

**How Lovely to be an Actress: Women in nineteenth century theatre fiction**  
**Abstract submitted to the 'Reading in the Age of Gladstone' conference**

At the end of the nineteenth-century Hall Caine was one of most widely read novelists in the country. His sold millions of novels and was recognised on the streets of London and New York. Caine himself hoped to be remembered as both novelist and social commentator, convinced enough of his lasting fame to arrange an exhibition of his correspondence seventy years after his death. Now, however, Caine is remembered primarily for his friendships with Wilkie Collins, Bram Stoke and, most importantly, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Theatre in the nineteenth century underwent significant technological and economic changes which fundamentally altered the industry. Hall Caine, whose career spanned Henry Irving and Alfred Hitchcock, used these in his original plays and adaptations of his novels. *The Christian* explores the struggle inherent of the woman question at the end of the century as women were encouraged to play a greater economic and social role yet remain within prescribed boundaries. Caine's music hall actress Glory Quayle symbolises the struggle of women to access a new status in a society not quite sure what to do with them.

Like other nineteenth century novelists (Collins, Dickens, Braddon), Caine rejects the duality of actress/prostitute, instead exploring theatre as transformative. Hazlitt stated that "it is only when actors are themselves, that they are nothing" - in many nineteenth century theatre novels the exuberant, unorthodox woman attracted to the stage is tamed by her theatrical experiences; her dangerous disruptive energy converted into the ability to perform the role of a conventional woman offstage. Once reaching this ability to subsume themselves, women retreat from the stage into domesticity and appropriate femininity. Caine allows his heroine to follow a more radical path, leaving the stage without entering the angelic domesticity of the Victorian homemaker.