

Hall Caine's novel *The Christian*, published in 1897, draws on a tradition of theatre novels written through the nineteenth century, themselves demonstrating the intense cross-over which existed between theatre and popular novel during the century, and through which can be traced the changing status of both women and the theatre.

The lack of critical work on Caine's writing could be taken as evidence for his loss of relevance; only one biography exists and elsewhere he is more often mentioned for his work with Henry Irving, Bram Stoker and Alfred Hitchcock, or for his long standing friendship with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for whom he worked as secretary and companion, and his biography of the poet. Outside his adopted home, the Isle of Man, few would now know Caine's name and his books are now largely out of print. So why pay attention to a novelist who has sunk with barely a trace? The little critical work existing on Caine rather than his connections tends to either call for his rehabilitation into the canon or suggest that he is a mere curiosity for scholars examining particular themes, but will never be accessible to a wider public. David MacWilliams compares him to Dickens in his concern to explore and critique social issues of the age, but complains that Caine's didacticism is too heavy handed¹, unleavened by the comedy of Dickens's work, a criticism also made in Caine's obituary in *The Times*:

This conscientious earnestness, which in personal matters made him an easy prey to the irresponsible American interviewer, often raised his work to a fine fervour; at its worst, it robbed him of his sense of proportion and of his sense of humour²

Wilde too in *The Decay of Lying* suggested that Caine

aims at the grandiose, but then he writes at the top of his voice. He is so loud that one cannot bear what he says.³

¹ {MacWilliams, 2004, *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)*, 47, 426-439}

² {Unknown, 1931, *The Times*, Obituaries}

³ <http://www.online-literature.com/wilde/1307/>

There are undoubtedly didactic digressions which, at times, leave the reader wishing for a lighter tone but Caine's authorial intentions to make a difference to society through his writing was equal to his desire to tell a good story.

Mary Hammond places Caine in a debate at the end of the century over whether novels debased literature simply by their popularity, in large part a result of decreasing costs meaning increasing accessibility to newly literate groups including women and the working class. She notes that Caine's ability to promote his work and produce different editions was "symptomatic of a market-driven alteration in publishing practices,"⁴ and authors on the 'art' side of the debate disliked his sales tactics, as does MacWilliams who disapproves of what he calls Caine's "annoying habits of self-publicity".⁵ His popularity remains a tool for critics to dismiss him, as it was during his lifetime. Popular he undoubtedly was; *The Christian* was the first million seller and he sold over ten million books in his lifetime. His novel 'The Deemster' (DATE) was listed in the Telegraph's 1899 '100 Best novels of all time' alongside works by Bronte, Austen, Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Walter Scott and J M Barrie. Caine's novels also demonstrate the connected nature of novel and stage, with some adaptations of his novels being incredibly successful – stage adaptations earned him £1500 plus 15% of the gross, rising to a \$25,000 advance for film rights in 1923, the equivalent of 1.5 million today⁶ - and continuing until his death, including Alfred Hitchcock's final silent movie, an adaptation of *The Manxman* – that Hitchcock chose Caine's work, and faithfully reproduced it perhaps lends Caine some additional

⁴ {Hammond, 2004, Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film, 31 , 39-59}

⁵ { MacWilliams, 2004, English Literature in Transition (1880-1920), 47 , 426-439 @428}

⁶ <http://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/result.php> and http://madwiki.beds.ac.uk/madwiki/index.php/Mary_Hammond_%27When_is_a_Book_not_a_book%3F_Literary_adaptation_and_the_problem_of_methodology

credibility in terms of storytelling. More than this, Caine's novels provide an insight to the cultural and social questions of the time, their huge sales evidence of their ability to speak to a wide audience. They tell stories and involve characters which are intriguing in their own right and do not deserve to be so forgotten.

Other theatre novels are ubiquitous in the nineteenth century, from Austen's *Mansfield Park* to Rochester's at-home gypsy impersonations and elaborate charades in *Jane Eyre* to professional performers, like Wilkie Collins's Magdalen Vanstone and Elizabeth Gaskell's Margaret Jennings. Theatre is all pervasive in the nineteenth century novel; authors themselves were often amateur or professional actors and stage managers, writing about actors and theatrical performances. Novels were frequently adapted, becoming some of the major stage successes of the latter half of the century, like *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret* which were rarely not being produced onstage. The prevalence of actresses in nineteenth century fiction is indicative of a deep interest in the shifting status of women, and recognition of the often-performative nature of femininity during a time of intense change and debate over the roles of women. The theatre in these novels, as changing as the status of women, is a site of transformation where independent, forthright heroines seem to learn to act a more acceptable, traditional femininity. Yet their authors often end these novels in an ambiguous way, suggestive more of a critique of that type of femininity which insists upon women behaving in a certain way, often an anathema to their own personality and inclination. In the second half of the century this ambiguity begins to clarify – Collins's Magdalen Vanstone does marry a strong protector figure in Captain Kirke and submits to her elder married sister, but only after achieving her goals and does not suffer significant punishment for her earlier actions. Caine's story of Glory Quayle is even more controversial. A middle class single woman with a supportive family, she

becomes a professional actress through choice, rather than necessity . Other characters who become professional actresses are more often forced into it through need to support themselves and their families, through poverty and loss of fortune. Glory leaves behind a promising and far more socially acceptable nursing career to become an actress, then is openly involved in a sexual relationship with a vicar before marrying him on his death bed and joining the social work movement prevalent at the end of the century.

This female-led moral reform gained credibility and authority alongside the suffrage movement.. The connections between actresses and the suffrage movement at the end of the nineteenth century has been well documented in, among others, Viv Gardner's assessment of the Actresses' Franchise League, Mary Corbett's critical examination of biographies written by actresses-turned-suffragette, and Christopher Kent's study of the uses to which actresses put their talents in agitating for the vote. With male and female roles becoming more polarised, female roles became responsible for the domestic and personal, extending to moral and religious education and the welfare of children. While higher class women tended to be involved in suffrage movements, the middle class took their domestic responsibilities out of the home to focus on the moral reform of society. While not strictly a religious movement, it involved improving the morality of society outside the home to protect the home itself from encroaching immorality. Prostitution in particular was seen as symbolic of a violation of the divide between the home and the domestic, and the pollution and corruption of the city. Helping fallen women was a priority; exploited by men taking advantage of their poverty, they were a threat to other women, putting them at risk of sexually transmitted diseases.

'Actress' had previously been synonymous with these fallen women, the theatre being a place for them to solicit and where single women were assumed to be prostitutes, rather than theatregoers themselves. The gradual change in this reflects the changing opportunities for women. The music halls hey day of 1880-1900 took place during an intense period of change in women's opportunities and political campaigning, yet theatre in London continued to experience a similar class distinction to that of the suffragettes and moral reformers. Outside the capital, single women worked more frequently and had gained a measure of independence; seeing them in theatre audiences in groups or on their own was accepted. In London though, this was not the case as fewer women were employed – Martha Vicinus notes that as a result the only women alone at a theatre or music hall in London were assumed to be prostitutes. There also remained different licensing laws in place in the capital, stopping the majority of theatres producing straight drama. As music hall gained in popularity, with their burlesque, pantomime and variety performances, theatres showing so-called 'legitimate' drama became less acceptable for the working class to be involved in, either in the audience or onstage.

Earlier in the century a career in theatre had provided potential for social-climbing; actresses married aristocracy and increased contact with the upper class through their work, fame, wealth and theatre's new fashionability improved their social opportunities. Increased respectability of the straight drama theatres meant these actresses enjoyed higher social status, though the link between actress and prostitute is hardly severed by the suggestion that actresses can use their profession to work their way into higher society, merely covered with the civilising veneer of marriage. Glory comes close to experiencing this, even working in the music hall as she does –

the attentions of Drake and Lord Robert provide a tantalising glimpse of a society above her own family's, though it is quite clear Lord Robert would never accept an actress as a wife, Drake's intentions are more ambiguous and, finally, honourable. For working class women however there were fewer similar opportunities as they were considered unsuitable for the upper-class audiences to associate with, even across the fourth wall between stage and audience. Working class women had generally more employment opportunities open to them, and so the music hall, with theatre's old associations of prostitution and immorality, remained a dubious career choice.

Glory is one of the increasing numbers of single women in the 1880s whose family could afford to educate them, but not support them if they did not marry. Like many others, she takes up a nursing training post; by the late 1880s nursing was a profession for the more ambitious single woman who needed to support themselves as well as playing to traditionally feminine strengths of caring and nurturing. Martha Vicinus suggests that 'the most important model for single women was Florence Nightingale'. Nursing provided a progression along a career path and an opportunity to make a visible difference in a male-dominated environment. In addition to catering to Glory's ambition, hospitals also provided accommodation for trainee nurses which gives her an opportunity to leave the Isle of Man and experience independence.

While Caine acknowledges the potential for moral corruption in the theatre he suggests that there is a similar possibility in all professions. Glory's dismissal from the hospital is a result of her anger when a fellow nurse is dismissed for becoming pregnant by Lord Robert Ure, on the hospital's board, to which Glory stands up:

"I have been taught to think of a man as strong and brave, and tender and merciful to every living creature, but most of all to a woman if she is erring and fallen. But you are not brave and tender; you are cruel and cowardly, and I despise you and hate you...you have discharged

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my friend...and you may discharge me too if you like – if you dare!
But I will tell everybody that it was because I would not let you insult
a poor girl with a cruel and shameful name and trample upon her
when she was down."

Glory's insubordination is unexpected, even shocking – despite her tendency towards enjoyment and pleasure she has a respect for authority, but only when it is deserved rather than conferred as a result of a title. This is the first instance of Caine's criticism throughout the novel of a society which shames and torments fallen women while protecting the men who seduce them. His criticism extends to those who, like the board, fail to chastise these men and so are complicit in their behaviour. The theatre can be corrupting; Caine does not portray the music hall as a force for either good or bad, and as Glory begins her career onstage she comes into contact with those who could potentially bring her to moral ruin – the ballet chorus girls who are more sexually knowing than they should be, a stage manager who demands a kiss in exchange for a role though she is outraged and leaves immediately and a programme seller who takes Glory to a seedy club frequented by prostitutes – but Glory remains innocent throughout her theatrical experiences.

Two men, Drake, a politician, and Storm, a vicar, constitute the greatest threat to Glory's innocence; she is never tempted by anything or anybody she comes into contact with in the theatre but these two men she knew as a child, a politician and vicar respectively, lead her out of innocence. Drake assumes that because Glory is involved in the theatre she must be more sexually knowing and willing than she appears to be; he may treat her better than his friend Lord Robert treats his girlfriends, but Drake's attitude towards Glory is that of a lengthy seduction. Though she interprets it as friendship she is aware – because of Drake's connection to Lord Robert

– that he may intend more later and tries to keep at a distance, yet he finally insists on taking her to a club which, she realises on arrival is for gentlemen and their lower-class lovers, and Drake insists he will come to her house even if he has to break the door down. Caine is highly critical of Drake – Drake is aware that Robert treats women shamefully yet Drake remains close friends with him without questioning his behaviour. Even after Drake has realised his error in his inability to distinguish between Glory and her profession's reputation he cannot make full recompense for it to redeem his relationship with Glory, and so he does not see her again.

The other man involved in Glory's loss of innocence is the vicar John Storm, the final cause of Glory's seduction, and the final stage of her transformation from music hall star to social reformer. Storm is constantly jealous of the attention Glory attracts from other men – though she does nothing to encourage it – and the audience's possession of her when she is onstage. He is driven to a campaign of rescuing fallen women, all of whom he associates with Glory, believing that if he can save them he can alleviate her fate. Caine portrays his jealousy as maddening; Storm sees Glory onstage as more knowing, her sincerity and artlessness as an act to encourage men to watch her and lust after her – yet Storm describes her behaviour as being 'the same' as it always was, unable to recognise that it is his way of watching her that has changed. Storm may condemn Robert for objectifying women as expendable, meaningless entertainment, but in this scene Storm sees Glory as being one of these women, in effect blaming the women and Glory for provoking men like Robert into their actions. Storm's jealousy provokes him to attempt to murder Glory in a terrifying scene in which he justifies himself as destroying her body to save her soul but, when confronted with her and realising she is the same as he has always known her, they

make love. Storm's jealousy and anger is just one indication of Caine's criticism of hypocrisy and complicity, here of religious men and religion itself; Storm's bishops are more concerned with their social standing and politics than ministering to those most in need. Storm's attempts to live up to his religion's requirements leads him to deny his feelings for Glory, causing his jealous rage. Glory's eventual seduction comes, not through her association with music hall, but through the uncontrollable jealousy of a man of religion. Though the scene itself is not described, the morning after is in Storm's guilt and Glory's sensual enjoyment:

She felt no remorse...he loved her, she loved him and nothing else mattered...She was conscious that a subtle change had come over her. She was not herself any longer...with a certain tremor, a certain thrill, she reached for a handglass and looked at herself to learn if there as any difference in her face that the rest of the world would see. Yes, her eyes had another lustre, a deeper light, but she lay back in the cool bed with a smile (415)

It is the final stage of Glory's transformation. From a programme seller to a music hall performer to an acclaimed star actress, she has come to understand the difficulties women can face. Rather than treating this knowledge as a loss of innocence, Caine positions it as a maturation. On her arrival in London she was unprepared for her caring role at the hospital – she wept for child patients but was selfish in her desire for recognition and independence. Her stage experience and the society it brings her into contact with make her more aware of the difficulties and suffering women like Polly Love undergo and the problems they have in maintaining their integrity in a society which privileges both the masculine and the wealthy. Having been through these experiences, she is able to take on Storm's role in the social reform movement, working in the slums of Whitehall and happy to do so. Prior to her acting, she is a naïve, frivolous child. By the time she leaves the theatre she is taking on the role of a social reformer aiming to protect vulnerable women and improve their lives.

Glory finds independence and selfhood – living alone, financially independent if not entirely secure, emotionally unattached but confident – while in the music hall phase of her career. Through her theatrical experiences she is transformed into a less selfish woman, but remains as independent as ever; her spirit and energy is redirected into a new direction. Her ending bears a resemblance to that of earlier theatre heroines, who went through their acting experience yet emerged willing to submit to the demands of society and their husbands, at least superficially. Jane Eyre marries Rochester, once he is maimed and dependent upon her but they remain together – she is by law and convention duty bound to him. Magdalen Vanstone initially marries an invalid whom she can control but eventually marries a strong figure, achieving the retrieval of her fortune at the loss, once again, of her name and through submission to her husband and brother in law. Glory, however, remains truly independent. She directs her own fate throughout the novel and though she marries Storm at the climax of the novel she does so when he is on his deathbed. Their marriage effectively confers upon her the protections and status of widowhood without her actually having been married and compelled to submit to her husband in the same way that Magdalen Vanstone must, despite regaining her inheritance.

Caine's attitude to women's work and the scope of their experience as well as its critical attitude towards exploiters of women and those who implicitly condone it places his novel as an important text which offers a far more radical, and forgiving, story than his predecessors.