic through the everyday and banal continues, for when Alfred goes to the Danish camp (a deed which Tupper, for instance, celebrates as full of dangers, for a follower warns Alfred: “O King, be sparing of that precious life / In which all England lives”; ibid. 22), he does so not disguised as a wise minstrel, but carrying “a tray on his head, a muffin basket on his arm, a bell in his hand, a banjo slung at his back” (ibid. 35). Instead of the expected brave, wise and patriotic songs, he sings parodies of them (using a common device of burlesque). He undermines the heroic songs’ values, for

instance with the aria “Death of Nelson”, which he changes to:

‘Cos in Trafalgar Square
I want my statue there,
(To be paid for I don’t say when.)
With the kings and warrior folk,
The hearts of steel and oak,
And the *waxy-nature* men;
With Napier and Nelson brave –
A monument of stone to have;
I mean to make a duty –
I mean to make a duty –
Along the lines of statues there –
Alfred expects as something rare
His own may prove a beauty! (ibid. 37)²³

Hero-worship, as this parody shows, is thus amongst the theatrical devices and cultural values undermined and ridiculed in the play. Rather than a selfless, brave and devoted king, the burlesque’s Alfred is a silly and excitable baker, who lays bare the hollowness of the values presented in the plays criticized, heroism chief amongst them.

Celebrating the Anti-Hero – Charles II in Selected Nineteenth-Century Plays

Though military heroes provided playwrights with popular topics, nineteenth-century plays did not confine their interest in history to Nelson, Alfred the Great or similar figures. Indeed, famous actresses such as Peggy Woffington or Nell Gwynne, or immoral poets such as the Earl of Rochester, also featured on the stage.²⁴ As might be expected, these historical figures, who all share a rather dubious moral reputation, do not present examples of conventional heroism on the stage.²⁵ Rather, these plays concentrated on the social and private lives of their protagonists, often a very daring private life at that. The past setting and the well-known anecdotes associated with these historical characters were used primarily for comic and entertaining situations, and the historical characters are not shown in a particularly flattering light. The temporal distance from these historical figures also made more ‘racy’ treatments of morals possible, and it has been suggested that they may thus have served as a ‘bowdlerised’ escape from the present (Nicoll, Vol IV 16).

A similar trend can be observed in the many comedies depicting Charles II, the “Merry Monarch”. This seventeenth-century king seems to

have been a particular favourite with nineteenth-century playwrights, as he featured in more than thirty plays throughout the nineteenth century.²⁶ A few of them, for instance William Diamond’s *The Royal Oak* (1811), showed his flight after the Battle of Worcester, where Charles invaded England at the head of the Scottish army, being finally defeated by Cromwell. These plays thus indeed celebrated him for his military prowess, as when a Puritan officer admits:

When all was lost, and o’er red heaps of kindred slain, his routed soldiers faintly pressed their flight, I saw young Stuart singly stand, and keep the centre of the field, unhors’d – his helmet gone – his buckler battered with innumerable blows, – in his right hand aloft he shook a glittering sword, [...] – so terrible, and yet so glorious looked the youth, that e’en our roughest sons of war [...] turned their blood-dyed weapons from his breast averse! (Diamond 30)

Yet Charles II featured increasingly in a series of formulaic comedies set in the post-Restoration period and concentrating on his notorious love life. Plays such as Douglas Jerrold’s *The Bride of Ludgate* (ca. 1829) and *Nell Gwynne* (1833), John Walker’s *Nell Gwynne* (1833), and John Payne’s *Charles the Second* (1824) thus show Charles II in more or less successful pursuits of a host of beautiful young girls. To this end, the jovial monarch is usually in disguise and mixes with his people, meeting with all kinds of comic adventures and scrapes.

Indeed, so conventionalized does this depiction of the “Merry Monarch” seem to have become that in 1872 Gilbert Abbot À Beckett produced a burlesque on Charles II entitled *Charles II. or Something Like History*, in which the king is always sad and shows no interest in Nell Gwynne and other pretty women whatsoever. Indeed, when Nell comes to the court Charles is decidedly upset: “CHAS. (Collapses.) You at my court!” (Beckett 7). His legendary womanizing in this play is presented as a mere invention: “Cut from the Roundhead papers. [...] Put in to damage him” (ibid. 4), as Nell Gwynne explains to Samuel Pepys. When Charles is (anachronistically) visited by Oliver Cromwell, he “[a]ssumes a swaggering pose.) I think that’s like a king”, he explains (ibid. 8). His joviality and self-assuredness is thus just an act. Moreover, his wife, Queen Catherine, who in the comedies rarely features at all, is here seen as a decidedly jealous woman. The military heroism so dominant in other nineteenth-century plays, then, has

no place in the comedies featuring Charles II. Instead, in Walker's *Nell Gwynne*, the king and the Earl of Rochester even joke about his famous flight after the Battle of Worcester, comparing it to his present chase after Nell Gwynne, his most famous mistress:

Char. Oh, dear! – (*puffing*) I never ran so much in all my life.
 Roch. Never?
 Char. No! – never.
 Roch. Yes! – *once*.
 Char. Come, come, Rochester. – no reflections on the past.
 (Walker 16)

By serving as a joke, this comparison also highlights the unsuitability of Charles's present occupation, which is not what one would expect of an English king.

Indeed, this is repeatedly emphasized in the plays. As Charles usually pursues the beautiful young girls *incognito*, often rivalling other suitors, he repeatedly has to suffer undignified situations, as when in Henry Robert Addison's *The King's Word* (1835) he flirts with the pretty Kate and is afraid of being caught by her husband:

Kate. (Alarmed.) Heavens! – My husband!
 Char. I'll jump out of the window!
 Kate. Impossible, he will see you.
 Char. In yonder chamber?
 Kate. Impossible, he will enter it.
 Char. Happy thought – this wardrobe?
 Kate. How?
 Char. Simply, thus. (*Jumps in.*) How small is now the empire of a king! (Addison 15)

As in this case, Charles repeatedly comments on the unsuitability of his adventures himself, thus highlighting them for the audience and creating comic effect (cf. also Payne 50). Indeed, so do the other characters who share his adventures, for when he discovers Charles in the wardrobe, Kate's husband refuses to believe that this is indeed the king, at the same time, however, voicing an ideal of how a king should behave: "Ha – ha! caught in your own trap. No, no; I am not to be imposed upon; the King, though he is a Stuart, is an upright Prince – a man of honour, as his usher told me; not a vile intriguing base seducer. You are not the King" (Addison 17). In other plays, this criticism is repeated (cf. Walker 18) and confirmed by the silly situations that Charles finds himself in, for he frequently has to hide in cupboards and to appease jealous husbands and lovers (cf. e.g., G. A. Macfarren's *King Charles II*, 1849).

The rather dubious position of the "Merry Monarch" is confirmed, as he is not even particularly successful with the women he pursues. Kate in Addison's *The King's Word* is not the only virtuous woman who does not succumb to Charles II's legendary charm.

Char: [...] I would improve your fate, not injure thee, beloved one! Riches – power – rank should be yours.
 Kate: I understand too well their price. No splendour can shut out the truth – gloss over the infamy [...]. No, I would sooner be the virtuous wife of an honest farmer, than the mistress of the proudest head that wears a crown. (Addison 14)

While this is clearly also a concession to nineteenth-century morals (which in comparison to those of the Restoration were much more narrow, so that the period and its protagonists had to be "bowdlerized" to become suitable for presentation on the stage), as a result Charles II is thwarted even in this, his own particular field. In Walker's play *Nell Gwynne*, the eponymous heroine, too, constantly escapes his advances and does so until the end of the play. By contrast, the girls' other suitors are usually successful, and Charles is left with the position of the graceful loser, who, as in Jerrold's *The Bridge of Ludgate*, pays for the wedding as a surrogate father of the bride: "Charles. [...] Master Shekel, may I play the host tonight?" (Jerrold 46). Compared to Nelson, who was shown to succeed in everything, Charles II seems decidedly anti-heroic.

Nevertheless, Charles II is presented as a likable and personable character in the plays. It is noticeable that not only the women who resist his advances but also practically everyone else likes the disguised monarch. Thus, in Payne's *Charles the Second*, Mary's successful suitor Edward becomes very jealous when he sees how Mary reacts to his rival:

Mary (*apart to Edward*). He certainly has something genteel in his air. This unfortunate man may, perhaps, belong to decent people. [...]
 Edw. (*apart*). Egad, I must get him off, or he'll win his pretty jailer, culprit as she thinks him.
 Mary (*taking Edward apart*). How penitent he seems, and his countenance is rather amiable too! [...] and so good looking a man! (*ibid.* 44)

The king is thus not merely depicted as a stupid dupe; while not particularly successful as a king, he is repeatedly praised as a man. His positive personal qualities are confirmed by the ease with which Charles joins common people for drinks in taverns and talks to them on an equal footing.

By moving away from politics and warfare, the plays thus show a monarch who is close to his people, who, rather than succeeding in exceptional deeds as heroes do, impresses those around him with his good humor and his personal charms. The Charles II of nineteenth-century comedies is particularly remembered for his less than exemplary private life and his personal failings, which entertain rather than awe. Considering nineteenth-century theatre's preoccupation with the domestic lives, also of historical characters (Watt), however, this turn from the heroic is not surprising. Rather, it would seem that the voyeuristic wish to see a famous person "in his undress" (Thomas Moore, quoted in Huber and Middeke 134) that is so dominant in many late twentieth and early twenty-first century bioplays is also a prominent feature here. Charles II, a king whose posthumous reputation in popular culture largely rests on his alleged personal charms and sexual prowess, fitted this interest particularly well.

Conclusion

As popular entertainment, nineteenth-century theatre offered a variety of attitudes toward and images of historical heroism and heroes. Contrary to its bad reputation, it was not a form of entertainment characterized by an unthinking hero-worship only. The celebration of historical military leaders, such as Horatio Nelson or King Alfred the Great, was an important feature of certain genres, and thus, (nautical) melodramas such as Edward Fitzball's *Nelson; or the Life of a Sailor* (1827) celebrated past heroics. Yet this military heroism was also often accompanied by other qualities, beyond the mere military, a care for the weak or the sacrifice of the hero's private happiness, which also stressed the protagonist's human qualities.

In particular, the burlesque, a popular meta-theatrical genre questioned the hero-worship of other plays, as plays such as Robert B. and William Brough's *Alfred the Great* exposed historical leaders to ridicule, by showing them as fallible human beings, and by undermining the conventions of elevated language and the heroic values thus created. Moreover, by also concentrating on the far from exemplary private lives of historical kings and celebrities, first and foremost King Charles II, nineteenth-century theatre also revealed a voyeuristic pleasure in the private lives of historical figures. As the "Merry Monarch" was seen in a host of very human, embarrassing

situations, he was remembered in comedies as a very loveable and affable man, far removed from exemplary heroes like Nelson. Considering the great diversity of nineteenth-century theatre, a form that consisted of thousands of plays, written by many different authors and in a variety of different genres, this finding is not surprising, for recent studies of nineteenth-century theatre have repeatedly stressed its wide range of different forms, themes and attitudes.

Just as diverse as nineteenth-century theatre itself, however, are probably the reasons why this form of entertainment should be criticized in general for what is felt to be its undue reverence for historical heroes. Firstly, as popular entertainment, nineteenth-century theatre is often felt to be a "dark abyss" (Moody 112), a vast array of "performing dogs, stage volcanoes, villainous usurpers, and other irrepressible heroes" (ibid. 113), and as such, it usually falls out of academic studies. Nineteenth-century theatre is then only read through a few select plays which are said to represent theatre as a whole; in particular melodrama, a genre long infamous for its "excess" (Schmidt 9), is often, it seems, seen as typical here. Therefore, there is still an astonishing lack of knowledge of the varieties of entertainment on offer. Secondly, it seems that the distance from nineteenth-century theatre has often been exaggerated deliberately, not only by G. B. Shaw and his contemporaries (cf. also Meisel, *Shaw*), but also by later generations. It would seem that in a deliberate attempt to distance themselves from older, and more importantly, popular forms of entertainment, the changes in historical drama have perhaps been (over-)emphasized both by playwrights and scholars. Moreover, the post-modern urge to be different from the past may have obscured the view for older forms of anti-heroism and parodies of heroism in popular historical culture.

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1 Indeed, it has been suggested that there has since been a slow return to heroism, cf., e.g., Eriksonas.

2 Cf. Immer and van Marwyck (11). On contemporary drama as "high" culture, cf. Berninger, *Formen*.

3 Cf. Huber and Middeke; Berninger, *Formen*. Richard Palmer shows how Marxism and feminism have also made a similar impact on historical drama's treatment of past characters (Ch. 4).

4 Only the plays of writers such as G. B. Shaw or Oscar Wilde, the “new drama”, were said to represent the end of the theatre’s demise.

5 When classifying the theatre as popular entertainment, one also has to consider that some playwrights wrote for reading rather than performance. These usually show “literary”, i.e., high-brow ambitions. Moreover, some genres, such as melodrama, were more obviously “popular” than others.

6 Cf., e.g., Melman (Part I) on the many uses of the past in the nineteenth century.

7 For an assessment of Charles II in historiography, cf. Hutton, *Debates* Ch. 5.

8 Thus, unlike true “heroes” (Reiling and Rohde 12), he did not achieve much.

9 Not all plays analyzed in this essay are so explicitly subtitled as historical plays, however (following recent approaches towards the history play; cf. Berninger, *Formen* 47), I adopt a broad approach towards the genre as (popular) historiography in the following. This approach is supported by the general pervasiveness of nineteenth-century popular historical culture (plays were considered an important means of teaching history; cf. Schoch, “*Theatre*” 333) as well as the notorious vagueness of nineteenth-century theatrical genres (cf. Booth, “*Social*” 30-31).

10 As the “theatre does not lend itself to a clear-cut historiographic division between the Romantic and the Victorian periods” (Moody 112), I will apply the broader term “nineteenth century”. However, as the theatre changed considerably in the course of the century, I have selected most of the examples from the earlier half of the century to achieve some coherence.

11 For a more extensive list of plays on these characters, cf. Nicoll (Vol. IV 53 & 10) and Emeljanow (8).

12 Nautical melodramas featuring the victories of the British navy, particularly in the wars against Napoleon, became an important melodramatic subgenre in the early nineteenth century (Emeljanow 8-9).

13 For the original version, cf. Lonsdale (482-483).

14 In fact, the battle was not a British success. Yet it seems that a commander like Nelson cannot possibly be shown to lose.

15 For descriptions of melodramatic conventions, cf. Schmidt; Bratton, “*Romantic*”.

16 The stereotypical presentation of characters, who represented types immediately known to the audience, is typical of melodrama. For the different functions of the comic, lower-class characters, cf. Bratton, “*Contending*”.

17 The tableau, where the action froze in important moments of high tension, often realising famous pictures on the stage, was an important device in nineteenth-century theatre. Cf. Meisel, *Realizations* (40-48).

18 The four plays examined here, Sheridan Knowles’s *Alfred the Great*; or, *The Patriot King* (1831); Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe’s *Alfred the Great at Athelney* (1875); Sarah Hamilton’s *Alfred the Great* (1829) and Martin Farquhar Tupper’s *Alfred: A Patriotic Play* (1858), show great similarities in that they all follow a similar plot line: They first emphasise the difficult situation of the Saxons under Danish rule, show Alfred in hiding, his visit to the Danish camp (in disguise) where he acquires important information, and finally his triumphant defeat of the Vikings. Moreover, they all share the key episode: the famous “burning of the cakes”. Nevertheless, they are quite different, as de Redcliffe’s “historical play”, for instance, is a tragic verse play with literary ambitions (which does not seem to have been staged). James Sheridan Knowles was a successful professional playwright also of melodramas, whose plays were produced at Drury Lane, then one of the patent theatres. This difference is readily apparent in the de-

sign of the plays. (In comparison to Fitzball’s play, however, Knowles’s, in spite of its melodramatic characteristics, seems more “literary”, as the more upmarket theatre, the dedication to William IV and the use of iambic pentameter reveal).

19 Similar situations where love stands against duty were a much-loved staple of nineteenth-century (history) plays. Cf. Tupper’s *Alfred* (Act II, Scene 1 & 2).

20 This play is subtitled “An Historical Extravaganza”, yet as Schoch (“*Introduction*” xiii) argues, contemporary usage did not differentiate between burlesque and extravaganza – an example of the fluidity of nineteenth-century theatrical genres.

21 Cross-dressing is not uncommon in burlesque.

22 In Knowles’s play, Alfred muses: “How stands the fate / ’Twi’x me and fortune? – We are wholly quits! – / She dress’d me – She has stripp’d me! – On a throne / She placed me – She has struck me from my seat!” (Knowles 25).

23 Originally, this well-known song from John Braham’s opera *The Americans* ran: “’Twas in Trafalgar’s Bay / We saw the Frenchmen lay; / Each heart was bounding then: / We scorn’d the foreign yoke, / Our ships were British oak, / And hearts of oak our men! / Our Nelson mark’d them on the wave, / Three cheers our gallant seamen gave, / Nor thought of home or beauty; / Along the line the signal ran: / ‘England expects that every man / This day will do his duty!’” (lyrics S. J. Arnold, 1811).

24 Cf. Tom Taylor and Charles Reade, *Masks and Faces* (1854); Douglas Jerrold, *Nell Gwynne; or, The Prologue* (1829) and John Walker, *Nell Gwynne* (1833); William T. Moncrieff’s *Rocheater; or King Charles II’s Merry Days* (1823) and *The “Tobit’s Dog”* (1838); Joseph S. Coyne, *Presented at Court* (ca. 1850).

25 Nevertheless, Peggy Woffington and Nell Gwynne are both presented as good-hearted women, who help the poor and sacrifice their own happiness, displaying characteristics worth emulating.

26 Most of these, e.g., Douglas’s or Henry Addison’s plays, were genteel comedies, produced at the patent houses. Others include pantomime, burlesque and opera, the latter a more high-brow theatrical genre. For a list of plays cf. Flothow.

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