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Literary Tradition and Popular Culture: Toga Plays in Victorian Popular Theatre

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Introduction

Toga plays are part of the rich history of Victorian theatre that for a long time lay in obscurity, which is not that surprising as the variety of theatrical forms and styles that the long Victorian era (1837-1901) encompassed is so great that they were being gradually uncovered one by one. Toga plays had to wait some amount of time as they are one of many examples from Victorian culture that through the twentieth century were regarded as low quality and even kitschy, with only a few exceptions of artists who became best remembered and associated with the period, with, in the case of the theatre, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw as the most obvious of those exceptions. Only the late years of the twentieth and the twenty-first century, in which the popular and hybrid culture is booming looked more kindly on the forgotten parts of Victorian culture. The most thorough studies on the topic of toga plays were made in the 1990s and 2000s by David Mayer and Jeffrey Richards and it is they that shed more light on this fascinating topic. To David Mayer we owe the only scholarly analysis devoted exclusively to the topic and the publications of the scripts of *Claudian, The Sign of the Cross, Ben-Hur* and a few other works which stay within this theatrical genre. Jeffrey Richards is the author of a book covering larger topics such as the influence of John Ruskin on Victorian theatre and the ancient world on Victorian stage, which contain substantial parts on the toga genre.

Each publication gives a similar definition of a toga play – they were melodramatic plays with the motifs of "conflict, persecution, and clashes in values and beliefs between early Christians or proto-Christians and their Roman oppressors" (Mayer, x) or simply plays which "recreated the Ancient World on the stage" (Newey and Richards, 83). The term itself appeared around 1895-1896, as David Mayer notes in the *Foreword* to his book (x), and it is the time when the play regarded now as the prime example of the genre was created, Wilson Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross* (1896). Since

the play was known for its attentiveness to detail in scenery and costumes and Wilson Barrett's skill in advertising his own work by selling pictures of actors and postcards with the most popular scenes, it is no wonder that the name inspired by togas worn by the actors stuck. However, Jeffery Richards points out that what differentiated toga plays from previous pieces that were set in antiquity was a set of specific themes[1] strongly related to the Victorian world, that is the religious, moral and imperial conflict, triggered by the fear of the decadence of the end of the nineteenth century and the gender struggles provoked by the birth of feminism (83). Giving a short definition of toga plays in her book *The use of classical art and literature by Victorian painters* Rosemary Barrow points out that there were no real Roman dramatic texts staged in Victorian era, unlike the Greek verse dramas, and toga plays were the only Roman-topic productions, being based on the popular novels, possibly also influenced by Shakespeare's Roman plays, not on original Latin sources. Of course, the reason for this is that the Romans were not very fond of theatre, and it was the Greeks who produced the classical masterpieces. Barrow describes Victorian toga plays as successful in mainstream theatre and profitable, but often receiving criticism by those who focused on the distinction between the popular entertainment and serious drama (168).

I would define toga plays as spectacular melodramatic plays produced on Victorian and post-Victorian popular stage, set in the ancient Roman Empire[2], tackling

[1] Richards himself states that the themes characterizing the toga genre were first described by David Mayer. In Mayer's *Foreword*, he enumerates and further analyses "class identity, gender, religion, immigration, and imperialism" as the issues the plays dealt with (X).

[2] Roman Empire in toga plays is treated very broadly as in some plays, such as *Ben-Hur*, there are many characters presumably speaking Greek, Aramaic or Hebrew, rather than Latin, because of the setting in Syria and Palestine, there are also plays, like *Clito*, set in Athens, but it is possible that because of this it did not achieve success, as mentioned by Rosemary Barrow ("Toga Plays…," 219). Even a blank verse comedy *Pygmalion and Galatea* written by W.S. Gilbert is mentioned by some scholars (Heinrich, 109, Richards, 93) as one of the earliest toga plays, but I see it as an important influence rather than part of toga plays genre. Hence, in my view, the typical toga plays – that is the melodramatic plays enjoying considerable popularity on Victorian stage, produced with great visual splendour – are the plays set either specifically in Rome, or in Roman Empire, but clearly referencing the topic of the Roman imperialism, corruption and debauchery.

the topics of the decadence of Roman life, eroticism, religion, of moral struggles between duty and imperial rule, virtue and debauchery, characterized by the use of archaeological authenticity, visual spectacle and a desire to educate as well as to entertain the audience. I would also make a distinction between the toga plays based on historical novels, like *Quo Vadis* and *Ben-Hur* for which the theatrical staging was a natural middle phase between the world of bestseller literature and films. Their theatrical productions, although not very different from plays written by a Victorian playwright from scratch such as *Claudian*, *The Sign of the Cross*, *Clito* or *The Daughters of Babylon* as they all were greatly inspired by historical literature, were always confined to their literary base sources, which made the staging production a little different. There were also toga plays 'in-between' – strongly based on a work by different author, but adapted to Victorian stage and, as it is now clearly seen, to the common characteristics of this genre – like *The Cup*, based on a story from Plutarch or *Junius, or the Household Gods*, first written as a novel under the title *Brutus* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Also, an important characteristic of toga plays is the fact that although most of them were melodramas (with a few written as verse plays) they aspired to the rank of literature, but are viewed, especially by late Victorian, and definitely by post-Victorian critics as middlebrow drama and entertainment, and despite their popularity in Victorian times they did not enter the canon of Victorian drama and became largely forgotten.

Jeffrey Richards puts emphasis on the visual aspect of this genre and its closeness to painting and states that:

> The visual imagery of these historical plays was often directly inspired by famous paintings and the plays were staged, framed and lit like paintings. Performance and visual imagery combined to create a popular memory of history, but one which often looked to romance, myth and melodrama for inspiration rather than to academic research. (*The Ancient*…, 22)

Hence, in the first chapter I analyse the classical painting of Victorian era and its

peculiar treatment of history as a narration about the present day, the same characteristics that we find in theatrical toga genre. The genre was part of the prevalent in nineteenth century interest in ancient history, prompted by archaeological digs and travel guides written also for common tourists, which triggered the creation of many popular historical novels, which I present in Chapter I along with the vital for the Victorians tradition of Shakespeare's history plays and particularly his Roman plays. The connection with the historical novel is noted by Margaret Malamud, who wrote about the genre in her book devoted to using the imperial history of Rome in creating the view of modern America:

> Building on the enormous popularity of nineteenth-century novels about Roman persecution of Christians and Jews, melodramatic plays known as "toga plays" became popular middlebrow stage entertainment in the 1890s. Typically, the plays put virtuous Christians or Jews against militaristic and depraved Roman oppressors. Like the novels, most feature delusional and tyrannical emperors, predatory and sexually dominating women, orgies, and spectacles of violence and excess in the Roman arena. In the early twentieth century, several of these novels and plays were adapted into film in an attempt to legitimate the new medium as an art form and widen its working-class audience to include the middle and upper classes. (187)

The important factor of using toga plays to legitimize the culture, first in Victorian theatre, much later similarly in cinema is an important issue that I try to analyse in Chapter II. There I briefly comment on the state of late Victorian theatre and the need to introduce changes that would elevate the drama and invite more respectable audience to theatres that appeared around 1880s, including the idea of creating the National Theatre. In this Chapter, I also briefly describe the key figure of toga play genre, the actor-manager Wilson Barrett, who produced the biggest number of toga dramas on stage and seemed to understand the unity and uniqueness of the genre the most. To him we owe that fact that the plays were produced as a coherent cycle, to which he was encouraged by John Ruskin, and that they successfully introduced the topic of religion to drama, after a centuries-long absence. The premise to bring more educated viewers to theatre was both his and Ruskin's aim, but his figure is even more interesting, as in realizing

this aim he did not stop using the methods that made the plays stay within the norms of popular theatre. David Mayer also notes that toga plays "enjoyed unprecedented popularity on the stage and were seen by a wider range of audiences than had previously gathered in playhouses" and that they were the only dramas so understood by the audiences "as to pass from stage into motion pictures with no apparent disruption" (x).

After outlining the characteristics of all plays that are considered as examples of this genre and a close analysis of three of them – *The Cup*, *Claudian* and *The Sign of the Cross* in Chapter III, I try to point out the features that made them the only genre of Victorian stage that could be transferred so easily to the new medium of popular culture – cinema, and stayed there, in a cinematic form, for so long. In the final Chapter IV first I analyse the play that closed their theatrical life – *Ben-Hur*, also commenting on the differences that differentiate it as American toga drama. I discuss briefly the two dramas that were based on historical novels – *Ben-Hur,* a stage version of Lew Wallace's work and *Quo Vadis*, based on also internationally popular Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel, and the possible reasons why they were less popular on stage than for instance *The Sign of the Cross*. Finally, I present shift of the genre from stage to screen and their most famous cinematic realizations in Hollywood, pointing out the similarities and differences between how the genre was treated by the theatre and by the American cinema and also what the American cinema has taken from it.

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the toga plays genre in the context of their use of literary tradition – here I understand their treatment of history, their inspiration by the history plays of Shakespeare, and their closeness to nineteenth century historical novels, in general every aspect that made them aspire to the quality of literature. I am going to analyse also their connection (later shift) to elements of popular culture in order to prove that they are a unique, hybrid Victorian theatrical genre that combines elements of high art and popular culture. In the Introduction I would like to

devote some space to briefly describe some general concepts concerning the nineteenth-century Victorian theatre. The place of melodrama and spectacle as well as the notions of visual and popular culture are the key to understanding what toga genre was and why it was one of the most conspicuous Victorian theatrical genres that quickly entered the sphere of popular culture, even though it was not merely an entertaining spectacle, but also important step in introducing the more serious, educational, and religious topics on stage.

Any analysis of Victorian culture worth its salt would also have to mention the melodrama. It pervades the Victorian stage from the early years of Victorian era to the end, despite the attacks and the New Drama being present, and makes way into the early film, and later television, there being a reminiscence of this Victorian entertainment. In an article "Theatrical Melodrama, Dramatic Film, and the Rise of American Cinema: The Case of Griffith's" Robert James Cardullo writes about the melodramatic sources in early American films, emphasizing that the whole nineteenth century theatre was dominated by it, and it was only at the end of the century that it started to look for new means of expression, be more ambitious and target the chosen audience that may understand it:

> The reasons for this general absence of literary depth or quality were many and not restricted to America, for in Britain and on the European continent the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were also generally fallow periods for dramatic literature. (In America, as in Europe, a change in the kind of literature being written for the theater began to become apparent in the last years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, as Ibsen in Norway, Chekhov in Russia, and later Shaw in England and O'Neill in the United States rediscovered the theater as a vehicle amenable to ambitious dramatic literature – be it tragic or comic, realistic, naturalistic, expressionist, or symbolist.) (Cardullo, 32)

The fact that that toga plays were melodramas goes a long way towards explaining why they were so popular. The very name given to the plays set in the Roman Empire – toga plays – in its straightforwardness is typical of many names given to various types of melodramas that were present on the Victorian stage. A good, and

quite amusing example is the Contents included in Maurice Willson Disher's book *Melodrama: plots that thrilled.* The titles of the chapters, in which he analyses the genre of melodrama through specific plays (from 1850s up till 1950s), but also films and television shows are very telling about the variety of subjects tackled by the genre: Sensation Dramas, The Sins of Society, Cup-and-Saucer Comedy, Detective Stories, Murder Puzzles, Modern Life, Brutal Realism, Drawing-Room Drama, "Grecian" Dramatists, Parsons In Love, Sex and Salvation (here *The Sign of the Cross*), Crime Repentant, High Life at Drury Lane, to name only a few. At first glance, the toga play is one of the types of popular melodramas presented to Victorian audiences.

Melodrama existed on the English stage from 1820s, at that time being usually a three-act play set mostly in the working-class world (manufacturing, agricultural, military or naval service, urban world) and during the next two decades occupying mostly the minor theatres. Then, by the end of the 1830s, there appeared an attempt to make melodrama more respectable in order to present it in patent theatres in front of the new middle-class audience. The choice fell on melodrama dressed in historical setting – something that the toga play will repeat in the declining in quality theatre of the 1880s and 90s. The most notable of these plays, already in five acts so that they were meant as a main performance of the evening, were written by Edward Bulwer Lytton *Virginius* and *Richelieu*, performed by William Charles Macready at Covet Garden in 1837 and 1839 respectively (Mayer, *Encountering…*, 156-158). The 1850s and 60s were dominated by the works of "the most conspicuous English dramatist of the 19th century" as *The New York Times* described Dion Boucicault, a native of Ireland, after his death in 1890. He was the first actor-playwright-manager known internationally, as he often preformed his plays first in America, then showed them both in New York, London and English provinces, a practice undertaken later by the actor-manager Wilson Barrett. He set the standard for the construction of melodrama with five acts and a

sensation scene closing the fifth act, with the remaining last one as a necessary resolution of the play, a model that will be still visible in such toga plays as *Claudian* (of course later, the number of acts varied). He was most famous for introducing the sensation episode in his plays, for which he devised special machinery that could produce the effects, something that later melodramatic Victorian stage improved even more. As David Mayer notes, the variety of machinery-supported sensational effects was great:

> His plays are remembered for a burning tenement, a last-minute rescue of the heroine from under the wheels of an oncoming London Underground train, the relief of a garrison from the revenge of India-mutineers, an Oxford–Cambridge rowing regatta, horse-racing with live animals, racing and exploding Mississippi side-wheelers, an escape from a British military prison with a precarious ascent on vines to the sea-cliffs above, and near-murder-by-drowning. (Mayer, Encountering…, 158)

Boucicault's most famous plays include *London Assurance* (1841) – first major success in London, *The Corsican Brothers* (1852), an adaptation of a French play, *The Phantom* (1856), *The Poor of New York* (1857), *The Colleen Bawn* (1860) and *The Shaughraun* (1874).

The subsequent times from the 1870s followed the characteristics of the genre developed by Boucicault, with the most conspicuous adjustment of more complicated psychology of the main hero, who became an internally divided hero-villain, trying to overcome his faults along the way. It was a time when Henry Irving rose to fame as an actor, Drury Lane became known for their own specific types of plays with elaborate settings, large casts and astounding sensation effects, and the melodramas by Wilson Barrett like *The Lights o' London*, *The Silver King*, and then *Claudian*, appeared. The late Victorian society plays are of course also a variation of the melodramatic form. The melodramas from that time often presented the morally-challenged hero, but with an ending where "justice and equilibrium are eventually restored, virtue triumphs, but the processes of negotiating the 'happy' ending exposes the spectator to his willingness to tolerate, and even relish, evil and the suffering of the innocent" (Mayer,

Encountering…, 160).

David Mayer notices that melodrama has always been concerned with the issues close to people of the given times, it offered "a brief, palatable, non-threatening metaphor which enables an audience to approach and contemplate at close range matters which are otherwise disturbing to discuss," it allowed the commentary of the full of changes turbulent Victorian times (Mayer, *Encountering*…, 147). He notes that while British melodramas most often tackled the issues concerning different classes of society, their status and anxieties, American melodramas investigated the questions of race and national origin, which will be apparent in the examples of toga plays I analyse – the British ones – *The Cup*, *Claudian* and *The Sign of the Cross*, and *Ben-Hur* adapted from the American novel to its theatrical version by American playwright, William Young. The historical setting, the love of archaeological detail in designs of architecture and costumes may seem peculiar [3] in comparison with the widest category of melodramas which presented the social issues of contemporary Victorian Britain, but as I discuss in Chapter I, the historical setting was just a veneer only slightly covering the allusions to present times. Besides, as Mayer notes, "Melodramas, however much they would seem to be offering a narrative distant from our daily lives, however much they might be labelled "escapist," are always about something far more immediate, even if we fail to recognize what that something is" (*Encountering…*, 146). It is even more understandable why the historical setting of ancient Rome, in later toga plays mostly concerning the persecutions of Christians, appeared in the melodramatic genre when we read the definition of melodrama that Mayer provides:

> Melodrama, then, is a theatrical or literary response to a world where things are seen to go wrong, where ideas of secular and divine justice and recompense are not always met, where suffering is not always acknowledged, and where the

[3] It definitely may seem so at first, as the times of ancient Greeks and Roman are very distant, but when one thinks about the variety of sub-genres of melodrama – gothic, nautical, urban, prison, sensation and so on, it is much less surprising.

> explanations for wrong, injustice, and suffering are not altogether understandable. Melodrama tries to respond with emotional, rather than intellectual, answers to a world where explanations of why there is pain and chaos and discord are flawed or deeply and logically inconsistent, where there are all-too-visible discrepancies between readily observed calamities and palliative answers… Melodrama also addresses, more simply, people… finding their way in a rapidly changing, increasingly urban world. It offers them emotional satisfactions and emotionally validates the factual world as they have experienced it. (*Encountering…*, 148)

Because melodrama is a commentary on the present world and an attempt to explain the wrongs done to ordinary people, it incorporates quite simple means of expression. There is always the collision of good and evil, which are pretty simply characterized, rarely with some ambiguity, and hence the characters symbolizing the right or wrong behaviours are stock characters, especially in melodramas reaching up till the 1860s, in the later ones of course there is still some trace of them. The characters are always the hero and heroine, with their group of supporting characters like family members, friends and servants, and the main villain with his accomplices among whom there is often a villainous woman, in the case of toga plays often the temptress type, and also some comic supporting character. Mayer observes that the source of trouble of the main hero and heroine are either a current social problem (war, military or naval service, economic depression, agricultural blight, disruptive industrialization, unemployment or poverty, the difficulties of life in foreign lands) or the acts of the villain, who was a crucial aspect of the "villain-driven" melodramatic plays. The villain served as a help to "dispel or disguise unresolvable contradictions and conspicuous incongruities," that is helped to tame the problems of the present world he was associated with (Mayer, *Encountering…*, 150-151). I would add the fact that the centre of melodramatic story usually revolves around the romance of the hero and heroine, which refers to the most recognizable among the viewers human emotion – love. The romantic story is contraposed to the acts of the villain and the harsh circumstances of the protagonists' world, which they have to overcome in order to let the love be fulfilled. In the melodrama of the first half of the century, the morality of the main hero

was rather impeccable, he overcame the power of the villain and even after the hardships he went through, he ended up victorious and very little changed, in contrast with tragic plays (*Encountering…*, 149). As the morally perfect hero had limited possibilities of expression, he was later changed into "the morally fallible hero" (Mayer, *Encountering…*, 150), who had to overcome his moral flaws. This is undeniably characteristic of the protagonists of toga plays. Their struggles with the moral decay both of their own character as well as the world they belong to was a crucial motif, they often had to sacrifice their happiness and life for the sake of heavenly redemption, which made those plays close to tragedies.

In an Introduction to his book, M. W. Disher noted that the most apparent feature of the nineteenth century melodrama, next to scenic superficialities (sometimes coming to a level of absurd) and realism (to the point of reproducing both scandalous topics taken from the newspapers' reports and the insignificant details of ordinary homes), is moralizing. As he wittingly observes:

> Shakespeare's audiences liked blood, Restoration wits preferred sex eighteenth-century exquisites favoured sentiment and Victorians demanded morals. Midway through the nineteenth century the theatres of London, Paris, and New York were over-whelmingly devoted to the display of virtue in conflict with vice. Authors depicted the struggle in novels and artists in pictures; it was the dominant theme of the age. (xiii)

It has to be remembered that an important element of melodrama was the use of incidental music, which is stated in the very name of the genre – *melodrame* came to the English language from French, which in turn translated the Greek *melos* (melody). When melodrama entered the patent English theatres like Covet Garden and Drury Lane, it was practiced as a musical afterpiece to follow the performance of legitimate drama. Music in melodrama served, together with dialogue and sound effects as integral part of the dramatic ethos, which also makes melodrama an obvious source to be later used in first sound films (Pisani, 95-96). In toga plays, the music played a crucial role, the best example being the published hymn "Shepherd of Souls" from *The Sign of The*

Cross, sold in many copies at the theatre foyer. In David Mayer's crucial book with the published texts of toga plays, there is a short essay by Katherine Preston on the music used in toga dramas, based on the existing material evidence, which is not very substantial. Preston notes that the music played by theatre orchestras as a background to characters' speeches or accompaniment to the silent events, most notably *tableaux vivants*, was another artistic means to guide the audience through the dramatic events and their tone. Usually, specific musical motifs were assigned to particular characters or types of scenes, for instance the scenes with the Christians are usually accompanied by the hymns and the Romans appear with either frivolous or ominous music (Preston, 23-24). This will be also used in later toga movies as for instance in *Ben-Hur*, where the scenes from the life of Christ will be accompanied by a characteristic minimal pipe-organ music called "Jesus theme."

Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, writing on the relations between early cinema and late nineteenth century theatre, quote some earlier analyses that enumerate the types of popular theatrical genres in Britain and America that were prefect to be taken over by early films, as they all greatly focused on the visuals: "the popular sensational drama usually known as 'melodrama,' its principal example being Dion Boucicault, the 'archaeological' costume drama of Charles Kean, the pantomime or *féerie*, and the more respectable spectacle drama of Henry Irving and David Belasco" (qtd. in Brewster and Jacobs, 6). This summary of popular nineteenth century theatrical genres can almost serve as an overview of popular Victorian theatre up till the Aesthetic and Decadent movement, maybe only with the omission of the so-called society plays or problem-plays of Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones. And it is interesting to observe what the place of toga plays in this picture of popular theatre is. The plays are hidden in between the above-mentioned movements and can be seen as a bridge, or hybrid, between a few of them. The elements of the first mentioned sensational melodrama can

be found in toga plays, or at least were clearly an inspiration for their own spectacle. Interestingly, the dramas of Irving, who is of course being mentioned as the most known Victorian actor-manager, are described by two words: "respectable" and "spectacle," and that is precisely what Wilson Barrett, only a few years younger than Irving, with the critical support of John Ruskin, wanted to achieve by realising his series of toga plays. Producing a respectable play was a far greater challenge than producing a spectacle, which had been on the Victorian stage since the already mentioned Dion Boucicault. The 1880s and 90s were the times where the lower kinds of entertainment were long-rooted on Victorian stage, hence the respectability that would draw more reputable audience to theatre was achieved by choosing the 'archaeological' costume and historical topic. The history plays, referred to in the quoted fragment from Brewster and Jacobs's book, were the dramas produced by Charles Kean, at that time more famous than Barrett, and they were mostly his adaptations of Shakespeare's history plays, which only proves that toga plays were one of a kind, a specific Victorian theatre creation, unfortunately not as widely discussed as the Victorian classics mentioned in the quote.

Another common characteristic of the Victorian theatre, the key to the toga play genre, often realised in melodramas but also in Shakespearian's productions was spectacle, with which the Victorian stage brimmed to the full. It was a certain combination of art and realism, as Michael Booth explains in his book on that topic, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910,* which was characterized by framing the theatrical stage "as a painting would be framed, and bringing much stage art close to the art of painting" with "the content of the frame as life-like as possible" (16). He asserts that it sounds like an artistic paradox, the combination of artistic illusion and realism, but it appears at its most extreme in the Victorian theatre. The reason why "a fondness of spectacle was not in origin exclusively East End or West End, working and lower middle class on the other hand, or upper middle class and fashionable on the other" but

was “a homogenous, a ubiquitous taste that had nothing to do with income levels, employment, living conditions, or class position” (Booth, *Victorian Spectacular…,* 3) lay in the conditions of Victorian times, and the visual culture that started to be present everywhere. The urbanization and hence the monumental and ornamented urban architecture with the more and more widespread use of glass (and its peepshow quality) and the gas-lighted streets and thus better seen window displays, the inventions such as stereoscope and diorama, the illustrations seen in books, travel guides, magazines (the first proper illustrated magazine being the *Illustrated London News* from 1842), reproductions by steel engravings and prints, the camera in professional use from 1840s and the first exhibitions of photographs were all the visual stimuli exerting its influence over people who craved to see even more exact visual representations in their everyday and cultural life (Booth, *Victorian Spectacular…,* 3-14). The popularity of painting and their own spectacular realisations were of course one of the most important factors in shaping the craving for spectacle among Victorian people. The popular paintings by John Martin presenting the vast and apocalyptic scenes taken from Bible with minute figures of people placed in imposing landscapes, and then the different in tone, but also the spectacular in scale works by William Powell Frith who specialised in genre subjects and panoramic narrative works of life in the Victorian era (both artists extremely popular and widely reproduced), were the examples of spectacular painting, theatrical in nature (Booth, *Victorian Spectacular…,* 12-13). In theatre there was a widespread practice of realising famous paintings on stage, which eventually transformed into the use of the *tableaux vivant*, which ended the scenes before the closing of an act. As Booth notices, the audience immediately recognized the painting and applauded the resemblance rather than its stage performance (*Victorian Spectacular…,* 10). It all resulted in the fact that “to look at the stage as if it were a picture was by 1850 an automatic response in audiences, and to make performance resemble painting was a

habit of managers and staff" (Booth, *Victorian Spectacular…,* 10). The historical settings of toga plays in theatre are part of the demand for realism permeating the Victorian art and drama, with William Edward Godwin, who worked on the setting for *The Cup* and *Claudian*, as the most extreme and the most dedicated of archaeological advisers for theatre, who said that the play-goers attend theatre "to witness such performances that will place us as nearly as possible as spectators of the original scene or of the thing represented, and this result is only obtainable where accuracy in every particular is secured" (qtd. in Booth, *Victorian Spectacular…,* 21). The historical setting of toga plays made them probably the most suitable dramas to be filled with spectacular costumes, objects, buildings, lightning, machinery-based sensation scenes and painted sceneries, but the love of spectacle among Victorian audience did not prevent even more inappropriate usages of it, in which "drawing-rooms looked like state reception-rooms in palaces" and "a garden scene opened into visions of park-like beauty" (Booth, *Victorian Spectacular…,* 24).

There were some critical voices stating that the elaborate realism leaves the audience mentally passive as it does not require anything from their imagination and it rises to the foreground of the production while being technically just a background to the actors, their actions and words. The criticism concerned mostly the spectacular productions of Shakespeare which were thought to "leave too little to the imagination" because they were "so splendidly produced" (Booth, *Victorian Spectacular…,* 17). As Michael Booth asserts:

> These voices were, however, those of a minority, a thinking minority certainly, but not at all representative of the great mass of public and journalistic opinion. This mass hailed every new refinement of realism and every further elaboration of spectacle with almost unqualified delight. It was in tune with the visual temper of the age and opposing critics were not. In the nineteenth century only audiences kept theatres in business, and audiences thought as Charles Kean, Irving, and Tree thought. This unity of taste between actor-manager and spectator is one of the most interesting and impressive phenomena of the Victorian theatre; it kept the pictorial and spectacle style going for a very long time, well after critical hostility had been translated into reformist practice, (*Victorian Spectacular…,* 17)

and the opinions like that voiced in 1866 by E.T. Smith, a former manager of Drury Lane that "for a person to bring out merely talking drama, without any action in it, or sensational effects, is useless; the people will not go to that theatre; they will go where there is scenic effect, and mechanical effects to please the eye" (qtd. in Booth, *Victorian Spectacular…,* 2) were the representative of the scale of want for spectacle on the Victorian stage.

The incorporation of visual culture into theatre, caused by all the circumstances (and many more) mentioned by Booth, and the, associated with it, economies of consumption and commodity that were developing throughout the century, were converging in the mainstream of the Victorian theatre, which became thus part of a vibrant popular culture. This phenomenon came to an end, interestingly enough, when some of the theatrical genres, like toga plays, were transferred to cinema. When John Golby and A. W. Purdue discuss the popular forms of leisure in their study entitled *Civilisation of the Crowd: Popular Culture in England, 1750-1900* they describe the early nineteenth century theatre as a mixture of high and popular culture. They report the impressions of a German visitor, Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, traveller and author of books, after visiting different forms of entertainment – pantomime, Shakespearian production and an opera, where for instance, he noted that "popularizing influences were at work modifying the art form of opera in an attempt to make it acceptable to unsophisticated tastes" with the use of popular modern songs in between Mozart's operatic parts (Golby and Purdue, 66). They further describe what follows:

> The world our German visitor was describing was one in which the divisions between high and popular art, between opera and drama on the one hand and spectacle, circus and showmanship on the other had broken down… Excitement, novelty and spectacle became all important. Commercial forces did not replace either the elite or the popular traditions in dramatic entertainment; rather, they mixed them up with a magnificent unconcern for past distinctions and niceties, with the overriding aim of exciting, titillating and enthralling the audience. Shakespeare, melodramas and performing animals did not merely co-exist but intermingled. Patent theatres sought to retain their privileged position behind protective legislation, but were forced to adapt, to anglicise and plebeianise their opera, to set Shakespeare amidst spectacular stage sets and follow him with performing dogs.

(67-68)

Their descriptions of the coarseness and brutality of the theatre audiences up till around 1843[4], as in fact they were shifted from the popular entertainment of fairs to theatres, bear a lot of resemblance to the first American production of *Ben-Hur* as a proto-cinematic show in Coney Island, whose audiences were the same people attending the nearby fun fair attractions, to the dislike of the author's descendants. Of course, Victorian theatre of the second half of the century, and the last twenty or ten years of it, differ substantially from the early one, as it underwent a 'middle class appropriation of leisure' and the divisions between low entertainment for working classes like music hall and more respectable theatre for the middle classes of society became more distinct. Nevertheless, "the theatre links with the music halls and the working classes were to some extent maintained throughout the century" as Golby and Purdue notice (180) and there was "a fluid mixture of genres that drew virtually all classes" (Auerbach, 5). Besides, the change in theatre of the 1880s into a more respectable one is not connected with the tragedies and melodramas, still popular among the poorer classes as Golby and Purdue note (180), but the problem plays of Wilde, Shaw and Pinero. Hence, the melodramas of Wilson Barrett aimed at the educated classes of society are not fully part of the new quality of drama from the 1880s and 90s (described in the present dissertation in Chapter II), but stand somewhere in the middle, much like the Victorian theatre itself. In an essay "Before the curtain" Nina Auerbach describes the popular nature of the Victorian theatre, calling it "a scruffy orphan of high culture" and a perfect example of hybrid media with literature as its collaborator (we have to add painting as

[4] It was the year of the famous Theatre Act, which greatly changed the history of nineteenth century theatrical stage. It allowed the greater number of theatres to be given license, and abolished the monopoly of the few patent houses that could play the spoken drama. It encouraged the development of new theatre buildings, but caused the later division between music halls and theatres. It also regulated, but at the same time strengthened, the office of Lord Chamberlain which gave the licenses, but also could prohibit the performance of plays if he thought "it is fitting for the preservation of good manners, decorum or of the public peace so to do". The censorship powers of Lord Chamberlain were lifted in 1968 (Trussler, 225).

another one as well) which served audiences to understand the world, the closest of all Victorian art forms to becoming a universal language, providing a common audience with common visions, similar to what early cinema claimed to be (3-6). She notes that theatre was in the centre of the nineteenth century Victorian culture, hence it was "despite the prevailing antitheatricalism of official high culture – perhaps the most widespread arena of popular culture" (4). She points to the 1890s, in a manner similar to all theatre historians, that theatre "grew ashamed of mere popularity and aspired to high art" with the works of the reformists such as H.Ibsen, W.Archer and G.B.Shaw and lost its unity and universality, becoming an elitist art (6).

What I find interesting about toga plays is that they tried to satisfy all kinds of audiences (the popular audience, and also the more respectable one, but not so elitist as the one that enjoyed the New Drama) and that they, it seems, have not yet been properly analysed and understood. I want to attempt to answer the question of what made toga plays popular and why they eventually lost this popularity and are now largely forgotten. Having in mind that toga plays were in fact bridging the popular and high culture with their use of both popular means of theatrical expression as well as more elevated ones I want to show the elements of both in them, hence a lot of my study has a theatre studies approach where I place the toga dramas within the wider culture of the Victorian era, investigating its use of re-discovering and re-telling history and making links with painting and literature. Within a very limited number of the published toga play scripts I chose four of toga plays to be analysed – *The Cup* written by Alfred Tennyson and produced by Henry Irving in 1881, *Claudian* written by Henry Hermann and W.G. Wills and produced by Wilson Barrett in 1883, *The Sign of the Cross* written and produced by Wilson Barrett in 1895 and *Ben-Hur* written by William Young and produced by Arthur Collins in 1902. I want to subject them to a close textual analysis, which is scarce when it comes to the topic of toga plays, and also to show them as

examples of spectacle, realism, history, archeology, and pictorialism combined together in a melodramatic genre. The aim of the dissertation is to demonstrate how, taking into considerations the relevant circumstances of the times, tendencies in theatre and the literary sources that shaped them, toga plays became one of the few late-Victorian theatrical genres that left behind the elitist and reformist theatre and entered the popular culture with the help of the film industry.

Chapter I

Literary tradition: The Antiquity in the Nineteenth Century

1.1 Nineteenth century and vogue for antiquity in Europe – historical stylisation and its meanings

The fascination with the antiquity in Victorian times is seen in every aspect of culture and life of the period: the arts (literature, theatre, painting, architecture), social and moral values, and the politics. Not popular on a large scale in the earlier years of the Victorian era, in the 1830s and 40s, nevertheless, from the 1860s to the end of the century, the elements of classical revival could be observed in almost every aspect of Victorian art and culture (Wood, 179). This phenomenon corresponded with the general vogue for re-discovering and using antiquity in nineteenth century culture of Europe and North America. Martin M. Winkler notes that the nineteenth century was the time "of a new rise of Rome in the artistic imagination of the West" (136). He observes that even though antiquity had an endured life since the times of Renaissance with the imitations and inspirations that classical art gave to painting, sculpture, poetry, drama and architecture, it was in the nineteenth century when "familiarity with antiquity widened considerably when popular culture discovered the classical past" (136). For him, the examples of the typically nineteenth century usage of classical past in the sphere of popular culture are the middle or low-brow, as he describes them, historical novels like *Ben-Hur* and toga plays. Winkler also notes that "the visual and literary arts in both high and low culture have always combined fact with fiction when their subject was history, particularly a distant past not easily recovered," (136) suggesting that especially the nineteenth century usage of antiquity was a peculiar one, with frequent allusions to modern-day issues, which also will be the subject of this chapter.

The greatest reason for the interest in ancient cultures that was common in the whole of Europe, but also in the United States, were many excavations and discoveries of famous ancient cities that were capturing people's imagination through many years. A lot of discoveries and excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum, and also in the ancient Troy and Mycenae and Knossos occurred throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the times when archaeological excavations on a larger scale started and archaeology was developing as a science (Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 10-19). In 1866 the British Museum created a separate department of Egyptian and Oriental Antiquities, which organised many popular with Victorians exhibitions and events. In 1879 the British School of Archaeology in Athens was founded and in 1885 Oxford University established a chair of Classical Archaeology (Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 12-16).

One of the landmark discoveries for the nineteenth century cultural world were the excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum. The quiet and undistinguished within the Roman Empire, up to the day of the volcanic eruption, mercantile port cities shaped a great deal of nineteenth century literature when their treasures telling the stories of an ancient life were being gradually uncovered. The first bigger and more advanced in method archaeological works on the site took place when both general Joaquin Murat, the King of Naples from the times of the French occupation of the region, and his wife Caroline who was one of Napoleon's sisters took special interest in the digging (Moormann, 48). As Eric M. Moormann points out in his book *Pompeii's Ashes: The Reception of the Cities Buried by Vesuvius in Literature, Music, and Drama*, especially the uncovering of the forum with its public and secular buildings – the Temple of Jupiter (later popular place used in novels), Temple of Apollo, Temple of Fortuna of Augustus, macellum (an indoor market), and a market place – "boosted Pompeii's popularity" (50). Foreign researchers were granted permissions to work in Pompeii and

Eric M. Moorman notices that in the nineteenth century the ruins of the city were "a crucial scholarly stop." He explains that:

> The digs transmitted real life from the past directly to the present, and invited visitors to Pompeii and readers of publications concerning it to reflect on the destiny of this ancient town and of their own cities. Studies in urbanization in an urbanizing society like that of the nineteenth century often referred to Pompeii. Its value clearly surpassed that of the old curiosity shop it had been in the previous century (52).

During the ongoing excavations in Pompeii there started to appear publications about the discoveries, first for other scholars, then for tourists. The 1820s saw the publication of two first scholarly works, which, however, were also very popular and impressive. The first was a series of four folios written by French researcher François Mazois, who spent twelve years working among the ruins of Pompeii to write his work describing all of the uncovered Pompeian architecture. At the same time, there appeared the first guidebook called *Pompeiana* written by Sir William Gell, who had to add a supplement in 1822 when his book turned out to be very popular. Both works served as the main source for many fiction writers and served as a model for later publications (Moormann, 55-57). Other books of course followed, fulfilling the demand for knowledge about the cities. They described not only the architecture, but very often gave accounts of daily life in ancient times. Later books also included sets of Latin inscriptions from Pompeii's numerous wall painting, which were of great interest of tourists and literary authors, as they provided information about real life in ancient times (Moormann, 61). Around the1850s there was an increasing need for a smaller format books that could be used by tourists and a 1864 work by Frenchman Marc Monnier turned out to be very popular and translated into many languages. It was written in a very literary language, even comparing the destruction of Pompeii to Sodom being punished by Heaven, full of passion for the subject, sentimentalism and "longing for contact with re-enacting of the past" (Moormann, 57-58). It was not uncommon for authors of these publications to add their comments on the self-induced

destruction of Pompeii because of indulging in sinful pleasures and on the subsequent fall of the whole of Roman Empire (Moormann, 60).

The second, after Pompeii, most captivating discovery was the finding of the mythical Troy and Mycenae. Very well-known from Homer's *Iliad,* it was a tempting aim for many archaeologists, since, contrary to the situation in Pompeii, the exact place of the city of Troy was still unfound and what is more, some scholars heavily doubted its real existence. The man who proved them wrong was German businessman and pioneer in the field of archaeology Heinrich Schliemann, who started his work in the 1870s. The results were the excavations at Hisarlik in modern Turkey, the place suggested to him by an English amateur archaeologist who started digging there a few years earlier, believing it to be the place of the ancient Troy. During his activity up till 1890s Schliemann proved it to be true[5] and also made many discoveries in the cities of Mycenae and Tiryns. Very engaged in his goal to find the Homer's Troy he published his findings and thoughts in very graphically written books *Mycenae*, *Ilios* and *Tiryns*. When from 1873 he found a few graves, one of them he believed to be of King Agamemnon, full of treasures he readily called some of them "Priam's treasure," "Mask of Agamemnon" and "Jewels of Helen," the names that stuck to this day although it was proved later that the treasures date to around 400 years before the Trojan War (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 12-13). There is a famous photograph of Schliemann's Greek wife, Sophia, presenting the jewellery from "Priam's treasure" including the gold diadem called the "Jewels of Helen." The photo, willingly published by the press, must have had a profound effect on the viewer:

> Not only can one see King Priam in the newspaper, but it is also personalized by Sofia Schliemann. His wife, who aims to look royally under all the earrings, chains and bracelets, embodies the remote past in the presence of a daily newspaper. The

[5] He found the third layer called by archaeologists Troy III, as throughout centuries there were cities built on the remnants of the destroyed ones, while it was later discovered that the Troy of Homer's Iliad was probably Troy VI.

> photo not only stylized the Schliemanns into the archeological heroes of the time, but also brought Homer's world into the entertainment and popular culture of the nineteenth century. The ancient world could now be worn as a fashion accessory. The picture made people want to have such jewellery. The effect was much like a fashion magazine's. In Schliemann's *Vogue* of ancient history, the past was no longer a remote and sacred time; it could be seen, touched, and even worn. (Maurer, 312)

Using such names with the fictional elements in them, shows that Schliemann wanted to stimulate people's imagination and make ancient history as close to present day as possible (Maurer, 311). The pair's son, born in 1878, was named Agamemnon and as Kathrin Maurer observes, Schliemann's "obsession to excavate Troy, to his graecophile lifestyle with his wife and his children Andromache and Agamemnon, [he] made himself into an archeological legend during his lifetime" (303). Schliemann's unconventional methods of work deserve brief mentioning, as the fact that he "shaped his life and work into a spectacle" and "thus, broke with the historicist tradition of 'grand narrative' in representing the ancient Greek past and opened up new non-narrative conceptions of history in the field of archaeology," as Kathrin Maurer describes in an article "Archeology as Spectacle: Heinrich Schliemann's Media of Excavation" (303) may have shown a way to re-create the ancient past in a way that suited the nineteenth century artists in their works and even private life. Some Victorian painters, for instance, were known for collecting artefacts from ancient ruins, and had their homes designed in antique style. Schliemann's approach may have been highly influential as it consisted not merely in putting on a show, but in "a vital rhetorical strategy in his scholarly writing and interpretation of history" (Maurer, 303). Thanks to his methods of using popular sources for the distribution of knowledge such as travel guides, easily accessible for people from all classes, descriptions of landscapes in the aesthetic style of panorama paintings, and photographs (named as if they really were connected with the heroes of Homer's works). He was indeed a pioneer of their use in archaeological research. Therefore:

> instead of representing history as a *grand narrative*, which tells about the past of ancient Troy under the auspices of temporality, teleology, and continuity, Schliemann's spectacle promoted a different view: the spectacle showed ancient Greece as a location shaped by the gaze of a modern tourist and, in this way, conveyed a sense of presence, availability, and accessibility. (304)

Since the vogue for antiquity reached most European countries like Germany, France, and Great Britain, and aroused interest in history, presented as having a high propinquity with modern times, it is not too startling to say that "the Victorian classical revival was much more Victorian than classical. It tells us more about Victorian, and Edwardian, England than it does about ancient Greece or Rome" (Wood, 178). In fact, it was "a reinterpretation of a potent literary, artistic and historical tradition," (Wood, 178) which allowed the artists to have their own take on it. Christopher Wood asserts that the sources of the popularity of the antiquity could be also found in school education which was filled with studying classical authors and classical history. He notes that one of the favourite authors of the Victorians was Homer and his two epic poems – the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They admired Homer's works and his noble and heroic characters and generally considered him "healthy, manly, and wholesome, three favourite Victorian adjectives" (Wood, 178). Interestingly, Wood notices that the refined Victorians did not mind the topic of war topic, full of violence and bloodshed as it was, because they "feared violence less much less than they feared decadence," (178) in their own times and to show how they fear it they used the example of the Roman Empire.

The importance of studying Greek and Latin and some changes concerning it throughout the century are briefly discussed by Christopher A. Stray in an article "Culture and Discipline: Classics and Society in Victorian England." He notes that starting from the late eighteenth century, when the provincial grammar schools were being replaced by more modern boarding schools for more bourgeois parts of society that was getting wealthier, the curriculum was almost totally dominated by the study of classics. He further describes the significance of classics:

> English, Latin and Greek formed a hierarchy which was both linguistic and social. Latin occupied a middling position quite widely accessible; Greek offered the means of a higher social and cultural distinction. Latin, once necessary for communication and now redefined as the symbol of learning, provided a resource, something with which one could make a point; Greek was a topic, something one learned about. (79)

The good knowledge of the classics, incomparable with our present times, remained a feature throughout the nineteenth century, but there were some significant changes on the way. As Christopher A. Stray observes, after some educational reforms in the 1850s and generally in the second half of the century "the relaxed amateur practice of gentlemen gave way to the methodical and disciplined pursuit of knowledge by professional scholars," (81) and apart from studying literary texts, there appeared the study of history and archeology, the scholarship became more specialized, and "the study of Roman civilization emerged from the shadow of Hellenism" (82). But generally, as the century advanced, Stray concludes that the position of classics in education slowly, but gradually diminished: "as the literary taste of the liberally-educated gentlemen gave way to the disciplinary authority of systematic learning, it became marginalised in English high culture, an academic subject among many others, though still trailing clouds of cultural glory" (82). The fact that being knowledgeable in classics was for long associated with high culture is particularly relevant to the topic of toga plays, as this quality added to their air of respectability. Also, knowing that the place of classical knowledge was still central particularly among upper-middle classes, but already affected by the numerous social and economic changes of the century, it is easier to understand why John Ruskin and some other critics marvelled so much at the possibility of a series of dramas on late Victorian stage that would provide some artistic and classical, or at least historical, education to a wide number of people.

There is no surprise that British Empire, gradually gaining in strength through its colonies, the industrialization and development of technology, and the powerful and uniting figure of a monarch, compared itself to the ancient empires, especially the

Roman Empire. In order for people to feel like being part of a huge common Empire there had to be strong unifying forces in Britain. Jeffrey Richards in his study on Victorian and Edwardian theatre points to the fact that despite many differences and division between Scotland, Wales, Ireland and England there was a strongly developing feeling of nationalism concerning the whole of the United Kingdom. He points to national political system, fast developing lines of railway throughout the cities and provinces, national time standard, newspapers, sporting leagues and the British Imperial Army with governors ruling over different colonies as the key uniting factors, which all led to "the empire being seen as distinctively British rather than specifically English" and the emergence of "a genuinely British culture" (*The Ancient World*…, 3-4). The proof of the national spirit was also the idea of creating the National Theatre, which I discuss briefly in Chapter II. Crucial in creating a coherent British society, according to Richards, were religion and, related to it, popular moral conduct. Evangelical Protestantism encouraged puritanism, but also promoted philanthropy, education and diligence. What Richards sees as part of moral conduct, in my opinion arising naturally from religion, was the popularity of chivalry revived thanks to Sir Walter Scott's works set in different historical settings and encouraged by such writers as John Ruskin. The chivalric conduct helped to create the idea of an English gentleman, which at that time spread form the higher classes of society to the rest of society through arts, schooling system and sport ethos, generally through popular culture. This enabled the British people to see themselves as having a greater goal in spreading their culture and in their care over the distant lands of the British Empire and also as having a mission comparable to that of the successful Roman Empire from the ancient past (Richards, *The Ancient World*…, 4-6). In the second half of the century, the values of the Victorian world were completely formed, and the sense of wealth, prosperity, order and power of the Empire gave the average middle and upper classes a strong belief in their country

and their own strength. As Jeremy Mass notes in the chapter devoted to neo-classical painting, the Victorian public wanted to see in the arts the images "which mirrored its affluence, sturdiness and sense of justice, its power and its aspirations. And what better reflected its sublime self-assurance than the passion for the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome?" (177).

On the other hand, the lesson that could be learnt from the rise and the fall of the ancient empires prompted different readings of the comparison between Victorians and ancient civilisations. As Jeffrey Richards puts it,

> The Ancient World could be used to represent an escape from an increasingly urbanized and industrialized present to an idealized golden age. It could constitute a vehicle to critique the present. It fulfilled a continuing nineteenth-century taste for the exotic, for spectacle and for education. It could be used to explore the roots of national, communal, individual and gender identity (*The Ancient World*…, 1).

The first ancient empire that spoke to the minds of the Victorians was undoubtedly the Ancient Rome mostly through comparisons made from political and economic perspective. As Jeffrey Richards observes, "the British admired the Romans for their stoicism, their courage, their administration and their legal system, their concept of citizenship, their straight roads, bridges and aqueducts, their common currency and common language" (*The Ancient World*…, 7). David Mayer also notices that for the Victorians Roman life was synonymous with "self-sufficiency, deliberate frugality, and intellectual rigour" (*Playing Out…,* 8). He further describes that:

> Roman domestic life was praised for the virtue of its matrons and the rectitude of its patricians. The rhetoric of Victorian imperialism spoke openly and favourably of comparisons to Rome, enlarging upon the idea of a commercial and military British Empire stretching from Canada to the hongs of China to the Cape of Good Hope, governed from an administrative capital city where, from 1897, a ruler styled as 'Empress' reigned over numerous tribute-bearing colonies (*Playing Out…,* 8).

The proof that often parallels were drawn between the history of the ancient Roman Empire and Victorian Britain was given by Martin M. Winkler, who provided a quote from the famous Victorian critic and writer involved in the Aesthetic movement, Walter Pater, who wrote in his largely autobiographical novel *Marius the Epicurean*

(1885) set in the times of emperor Marcus Aurelius that: "That age and our own have much in common – many difficulties and hopes. Let the reader pardon me if here and there I seem to be passing from Marius to his modern representatives – from Rome, to Paris or London" (137).

An apparent proof that the governors of the British Empire, despite obvious differences, such as the fact that their power was founded on modern colonialism, modelled themselves on Rome can be found in the famous historical term *Pax Britannica* (British Peace), which was modelled on the Roman *Pax Romana*[6]. It was a time of relative world peace between 1815 and 1914, a period referred to as Britain's "imperial century," and the time when Britain became the global hegemonic power, including around ten million square miles of territory and 400 million people from the overseas colonies (Parsons, 1-5). Keeping the peace was possible mostly due to the unchallenged power that Britain's Royal Navy had over the fleets of France and the US. The hegemony on maritime trade routes gave Britain enormous economic dominance in the world (Marshall, 32-34). The monuments of old Roman architecture in cities like Bath or Colchester and the remains of the famous Hadrian's Wall often made the Victorian architects turn to neo-classical style in public buildings around the Empire. The famous Roman rhetoric inspired British politicians, the Roman laws, military and civic institutions were often a model, and Benjamin Disraeli, British Prime Minister between 1874-1880, described his imperial policy as *imperium et libertas*. The references were so abundant that in the second decade of the twentieth century appeared comparative studies such as *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* by Lord Cromer, *Greater*

[6] *The Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) was a time of relative peace and order, also referred to as the golden age, that lasted from the reign of Emperor Augustus (27 BC–14 AD) to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161 –180 AD). During this period lasting for around two centuries, the Roman Empire achieved its greatest territorial extent and protected and governed its individual provinces, allowing them to follow their own laws while accepting Roman taxation and military control.

Rome and Greater Britain by Sir Charles Lucas and *The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India* by Sir James Bryce's (Richards, *The Ancient World*…, 7).

Interestingly, the Victorians saw Ancient Rome not only as a place of peace, order and beauty, but they were also strongly aware that the Empire ultimately fell and were seeking reasons for that fall. Treating religion and values deriving from it as their priority in shaping their attitudes towards life, it is not surprising that most thinkers came to the conclusion that the main reason for the fall of Rome was the absence of real Christianity[7], a religion most probably too young for them with plenty of remnants of paganism to be able to hold together the falling civilisation. Jeffrey Richards notices that the Victorians saw other Ancient Rome's flaws such as "the absence of parliamentary democracy and a responsible aristocracy, the existence of slavery, the decay of public spirit, civic virtue and morality, the dominance of sensuality, the employment of mercenaries, the decline of racial purity" (*The Ancient World*…, 8).

David Mayer in his introduction to the analysis of toga plays devotes a lengthy fragment to the popularity of Roman Empire in this theatrical genre and later films. He asserts that the fact that the plays set their action in ancient Rome is strongly connected to the fact that they were created in the last two decades of the nineteenth century (the most famous of them in the last five years of the century) and when they shifted to the early cinema it was the time of the beginning of the new century and later First World War (*Playing Out…*, 7). He mentions three causes for the feeling of uncertainty and shaken values at the end of the century. The first was the appearance of Darwinism that shook the world by choosing a scientific approach based on biological evolution of species, including humans, and their natural selection rather than a religious one and

[7] A crucial influence for this theory was a six-volume work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* written by the English historian Edward Gibbon in 1770s and 80s, in which he attempted to give reasons for the fall of Rome, mostly pointing to gradual loss of civic virtue among its citizens. He also discussed the controversial role of Christianity in it.

greatly weakened the position of the Church in England. The second was the growing force of working classes which resulted in the development of Labour movement and creating trade unions, which were a sign of the growing awareness that people felt of being exploited and oppressed by the ruling classes, and the last being numerous controversial issues concerning imperialism such as imposing the supremacy of white civilisation and claiming certain rights because of it (*Playing Out…*, 12-13). Jeffrey Richards also notes that "there was a widespread sense of crisis in intellectual and elite circles" of British society at the *fin de siècle*, and brings attention to the decadent movement and 'Wildeanism[8],' which produced artworks full of sensuality (*The Ancient World*…, 9-10).

In those times full of unease and less frequently of a hope for a better new reality to come, Rome was "a metaphor with a lengthy history of permitting spectators to meet, confront, and understand their own world" (*Playing Out…*, 7). He also enumerates similar virtues and vices that the Victorians were aware of and neatly summarises:

> In short, Rome for British and North American Victorians was one the 'other' cultures: enticing, distant, unattainable, and strange, but, paradoxically – because aspects of Roman culture and Roman conquest were perceived to resemble comparable elements of British and American life – Rome and its Empire were painfully familiar. Unattainable, Rome was both infinitely desirable and frightening. It simultaneously attracted and repelled (*Playing Out…*, 8).

Mayer further notices that the depiction of Rome in toga plays is mostly focused on its vices. The motifs of corrupted aristocracy and oppressed lower classes were common. The very fact that there were often two clearly opposing forces, most commonly pagan Romans and early Christians, made it clear for the audience that the abuse of power and corruption of elites may lead to a fall. According to Mayer, the Christian element could be interpreted as the Victorian working classes or social and

[8] Oscar Wilde is associated with both the aesthetic, advocating the supremacy of art, and decadent movement, the latter being especially threatening to Victorian morals. His novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was in particular criticized for homosexual allusions and the depiction of decadent behaviours.

radical views, while the Roman one as standing for the official establishment (*Playing Out…,*10). At the same, what allowed toga plays to stay relevant for quite a long time was the specific dualism in enjoying the view of lavish Rome and its rich citizens and, at the same time, sympathizing with Christians. As Mayer puts it,

> it was possible for the spectators to empathize or side with both agonists, to see themselves both as powerful winning Romans and as virtuous Christians. It is characteristic of toga melodrama that, because it never wholly condemns either group and merely identifies individual villains amongst the Romans, it allows audiences to 'have it both ways', to select from both sides, to have knowledge of the world and still retain one's innocence, to believe or not believe, and to expect optimistic solutions (*Playing Out…,*12).

Also Rosemary Barrow notices that it was possible both to admire Romans and enjoy seeing or reading about their lavish pleasures and support and sympathize with the Christian victims, knowing that they have to triumph at the end. The Christian element in both painting, literature and drama was a justification for showing the pleasures of the Empire (the scenes in amphitheatre, banquets) without feeling any guilt about seeing something indecent. Both painters and writers concentrated on the female victims of the persecutions of Christians as it was an ideal cover for showing the female body, helpless and passive. The focus on the beautiful, half-naked female body is mostly seen in painting, but Barrow states that in all of the media the final triumph of Christianity provided the maintaining of moral etiquette. It was impossible to show it in the stories set in pagan Greece, like Wilson Barrett's 1886 play *Clito*, with its lavish festivity scenes with dancing girls, which was berated by critics (*The use of…,* 46-47), probably hence the popularity of Roman topics.

The fact that American nineteenth century society was also the one which marvelled at the history and power of Roman and Greek empires should not be surprising as the United States of America conjured up imperial thoughts just because of the dimension of their lands. Also, being a powerful, but quite a young country in comparison to European nations the fact of seeing themselves as a successor of ancient

Rome was very reassuring and desirable for the Americans. Margaret Malamud in her book *Ancient Rome and Modern America* analyses the allusions to Roman Empire in American politics and culture, and states in the *Introduction* that the "vision of Rome as a virtuous Republic undermined by imperial corruption haunts the American imagination" throughout history (3). American politicians, just as British ones in Victorian times, willingly invoked the Roman Empire in speeches and writing, setting the example of the Roman government in the times of early American Republic up till the twentieth century. Interestingly, in the 1820s and 1830s, there was a view shared by American working classes that they are like the Roman plebeians who were oppressed by the Roman elites for the sake of sustaining the power of the Empire, with the difference that in their case the oppressive system was the developing industrial capitalism (Malamud, 5), a thought also mentioned by David Mayer, as one of the interpretations of the Roman allusions in toga plays. The allusion of the elites and politics as oppressors was relevant through most of the century as nineteenth century was a very turbulent age in American history with the controversial question of slavery in the South and eventually the Civil War (1861-1865). After the turbulent years there appeared, mostly in popular fiction, the same trend as in Europe – descriptions of persecutions of early Christians by Roman oppressors, which replaced the earlier imagery of Rome as an exemplary place of immorality and decadence. In times of the so called Second Great Awakening[9] (that lasted up till 1840s), a time of increased religiosity as a reaction to the increasing materialism, consumerism and American expansionism, the new evangelical Protestant culture keenly admired the resistance of

[9] It was a time of Protestant religious revival in the United States which started around 1795. During this period many churches, mostly Methodist and Baptist, experienced a great increase in membership. Several moral and philanthropic reforms, including temperance and the emancipation of women, as well as the founding of numerous colleges, seminaries, and mission societies across the country were related to this revival (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*).

early Christians and their eventual victory over the pagan Rome. Margaret Malamud explains this "new flavour of religiosity" in the following passage:

> Evangelical Protestants preached that regeneration of the self and salvation of the soul depended on inner faith. This displaced the earlier colonial Puritan and Calvinist emphasis on predestination or the necessity of grace for salvation. Now the matter of salvation was largely in the hearts and minds of individual believers. Thus, at the same time that the nation embraced democracy, salvation was also democratized. On an individual level, there was a concern with sin, hellfire, and redemption and a desire for an experiential knowledge of the Christian God. (124-125)

She asserts that "to this new, increasingly prosperous, generation of Americans, America was exceptional: America's embrace of evangelical Christianity meant that the country could embrace wealth and empire and yet avoid Rome's cycle of imperial decline" (6). By the end of the century America gained new overseas lands, just as Great Britain through the whole nineteenth century, and a new, more "celebratory linking" was drawn between the old and the new Empire. As one of very few researchers, Malamud also notes that in the 1890s, and upon entering into the twentieth century, the visions of Rome changed and corresponded with the appearance of mass and material culture. Having in mind the shift from popular fiction and plays to movies and other type of mass entertainment that she calls "imperial pleasures," she notes that:

> …in mass culture, entertainment entrepreneurs played the role of populist emperors and offered the public voyeuristic access to a sumptuous and titillating realm of imperial pleasures. Imperial pleasures were no longer frowned upon but instead were increasingly to be consumed, enjoyed, and displayed by all classes. (6)

This is of utmost importance in the context of the toga plays and their analysis further in my thesis as they have the qualities of mass culture entertainment combined with references to literary tradition.

In general, just as for the Victorians, in American culture the idea of, in a sense, bringing back the ancient past was not only motivated by the obvious similarities between the past and the present, but also because those similarities provided a very good commentary and lesson about the present issues. Margaret Malamud clearly states that "Rome has been appropriated in order to debate the state of the nation and address

internal tensions and anxieties" (4). She also summarizes the myth of Rome that spoke so well to the minds of Americans and Victorians, and without a shadow of a doubt allows us to see the analogies between the ancient past and the nineteenth century "modern" Empires of Great Britain and then, the growing imperialism of America. She describes:

> The myth, in its simplest form, is this: once there was a virtuous Republic of citizen-farmers who embodied *pietas*, a term that encompasses respect for the patriarchal family, selfless devotion to the laws and traditions of the civic order, and reverence for the gods who watched over the affairs of the family and the Republic. Simplicity, sobriety, frugality, and fortitude were all characteristics of good citizens. Republican virtues and military technology and prowess enabled conquest, and soon the Republic acquired an empire. The acquisition of wealth and imperial power brought in its wake corruption, decadence, and a loss of the qualities that had once made the Republic great. The vices of luxury, materialism, avarice, and a lust for power undermined the social and political fabric of the Republic. And so, the Republic collapsed and dictators then emperors seized power. Corrupt emperors dominated a cowed Senate, and a decadent citizenry ceased to observe and respect the old customs and traditions (3).

Most researchers notice that Ancient Roman Empire first appeared in Victorian novel, then in painting, and painting inspired playwrights who created the toga play genre (e.g. Richards, *The Ancient…*, 8-11). Authors usually chose the times of the Empire rather than the Republic, which allowed them to incorporate the historical figures of notorious Emperors in their novels – Caligula, Nero, Heliogabalus, all of them known for their lives full of indecency. Rosemary Barrow notes that when in 1885 Wilson Barrett produced a play based on Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Junius, or the Household Go*ds which was set in the times of the Roman Republic, the audience was so disappointed by the lack of the lavish setting from decadent times of Empire that they were so used to that the play was withdrawn only after 30 performances (*The use of…,* 23). The period of Roman Emperors was also chosen, because it had good written sources such as the works of Suetonius and Tacitus, but even more importantly because it fascinated people and made perfect villains for the stories. A model in which the protagonists are fictional figures, with the real historical figure of an Emperor among

the characters, is present in vast majority of the popular historical novels (Barrow, *The use of…,* 19-21).

Jeffrey Richards gives the titles of three main novels that were set in the antique world – *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) written by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) by the American writer Lew Wallace, and Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* (1896). He draws attention to the fact that these three most popular nineteenth century novels set in Ancient Rome were written by men of three different nationalities – British, American and Polish, which is undeniable proof of a peculiar vogue for antiquity in the nineteenth century culture. In fact, he notes that around 200 novels depicting Roman life and most of them involving the topics of early Christianity were written between the 1820s and 1918 by British and American authors (*The Ancient…*, 8-12).

Richards gives the most attention to *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which is understandable as it was the first such a successful novel using the topics of decadence of Rome, the appearance of Christianity, treason, love triangle and spectacularly culminated with the main character Glaucus to be ripped by a lion in an arena, which, at the last moment, was prevented by the eruption of Vesuvius. Its very interesting characters are two opposites in the sense of bad and good – Arbaces , an evil Egyptian priest in the cult of Isis who tries to seduce a young girl, Ione, murders her brother and tries to frame Glaucus, and Nydia, a blind slave girl who leads Glaucus and his love, Ione out of Pompeii when the streets are dark due to the eruption. At the end, she commits suicide as her secret love for Glaucus is unrequited, while the couple live happily in Athens as Christians. The character of Nydia became hugely popular, which is unsurprising as she possesses a certain melodramatic quality (her pureness of soul, her blindness and unrequited feelings, and very tragic ending make her very relatable to readers) – as popular as "the little matchstick girl in Andersen's fairy tale," as Eric E.

Moorman wittingly compares (231). An American Neoclassical sculptor Randolph Rogers created a very famous work *Nydia, the Blind Flower Girl of Pompeii* (1853–54); it proved so popular that his studio had to produce more than 77 marble replicas of it (Moorman, 231).

The novel inspired numerous paintings, operas, films, and the famous dramatic outdoor pyrodrama shows that David Mayer brackets as a variation of toga play (*Playing Out…,* 90-95). It is also quite logical that the novel which can be even classified as one of the inspirations for the toga plays and films genre used the history of the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii, proving that the discoveries in the two ancient cities played a crucial role in triggering interest in antiquity among Europeans and Americans. Edward Bulwer-Lytton himself visited the sites in 1832 and used in his novel the real Pompeian places discovered by archaeologists, such as the amphitheatre, the House of the Tragic Poet and of Diomedes, the temple of Isis. He admitted that he was greatly inspired by the painting showing the catastrophic eruption, namely *The Last Day of Pompeii* by the Russian painter Karl Briullov, also painted, in 1833, after its author visit to the archaeological site and expressed his aim to educate (with the retelling of ancient customs, traditions, language, and accuracy of setting) as well as to entertain the readers (*The Ancient…*, 10-11). During Lytton's stay in Italy he met the author of the guidebook *Pompeiana* Sir William Gell and Sir Walter Scott, also passionate about history, and both authors deliberated on the fact that it is a difficult task to bring the antique world to the readers as it is more distant to them in comparison to Middle Ages,[10] which were dominated by Christian culture. They thought that the

[10] In fact, the references to the classical antiquity were also preferred in the times of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, even though the period of the Middle Ages was much closer, taking into consideration the time gap, but thought of as barbarous.

period of early Christianity is the most "civilized" and hence the best for the reader to grasp (Moorman, 225).

Choosing the materials for the novel he stated that his "endeavour has been to select those which would be most attractive to a modern reader; — the customs and superstitions least unfamiliar to him — the shadows that, when reanimated, would present to him such images as, while they represented the past, might be least uninteresting to the speculations of the present" (Bulwer-Lytton, "Preface," vi). The novel is of paramount importance in the context of toga plays as, in Jeffrey Richards words, it was the first to introduce the characteristics of later toga drama – the "archaeological authenticity, emotional truth, visual power and a desire to educate as well as entertain" (*The Ancient…*, 12.) Bulwer-Lytton's clear aim – to educate and entertain the reader – caused quite an interesting style of writing with the use of frequent digressions of the omnipresent narrator which explained the details of the ancient life to the readers and compared it with their present times. The common elements in both societies in the novel were for instance the depiction of the Pompeii Forum shown as comparable to the busy streets of Paris and London, the love for gardening and discussing sports, the need of a ticket to enter the arena just as going to a theatre or opera hall (Moorman, 226-228). Eric E. Moorman puts forward a thought that Bulwer-Lytton juxtaposed the good and bad aspects of Pompeian society with the contemporary English one in order to make the novel closer to an English reader. He explains:

> Bulwer-Lytton contended that most of the bad could still be seen in Italy, primarily around Naples, while most of the good still existed in English society. These comparisons enhance my conviction that the book resonates with the atmosphere of the upper class English society, which is seen as a successor to the Roman upper class. Bulwer-Lytton – and his readers from the same class – would have looked down upon the primitive society of southern Italy, which in their opinion had not developed substantially since Antiquity. The ancient community described in the book barely differs from Bulwer-Lytton's own contemporary milieu (227).

The novel also contains many footnotes providing references to publications about Pompeii and ancient history, but some critics state that it is the novel's romance and sensationalism that won the readers (Moorman, 226). In my view, it was the combination of both elements, the archaeological approach and the romantic story, which was unprecedented up to his times, and fulfilled the author's both goals. Even though criticized by some for antiquarianism and distracting readers from the story by digressions (Moorman, 232-233), from today's perspective it is quite understandable that Bulwer-Lytton chose this type of style as it was the first major work with ancient history as a background, and it enchanted readers so much that many later writers of the century used it as a model for their works.

With regard to this thesis, however, Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis* and its popularity in Europe and America is equally worth analysing, at least in short, and it is due to the fact that *The Sign of the Cross*, the toga play that I will analyse in Chapter III, has a very similar plot and characters and also achieved great popularity[11]. In fact, numerous nineteenth century books and plays dealing with the historical events from the times of Roman Empire could be found, and the motif of a young Roman patrician falling in love with a beautiful Christian woman was also present in a great deal of them. Wacław Lednicki in his book *Henryk Sienkiewicz: A Retrospective Synthesis* notices that "*Quo Vadis?* was born in the period of the so-called neo-Christian trends in Europe. It is the picture of a dying materialistic civilization defeated by two main factors: by its interior degeneration and by the breath of the Gospel" (55-56). The second famous Sienkiewicz's researcher, Mieczysław Giergielewicz, analyses the historical context of the time in which Sienkiewicz wrote his novel, stating that:

[11] The similarities in plot and characters, the question of possible plagiarism concerning almost the same date of publication (the play – 1895 in America, 1896 in London, the novel – from 1895 to 1896) and the acquisition of the rights to stage *Quo Vadis* by Wilson Barrett is discussed in Chapter III "Toga plays."

> Literary works based on the history of the Roman Empire were quite plentiful. Some of them coincided with the growing interest in the origin of Christianity during the Romantic period. Zygmunt Krasinski's tragedy, *Iridion* (1836), introduced a Greek rebel who tried to turn the Christian dissenters against Rome. *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) by Edward Bulwer Lytton was available in Polish and was widely read. Even more popular was *Fabiola* (1854) by Nicholas Wiseman, which was twice translated into Polish and reprinted several times […] Other more renowned works on similar themes were: John Henry Newman's *Callista*, Paul Bereille's *Emilie*, Hermann Geiger's *Lydia*, George J. Whyte-Melville's *The Gladiators*, Rene du Mesnil Marincourt's *Vivia, ou les Martyrs*, and F. N. Farrar's *Darkness and Dawn, a Story of Nero's Days*, as well as two Polish novels *Caprea and Roma* (1860) and *Nero's Rome* (1866) by Jozef I. Kraszewski (Giergielewicz, 127).

Giergielewicz continues with giving examples of the books specifically about the emperor Nero that were popular particularly in Italy and France. In one of *Le martyre de Saint Saturnin's* characters, a novel written by Frederic Soulie, he sees some similarity to the Quo Vadis' character – Chilo. The author of another book, *Mondo antico* (1877), Agostino della Spada even claimed that Sienkiewicz was influenced by his work. He quotes an Italian researcher, F. Giannini, who estimated that from the seventeenth century around thirty-nine Italian plays were written about Nero. Giergielewicz also briefly compares Gustave Flaubert's also immensely popular novel *Salammbô* (1862) with the method of writing a historical novel that Sienkiewicz also used – relying on authentic sources and accurately describing ancient life and customs. *Salammbô* is set in ancient Carthage and written mostly on the basis of a historical source – *Histories* by the Greek historian Polybius. It was praised for the accuracy in describing the ancient times, particularly costumes, and renewed interest in the history and archaeology of the Roman North Africa region. Giergielewicz even calls it "a model for historical novels based on antiquity" and draws attention to the novels two most impressive fragments, similar to *Quo Vadis* – a magnificent banquet and a slaughter of real or avowed enemies (127-128). The main concept of the story, with its heroine, Salammbo, falling in love with one of the worst enemies of her own people, much like Sienkiewicz's Lygia, is also reminiscent of the story of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

What made *Quo Vadis* such a successful book was the chosen topic, the time it was published, and Sienkiewicz's impressive use of historical knowledge based on different historical and literary sources together with vivid language and characters. Giergielewicz asserts that:

> it was the Christian message in *Quo Vadis* which was responsible for its widespread acclaim. With his customary intuition of tire current atmosphere, Sienkiewicz wrote and published this novel at the most opportune moment. At the end of the nineteenth century there was some feeling of general anxiety comparable to tire premonitions and fears at the end of the first millennium. The good news announced by the novelist brought a feeling of optimism which was eagerly awaited. This effect was most vigorous in France, where the date of the French translation coincided precisely with the very end of the stormy nineteenth century (136-137).

Giergielewicz states that there were some critical voices, although definitely in minority. He gives an interesting example of the noted English critic, Sir Edmund William Gosse, who translated and promoted works of Henrik Ibsen in England and encouraged the careers of William Butler Yeats and James Joyce, who perceived the topic of the book as a trope. Although Gosse admired Sienkiewicz for his *Trilogy*, writing in 1897 he expressed prejudice against another work on the Pagan-Christian topic, proving that they were indeed abundant in the nineteenth century literature and arts:

> If I have not read *Quo Vadis*, it is partly because life is short, and partly because I have an invincible dislike to stories written for the purpose of "contrasting the corrupt brilliance of Paganism with the austere and self-reliant teaching of early Christianity." One knows all this business by heart, the orgies, the arena, the Christian maiden with her hair let down her back, the Roman conversion in the nick of time, the glimpse of the 'bloated and sensual figure of the emperor." It all lies outside the pale of literature; it should be reserved for the Marie Corellis[12] and the Wilson Barretts. That Sienkiewicz has taken up this facile theme and that (as I gather from epitomes of his plot) he has treated it in very much the old conventional way, lessens my respect for this talent (qtd. in Giergielewicz, 136-137).

[12] Mary Mackay (pseudonym Marie Corelli) was an author of more than 20 romantic melodramatic novels which mostly dealt with the topics of Christianity, reincarnation, astral projection and mysticism. The book *Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy* (1893), in which her treatment of the Crucifixion was designed to appeal to popular taste made her a best-selling English author. *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), also based on a melodramatic treatment of a religious theme, had an even wider vogue. Throughout her immensely successful career, she was accused of sentimentality and poor taste and often ridiculed by the critics (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).
It is very telling that Gosse juxtaposes Corelli and Barrett, both writing melodramatic works on the topic of early Christianity, with Sienkiewicz whom he deems unworthy of such common topic.

Wacław Lednicki comments on Sienkiewicz's style of writing in this topic stating that "it is well known that Sienkiewicz excelled in his description of the pagan civilisation – this was determined by his artistic inclinations, his own hedonism, his love for the plastic arts and for the beauty of form" (56). In fact, just as Bulwer-Lytton, Sienkiewicz was also inspired by painting, particularly Polish academic painter Henryk Siemiradzki known for depictions of Roman and Greek life like in works "Nero's Torches" and "Christian Dirce". Siemiradzki was also Sienkiewicz's guide during the visit of the author in Rome (Kowalczyk). Sienkiewicz also knew and liked Lewis Wallace's *Ben-Hur* (thanks to him it was printed in Polish journal "Słowo") and his main literary inspirations were Ernest Renan's *Antichrist* and *Rome under Nero* written by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski.

The novel met the widespread approval of the Christian communities, which was not an easy task. When it was published, it was highly praised by Pope Leo XIII (Kowalczyk). In Italy, there were some clerics that condemned it as "morbid art", but most of them admired its educational value, for instance a celebrated preacher, Father Giovanni Semerianni, called it "an apologetic work written in defense of Christianity" in his public lecture published in 1900 (Giergielewicz, 135).

Wacław Lednicki recalls that between years 1895 and 1910 in Europe, America and Russia Sienkiewicz's work were so popular that there was a cultural phenomenon called 'epidemia Sienkiewicziana' (11) and it was the novel *Quo Vadis*, which drew people's attention to his other works (12). Lednicki writes that:

> The names of the heroes of *Quo Vadis?* were given to race horses in Paris; pantomimes, ballets, plays, operas, and movies were based on his novels, and even circus performances found in them a source of inspiration. Belgium smoked *Quo Vadis?* cigars, there are still restaurants in the United States called *Quo Vadis?*; and some Russian anti-Polish books were published in France under the title of *Quo Vadis Polonia?* (11)

Quo Vadis contributed greatly to Sienkiewicz's Nobel Prize in 1905 and was translated into 59 languages[13]. The first translations of the novel were English and Russian and they appeared the same year as the Polish premiere of the book. Next year, twenty editions of *Quo Vadis* were already available in Polish and other languages and the biggest number of reprints (52) appeared in 1900. The year Sienkiewicz died, 1916, the number of copies of *Quo Vadis* sold in the USA exceeded 1.5 million (Kowalczyk). A few films were made based on the novel, the first were two Italian silent films from 1913 and 1924. Because if its educational value, it has been included in the books recommended for American colleges. In Italy, a slightly censored version (without the description of the feast in Nero's palace) was introduced into seminaries (Giergielewicz, 145). In Spain, it became customary to give the novel as a gift to children for their first communion (Kowalczyk). A Swiss radio station organized a series of broadcasts for youth in 1957, based on Sienkiewicz's work (Giergielewicz, 145).

The depiction of Rome in Sienkiewicz's work is very much in accordance with the trends in historical topics in the nineteenth century. With the main figure of the brilliantly portrayed Emperor Nero, who can be a symbol of Rome's decay, debauchery and vainglory, the corrupted Empire stood in opposition to the promising world of early Christians, however, not without some grandeur and awe in portrayal, as was usually the case. Mieczysław Giergielewicz notices that "in the opening chapters the novel suggested that the pagan world portrayed in *Quo Vadis* was doomed and its days were numbered, that it lacked guiding principles, faith and morality, and that it practiced vulgar hedonism. Yet the author attributed to this accursed Rome glamor and magnificence" (129-130).

[13] Until 31st July 2016.

Not only ancient Rome and Greece stimulated the imagination of painters, sculptors, writers, and dramatists of the nineteenth century. Ancient Rome was definitely on the pedestal for Great Britain and America when it comes to identifying as the successors of the great Empire, but ancient Egypt was a close second. Just as in Pompeii, where many excavations were made because of the personal interest of Napoleon's sister, Queen Caroline and her husband, thanks to Napoleon himself[14] and his expedition to Egypt in 1798 there began an interest in exploring the ancient empires of the East. Using the, controversial from today's perspective, method of collecting many artefacts and exporting them out of Egypt, Napoleon's expedition made a breakthrough discovery in finding the Rosetta Stone. Deciphering the parallel texts of inscriptions in Ancient Greek and hieroglyphs, mostly achieved by Jean-François Champollion, and making the results public in 1822 allowed later scholars to understand Egyptian texts. Major archaeological works in Egypt were done after 1850s and in 1866 the British Museum opened a department of Egyptian and Oriental Antiquities. At the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth major British universities had studies in Egyptology (Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 16). The historical event of opening the Suez Canal in 1869 as well as producing Verdi's opera *Aida* at the Cairo Opera House also triggered interest in Egyptian culture. In fact, in the nineteenth century Britain there was a phenomenon called "Egyptomania" that was manifest mostly in architecture and popularity of Egyptian "décor," but also in learning about the customs and history of this ancient Empire. The fact that Egypt was an empire, eventually overshadowed by Rome, was the primary reason for this craze for all thing Egyptian. The monumental architecture (pyramids, obelisks, sarcophagi) was

[14] It is a known fact that also France, in times of Napoleon Bonaparte, referred to the power of Roman Empire, with Napoleon assuming the title of the Emperor of the French and in practice he quite often behaved as if he were a new Roman emperor. In his portraits, he sometimes looks like an Egyptian pharaoh. His son, who never succeeded him, had the title of the King of Rome.

admired by the Victorians who were aware of the imperialism of their own country. Interestingly, it is known that there was an ancient custom of collecting Egyptian obelisks by the conquerors of Egyptian cities, as they were believed to have cosmic power. Romans often brought the pieces of architecture to Rome, "partly as victory trophies but also partly as symbols of the process by which a new and thriving empire in the West was replacing an old, worn-out, decadent empire in the East" (Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 17). The process was in a way repeated by Great Britain in the nineteenth century, which saw itself as a successor of the old fallen empires and thrived on the antique motifs in culture and politics. The Egyptian rituals and religion (mummification, the belief of an afterlife among gods in part-human part-animal form) were teasing the imaginations of people and catered for the interest in exotic and esoteric. The interest in Egyptian culture allowed the development of such cults like Theosophy or Freemasonry (Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 17). Jeffery Richards also notices that Egypt was particularly relevant as it appeared in two most significant cultural points of reference for the Victorians – the Bible and Shakespeare. The biblical story featured Egypt in the tale of Moses and Jews in captivity and Shakespeare used Egypt as one of the settings in his tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra* (*The Ancient World…*, 17-18), which I am going to briefly analyse further in the Chapter.

As mentioned before, the "Egyptomania" was visible primarily in architecture. There was a famous Egyptian Hall built in 1812 in Piccadilly, London, one of the first building in England stylized as an Egyptian temple. It was commissioned by William Bullock, a traveller and antiquarian and was an exhibition hall of many artefacts brought form journeys. The façade was decorated with huge statues of Isis and Osiris. It was later used for popular entertainments and shows associated with magic and spiritualism, earning a nickname of "England's Home of Mystery." The exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1854 featured an Egyptian Court, and the British Museum had an

Egyptian gallery. The second medium popularizing scenes from Egyptian life was painting, mostly the monumental works by John Martin, Edward John Poynter and Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 18).

In literature, the works describing ancient Egypt were not in abundance maybe because the culture did not leave many stories that could inspire like the ones from the Greek and Roman Empire – known from the Bible or the works of Greek and Roman poets like Homer. The power of Egypt lay mostly in the visual imagery of ancient hieroglyphs, monuments and gods, and the customs, interesting, because unknown to the Western European culture. Thus, it will be very interesting to mention, at least briefly, the novel written by another Polish writer of the same period as Sienkiewicz, Bolesław Prus. His seven-hundred page only historical novel, *Pharaoh*, written in 1894–95, serialized in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* between 1895 and 1896, and published in book form in 1897 is quite an unprecedented work. For Christopher Kasparek, the author of many publications on *Pharaoh* and Prus, the novel "remains unique in its kind in world literature as a profound archetypal analysis of the mechanisms of political power" (50). Interestingly, it was published almost the same year as Wilson Barrett's *Sign of the Cross* – 1895, and Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* – 1896. It has been translated into twenty-three languages, the first translation into English was provided by *Quo Vadis's* translator Jeremiah Curtin in 1902, although the translation was highly criticized for bad quality (Kasparek, 49).

The plot is set in the Egypt of 1087–85 BCE in the time of the Twentieth Dynasty[15] and New Kingdom. The main protagonist, Ramses, later Pharaoh Ramses

[15] The historical accuracy of the book is at times a little problematic. Ramses the Twelfth and his son Ramses the Thirteenth, who appear in the novel, did not exist in reality, which makes the book a historical fantasy novel to some extent, rather than a historical novel in the strict sense of the word. On the other hand, there is at least one historical character in Prus's novel, the archpriest Herhor, who really became a pharaoh after the death of Ramses XI and started a new dynasty.

XIII tries to introduce necessary reforms to the country that experiences many difficulties – the increasing wealth of priesthood and elitism of high classes, decreasing native population, debts, and the threat posed by the neighbouring countries. The 22-year-old Ramses concentrates his efforts on winning over the priesthood, especially the High Priest of Amon, Herhor, and later, as a Pharaoh, to push through the reforms blocked by his opponents. Prus wrote one earlier short story about Egypt, 1888's "A Tale of Old Egypt," which is believed to be inspired by real events of his age, namely the two German modern emperors, William I and his successor Frederick III, who tried to reform the country during his short, only ninety-nine day reign. The topics from the short story were later developed in *Pharaoh* (Kasparek, 49). Christopher Kasparek sums up that the book is excellently written, combining a few literary genres: the historical novel, the political and utopian novel of ideas, poetry, chronicle, with some humour (49). Prus used real Egyptian texts as an inspiration and worked them into the novel. The inspiration for the famous Labyrinth[16] that plays a crucial role in the story was taken from its description by Herodotus from fifth century B.C. (Kasparek, 46-47). Prus also used in his novel the name "Suez Canal," which is believed to be inaccurate because even though the canal between the Nile River and the Red Sea existed in Egypt, it had not bear the modern name and is known to be operating a few hundred years earlier than the time of the New Kingdom (Kasparek, 48). Nevertheless, it most probably proves the impact that the contemporary history of this region had on the imagination of writers and artists.

Curiously enough, the writer was an opponent of the historical novels written in his Age. He thought that they are "inevitable distortions of history" and preferred a

[16] The Labyrinth of Egypt, built by Amenemhat III, the ruler during the Twelfth Dynasty was a complex labyrinthine structure that once stood near the foot of the Pyramid of Amenemhat III at Hawara. In Prus' *Pharaoh*, Ramses plans to obtain the treasures that were stored inside it, and use them to finance his reforms.

scientific approach towards arts and discovering reality (Kasparek, 45). He proved his love of science in his 1884 review of Henryk Sienkiewicz's historical novel, *With Fire and Sword*, where he wrote that scientists and artists are "the teachers of humanity… Some of them, whether scientists or artists, only popularize discoveries made by others, while others themselves make discoveries" (qtd. in Kasparek, 45). Christopher Kasparek further proposes that there were two approaches to composing historical novels – first is an attempt of showing a non-falsifiable picture of a past social reality, and the second in which historical accuracy is not a main goal. Bolesław Prus thought that the first approach was unviable, hence he focused on showing universal, also in his times, struggles for power and incorporated a scientific idea proposed by Herbert Spencer and depicted the Egyptian civilisation operating as one organism (49).

For both Sienkiewicz and Prus, although their approaches towards writing historical novels varied, the ancient world was a means of commenting on their own times. Mieczysław Giergielewicz compares this issue in *Quo Vadis* and *Pharaoh*, stating that:

> Prus in *The Pharaoh* tried to demonstrate that some current problems were as old as the Egyptian civilization and that the rules guiding the behavior of mankind remained unchanged. Sienkiewicz believed that there was an analogy between the dissolution and moral chaos of his own epoch, and the Rome of the pre-Christian era. He wanted to show that the same expedient which had revived the ancient world contained hope and promise for his generation (134).

Just as with the Victorians and ancient Rome, which was often a depiction of their contemporary issues and struggles, Sienkiewicz's and Prus' works were interpreted as depicting the political situation of Poland, which was under the partitions and not on the map as an independent country. In *Quo Vadis* the most telling passage is that about the origins of Lygia and her protector Ursus who belonged to the tribe of Lygians[17], the alleged ancestors of the Poles (Giergielewicz, 136). Nero and Rome could be seen as the

[17] Sometimes also called the Lugii, they were mentioned by Roman authors as tribes living in ca. 100 BC–300 AD in Central Europe, covering most of the modern southern and middle Poland.

oppressive dictatorship and the rescuing of Lygia and Ursus in the arena could be the above-mentioned glimmer of hope for the future of Poland. In *Pharaoh*, the declining Egyptian empire was interpreted as "the immediate experiential prototype for its picture of a nation passing into decline was Prus' own country" (Kasparek, 46). Taking into account that Prus himself took part in the 1863 uprising it is even more sure that he used the Egyptian ancient history as a parallel to the Polish one, with the going back in time as a "distance required for a more objective experiencing of the social phenomena described" (Kasparek, 46).

In the nineteenth century there were also excavations in other regions of the East, besides, Egypt, namely the historical lands of Babylonia, Sumeria, and Assyria, but they did not have an influence comparable to Rome, Greece and Egypt. The interest in these places was mostly connected with finding the proof of the ancient cities and cultures described in the Bible, pressured by such scientists as Charles Darwin, who doubted the biblical version of events and preferred the scientific approach. The Palestine Exploration Society created in 1865 even described its aim to investigated "the archaeology, geography, geology and natural history of the Holy Land" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 19). The discoveries in the region of present Israel did not trigger the increased interest in depicting scenes from the Bible in literature and painting. It can be said that in visual arts it at least existed, in Britain the most popular "biblical" painters were, strongly supported by John Ruskin, the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, in particular Holman Hunt, and French painters James Tissot and Gustave Doré, the illustrator of *La Grande Bible de Tours* (Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 20-22). In theatre the biblical subjects were scare due to long history of prejudice of Church towards the amusement of masses on theatricals stages. The prejudice probably would have been of less influence on reality if not for the office of Lord Chamberlain, which guarded the British stage from 1737 to 1968, censoring the

potentially offensive and morally threatening topics (Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 23). I discuss the issue of fighting with the prejudice towards religious topics and the gradual change in attitudes around the 1890s in Chapter II, as most of toga plays used religious topics. It is not surprising as they are part of the vogue for topics related to classical antiquity, its most common story being the times of Nero and persecutions of early Christians.

There was, however, one work that was set in the Holy Land that is definitely worth mentioning as its popularity and influence on theatre and film was comparable to that of *Quo Vadis*. It sparked people's interest in the history of the Holy Land and some editions of the book were illustrated with drawings and photogravures of the particular places mentioned in the story (Malamud, 141). *Ben-Hur*, written by an American author Lew Wallace in 1880, was immensely popular in America and Europe, and similarly to Sienkiewicz's novel, it won the audiences mostly because of its Christian topic, but also the romantic melodramatic elements, which prompted some critics to treat it as "artistic failure" and the audience – to love it (Malamud, 133). The novel is divided into eight books and besides the main story of Judah Ben-Hur, a Jewish nobleman from Jerusalem, it contains a parallel story of Jesus Christ, which brings immediate association with the much later Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* with the difference that in *Ben-Hur* the characters live in the same times, their paths cross and they meet a few times throughout the novel. It is noticeable that Lew Wallace was much more courageous with treating his religious motifs than later English playwrights, Wilson Barrett and Henry Arthur Jones. It was possible for him to intertwine the real biblical theme with the fictional story of Judah because he was writing in America, where the religious circles in the nineteenth century were also strong, but as the history of America shows, the American culture on the whole was slightly more tolerant and more easily adapted to changes than the British one. For Americans, the book earned a special place

in history and literature. It was published after fifteen turbulent years of political and economic changes after the end of American Civil War, which abolished slavery and ended the political division between The Confederacy and the Union and in which Wallace took part himself. As Howard Miller notices in his article "The Charioteer and the Christ: Ben-Hur in America from the Gilded Age to the Culture Wars:"

> It might be argued that if Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) had helped to divide the Union in the 1850s, Wallace's *Ben-Hur* helped to reunite the nation in the years following Reconstruction. The novel resonated with some of the most significant issues in late Victorian culture: gender and family; slavery and freedom; ethnicity and empire; and nationhood and citizenship – all of which emerge from the crucial relationship of Wallace's two protagonists: one of them exemplifying action, striving, and revenge; the other absolute, sacrificial love and redemption. The combination of their stories proved, for more than a century, irresistible (155-156).

The misfortunes of Ben-Hur, whose revenge story is similar to that of Count Monte-Christo by Alexandre Dumas, start when he is falsely accused of an attempt to kill a Roman governor, the accusations made by his childhood friend, now an ambitious Roman officer, Messala. Ben-Hur is sent as a slave to work on a Roman galley while his mother and sister are sent to prison where they eventually contract leprosy. When Ben-Hur marches through the desert to get to the galley for the first time he encounters Jesus Christ, who offers him a drink of water. After some harsh times being a slave, Ben-Hur eventually befriends the ship's commander who adopts him and takes him to Rome. There he trains to be a soldier and charioteer. After the death of his father, he returns to Jerusalem and seeks revenge on Messala. He is also romantically involved with two women – Esther, the modest daughter of Simonides, a wealthy merchant and friend of Ben-Hur's father, and the Egyptian mistress of Messala, Iras. Ben-Hur defeats Messala in a chariot race and his old friend is later killed by Iras. His mother and sister are released out of prison by Pontius Pilate and later cured by Jesus Christ. Gradually becoming a devoted follower of Christ and changing his revenge motives into feelings of forgiveness, Ben-Hur watches the Crucifixion together with his family. The novel

ends with Ben-Hur and Esther living as a Christian family, and when they hear that during Emperor Nero's reign Christians are persecuted, they sail to Rome. There they decide to build the catacomb of Saint Callixtus in Rome, which will serve as a refuge for Christians.

The novel was created in a similar method as *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Quo Vadis* and *Pharaoh* – in order to gain knowledge about the ancient world Lew Wallace Lew Wallace spent years researching the period and based his knowledge on the ancient texts of Plutarch, Tacitus, Josephus, Pliny (Malamud, 139). The result was that his work is "stuffed with details of everyday life in the Roman Empire of the first century – how to drive a chariot, ride a camel, row a Roman trireme – and it provides a vivid description of the manners and customs of the peoples of the multicultural eastern Mediterranean, in particular the Holy Land" (Malamud, 139). The details were so impressive that Wallace was appointed as the US minister to the Ottoman Empire, a representative of the American administration at the Ottoman court, in 1881 (Malamud, 134).

Ben-Hur was one of the first novels to be so warmly received by the clergy. It was recommended from the pulpits of many churches, and Sunday school lessons frequently included readings from it (Malamud, 138). Many readers wrote letters to the author in which they confessed that the book changed them spiritually and they even became missionaries (Malamud, 134). Margaret Malamud also notices, as most of other researchers about the nineteenth century religious novels and plays, that the choice of the religious motif was most probably made as a reaction to Charles Darwin's theories and the discrepancy and tension they caused between the teaching of the Bible and science (139).

Apart from being popular because of the religious topic, the novel won the audience with its adventure and romance. It contained a spectacular element, just as

toga plays, the chariot race (taking up three chapters of the novel), which immediately became popular among readers and viewers of the stage adaptations and films, which it was perfect for. Howard Miller observes that "Judah Ben-Hur at the reins of a chariot [became] the epitome of the heroic action figure, an embodiment of the time in which the novel appeared" (158). Shortly after the novel's publication, the Barnum and Bailey Circus created a "Ben-Hur" chariot race (Malamud, 133), the 1899 stage adaptation written by William Young and performed at the Broadway Theater in New York made the chariot race its main focus, the short 1907 silent film consisted *only* of the chariot race, and the chariot races were the memorable climaxes of the epic films of 1925 and 1959 (Malamud, 138). Just as in the case of *Quo Vadis* mentioned before, various products related to *Ben-Hur's* character and story started to appear in American market place, including The Royal Milling Company of Minneapolis which famously used the dynamic scene of Ben-Hur riding a chariot topped with the words "Ben Hur Flour is in the race to win your favour" in their poster for flour advertisement (H. Miller, 158).

Margaret Malamud presents an interesting thought calling the novel a "popular pulp fiction of the age" (136). She also calls it "the toga Western" because of the revenge motif, a central one in the newly emerging genre of dime Western novels[18]. She explains that:

> *Ben-Hur* was a crossover novel – like the dime novel, it offered in the words of one reviewer plenty of "battle, murder, and sudden death," but it was read by an educated, largely Protestant audience. Through mixing religious pieties with excitement, romance, and adventure the novel broke the last remaining Protestant barriers to fiction (137).

This is very much in accordance with the development of the toga genre in Victorian culture, the genre which won the favour of the audience because of its use of

[18] Dime novel is a type of inexpensive, usually paperback, melodramatic novel of adventure popular in the United States roughly between 1860 and 1915, often with a western theme. It was eventually replaced by pulp magazines. The Victorian penny dreadfuls and shilling shockers are genres similar to the dime novel (*Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*).

spectacle, melodrama and pictorialism with the equivalent aim to be educational and appeal to more educated viewers. It also managed to break the barriers between the church and the stage, which was mostly Wilson Barrett's credit (it will be one of the topics discussed in the next chapter), and was much harder to do in Britain than in America. In my opinion calling the novels set in antiquity and appealing to the readers through adventure, romance, spectacular and turgid scenes (volcanic eruption, solar eclipse etc.), "a pulp" is also very telling and accurate. One of the aims of this thesis is to show that toga plays were quite an unprecedented form of the nineteenth century popular drama that were in fact a hybrid form of traditional literary sources (like the most popular historical novels of the century) combined with and the educational value and the use of mass media and low entertainment techniques, which made them a popular culture phenomenon.

1.2 The great tradition of Shakespeare's Roman Plays – *Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, Anthony and Cleopatra*

The role that Shakespeare played for Victorian audience and artists is the subject of many analyses and is just as peculiar and characteristic as the Victorians' attitude to antiquity presented in the present Chapter. Adrian Poole in the Introduction to the collection of essays entitled *Victorian Shakespeare* notes "how multiple and oblique were the forms in which 'Shakespeare' reached Victorian audiences and readers. Shakespearean stories, characters, sayings were being constantly, as we would now say, re-cycled, often misremembered or turned deliberately to novel effect, both serious and parodic" (6). A good example of the prevalence of Shakespeare in Victorian culture is the popularity of his persona and his plays as topic of different exhibits during the Great Exhibition of 1851. A very telling example was the display of a technical novelty – an electroplate vase presented by a company from Birmingham decorated on its four sides

with statuettes representing Newton, Shakespeare, Bacon and Watt, surmounted by the figure of Prince Albert. Clare Pettitt describes the significance of the exhibit, stating that "Shakespeare is pressed into service alongside scientists and industrialists, as one of the 'authors' of modern Britain" (*Victorian Shakespeare*, 67).

George Taylor in *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre* recalls that many scholars analysed the way Shakespeare was "hacked and plastered" to suit the Victorian stage. He observes that "if 'good theatre' was assumed to be historical intrigue in five acts, with accurate costuming and lavish scenery, then it seemed only natural to edit the playing texts of Shakespeare to accommodate the same format" (174). The popular Victorian theatrical system of actors-managers willingly staged Shakespeare's tragedies, as the heroic characters appealed perfectly to the Victorian taste, and used them as "star vehicles" (Taylor, *Players*…, 176). Interestingly, it were the tragedies in particular that were often successfully staged by the actors-managers, and not the comedies, as "the organization of their theatre and the taste of their audience were ill-suited to presenting the comedies with any kind of 'authenticity'. There is no place in comedy for the sublime…," as George Taylor observes (176-177).

As Shakespeare was definitely perceived as "high art" in Victorian times, all the most popular actor-managers attempted staging and playing Shakespeare's plays and characters. George Taylor's summary of playing Shakespeare shows a few interesting facts. He notes that in the 1880s and 90s, when the provincial touring companies dominated the theatrical system, only a few managements were able to mount Shakespearian productions in long runs, which required a lot of effort, cast, equipment and money. Taylor writes that:

> In London Irving's Lyceum was the only theatre that constantly performed Shakespeare… Wilson Barrett managed a decent run of *Hamlet* at the Princess's in 1884, but, during the nineties, Beerbohm Tree was Irving's only regular rival in London. Both Tree and Irving concentrated on the centrality of their own performances and the scenic splendour of their productions… After the failure of

> Irving's 1888 *Macbeth* – a genuine attempt at a psychological reinterpretation – all his later Shakespeare productions concentrated on scenery… (*Players*…, 193).

The three mentioned actors-managers, Irving, Barrett, and Tree were the major figures in late Victorian theatre and interestingly Irving and Tree staged Shakespeare's history plays – this being their answer to the vogue for antique costume plays – while Barrett, of course producing a few Shakespeare's plays as any major respectable actor-manager, devoted himself to the typical toga plays – newly written texts set in ancient Rome. What they had in common, according to Taylor, was the focus on the visual aspect of their productions. The common style of the late Victorian stage did not miss Shakespeare as well, and even the actors played Shakespearian roles in a way they were used to in other plays – the passionate melodramatic mode (Taylor, *Players*…, 193). Even though there were advocates for the simplistic, like in Elizabethan times, or modernistic, with abstract scenery and focus on lightning, who thought that staging Shakespeare with "too much splendour stifled meaning and the emphasis on the star performer distorted meaning, reducing the other characters to ciphers" (Newey and Richards, 173), the Victorian "pictorial Shakespeare reigned supreme, characterised by spectacle, lavish scene painting and claims of archaeological accuracy and educational value– in other words Ruskinian Shakespeare" (177). Thus, the same values were cultivated in toga plays as well as in the Victorian productions of Shakespeare.

There were three of Shakespeare's six history plays that were set specifically in ancient Rome that enjoyed some interest in Victorian era – *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* that, although set much earlier in history, could teach a lesson about a fall of Empire because of private passions taking over the public duties, and *Antony and Cleopatra* which suited the Victorian craze for all things Egyptian, hence was perfect for showing "visual spectacle and archaeological authenticity" (Newey and Richards, 205-206). Interestingly, his plays *Timon of Athens* about a rich Athenian who becomes

an outcast of a society, and most particularly *Titus Andronicus* with the motif of revenge, often present in toga dramas, which is taken by Tamora, Queen of the Goths on the Roman army general Titus who killed her son, were not popular among the Victorians. Richards notes that only Samuel Phelps tackled the topic of *Timon of Athens,* but *Titus* was not produced in Shakespeare's original version in Britain until 1923. The Victorians found it too bloody and violent (*The Ancient…,* 40).

The approach to classical history in the times of the great English author could be a model for the Victorians. Basing his knowledge on the classics learnt in grammar schools, thanks to the growing number of translations of Greek and Roman works into English and through various reference books Shakespeare could re-create the ancient world in his dramas. People expected to see the world full of myths, entertaining facts and practical information, as generally there was "a deep fascination with classical culture and a serious (though not scholarly) engagement with it" (Miola, 10). The English classicism in the times of Shakespeare was flexible and eclectic in character with a certain amount of disregard for historical accuracy, there were also "classical translations that directly aimed at establishing instructive parallels between ancient history and contemporary politics" (Miola, 9-10). Robert S. Miola in his book devoted to Shakespeare's vision of Rome summarizes:

> Shakespeare's Rome rises and falls… *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare's portrait of Rome divided, skillfully and movingly depicts the city that entangles itself with its strength. The playwright achieves this depiction by balancing audience sympathies and by creating a web of political and moral paradoxes. *Julius Caesar* is Shakespeare's Roman fugue – a contrapuntal composition in which the Caesar theme receives exposition and development by various voices. Each recurrence of the theme reveals new facets and evokes a slightly different response. *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's study of Rome and the world, is his symphony. The play astonishes with its large scope, its sonorous majesty, its variety of mood and emotion. The contrasting Roman and Egyptian movements come to harmony and glorious resolution with the deaths of the lovers. Descending from the heights, Shakespeare's imaginative vision of Rome concludes in *Coriolanus* and *Cymbeline*. To be sure, traces of the former power and control appear in *Coriolanus*, that intellectual and sophisticated exploration of the *urbs*, of the self in society. Yet, the performance as a whole is less satisfying because Shakespeare seems impatient or out of sympathy with his absolute and epic hero… (236-237).

In Victorian times all of those plays were quite unpopular before the revival of

interest at the end of the nineteenth century, which is proved by Jeffrey Richards with the example of *Antony and Cleopatra*. He states that it was one of the least popular and least played Shakespeare's plays before the twentieth century. Between 1660 and 1759 there were no productions, and the 1759 performances at the Garrick Theatre were not successful. In the first half of the nineteenth century there were three London productions with the most successful (because of the leading female actress Isabella Glyn) one from 1849 that was revived in 1855 and 1867. The lavish Victorian productions started in 1873 and then 1890, with the end of the century and five productions between 1897 and 1906 (*John Ruskin…,* 205). The problem with *Antony and Cleopatra* seemed to be the length, its being connected with that many different locations of scenes and its large cast. Because the sets were not treated in a simplistic and more symbolic than realistic way as in Elizabethan times, preparing the different detailed sceneries was definitely a challenge. What is more, some parts of the plot were controversial for the Victorian, and probably earlier, audience (*John Ruskin…,* 205).

Antony and Cleopatra is divided into the action in Alexandria in Ptolemaic Egypt and Roman Republic's Rome and is based on true events from Roman history. It starts with Mark Antony spending time with Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, with whom he is infatuated and neglects his duties in Rome. The plot revolves around the Roman triumvirs[19] – Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Lepidus and their opponent, rebellious Sextus Pompey with romances with the female characters, Cleopatra and Octavia, whom Antony agrees to marry, complicating the action. Getting into disagreement over the war with Sextus, Antony goes back to Alexandria and crowns Cleopatra and himself as rulers of Egypt his share of land of the Roman Republic. His and Cleopatra's fleets

[19] Triumvirate is a term from Roman history. *Triumviri* was popular during the Roman Republic, and was a board of three officials appointed for specific administrative tasks apart from the regular duties of Roman magistrates.

take part in the Battle of Actium, in which they fight with Octavius, but Cleopatra flees and Antony goes after her abandoning his ships. When Antony and Cleopatra lose the second battle, on land, he accuses her of betrayal. In order to win him back she sends a word that she killed herself thinking of him to the last minutes and hopes he will return to see her dead body. However, Antony is so devastated that he tries to kill himself. He is brought to Cleopatra and dies in her arms. As the Queen of the defeated Egypt Cleopatra is held captive and tries to kill herself with a dagger but is stopped. Fearing that she will have to endure a life of humiliation she finally (and famously) manages to kill herself, together with her three maids, with the use of a venomous snake. Seeing this, Octavius is full of conflicting emotions and orders a public military funeral of the couple. As a result of the events, he becomes the first Emperor of Rome.

The division of the play into two locations, both of particular interest for the Victorians, was a good chance to show the differences between the two worlds – Egypt – more exotic, related to emotions and sensuality and unstable, represented by a female Cleopatra, and Rome – linked with the three Roman officials, which could be interpreted as generally male by nature, more pragmatic and reasonable, treating national duty as priority. The central character of Mark Antony also seems to be perfect to demonstrate what the Victorians thought of the fall of Rome and attitude towards duty. He is a figure in between the two worlds, struggling with his emotional side and the duty imposed on him, the neglect of duty ultimately bringing him to failure. Nevertheless, the Victorian audience had some moral doubts when it comes to the plot and the play was not a great success. The doubts were associated with the depiction, and possibly admiration, of illicit sexual passions, the neglect of duties, betrayal and pagan suicides treated as allowable practices (Newey and Richards, 205). When the play was staged in 1890 by Lillie Langtry, it was visually admirable, but as Jeffrey Richards asserts:

> That it was not a play to the taste of Victorian theatregoers is evidenced by veteran Shakespeare watcher Richard Dickins, who wrote 'Antony and Cleopatra may prove successful on the stage if produced as a series of beautiful pictures, but otherwise I think it unlikely to appeal to an average audience on account of the plot being unsympathetic […] we cannot take a keen interest in characters who have fallen so low as to fill us with feelings akin to disgust. The life depicted in Egypt is bestial in its gross animalism' (qtd. in *John Ruskin…,* 206-207).

He also conjures up a famous opinion of one viewer of the production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, who said "So unlike the home life of our own dear Queen" (qtd. in *John Ruskin…,* 207), which shows that to appeal to the Victorian audience with a history play required a skilful combination of showing them things they were familiar with, only in a historic costume, which the toga plays of Wilson Barrett achieved to a great extent.

Julius Caesar and *Coriolanus*, both set in republican Rome, are regarded by Jeffrey Richards as the most popular of Shakespeare's ancient world plays, but with changeable interest during the nineteenth century. Both plays were often staged in the first half of the century – 128 productions of *Coriolanus* and 90 of *Julius Caesar*, while between 1851 and 1900 there were only mostly provincial productions of *Coriolanus* – fifteen times, and *Julius Caesar* – nineteen (*The Ancient World…,* 40). Richards provides an explanation of this lesser interest in the second half of century, writing that:

> The two plays went out of fashion partly because *Coriolanus* centred on class conflict with an arrogant aristocratic hero betraying his country because of his contempt for the plebs, and *Julius Caesar* debated the ethics of political assassination of an unpopular ruler. It was an axiom of actor-managers that politics should on the whole be avoided on the stage. Also by the second half of the nineteenth century other themes were paramount, notably the importance of Christianity to the proper administration of empire and the appropriate role for women in society (*The Ancient World*…, 41).

He further elucidates that it was difficult for the Victorian audience to identify with the main character in *Coriolanus*, as his behaviour was full of pride and temper, which kept the spectators from sympathizing with him, and quotes the *Era's* 1901 article written after Irving's production of the play:

> *Coriolanus* is not one of the most dramatic and interesting of Shakespeare's plays. It has never been popular . . . To a modern audience Coriolanus appears to be an egotistical swashbuckler, with no good quality except personal courage, uncivic, unfeeling, with a vanity which is all the more offensive on account of the mock modesty which he assumes to try to conceal it, and with a colossal selfishness which makes him a social outcast (*The Ancient World*…, 162).

The problem of identifying with the main character was not the main reason why *Julius Caesar* was rarely staged in the second half of the century, but the fact that it had three leading characters (Antony, Brutus and Cassius), and that one of the important figures dies half way through the play, and there is no love interest female role, and as Richards put it, "this flew in the face of Victorian practice which dictated that the actor-manager remain centre-stage throughout" (*The Ancient World…,* 40).

Coriolanus – the story of a great Roman general earning his nickname after a courageous defeat of the city of Corioli, the residence of the Volscian tribe, who is later banished from Rome due to his disagreements with the tribunes over his contempt of plebeians and joins the Volscian army – was staged in the first half of the century by such actors-managers like John Philip Kemble, Edmund Kean, Charles Macready, Samuel Phelps, all trying to avoid the political aspect of the play and emphasizing the character study of Coriolanus, an individual with a wounded pride. With years the settings of the play were becoming more and more authentic to the times of Roman republic and more spectacular. Samuel Phelps stagings in 1850s and 1860s caused a reaction that the play, although set in ancient Rome is thoroughly English, and the tensions between the patricians and plebeians are just like the differences between English aristocracy and English mob (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 46-47), which brings to mind the late century readings of plays set in ancient times. The most famous late-century production of *Coriolanus*, and in fact the next after Phelps', is 1901 Henry Irving's at the Lyceum, which he worked on from the 1880s. Irving concentrated on the motif of the relationship between the son and mother, with the culmination scene when Volumnia, Coriolanus' mother together with his wife and child comes to beg him to spare Rome and make peace after he marches there with the Volscian army. Irving reduced the play to three acts, cut out the battle scenes, but left the scene of triumphal

procession after Coriolanus' victory over the Volscians in Corioli, because it was perfect for spectacle with the use of flowers, palms and chariots. The person responsible for the setting was Lawrence Alma-Tadema, which meant that the play "was destined to be remembered more for its sets and costumes than its performances" (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 163). Tadema assumed that the city of Corioli and Antium were similar to the Etruscan civilisation and used the recent discoveries in that area, and for the Republican Rome he used the knowledge of early Greek architecture, which he assumed were quite similar. He also renounced using imitations of marble, even though he was a master in it, but decided to be more authentic and stuck to wood and brick to convey the vision of early Rome. He definitely succeeded in illustrating the differences between the Roman exteriors and interiors and the scenes in Volscian capital of Antium and received opinions such as – "A visit to *Coriolanus* . . . is a liberal education in the attire, the furniture, the weapons and the architecture of Rome five hundred years before Christ" (*Era*, qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 164) and "thanks . . . to the valuable artistic help of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema for the designing of the Ancient Roman scenes and dresses, Sir Henry has presented the most marvellous stage picture of masses of moving crowds ever seen on any stage" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 165).

Irving's *Coriolanus* was believed to be an answer to a very successful Herbert Beerbohm Tree's production of *Julius Caesar* in 1898. Tree, working until his death in 1917 was a keen advocate of using spectacle in productions of Shakespeare, as these were the resources that Edwardian stage had and in his opinion they added novelty to the dead author's plays. This attitude, and the fact that he was the last living of the great actors-managers who preferred historical plays, made him the target of all the criticism from the modernists (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 169). The plot of *Julius Caesar* has a few powerful characters – Julius Caesar, a Roman general with dictatorial power over Rome, disliked by the tribunes who plot against him, Mark Antony, a friend of Caesar,

who delivers a powerful speech over his dead body and changes the attitude of the crowds, and Brutus and Cassius, the conspirators and assassins of Caesar, who die by suicide during the Battle of Philippi, which they fought with the triumvirate of Antony, Octavius and Lepidus. Even though in earlier productions of the play actors such as Macready, Phelps and John Philip Kemble had played Brutus, a very complex and interesting character who is described after his death by Antony as the only conspirator who acted for the good of Rome, Tree chose to play Antony, as he felt that this character had "the colour – the glamour of the play" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 179). Obviously, the play was cut in the Victorian mode, so as Tree could be the leading and only star of the production, and the result was that some critics described its three acts as "Antony Introduced, Antony Contriving and Antony Triumphant" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 179). The setting and costumes were designed by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, together with shields, armour and insignia, hand-made by him. Even though the press noticed that the setting resembled more lavish Augustan Rome time period, they were highly praised. The programme of the play provided a necessary explanation that the richer settings and costumes were to represent the decadent aristocracy that Caesar wanted to reform (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 181-82).

The fact that after considerable break in producing Shakespeare's history plays in the early years of the second half of the century and the culmination of productions in the last few years of it (when also *The Sign of the Cross* was created), shows that this was an answer of the leading managers to the turmoil of the *fin de siècle*. Jeffrey Richards notices that for Britain it was the heyday of their Empire – the time of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, her death three years later and coronation of a new King, and the dominance of Wilde's decadent movement in the cultural and artistic world, hence "the stern lessons of imperial duty needed to be reinforced for today's audience" (*The Ancient…,* 180). In all three of Shakespeare's history plays set in Rome the

common vice of the leading characters that led to their fatal doom was the neglect of the imperial duty, and in *Julius Caesar* the death of the politician could be interpreted straightforwardly as stopping the needed reforms and clearing the way for the luxury and decadence of Imperial Rome and its Emperors.

The staging of Shakespeare's Roman history plays shows that for the late nineteenth century actors-managers it was a perfect opportunity to produce a play that was considered as high art, aimed at an educated audience, but they had to heavily adjust the plays to the mode of production of other toga plays, in which the historical setting was giving the play the respectable and educational veneer and was perfect for spectacular scenery. In fact, Shakespeare's history plays in Victorian and Edwardian theatre did not differ from toga plays in realisation and in this reasoning can be included as part of this genre. Because John Ruskin was encouraging both Barrett's educational plays and Shakespeare to be staged, Shakespeare's history dramas could have been an important stimulus for managers and playwrights to create the typical Victorian toga plays, with newly written stories. We can observe the possible traces of Shakespeare's influence in some toga plays, such as the introduction of the main hero who is an outsider, like in *Hamlet*, *King Lear* or *Cordelia*, quarrelled or at odds with his or her environment, just like for instance Marcus Superbus and his gradual disenchantment with his life as a Roman nobleman and soldier. Also, the use of supernatural motifs, of course in toga plays coming from God and being part of Christian religion but presented in a manner similar to Shakespeare's plays, may be some hint of the influence. This can be especially seen in *Claudian* with the earthquake which brings the resolution of the action and possibility of attaining long-awaited peace for the main hero, and the ominous curse at the beginning of the play.

The fact that most of Shakespeare's Roman history plays were not successful, not because of the scenery designed by famous artists and the use of spectacle, but

because of the problems with texts written in Elizabethan times, proves that toga play was a creation designed in total to suit the Victorian vision of antiquity. Toga plays enjoyed greater popularity than productions of Shakespeare's Roman plays, as they were better suited to Victorian audiences and provided them with some values and attractions that Shakespeare's Roman plays did not offer. Surprisingly, the fact that they were the mixture of highbrow and middlebrow quality added to their advantage as they contained some more obvious and easier to understand moral lessons. Even when the individual male protagonist was an example of 'the fallible' hero, just as the complex heroes of Shakespeare's plays, his path was much more clear – the audience knew that eventually he will repent, achieve peace in one way or another and the (mostly Christian) virtue will triumph. The fact that toga plays were either verse dramas (here perhaps a bow to Shakespeare), or most often melodramas gave the viewers the pleasure of seeing a form they are accustomed to, and possibly they gave the authors and managers more possibility to experiment with the historical and more educational content.

1.3 Neo-classical painting

Toga plays are inextricably linked with the Victorian neo-classical painting, also called classic-revival painting, and some researchers even call the artworks "the pictorial equivalents" of toga plays (Barrow, *The use of…,* V). Historical paintings which depicted the times of antiquity existed before, but the nineteenth century Victorian classicism is very different and peculiar. Instead of grand and heroic classical-themed paintings that were created in the previous century, the paintings in the Victorian era were smaller in size and with a different approach to the theme, as most of them were supposed to be displayed at homes of the wealthy middle-class buyers, who were not necessarily equipped with thorough knowledge of classical history, art and

literature. The new approach to bringing back the classical topics in art and literature was a subject of numerous analyses. Rosemary Barrow mentions that the history in Victorian culture was perceived as a subject of discourse between artist and viewer and the artists preferred to show general social experience rather than the studies of well-known individuals. That was true both for visual arts and literature, and she sums up stating that:

> From Walter Scott onwards, the historical novel strove to personalize the past by presenting familiar psychology in an unfamiliar setting. And like the novelist, the painter sought intimate situations and a new focus on psychological and emotional realism. The picture frame was no longer a barrier; events unfolded before the viewer, and the result was an imaginative elision of past and historical present (*The use of…,* 13).

Before having a brief, but closer look at some of the best-known classical revival Victorian painters, I believe it is a good idea to first look at one painting in more detail as it immediately shows the peculiarity and characteristics of the whole genre, which influenced toga plays to a large degree. The painting is entitled *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (Fig. 1) and was painted in 1888 by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. It was mentioned by Jeffrey Richards as an example of "half-horrified, half-fascinated" attitude towards antiquity, which perfectly mirrored the crisis of spirituality at the end of the century (*The Ancient…,* 9). It is one of a few paintings depicting a Roman Emperor – here Marcus Aurelius Antoninus better known by his nicknames "Elagabalus" or "Heliogabalus" who ruled for a short time from 218 to 222 AD as a teenager. He was murdered by a member of the Praetorian Guard, who – together with the society – despised him because of his reign full of sex scandals, decadence and religious controversy. The scene in the painting is separated into two spheres, the lower, in the foreground with a group of people covered with ridiculous amount of pink rose petals, and the higher, slightly in the middle distance, with the emperor and his entourage. Tadema's painting is based on a written source that describes the life of the emperor – *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* and shows a banquet during which the great amount of

"violets and other flowers" were let down from the ceiling on the guests who "were actually smothered to death being unable to crawl out to the top" (qtd. in Barrow, *The use of...,* 55). The painting includes all of the characteristic setting for Tadema's paintings – an outdoor terrace, as we see the light blue sky and the mountains in the background, beautifully depicted massive marble columns and floor (which became a characteristic feature of Tadema) and materials such as the golden robe of Heliogabalus and an ornamented carpet beneath him, flowers and fruits on the table. The scene is painted in rich pastel colours with the dominance of pink and different shades of blue, it is full of soft light. The colours and light make the viewer feel the warmth of air, but here also its thickness. There is plenty of archaeological and other detail like the marble columns with the pedestals, togas of the characters combined with jewellery and flowery or olive leafs wreaths on their heads, a kind of a silver incense burner, a young woman playing the pipes, and a statue of Dionysus behind the laying group of Emperors' companions. The most striking thing about the painting is the topic and the way it is depicted. The group of banquets' guests is barely seen under the petals, we see their heads, arms, a very light blue eye of the girl in the low left corner – they are being murdered in a very lavish, creative and, we can say, visually pleasing and aesthetic way. All is observed by the emperor who seems to be either bored, slightly amused or disconnected, sipping his drink and observing the scene with squinted eyes. His companions are in good spirit, the man in the centre of the group has a characteristic Dionysian drunken look – his face is red, his eyes watery. Only one person in the picture makes an eye contact with the viewer – a young woman in the low right corner, who is resting on the pillows, but in a tense position. Her big eyes are sad and in a direct call to the audience seem to be asking for help. Even though the scene depicts a horrific act, at first glance it is even possible to not notice its hidden sinisterness. All of the neo-classical painters avoided the bloody and dramatic scenes, and the antique world they

showed was focused on planet of details and every day or leisure activities. Here, as in all of the genre, the dramatic truth taken from the real history seems to be hidden under the abundance of petals so that it gives the viewer a definitely visually pleasing overall experience.

Neo-classical paintings were often criticized for superficiality of their scenes, but Jeremy Maas asserts that *The Roses of Heliogabalus* is one of Tadema's few paintings, in which he "does more than pulls off an effect" (182). In my view, there is some kind of a melodramatic effect in the painting, maybe because of the young woman looking at us directly, and the topic of decadence of the elites and oppression of the people, one of the favourite of the historical novels and plays, is shown without harshness and violence, but in an aesthetic form of high art. It is not surprising that toga plays marvelled at classic-revival painting so much and took a lot form it. The methods used by Wilson Barrett and others are really "equivalent" to what was done in painting. The plays usually focused on the visual – lavish scenery and costumes full of archaeological details. There was more focus, than in painting, on the melodramatic and spectacular effect, like the earthquake in *Claudian*, because theatre was a more suitable medium for showing it. In plays like *The Sign of the Cross*, the violent persecutions of Christians were shown in quite a subtle way – the arena or torture scenes were not shown directly, but off stage. The accusations were very similar – the scenery and visual effect were greatly admired, but the literary merit often criticized for being too melodramatic and not convincing. However, this did not cause the audience to dislike it, on the contrary – the neo-classical paintings in exhibitions and at homes and toga plays on Victorian stage were a dominant genre in the second half of the century.

The classical-revival or the neo-classical painting, as it is called by the researchers, was obviously influenced by the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum and other places. First, it appeared in 1850s in France, and it was French painters who

started showing the scenes from everyday life of Romans and Greeks. As Rosemary Barrow observes, the findings of many everyday objects form Pompeii's archaeological site enabled to shift the privilege from the public to the private and from the extraordinary to ordinary (*The use of…,* 34). The French paintings were very popular during the 1862 International Exhibition in London and in 1865 six paintings of Roman life were displayed at the Royal Academy Exhibition and they were more discussed than any other genre (Barrow, *The use of…,* 34).

Jeremy Maas in his major work, *Victorian painters*, notices that classical revival painting was especially taken by artists related to the Royal Academy for a few reasons. It required the knowledge of archaeology and antique customs and a good painting technique as the theme was perceived as an example of High art presented with "lofty idealism" (178). They excelled at the academic technique used to depict the archaeological details and materials such as marble, velvet plush, ornate furniture, costumes, but were often criticized for the lack of drama and depth of their paintings (Maas, 182). It is very similar to how the toga play genre is characterized – the stupendous visuality and acuteness to archaeological detail in costumes and settings that dazzled the theatre-goers, but too melodramatic plots or low literary merit that the critics, especially the supporters of New Drama, scoffed at.

The dedication of the neo-classical painters to bring the classical world to their times is also seen in their private houses, which are examples of oriental style in nineteenth century architecture. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema lived in a pseudo-Pompeian palace in St. John's Wood, and Sir Frederic Leighton had a house built in Islamic style, with elaborate Orientalist and aesthetic interiors where he stored his collection of tiles and other things he bought in the Near East (Maas, 182). The respect, popularity and praise they enjoyed during their lives is proved by the fact the three most well-known of them received nobility titles.

For the neo-classical Victorian painters the return to antiquity was very romantic and nostalgic, it was going back to the times of the "golden age, infinitely nobler, simpler and more inspiring than their own" and was a way "to escape from the intolerable ugliness, materialism and industrialism of their own age" (Wood, 181). Their main source of artistic inspiration, mostly when it comes to artistic techniques, was Greek sculpture and renaissance art. All of them also made great use of the Elgin Marbles, pieces taken from the Acropolis of Athens by Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin in the first decade of nineteenth century with the permission of then-rulers of Ottoman Greece, displayed in the British Museum. Interestingly, they wanted to be more linked with the European ideals of art rather than their native, contemporary, and powerful movement of the Pre-Raphaelites supported by John Ruskin. For their models, they used "well-fed, healthy English models," as in their opinion they were looking "Periclean" or "Graeco-West-Kensington," (Wood, 181) which probably only added to the easier relatability of the classical scenes for the public.

The inspiration by Greek sculptures, which were always perceived as an example of high art, has one very interesting aspect – the presence of female nudity and eroticism. The references to classical sculptures served as means for showing the female nude in various parts of Victorian culture – painting, music hall, theatre. As Rosemary Barrow explains, "the classical offered a veneer of respectability to high art and popular culture alike" (*The use of...,* 108). A very good, and quite funny from today's perspective, example of the problematic reception of the nude in Victorian era is the nude in painting. Because nudity was an essential part of Victorian classic-revival painting, as it referred to the ideals of Greek art (Bendiner, 139), the artists started to introduce the nudes around the 1860s. Interestingly, at the beginning of the century there were scarcely any such paintings as the "Victorian prudery had kept nudes off the Academy walls for about twenty years" (Wood, 188). With the help of the art journals

that greatly popularized and explained art to the public (often adjusting their language to the general viewer), the difference between the "nudity" and "nakedness" was elucidated and "with the aid of such critical double-speak, the nude was surreptitiously ushered back into Victorian art" (Wood, 188). When in 1877 Alma-Tadema painted *The Sculptor's Model*, a picture showing the female nude posing on a pedestal for an ancient sculptor who is behind her, he caused a moral outrage, even receiving a letter from a bishop who could not accept a painting showing "a life-size, life-like, almost photographic representation of a beautiful naked woman" (qtd. in Wood, 208). Christopher Wood explains the situation shortly and very accurately, writing that "*A Venus* was all right; *A Nude* was not" (209). Rosemary Barrow points out that "the use of mythological subjects and sculptural prototypes is often read as functioning to distance the erotic and sanitize the representation of the nude" (94). The nudes, usually presented in an imitating real body stockings were very popular in so-called *tableaux vivants* and living statues. Those presented from 1890s in different shows, including music hall performances and imitations of Academy paintings, in the Palace Theatre of Varieties under the management of Charles Morton, were so popular that for some time were a competition for standard theatrical stage. In fact, Rosemary Barrow notices that "images of Greece were assimilated into the popular theatre not as Greek-subject toga plays, but as imitations of the classicizing painted nude in the form of tableaux vivants" ("Toga plays…", 219). Paintings of Greece, in contrast to Roman scenes, always focused on presenting the idealised mythological world, in which the historical detail gave way to the representations of nudes. The focus on female beauty and hidden eroticism can be also found in the theatrical toga genre.

One of the chief neo-classical painters was Sir Frederic Leighton, the President of The Academy for the last eighteen years of his life, the only English artist who was made a peer. Christopher Wood notes that without him, there would be no serious

classical movement in Victorian Britain, only a passing aesthetic phase (182). He grew up in a well-educated family, knew the classic Latin texts, spoke French, Italian, and German, studied in the Florentine Academy and travelled in Europe (Maas, 178). First, he painted mostly biblical and medieval scenes, but then he turned to Hellenic paintings, for which he is now best remembered. He often emphasized that he admired the Hellenic idealism, their aesthetic instinct, the need of beauty and the fact that the Greeks were aware of their aestheticism, and it made them feel supreme among the nations (Maas, 181). His now best-known painting is *Flaming June* (Fig. 2) painted in 1895, reproduced numerous times and on various objects in the next century. Painting the figures of sleeping women in Hellenic costume was very characteristic of Leighton's late paintings. The picture depicts a sleeping woman in bright orange toga in a very tangly body position. She is probably on a terrace as a marble parapet is seen behind her. Right above her head there are the golden waters of an ocean in the sunset, the golden light creating even more dreamy atmosphere. The painting shows Leighton's academic style and references: the perspective is very classical with the lines of the marble floor meeting above the head of the figure, in the sky. The body of the woman is modelled on Michelangelo's figures – she is quite massive and in her peculiar position the leg at the front seems to be quite long. The light, sheer orange material of the toga dominates the painting. Her sheer costume allows us to see her bosom, which gives a hint of eroticism, although very innocent. All of the scenes with one or a few sleeping women in Leighton's paintings are interpreted as possibly depicting the motif of sleep as death, with *Flaming June* enhancing the motif by the depiction of a poisonous red oleander flower in the top right corner, which slightly distorts the structure of the scene. The classical costume is not overloaded with details here, and the focus is laid on the aesthetic experience – the personification of death or summer, as it is also perceived as. Christopher Wood asserts that "in pictures such as these, Leighton is using a classical

language to express a very Victorian aesthetic; this is the Victorianization of antiquity" (190).

In contrast to the genteel Leighton, Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema, a native of the Netherlands, of Frisian (West Germanic ethnic group) origins, was more down to earth. He is one of the best remembered painters form the Victorian era to this day, certainly the best remembered from the circle of neo-classical painters. He visited the ancient ruins in Rome and the archaeological site of Pompeii, where the relics of everyday life in ancient times fascinated him and immediately prompted to paint the scenes from antiquity. During the visit and throughout his life he created 168 volumes of personal notes, drawings and photographs of architectural details of Roman buildings, which became his sourcebook for depicting antiquity as accurately as it was possible (Wood, 205). He had a clear aim to present mostly social topics and to "reconstruct a view of the antique world, in which the aspiring middle classes could see themselves reflected" (Maas, 182). A French art critic, Robert de la Sizeranne wrote about Tadema's painting *Expectations* (Fig. 3), showing a solitary Roman woman sitting on a terrace, covering her eyes from the sun and looking at the distant sea waters in anticipation, exhibited in 1889 at the Paris Exhibition:

> His is not the Rome of David or of Poussin[20], of public ceremonies, famous actions, great events, which convulse the world around the echoing rostrums. Here we have everyday Rome, Rome as it appears in the letters of Cicero to Atticus, the life of antiquity as it is felt in Terence or Plautus. For the present age, weary of great historical events, and famishing for anecdotes, this is the most interesting side of life, because it is most like our own (qtd. in Maas, 182).

The opinion by a French critic shows that interpreting the paintings as a mirror of the present British society was not only common in Britain, but it was also apparent in other European countries. Tadema painted Greek and Roman subjects from the1860s and

[20] French painters, Jacques-Louis David, a painter in the Neoclassical style, and Nicolas Poussin, the leading painter of the classical French Baroque depicted stylized historical scenes full of pathos and drama, often against the background of grandeur classical architecture. They represented classic academic style.

already in his early paintings his love for the details and rich materials can be seen. Called the "Pompeian period paintings" in his career, he often featured ornate classical interiors with the walls of Pompeian red colour and often excellently depicted marble architecture and furniture, something he was later very well known for (Wood, 206). In the 1880s he painted the Roman spectaculars – large group scenes from the history of Rome, but even in such scenes he preferred to concentrate on a minor incident or moment of contemplation rather than drama. Christopher Wood notices that even when he painted scenes in the Colosseum, he focused on the audience and architecture rather than the gladiators' fights and wild beasts devouring Christians (210). His paintings were often criticized for the relentless accumulation of detail and no spirituality or intellect in the faces of men and women in his scenes. Christopher Wood also admits that he was a superficial and decorative artist, even though in the highest sense, "concerned only with the appearance of the real world, with celebrating the joy of the visual" (209-210).

Alma-Tadema was a painter loved by the audience, but also the theatre, and obviously exerted influence on later films. In contrast to the perfect Academian, Frederic Leighton, he did not hide that he aimed his painting at the "*nouveaux riches*, both English and American, for they were 'the best picture-buyers of today'" (qtd. in Maas, 182), and probably the part of society, which wanted to see themselves as the wealthy and proud successors of Romans the most. Christopher Wood notes that while Leighton's art was "noble, aspirational, intellectual: the art of Alma-Tadema is real, anecdotal, literal" and his view of antiquity "intensely bourgeois" (204-205).

He was very popular in America, which is described by Margaret Malamud in her book *Ancient Rome and Modern America*. She notes that the immense popularity, apart from the subject which appealed to people's needs, was boosted by the development of various forms of reprinting, which made art more accessible than in

previous centuries. She notices that "middle-class admirers of Alma-Tadema's paintings could purchase reproductions in lithographic, chromolith, or photogravure form to hang in their homes. Some of Alma-Tadema's paintings even inspired women's fashion: satin dresses 'à la Tadema' were popular in London and America, where women wore 'Tadema togas'" (172). In Britain, his paintings greatly inspired the playwrights, as it will be seen in the analysis of toga plays in the next chapters. He was also responsible for creating the whole sets for Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's *Hypatia* at the Haymarket and *Julius Caesar* at Her Majesty's as well as Sir Henry Irving's *Cymbeline* and *Coriolanus* at the Lyceum, where he used the materials based on the newest discoveries of Etruscan civilisation (Maas, 183). When the beginning of the twentieth century Alma-Tadema and other neo-classical painters' art started to be perceived as outdated and later in the century even synonymous with kitsch,[21] but they turned out to be a great material for the new medium of cinema and early film where the toga genre was thriving. Christopher Wood notices that the early "toga films" of D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. De Mille, whose crews were mostly English, must have known the paintings of neo-classical painters very well and use it as inspiration for sets and costumes. Wood states that "when Alma-Tadema's reputation was at its lowest point, his spirit lived on in the cinema" (212), just as the spirit of Wilson Barrett and his toga plays as the material for the films' plots, which will be discussed in the last Chapter.

A painter particularly interesting is Sir Edward John Poynter, also a sculptor, etcher, mural decorator and the President of the Royal Academy for 22 years and director of the National Gallery (Maas, 183). Although, as Christopher Wood notices, he

[21] It was undoubtedly caused by the numerous, often poor quality, reproductions of Victorian art that people hung in different places in their houses. In the late 1890s Alma-Tadema painted the same motif in different versions – one or two persons, usually women, on an outside marble terrace decorated with pink flowers looking thoughtfully at the sea. The paintings often had quite tacky titles, like *Her Eyes Are with Her Thoughts and They Are Far Away.* Christopher Wood notes that these paintings were endlessly imitated by Tadema's followers, the 'patio painters' (Wood, 208). Nevertheless, these are the paintings that Tadema is still most often associated with.

is the least known and appreciated of the Victorian classical-revival painting genre, he carried the genre into the twentieth century. He did it against all odds, especially the new artistic movements, and like "a Roman emperor waiting for the barbarians, he remained steadfast to the end, seated on his marble throne, wrapped in Olympian dreams" (Wood, 212-213). He painted all the neo-classical themes – the scenes from the Bible, mythology, life in Roman and Dante's times, but is best remembered for paintings depicting Egyptian scenes, particularly the times and events from the period of Pharaohs.

Christopher Wood notes that Poynter's best-known picture is the one with which he debuted during a major exhibit at the Academy in 1865, *Faithful unto Death* (Fig. 4), a depiction of a Pompeian soldier standing in front of the gates as the city in the background is being bombarded with fire from Vesuvius. The painting was inspired both by the scene from *The Last Days of Pompeii* as well as the newest excavation finding – a body of a city guard near the gates "faithful unto death" (213), which shows the common sources of inspiration for all artists who took up the classic revival genre. It was a huge hit with Victorian audience as they admired the figure's devotion to duty (Wood, 214). Nevertheless, I observe that in the rest of Europe, not in the eyes of a British art researcher, Poynter is best associated, if at all, with a large-scale group 1867 painting *Israel in Egypt* (Fig. 5). It is most probably based on a biblical fragment from *Exodus I, 7-11,* which mentions building treasure cities for Pharaohs, in this particular scene most probably for Pharaoh Rameses II, ruling between 1290 and 1224 B.C. (Maas, 186). The huge, long rectangular canvas depicts a procession consisting of many Israeli workers pulling a wooden platform with a huge statue of a lion. They are followed by members of royal class in their carriages, covered from the sun by umbrellas, and watched by the crowd of ordinary people. The structure of the painting is based on horizontal lines – the procession in the foreground, marvellous Egyptian

architecture, parts of it under construction, with facades with colourful wall paintings, sitting Pharaohes statues, an obelisk, lion sculptures and palaces with massive columns in middle distance and finally huge pyramids, desert and sky in the background. Analysing the huge canvas in detail one can observe different groups of people from different social classes with one small group standing out in particular – three people almost in the centre of the painting, an exhausted worker who collapsed to the ground, his guard and an Egyptian woman giving him a drink – the good deed being displayed right in front of us viewers. Although Alma-Tadema also had a series of paintings of Egyptian scenes, typically his works concentrated on social and private lives of the Egyptians, while Poynter often chose grand historical scenes.

Neo-classical painters definitely preferred to depict the scenes from everyday lives of the Greeks and Romans, concentrating on the social experience rather than famous individuals as Rosemary Barrow pointed out (*The use of..., 13*), but it is interesting to note that there were few paintings depicting Emperors. It is even more interesting that some of them turn to Shakespeare's historical plays rather than real antique sources, like in Edward Poynter's *The Ides of March* (Fig. 6) showing Julius Caesar and Calphurnia as two figures in the dark with Calphurnia pointing to the dramatic sky (during the Royal Academy exhibition the painting had two lines from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in the description) and Alma-Tadema's *Antony and Cleopatra* (Fig. 7), which depicts their first meeting as described by Shakespeare (Barrow, *The use of...,* 23-31). It proves that Shakespeare was also an important model for the Victorian classicists.

Interestingly, Cleopatra is one of the few rulers from the times of Republic that had an important place in the imagery of neo-classical painting and literature, also because of Shakespeare's play. Rosemary Barrow notices that in the nineteenth century she was mostly perceived as part of "Oriental otherness," but also, because of her

power, position and gender which posed a threat to the western ideologies of male dominance, as a femme fatale (*The use of…,* 31). In painting, her figure was a pretext for showing "the spectacle of Egyptianizing paraphernalia" (Barrow, *The use of…,* 33). I believe that Cleopatra was more popular in painting than Roman Emperors, because in this case her gender worked as an advantage making her like one of numerous females spending her time in wealth and luxury, sometimes exuding a hint of eroticism, painted by Alma-Tadema, Leighton and others. Rosemary Barrow summarizes the depictions of real historical figures in painting:

> Like the painting of the Roman emperors, Cleopatra imagery can be understood in terms of a reconciliation of oppositions: her Oriental otherness informs her role as a merciless tyrant, profligate queen and femme fatale, while the Shakespearian tradition of the hopeless lover invites empathy and compassion (*The use of…,* 33-34).

The Victorian classic-revival painting together with toga plays did a huge work bringing back the antiquity to the people living in the nineteenth century at a truly large scale. Combined with the typical popular entertainment like music hall and *tableaux vivants*, spread through engravings, prints and through popular press the classical world reached people from all classes and was not aimed at the elites, like in previous centuries. Maybe that was why the Victorian classicism was in reality the "familiarization and personalization of the past" (Barrow, *The use of…*, 16) and the famous phrase attributed to Alma-Tadema's paintings – "Victorians in togas" (Wood, 206) perfectly describes the Victorian attitude towards antiquity, in which the antiquity served only as an interesting costume. Christopher Wood notices that:

> Alma-Tadema's subjects were classical, and therefore both respectable, and familiar to those with a classical education. More importantly, his pictures appealed to those who found the lofty Hellenism of Leighton and Watts, a little too remote and difficult. The Victorians looked at Alma-Tadema's pictures, and identified with them. They realized that the Greeks and Romans were real people, not so very different form themselves (206).

The antique costume both in painting and drama can be interpreted in a few ways. First of all, it was taken on in order to look like a product of high art that was

respectable and had the aim to educate mostly middle-class people about antiquity – the archaeological details and traditions. On the other hand, it slightly diverted attention from the use of popular and unambitious melodramatic storytelling with a weak moral and the all too practical goal to appeal to the viewers and be profitable. It was the only way possible for the Victorian artists to focus on the female body and create an erotic atmosphere without being slammed by critics and members of clergy. Both in painting and theatre the costume of antiquity allowed to present problematic issues concerning society, but in totally safe way. It seems that the antique costume was a product carefully constructed and aimed at a popular audience, disregarding the fact that it showed a distorted and too polished vision of ancient times. Kenneth Bendiner in *An Introduction to Victorian Painting* nicely summarizes the peculiarity of Victorian classicism, writing that:

> In Alma-Tadema's classical works Greek and Roman culture is English country-house life in antique dress: polite, elegant, leisurely, dedicated to amusement and beauty, occasionally mischievous, and not heavily intellectual. Leighton's less anecdotal classicism is not all that different. The great majority of his classical scenes depict a restrained, often doleful but always majestic existence. This classical world is above all civilized, adorned with architecture and sculpture, incapable of excessive strain or torment. The heroes are gentlemen, the maidens all fair, and mankind rarely appears without a refined veneer (139).

Like in toga plays, posing as respectable high art that the classical subject guaranteed and using the popular and liked techniques of melodrama, the classical subjects managed to stay at the top of Victorian culture for quite a long time. When they were pushed from the heights by modern art and drama, they were immediately labelled as outdated and negatively associated with melodrama and titillation (Barrow, *The use of…,* 223), which, however, turned out to be perfect for the new medium – the cinema.

Toga plays are part of the classical revival that was present in different elements of nineteenth century culture, both in Europe and America. Nineteenth century proved to be the age where the classical history spoke to the rulers and politicians of countries

as well as ordinary people, not only due to the fact that many discoveries and excavations were made then or continued, but also because the societies, especially towards the end of the century, found the stories from ancient times corresponding to their own feelings, hopes, and anxieties. In America, a relatively new country and power in the world politics, there was mostly the want to create an Empire equal to that existing in Europe, in Victorian Britain to make people associate their colonial empire with the power of Rome, but also warn people not to follow the path of debauchery and rejecting of Christian values that may lead to ultimate fall.

The antiquity in various aspects of politics, economy, life, and culture, which is the main interest of this thesis, found one of the most breeding ground in Victorian Britain. It was popularized by the immensely popular historical novels written during the century – *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Quo Vadis*, and *Ben-Hur*, the fact that the books were written by authors of different national origins only proves the universality of the interest in antiquity. From literature, the classical motifs, Greek and Roman, entered other spheres of culture – art, fashion, architecture, and at the end, theatre. One of the most intriguing realisations of ancient history is that to be found in neo-classical painting, where the love of depiction of archaeological detail started, but also the specific retelling of antiquity took place – the paintings showed what the Victorian audiences wanted to see – the real lives of the Roman citizens, the beauty of their homes and palaces, the leisure activities, everything in which they could imagine themselves as well. This view of history was told in a language completely understandable for them. For the first time ancient history was not only reserved for the elites who were taught Greek and Latin at schools and universities, but was made accessible for a wide audience, mostly through the media of Victorian popular culture – painting and theatre.

The Victorian theatre drew inspiration from all of the above-discussed forms. The archaeological discoveries and both tourist-friendly and scholarly publications

aroused great interest in antiquity and provided great and detailed sources to recreate it on stage. The novels were an example of how popular the stories of love, lust, ambition and revenge set in antiquity can be and established the popular topics that were repeated in visual arts and drama. The great tradition of Shakespearian drama and his history plays were an additional literary source from which toga plays could draw inspiration. But above all, painting proved to be a source of the utmost importance for the dramatic representation of antique history. As Rosemary Barrow notes, "in late-Victorian London, the assimilation of classics and fine art into the mass-entertainment context of West End popular theatre brought previously unmistakable markers of exclusivity into a much wider arena" ("Toga plays…", 210). This enables us to see toga dramas as merging the educational and traditional quality associated with the classics with the visual and spectacular culture of Victorian times.

What the viewers could imagine themselves in, looking at the Academy pictures, was even more desirable for them to see in the theatre, where the events were taking place in front of them, where the antique objects were used by real characters, where they could follow their stories, struggles, feel their emotions and observe their moral dilemmas. This enabled them not only to learn history through this popular entertaining form, please their eye with the visual spectacle, but also reflect on a moral lesson that the times of ancient Empire could teach them about their own world.

Chapter II

Educational Theatre and Entertainment

2.1 The end of the century and the need for change

Toga plays appeared on stage not only because the vogue for antiquity spread around all aspects of Victorian culture, but also because there was a great need to propose some change to the melodramatic genre, lift its merit so that more educated classes of society could take interest in it. Especially John Ruskin, the great aesthete, wanted actor-managers to pursue the drama that could educate people, which will be a part of this chapter's topics. As Wilson Barrett stated himself, he wanted his cycle of plays set in antiquity to be an answer to the pervading society plays. His path to achieve that was extraordinary, starting from plays that treated about the harsh conditions of modern society, through *The Silver King*, the guilt and remorse, greatly popular melodrama, and ending with his classical-revival plays. The latter were great spectacles that in the future made their way to cinema in which he bridged the gap and eliminated the prejudices that existed for years between theatrical stage and church Knowing it, it is easier to understand the true phenomenon of toga plays.

The Victorian theatre of the 1880s and 1890s is one of the most interesting phenomena in the Victorian theatre history to analyse as it saw the clash between the old and the new. The great tradition developed by the dramatists of the first half of the century (with a great "help" of French drama) who excelled at melodrama and catered for the tastes of the public successfully with gradually growing need to modernize and make the stage more English and sophisticated. In such a fast-developing historical era it is no wonder that also the theatre was changing rapidly. Apart from the content and characteristics of drama which will be discussed in this chapter, the changes were also seen in pure statistics. For instance, the number of theatre buildings in the year of the

Great Exhibition was twenty regular theatres and two opera houses while in 1900 there were sixty-one theatres (thirty-eight in West End) and thirty-nine music-halls (Booth, *Prefaces…* 31). The number of city populations grew hence the number of playgoers rocketed, the run of a single play could be extended and the traditional repertory stock system gave way to touring companies. Important changes were made such as introducing protection of copyright laws and total darkening of the auditorium which let the viewers concentrate on the play and slowly eliminated the vivid responses of the crowd in the pit during plays. The process of drawing the respectable audience back to theatre had begun, with great support from Queen Victoria herself who regularly attended and ordered various plays. The popularity of actors-managers being in charge of theatres meant that they cared more about making their places both financially successful and respectable and in result "completed the transformation of a popular into a middle-class theatre, with a middle-class audience and a middle class drama[22]" (Booth, *Prefaces…* 33).

The late Victorian theatre was, in fact, ruled and shaped mostly by both already known and new powerful figures of the so called "actors-managers," although by the end of the century some frustration over the hold on the theatre they had through the years was expressed by some critics, such as William Archer. The most famous of them were the fading star, but still significant Henry Irving (he surrendered control of his Lyceum in 1898), John Hare at the Garrick Theatre built for him in 1889, young manager Herbert Beerbohm Tree from the Haymarket and later Her Majesty's Theatre and George Alexander, who took over St. James's Theatre in 1891 (Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre*, 104-105). The significance of actors-managers, but also the

[22] The use of the words "popular theatre" and "middle-class theatre" varies among different Victorian theatre researchers, but usually conveys negative associations of theatre of the age being at the mercy of middle-class playgoers' tastes. However, Booth uses the word "popular" in reference to theatre being attended by people form lower classes and for him, "middle-classes" mean the upper middle-classes of the second half of the century, who being more refined themselves also demanded more refined drama.

completely changed attitude towards drama (as compared with the first half of the century), was confirmed in giving most of them knighthood titles at the end of the century: Irving's was knighted in 1895, Squire Bancroft in 1897, Hare, Tree and Alexander all received their titles before 1914 (Rowell, 106).

To the support of the refinement of theatre contributed not only the Queen and aristocracy, but also the Church, which is often overlooked in analysis. After years of the clergy's contempt of the entertaining practices of theatres it was the last social group which finally encouraged some new developments in drama of the late nineteenth century. As Michael Booth notices, "by the 1880s the clergyman-hero was not uncommon in strong drama and the clergy even came to the theatre" (*Prefaces*, 34). The change in atmosphere during such plays could be noticed in the reviews of such critics as Matthew Arnold, William Archer or other major newspapers' reviewers, which will be quoted later in the chapter in connection of Wilson Barrett's plays, first *The Silver King*, then *The Sign of the Cross*, the most notable religious drama of the late Victorian theatre.

Predominant in the repertoire of this period was the so-called society drama, or in broader sense – problem plays. It was the realisation of Thomas William Robertson's will to stage native English plays instead of being greatly dependent on French sources. The society plays were what English audience approved and recognised as their own Theatre. Their aim was to appeal to every person sitting in the pit and gallery, they were plays "build around a handful of themes and situations easily recognisable to the humblest patron, whose knowledge of High Life did not extend beyond standing room in the upper circle on a Saturday night" (Rowell, 108). They did that focusing on social issues of the time and depicting them within a realistic social context and setting. In construction, themes and their realisation the plays were basically melodramas focusing on social problems. As John Russell Taylor puts it, this "drama based on the behaviour

of ordinary people in only slightly extraordinary situations, was one of the things the popular British dramatists of the 1890s held most dear" (85).

One of the most important playwrights of problem or society plays was of course Oscar Wilde with his plays often touching upon one of the most popular theme of society drama – "woman with a past". To these plays belong *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895) (Rowell, 109-110). Wilde's associations with decadent movement as well as his "woman with a past" characters will be what creators of toga plays often opposed to and tried to present an alternative in their works. Next to Wilde, there was also a playwright now remembered less, but in his times "the foremost serious dramatist of his generation in Britain" – Arthur Wing Pinero (J. R. Taylor, 60). Developing his playwriting career with quite popular comedies and farces he aspired to being recognised as a serious dramatist of problem plays. After his first major attempt in *The Profligate* (1889), which inaugurated the opening of the Garrick Theatre under new manager, John Hare (Rowell 113), he achieved this with his most famous play, *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893), which ran for 129 performances and is described in most popular studies as "the most famous example of the *fin-de-siècle* genre" ("England", *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*). It tells the story of the widower Mr Tanqueray and his marriage to Mrs Paula Jarman, a woman with a infamous past who came from the lower class. The plot revolves around the newly formed family of Tanqueray, showing how his second wife Paula and Ellean, daughter from the first marriage who just gave up the idea of entering the convent, get together. Although the subject of the play was quite "bold" and it had much more natural dialogues and realistic characters, it has been criticized for rather unrealistic, badly prepared "weak and watery ending," as John Russell Taylor states (66), in which Ellean decided to try to make up and try again with her stepmother only to find her dead by suicide. These dramas were by some irreverently called the "drama of the divorce

court" and Wilson Barrett asserted that he wrote *The Sign of the Cross* as a response to Pinero's plays, especially *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, about which he stated "if Tanquerays are to be the fashion in drama – before we know where we are, we shall be in the swamp at the bottom" (qtd. in Mayer, *Playing Out…*, 108). He opposed his Mercia from *The Sign* with Paula, which I will discuss further.

The second key figure in society drama of that tine was Henry Arthur Jones, with whom Wilson Barrett collaborated a few times. He is the author of *The Silver King* (1882), which was famously hailed by William Archer as "quite the best of modern English melodramas" (Archer, 47), and many more melodramatic and comedy plays, for which he is now mostly – if at all – remembered. George Armstrong Wauchope, an American critic, in his article written in 1921 after Jones's visit to the US states that Jones is one of the greatest exponents of the New Social Drama, which elevated theatre to the most influential fields of art that could even compete with the predominant novel. Wauchope saw the beginnings of the New Drama in the nineties in works of playwrights such as Jones, Pinero, Shaw, and James Barrie and highlighted their moralistic and educating aspect. He emphasised the return of the link between the church and the stage giving the example of Jones's *Saints and Sinners*, which brought back the critic Matthew Arnold to theatre after years of absence. He notices that drama of the early years of the twentieth century "is entering an era of artistic promise and moral strength unapproached since the death of Shakespeare. The best social aspirations, the noblest ethical ideas are being interpreted by our leading playwrights" (148-149). He praises Jones's later attempts to educate the society in his "sermon-plays" in which he presents audience with "lessons of justice, righteousness, and ethical conduct" (151).

Jones debuted with *The Silver King*, a melodrama written in collaboration with Henry Herman in 1882. It is famously described as the best melodrama of the century, being called by *The Times* "the most successful melodrama ever staged" (qtd. in

Thomas, 62). It was staged in Wilson Barrett's Princess's Theatre and the leading role was written specifically for him. To its fame also contributes the number of performances and record-breaking audiences. At the Princess's it ran for 39 weeks with 234 performances amounting to a huge for those times profit of 10 000 pounds (Thomas, 62). It was popular not only in Britain, as we can read in a note from 27th March 1884 in Canadian journal *The Week*:

> No better testimony to the continued popularity of the "Silver King" […] could be desired than the Toronto Opera House presented on Saturday performance. On that occasion so crowded was the theatre that the band was placed up in the flies, and scores of eager listeners lined the passages. […] Considering that this dramatic romance is now an old friend, and has been played fourteen times during the past season, this speaks volumes for its merits and attractions. Messrs. Jones and Herman's play is so well known that criticism is superfluous. (270)

The play remained popular in 1910s, when it was shown at King George's V request at the Royal Strand Theatre in 1914 and adapted for films by English companies in 1919 and 1929 and one TV series, having its last noted production in the 1940s (Thomas, 62).

It tells the story of Wilfred Denver (played by Wilson Barrett), a drunkard and gambler who killed a man and escaped to America. After his return as a rich man due to work in silver mines, he tries to track down the gang who conned him into the crime. The role was perfect for Barrett who presented a traditional for melodrama style of acting full of emotion, tragic intensity and exaggeration in speech and gesture and was praised for the "strength" and of his performance in showing the hero's slow descent and later moral redemption (G. Taylor 158-159). Barrett will expand on the topic of guilt and redemption in his first toga play, *Claudian*.

The play was simply a sensational melodrama but it was praised by contemporary critics for the subject which was found to be close to real life and an attempt to deal with human vices in naturalistic way (G. Taylor 132). Matthew Arnold, who went to see the play after many years of absence in Princess's Theatre, observed that in this melodrama there is a trace of novelty. He wrote in his review for *The Pall*

Mall Gazette that "instead of giving to their audience transpontine, diction and sentiments, Messrs. Jones and Herman give them literature" (253). It was a significant change concerning the future toga dramas that aspired to the ranks of more respectable drama. Attending the performance, Arnold saw the general change in theatre concerning the appearance of the building, but also the viewers and acting. He wrote:

> The public was there; not alone the old, peculiar public of the pit and gallery, but with a certain number of the rich and refined in the boxes and stalls, and with whole, solid classes of English society conspicuous by their absence. No, it was a representative public, furnisht [sic] from all classes, and showing that English society at large had now taken to the theater.
> Equally new was the high general level of the acting. Instead of the company with a single powerful and intelligent performer, with two or three middling ones, and the rest moping and mowing in what was not to be called English but rather stagese, here was a whole company of actors, able to speak English, playing intelligently, supporting one another effectively. (251-252)

William Archer describes *The Silver King* as the turning point of Jones's career and wittily notices in his essay titled "Are We Advancing?" analysing the state of theatre in 1880s that even though at the time of the debut of the play everybody asked: "Who is Mr Jones? …; a question… Mr Jones himself promptly answered by producing "The Silver King" (46). Archer also comments on the specific collaboration between Jones and actor-manager Wilson Barrett, not only with *The Silver King*, but also two later plays *Hoodman Blind* (1885) and *The Lord Harry* (1886), calling Jones "the text-writer to the constructions, or at any rate the conceptions, of Mr. Wilson Barrett (54). He shortly analyses the common phenomenon of English playwrights being obliged to give way in many aspects of their work to the managers of theatre (especially as prominent as Wilson Barret), which was not common at all in French theatre for instance. In fact, as Archer points out, Barrett made his managing "the principle". Archer quotes Barrett's interview for *Daily New*s in 1885, in which he stated that:

> dramatic authors are mistaken in finishing off a play and expecting to direct its entire production themselves, without reference to scenic effect and many other things which go to make the success of a stage-play, together with a good plot, striking situations, and telling dialogue. I wish to urge this with all modesty, but I think that the people who do the work of production can often help the author very much after he has invented his motive or mainspring. It is quite opposed to the

> method I have found most successful to accept a play absolutely as it is written and subject only to the author's emendations (51).

It is quite interesting to observe that such practice (or in Barrett's words – "principle") was seen by contemporary critic as autocratic, and on the other hand did not restrain him from calling such play "the best of modern melodramas," whereas majority of later critics rather viewed it as an advancement in theatre. One may dispute whether it was better for the whole play to be directed by the actor-manager and to what extent it contributed to the final success, or if this directing was not at times too forceful. A perfect example of that, discussed further, will be *The Cup*, considered the first toga play, produced by Henry Irving and owing its success mostly to his management.

The Silver King ensured Jones a stable place in the English theatre until the end of the century when the public started to grow tired of melodrama. He could continue his effort to raise drama to the ranks of serious literature, not only to the competition with "music-halls, circuses, Madame Tussaud's, the Westminster Aquarium, and the Argyll Rooms," as he pointed out in *The Ninneteenth Century* magazine (qtd. in J.R. Taylor, 37). We can read in his essays collected in 1884 under the title *The Renaissance of the English Drama*: "Our great need is, then for a school of plays of serious intention, plays that implicitly assert the value and dignity of human life, that it has great passions and great aims, and is full of meaning and importance" (qtd. in Rowell, 118). Among his other attempts are *Saints and Sinners* (1884), more successful *Judah* (1890), and *The Dancing Girl* (1891), a "nearly great play" (qtd. in J.R. Taylor, 41), but most of them are still "hampered by habits of thought and style acquired during his long apprenticeship in melodrama" (Rowell, 119).

It cannot be forgotten that at the same time there was a different tendency in British theatre, led by the figure of George Bernard Shaw, in cooperation with influential critic William Archer, which was influenced greatly by the English

translations of the works of Ibsen. Having delivered the lectures on Ibsen for the Fabian Society in 1890, Shaw was the co-initiator of the emergence of Independent Theatre whose aim was "to give special performances of plays which have a literary and artistic rather than a commercial value" (qtd. in Rowell, 129) and which staged the first in London plays of Maurice Maeterlinck, Eugène Brieux, August Strindberg and Gerhart Hauptmann (J.R. Taylor, 87). It took some time for Shaw to develop his style and offer something new to the public. He started with using the old proven 'tricks', only slowly introducing new mechanisms. His *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893) uses the well-known motif of 'woman with a past' but contrasting it also with 'woman with a future', that is, with the story of Mrs Warren's daughter, Vivie. Wilson Barrett used the same contrast when describing his perfect Christian figure Mercia from *The Sing of the Cross* with Pinero's Paula. In *Arms and the Man* (1894) he plays with the romance in a satirical way, using the construction of Victorien Sardou's *pièce bien faites* (Rowell 130-31). In his lectures, however, he was a strong opponent of 'Sardoodledom,' as he called French plays with the well-made formula, and verisimilitude, "the pointless proliferation of irrelevant detail" (J.R. Taylor 84). He despised most dramas of Pinero, especially the ones, which aspired to be serious, because in them it was more apparent that the dramatist tried to use new Ibsenian methods, but in a very superficial way, giving he audience only the "gripping story." As John Russell Taylor puts it, it was Shaw who created "a vacuum in the theatre, as far as exciting new British drama was concerned" (84-87). Shaw will be often quoted in connection with his opinions about Barrett's plays, generally scorning, but surprisingly discovering there some slight Ibsenian influences as well.

Summing up the drama of the late years of the nineteenth century, Michael Booth highlights the peculiar merging of popular drama with the efforts of the serious drama that were undertaken especially in these late years and of which toga plays are

perfect example. In prevailing tendency of realism and domesticity in popular plays, he pinpoints that it was particularly difficult for the legitimate tragedy to come through and attract audience. Before the intensified efforts to do so in the1880s and 1890s, the years when toga plays emerged, and some were successful, playwrights resorted to half measures in this field. For some time the so-called 'verse plays,' "a compromise between tragedy and melodrama" were being written (*Prefaces*, 43). Among them were plays by Alfred Tennyson, the most successful of them being *The Cup* (1881), which is considered by most researchers to be the first toga play and thus it will be discussed further in this thesis. However, Booth notices, that if it was not for the figure of Henry Irving who always supported romantic and serious drama that verse drama would not have been successful at all (*Prefaces*, 43-44).

This mixing of melodrama with the legitimate drama is an interesting phenomenon in Victorian theatre and to a large extent is present in the whole second half of the century, because even Wilde and Shaw could not steer away from it in most of their plays. Booth nicely summed up the attempts to introduce serious drama to what the public was accustomed to:

> One must remember, then that at the same time the drama was refining itself and heading away from melodrama toward a late-century sophistication and a greater complexity, the theatre continued to find room for the traditionally, simple, unrestrained, extreme forms of melodramatic expression. … While the more intellectual playgoers and critics responded to the new seriousness of Ibsen, Jones, and Pinero, and followed the critical lead of William Archer, the great mass of spectators comfortably enjoyed the light entertainment, romance, spectacle, and excitement provided for them in conventional fare. (*Prefaces*, 46-47)

As a proof Booth mentions the notable examples of serious plays such as Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, Jones's *Michael and His Lost Angel*, Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross* and Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* being played together with spectacular melodramas in popular repertoire of theatres (*Prefaces*, 46-47).

What is significantly different in the years 1880s and 1890s is that while melodrama still thrived in popular tastes the voice of playwrights and critics just as the

above-mentioned in Booth's quote, although being a minority, was more and more heard of. The melodramatic at their base plays of Jones, Pinero and other dramatists challenged and abandoned more and more conventional features, slowly coming towards the New Drama. Not only the plays, but also the critical works of that time, growing in number and their influence strongly advocated for the serious drama. These included many articles and essays from the 80s and 90s written by Henry Arthur Jones himself and William Archer's two notable works describing the condition of theatre of his times, *English Dramatists of To-day* (1882) and *About the Theatre* (1886), and many articles and translations of Ibsen, which finally, in the last decade of nineteenth century, made "English stage at last became aware of Continental playwrights other than the French, and of the sort of radical, experimental theatre that had developed in Europe" (Booth, *Prefaces*, 47-48).

In his *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* Michael Booth states that the transfer from Victorian to modern theatre, with its peak in the 1880s and 90s, would not be possible without the achievements of the whole bunch of earlier practitioners of different kinds of melodrama such as Tom Taylor or Dion Boucicault and that tragedy and melodrama actually merged with one another as a result of trying to cater for the tastes of both the majority and minority. He observes that "English tragedy and melodrama began the century full of rhetoric and poeticity on the one hand, and violence and a healthy vulgarity on the other; they left it, transmuted into virtually one form, rather more quietly, tastefully, and prosaically, with a healthy middle-class strength" (53). Also George Rowell, in his survey book about Victorian Theatre, summarises, in the *Afterword,* that "the society drama of the 1890s combined the strong situation of nineteenth century melodrama with the refined technique of Robertson and the (usually French in origin) plays which succeeded his in the Bancrofts' repertory"

and that many playwrights of melodrama are not discussed in critical works, taking into account the general abundance of practitioners of the genre (161).

Among the less often discussed is for instance the late religious melodrama and the works of Wilson Barrett. Rowell notices that religious melodramas of the late nineteenth century were viewed by church leaders as "evidence of the theatre's growing responsibility" (161). Both Rowell and Booth mentioned two significant religious-themed plays written around the same time – the extremely successful *The Sign of the Cross* (1885) and Jones's failed *Michael and his Lost Angel* (1896), a problem play with clergyman hero. Both plays are the examples of new type of religious respectable drama from the later years of nineteenth century and it will be interesting to see why it was Barrett's toga play which appealed to the audience and critics and bridged the gap between stage and church. *The Sign of the Cross* as the most successful toga play will be analysed in detail in the next chapter.

Wilson Barrett's most famous toga play is a prime example given by many scholars of the first widely accepted religion-themed play as well as the culminant point of the reconciliation between Victorian Church and Stage. As Richard Foulkes describes in his work entirely devoted to the connection of the two parties in Victorian times, paradoxically, due to many similarities, Church and Theatre were competing with each other through many years. It was an especially strong competition in this particular period of British history as due to urbanisation and industrialisation, the new masses of people were their potential target "audience" to be acquired and won. As Foulkes neatly puts it, Church and Theatre:

> … both strove for a recognised position amongst the nation's institutions. They both served – geographically and socially – the population at large. They both faced the challenge of the huge new industrialised conurbations. They both sought to uphold their traditions in an increasingly democratic society and mass culture. They both aspired to preserve and to popularise, to maintain their integrity and to bring the newly emancipated classes into their fold. They both saw themselves as forces for cohesion within an increasingly fragmenting society. (237-38)

It was in this period when actors and actresses overcame "the stigma of rouges and vagabonds" and the remarkable bolstering of the theatre's reputation took place, even though the theatre "at the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign, was widely regarded as the lowliest of the arts" took place (Foulkes 240-41). One has to appreciate the significance of the shift of thought knowing that nineteenth century clergymen, as well as many before them, constantly denounced the theatre, cultivating the thought rooted in writings of ancient scholars such as Plato, Tatian, Tertullian or St Augustine. For them, as for example in the sermons given in the 1820s by Reverend Thomas Best from Sheffield, theatre was simply linked with hell. Even the basic structure of the theatre, especially the pit, brought straightforward connotations with hell. As Best put it, it was "the unfruitful works of darkness" and for all who wanted "to have and to hold present fellowship with theatre is without repentance and pardon, to have and to fold for ever and ever future fellowship with hell" (qtd. in Foulkes 22-23). The situation was sustained by the power held over the repertoire by Lord Chamberlain's Office, which banned the religious themes form the stage deeming them unworthy of such place and completely forbade theatrical performances during Passion Week (Foulkes, 29-33).

As Foulkes notices, for Church and Theatre the educational aspect "was the broker in the marriage" (239). Such thinkers as Frederick Denison Maurice, an English Anglican theologian and one of the founders of Christian socialism started to dream about one culture that would be both "popular and profound" (qtd. in Foulkes 75) and would unify lower and higher classes together. Such thoughts were mostly inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's writings. He was a famous English poet but also a greatly influential theologian, who proposed the idea of "national clerisy" promoting "cultivation" (in modern words – culture) in life. His thoughts combine religion, education and the theatre as he deemed the Church responsible for cultural life. As Foulkes observes, "the idea that the progress of society depended not merely on

'civilisation' (material conditions) but also on 'cultivation' (the spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic) was fundamental to the nineteenth century" (14). Also, people coming directly from the clergy, such as Bishop James Fraser of Manchester, the first representative of the Church of England who addressed a congregation in a theatre, began taking part in the discourse, advocating a purification rather than a condemnation of the English theatre. He understood the need for amusement as a godly invention and saw the responsibility for changing the public taste and ensuring high and dignified standard in theatre as everyone's personal duty (62-64).

Henry Arthur Jones and Wilson Barrett took one of the final steps in improving the relationship between the Church and Theatre, that is bringing the theme of religion to the stage, and at the same time bringing respectable middle classes to the gallery. A little trifling as it may sound today, it was significant when one would think that all the other arts could deal with religion for centuries. It was either a peculiar coincidence or in fact the exact moment when theatre was ready when two religion-themed plays, one by Jones and one by Barrett, debuted in the same year, 1896. *Michael and his Lost Angel* written by Jones is a story whom many critics thought as sort of dramatic version of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter* (Foulkes 192). The main hero, Reverend Michael Feversham is a vicar at Cleveheddon whose strong moral convictions could be seen when he made Rose Gibbard, a woman in the parish who commits adultery, confess her sin in public. He also holds the belief that his dead mother is his guardian angel. His strong faith and morality is put to the proof when he falls in love with Audrie Lesden, who is believed to be a widow. She arranges an alone meeting with Michael on Saint Decuman's Island where they commit the sin of adultery as it later turns out that Audrie's husband was alive. In Act 4 Michael makes his own public confession from the altar of Minster Church of St Decuman. The play ends with Michael preparing for conversion to Catholicism in order to strengthen his faith and receiving a visit from his

"lost angel," now a real widow, Audrie. However, learning that their love is not to be fulfilled she dies telling Michael she will be his guardian angel and leaves Michael in despair.

Writing for *The Nineteenth Century* and other Victorian periodicals in the years preceding the premiere of his play, Jones devoted a lot of thought to the relations between stage, audience and religion and education. He acknowledged that the state of theatre had changed greatly and that many new viewers are coming to plays, including strongly religious people, but on the other hand they still:

> come timidly to the theatre with a vague sense of wrong-doing, and are shocked if there is any mention of religious subjects. Their views of life are such, that there is no general reconciliation possible between the two ideas of religion and the theatre, and so they wish to keep them utterly apart (qtd. in Foulkes 196).

As many of his contemporary playwrights and critics he saw the need to attract a new audience by giving them a different respectable repertoire. In fact, between the years 1882 and 1894 he observed the gradual appearance of "a body of cultivated playgoers" and called to the need to separate "the art of drama" from "popular amusement" (Foulkes 199). He stressed the educational aspect of drama highlighting its uniqueness:

> Therefore I say that drama is following life, is following nature, when it teaches in the same way, not directly, not absolutely, not for an immediate result, but hiddenly, silently, implicitly, and with results and consequences that are removed and far-reaching, and not obvious at first glance to the average man (qtd. in Foulkes 198).

Jones wanted religion in particular to be an accepted subject of plays just as it was the subject of many paintings, poems and musical pieces, believing that "the existence of such a restriction upon the dramatist forbids the hope of English drama ever reaching forward to be great art, and condemns it to remain as it is, the plaything of the populace, a thing of convention and compromise" (qtd. in Foulkes 196).

Although George Bernard Shaw proclaimed *Michael and his Lost Angel* to be "genuinely sincere and moving play" and stated that "the melancholy truth of the matter

is that the English stage got a good play, and was completely and ignominiously beaten by it" (qtd. in Clark 40), overall it was not a success and had only for ten performances. Barrett H. Clark attributed that to the problems with the play's casting[23] (40), however the Church press, which Jones undeniably wanted to win over, pointed out some inconsistencies with the plot and doubtful, if any, moral of the play (Foulkes 203). As Richard Foulkes sums up, the positive response from critics such as Shaw or Archer (who were the advocates of greater literary merit in theatre) and complete failure when it comes to the box office "reflected the divide between the theatre of the intellect and popular appeal" (204).

Wilson Barrett's most famous play had in turn a plot almost identical to Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis,* published the same year. The play is a love story set in times of Emperor Nero persecuting Christians for their faith. Marcus Superbus, the prefect of Rome (played by Barrett) falls in love with a young Christian woman, Mercia (played by Maude Jeffries). Despite Marcus many attempts to make Mercia succumb to him, she fights all the temptations, including not wanting to reject her faith in order to save her life from the death in the Roman arena. Her purity astounds Marcus, who finally converts to Christianity for her and joins her for the execution.

Many critics noticed that while Jones's play was an attempt to bring serious literature, and obviously the topic of religion to theatre Barrett's piece was mostly oriented to the visual effects in the form of tableaux, archaeological accuracy and tapestry of settings and costumes. However, it was Barrett's play which "gained almost universal approbation from all religious denominations" (Foulkes 209). The same Christian press which was doubtful of *Michael and his Lost Angel's* moral lesson

[23] Initially cast for the role of Reverend Michael Feversham and Audrie Lesden were Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Mrs Patrick Campbell, but Campbell did not like her role, previously playing in some controversial, especially from the religious point of view, plays. Alter clash with Jones she was replaced with Marion Terry (Foulkes, 201).

praised *The Sign of the Cross* for the good it can do to teach a valuable morals and fighting prejudice against theatre stating that "it is emphatically a play to be seen, and even those who do not ordinarily attend the theatre may well make an exception in favour of *The Sign of the Cross*" (qtd. in Foulkes, 210).

The fact that it was Wilson Barrett who excelled in producing toga plays, starting in 1880s with *Claudian* and writing *The Sign of the Cross*, which was popular long after his death is nicely explained by Richard Foulkes. He points out that the two men who managed to introduce the topic of religion to the theatre as the last of arts in this context, and even bring religious people to the gallery, differed greatly in their goals. He asserts that:

> Jones's sphere was the play of ideas, aspiring to the status to literature and eschewing a 'precise moral'; Barrett's sphere was the spectacular melodrama, susceptible to only one interpretation. Barrett's theme was the resistance of temptation; Jones's the possibility of 'salvation by sin'. Barrett upheld the sanctity of marriage; Jones explored the consequences of adultery. Jones hoped that 'the greater public" would join 'the smaller section of cultivated playgoers'; Barrett appealed unabashedly and directly 'the greater public' (Foulkes 210).

The popularity of toga plays in the last two decades of the nineteenth century is strictly connected with the era coming to an end and the changes in late Victorian theatre which was oriented towards more respectable and intellectual drama. Barrett's aim was to combat "the unwholesome tendencies of the so-called 'problem play'" (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1897, p.5). Even in his methods of acting he was described as the antithesis of the new 'society drama' of the West End or 'tea-cup and saucer[24]' school of acting and appreciated for his "heartfelt earnestness" (qtd. in G. Taylor 159). Asked by a journalist why he wrote *The Sign of the Cross*, a play with religious subject, he admitted: "These "sex pieces" were frightening family people from the theatre. I wanted to bring wives and daughters to it, and at the same time bridge the gulf dividing

[24] The nickname given to the realistic settings of T.W. Robertson's and his followers plays, in which, like in *Caste* for instance, he surrounded his characters with plenty of domestic objects focusing in stage directions on how they prepare tea while having the conversation.

regular theatre goers from the class which avoids the playhouse from religious motives" (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1897, p.6).

Critics confirm that Barrett indeed succeeded in "bridging the gulf" and attracting new audience to his plays. And taking into account that the number of Victorian theatre-goers was already high, his plays were often record-breakers. As it was never the case before, church groups from different parts of the country organised trips to London to see the original production of his plays. George William Foote, English secularist and journal editor, recollected in cynical, but very telling remarks about the viewers of the staging of *The Sign of the Cross:*

> When I saw the performance at the Lyric Theatre I was struck by the novel character of the audience, which might almost be called a congregation. It seemed to be the emptyings of the churches and chapels of London. Most of the people appeared to be unused to such surroundings. They walked as if they were advancing to pews, and took their seats with an air of reverential expectation. Clericals, too, were present in remarkable abundance. There were parsons to right of me, parsons to left of me, parsons in front of me . . . All men and women . . . wore their best Sunday faces; and when the lights were turned very low in the auditorium, and pious opinions were ejaculated on stage, it was remarkably like a religious exercise. 'Ahs' and 'hear, hears' were distinctly audible, and I should not have been surprised at an 'amen' or a 'hallelujah'. (qtd. in D. Mayer, *Playing Out…* 16)

Foote was not the only one to note down the similarity to a religious experience in the way people in the auditorium responded to Barrett's plays. In *The Idler* we can read a fragment of a review:

> An audience, notoriously addicted to the frothiest and most frivolous forms of entertainment, [was] hushed to silence, spell-bound and thrilled by dramatic pictures of the gradual purification by love and faith of a licentious Pagan, and the ecstatic exaltation of the early Christian martyrs. The whole house, it was apparent, was unable to resist a certain undeniable spiritual charm evolved from an atmosphere of unassailable purity, simplicity, and faith, pervading the crucial scenes of the drama. (qtd. in G. Taylor 160)

By addressing his plays also to a religious circle of viewers (from all classes) Barrett managed to break down the prejudice that some people held against popular theatre. Harold Child, a literary critic and writer, a prominent figure in the development of dramatic criticism, recalled his father's – an opponent to the theatre in general – reaction after seeing Barrett's play: "after he had come to London to see *The Sign of the*

Cross, he thought the stage might do some good in the world after all" (qtd. in Foulkes 209). A very influential English theatre critic in the final decades of the nineteenth century, Clement Scott wrote about the prejudiced "to whom the inside of a theatre is entirely unfamiliar" in the context of the Lyric's Theatre production of *The Sign of the Cross,* claiming that it appeals to the taste of a very large section of viewers. In his opinion stated in *Theatre* we can read:

> Now, if the prejudice of such can be broken down, a distinct gain will have accrued to the drama, and in time they may be brought to visit theatres where, though the entertainment may not partake so largely of the nature of a sensational sermon, the lessons of life are pictured with more thruth, and with the genuine morality of art rather than with that less respectable surface morality which usually underlies the working of melodrama. (qtd. in D. Mayer*, Playing Out…* 16)

Also Foote observed that Barrett's "striking success from a popular and managerial point of view" was achieved by "appealing to the sentimental and religious public, instead of to the more limited public with some dramatic taste and experience, he has drawn crowds to hear his fine if somewhat monotonous voice, and witness his statuesque posings in the scanty clothing of ancient Rome" (qtd. in Foulkes 210).

Taking care of his broad spectrum of viewers, Barrett was seeking for frequent advertisements and reviews in theatrical journals, religious and popular press, and the result was " the aristocracy of birth and the aristocracy of intellect lay[ing] jumbled hopelessly with the democracy in one friendly, admiring, and often touching sympathetic heap," as it is wittingly described by Jerome K. Jerome in *The Idler* (qtd. in D. Mayer*, Playing Out…* 17). As David Mayer points out, what also drew the broad audience to Barrett's plays was the 'history lesson,' which was "amusing, digestible, and moral and which purported to illustrate and to explain" (17).

Wanting to go beyond the dominant society drama and aiming at the intellectual value of theatrical productions Barrett's plays introduced something new to the drama of the *fin-de-siècle.* George Taylor notices that Barrett's productions "must be given as much credit as the 'artistic' success of Irving, and the 'intellectual' success of the New

Drama, in achieving, as the century drew to a close, the accolade of respectability that had been denied to the leaders of the early Victorian theatre" (161).

2.2 Wilson Barrett – actor-manager and his ambitions

When Wilson Barret came to English stage he was to combine pure theatrical entertainment with educational and 'religious' playwriting that found recognition among the Victorian audience of the 80s and further. James Thomas, the author of many works on Wilson Barrett, calls him with reason in the Introduction to his *The Art of the Actor-Manager: Wilson Barrett and the Victorian Theatre* "a perplexing theatrical phenomenon" (1) who on the one hand produced most common entertaining melodramas and was simple "a matinee idol with many of the vain habits of the popular entertainer" (2), but on the other hand is an example of "a genuine artistic force" (1) and deserves a notable place in the history of Victorian theatre[25]. The times of his work, from around the 1870s to the end of the century were itself a great time of change from "neoclassical heritage," as Thomas call it, to modernism and Barrett turned out to be "the perfect paradigm of the complete actor-manager, combining as no other could all the skills of actor, director, producer, critic, author, and thinker and using the combination as a powerful tool for progress in theatrical reform" (10), one of the first creators aware of the mechanisms of popular culture.

Wilson Barrett was born in Essex, England in 1846. His father, George Barrett was a modest farmer and with Charlotte Mary Wood had a family of four: three sons and one daughter. With no great education he quite early showed his interest in theatre. His first contact with a theatrical performance was in 1853 when he saw *Uncle Tom's*

[25]This is an attitude presented by modern scholars or researchers like James Thomas who devoted their works to Barrett. Before Barrett and many other popular Victorian artists were recognised, they received immense criticism throughout the twentieth century.

Cabin, a travelling production, in London. It is believed that the performance left a permanent mark on the 7-year-old child's memory. When his family relocated to London, first Barrett was a frequent guest at the Queen's Theatre, which was named a "Dust Hole" at that time due to its low reputation in the city, and later at the Princess's for Charles Kean's Shakespearian productions. At the Princess's he met his future wife, an actress Caroline Heath. Working for a well-established printing and engraving company, he both polished his skills in business as well as, in his free time, in acting and dancing. He also worked with his brother on a variety act, which they performed at the Grecian Theatre, known for productions of melodramas, variety shows, and infrequently Shakespeare, in 1861. He became a Harlequin actor and performed in Grecian, Eclectic Theatre and at the Highbury Barn in Islington (Thomas 11-14).

When in 1864 he started with his first professional engagement at the Theatre Royal in Halifax he was well-trained in comedy, dancing and singing and greatly wanted to become a professional actor. His first role was Hyland Creagh in Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* and soon became a 'juvenile lead actor'. His later engagements were at Mrs E. Saville's company at Nottingham, W.S. Bronson's company at the Adelphi in Liverpool, where he played his first leading role, in *The Colleen Bawn*, and at the Theatre Royal in Blackpool, after which he also tried theatre management for the first time, with little success (15-17).

In 1866 Barrett married Caroline Heath, nine years his senior, a very successful actress who played for several years for Charles Kean at the Princess's and also received an official title of Reader of the Queen. They had a family of two sons, Frank (born in 1869) and Alfred (born in 1870), and three daughters Ellen (born in 1867), Katherine (born in 1868), and Dorothea (born in 1871). During their early marriage years the couple were touring different circuit towns under the manager John Coleman which gave Barrett a chance to be a company acting manager. Miss Heath mostly

played leading roles in Shakespearian and classical productions and Barrett had supporting roles. During that time he managed a few prestigious provincial theatres in York, Leeds and Halifax. With the last one he showed signs of real talent for managing, changing it from an unpayable place with unsavoury reputation into a respectable and profitable (for the first time, as noted by its owner Coleman) theatre (18-23).

Having enough experience in managing provincial theatres and definitely aspiring higher, in 1870 Barrett decided to form his own touring company, The Wilson Barrett Company. The group consisted of actors he became acquainted with in Edinburgh, as well as his own family: his wife, brothers George and Robert, and sister Mary. Their initial repertory consisted of 18 plays, most of them being comedies, and later expanded to around twenty plays, adding the ones that were currently in vogue. Barrett was a generous manager when it comes to expenses, he gave his actors a good pay equal to the ones given in a well-known stock company and did not stint his growing profits on scenery and spectacle. The company had a fixed schedule of touring between sixteen to twenty provincial town and finishing the season with staying at Halifax for the winter months. His company was known for "the polish, spectacle, and competent acting" (26).

Managing the provincial theatres, Barrett was building himself a reputation (something he knew was very important for his ambitious goals) of a well-known and successful theatre-manager. He was aware that in order to make a theatre successful it had to have good publicity and respectable reputation. He managed to raise a few theatres to the prestigious level. Apart from Halifax, he achieved success with the Amphitheatre in Leeds, where he staged his "new" play *Jane Shore* (he bought it from

William Gorman Wills, and altered the ending[26]) and famous Christmas pantomimes, later with Theatre Royal in Hull, and the newly built the Grand Theatre in Leeds, which he managed for the next sixteen years.

Barrett started his major work as a theatre manager and actor in London in the Royal Court Theatre which he leased in 1880 after its previous manager, John Hare, retired (Thomas 33). At the very beginning of managing in London Barrett showed his unique style and skill in choosing plays that became hits among the audience. He started with an old play by Sardou *Fernande*, where he and his wife played major roles, but the outdated play was not successful and he quickly went into collaboration with Henry Arthur Jones, a young playwright at that time. With useful clues from Barrett himself, Jones provided a short play *A Clerical Error*, a romantic comedy. The play, new, fresh and humorous was received very well, Barrett immediately wrote to Jones to ensure their future partnership and payed him generous amounts in advance as well as weekly fee when the play run. James Thomas notices that this was an unusual behaviour towards such a young playwright as Jones and that Barrett demonstrated unprecedented attitude when he was willing to wait for Jones to create his play and understood that sometimes a future fruitful cooperation requires trust and time at the beginning. Apart from that, *A Clerical Error* was the first play, which "display[ed] Barrett's particular talent for drawing utmost sympathy from characters who make generous self-sacrifices unknown to those they benefited" (Thomas 35).

2.3 New quality in English theatre

[26]After touring with the play for couple of months and gaining favourable reviews, Barrett showed his characteristic generosity when it comes to managing the theatrical business and paid Wills extra 400 pounds (he bought the play for a hundred) offering him also five percent of the future profits (Thomas, 29).

Having skills and ambition like Barrett, conquering the challenging and competitive London theatre scene was an obvious step in his career. Gradually building his reputation as a manager and actor at the Royal Court with the cooperation with Polish actress Helena Modrzejewska he became known as one of the best managers, but also actors, in London. Interestingly, when he played with Modjeska[27] in 1881 in *Romeo and Juliet* it was not her (although already considered a star) but his role as Mercucio that gained the critics greatest acclaim, although it remained his only success in Shakespearian role. His acting was most of all unconventional and different from what actors used to present on stage. In James Thomas' words, "his portrayal showed a thorough grasp of the part as it related to the whole; a high order of stage intelligence was displayed" (41). The play was not only Barrett's first major London play, but also the first which introduced him as a leading actor.

During this phase of his career, he was not only mastering the skills in theatre management but also learned how to use publicity and advertising. Introducing Helena Modrzejewska, a foreign and new actress to the London stage undeniably required such skills. When Modrzejewska was to debut on the London stage in 1880's production of *Heartsease* (changed name from slightly controversial French play *Camille*) Barrett got an unprecedented idea of using posters in the form as used when advertising medicines or food products instead of popular until then playbills. He got a particularly clever, even in our modern sense, idea of using just the big caption "MODJESKA" on the poster, arousing curiosity of city's passers-by. From this successful experience he started to use posters more often than any other London manager (Thomas 39). When she finished her London engagement with the play at the newly leased by Barrett Princess's,

[27] Modrzejewska's surname was changed into an easier form 'Modjeska' for the sake of English audiences.

he organised a farewell gala for her, inviting the most prominent figures of contemporary stage, such as Sarah Bernhardt, Modrzejewska's rival, William and Madge Kendal, actors and managers, and actor Henry Irving (Thomas 46). Such a public gala with theatre celebrities of that day was a smart and pleasant farewell, as well as welcome to new theatre under his management.

In his following years, when he was in charge of the Princess's Theatre in London (1881-1886), Barrett reputation and popularity rose to its highest levels. The role, which made him a star (in a very close sense to contemporary understanding of stars and celebrities), was of Wilfred Denver, a drunkard, who believes himself to be the murderer of Geoffrey Ware, his wife's former beau. *The Silver King* is a typical melodrama with stock characters, revolving around the common motif of a mistake and false beliefs, and ending with a clear moral and redemption of a hero. Denver, who wakes up in Ware's house and sees him lying dead did not know that a bunch of thieves put him to sleep using chloroform and kill Ware themselves. Full of remorse and distraught about having to leave his family he escapes to America, by stroke of fate is believed by everyone to be dead (here the play's sensation scene, a train crash) and has a chance to alter his ways of life. He earns himself a nickname "Silver King" thanks to the fortunes he makes in Nevada's silver mines. Constantly thinking about his family, he decides to secretly go back and check on them and as a result of a few more plot twists finally his true identity is revealed, and he can be reunited with his folks.

The play was an instant hit among the critics and the audience – critics recognising it for the literary merit uncommon in the past sensational melodramas and directorial skill, and audience engaging in the prevailing sense of high morals and "heavenly forgiveness" demanded by the hero (Thomas 57-58). James Thomas sums up the successful elements of the play, highlighting one in particular:

> Literary quality, high purpose, elaborate and detailed *mise en scene*, directorial skill, and ensemble acting were all dimensions of *The Silver King* which helped to raise it far above the standards of ordinary melodrama, but the emphasis in the play was on acting, and it this element that impresses most playgoers. (61)

Even though there were many actors, like Mary Eastlake, in the play who delivered superb performances it was Barrett who came to be the greatest revelation. As James Thomas observes, it was "one of those mysterious theatrical events that mark the turning point in an actor's career and place him a level above the majority of his peers" (61). He perfectly reflected the need of heavenly forgiveness and prevailing feeling of guilt, which was the driving force of this character. Even though his acting was still for some critics an exaggerated melodramatic style, most praised him for uncommon up to that time truthfulness, closeness to real human nature and general "strength" of the character "at the striking points" (qtd. in Thomas 62). It seems that he successfully combined the old type of spirited acting presented by Henry Irving with a little bit of the new realism introduced in "cup and saucer" plays, which his traditional and conservative style generally stood in opposition to.

The role of Wilfred Denver is a good example to present Barrett's typical style of acting, also present in his later toga plays, as "[it] remained with him for the rest of his career because all the elements he embodied his acting style were present in the role" (Thomas 62). From the success of *The Silver King*, Barrett won himself as an actor and his touring plays immense popularity, which was accompanied (as it usually is) by some extravagance on his side. As Thomas recalls, he became so closely identified with the role, especially Denver's pose and attire used in advertising posters seen all over Britain that he started to behave as Denver in real life, as well as wear the characteristic frock coat, slouch hat and tie (63-64). Also George Taylor notices that Barrett was one of Victorian actors who enjoyed "straightforward" popularity, especially among conservative playgoers (158). He describes Barrett as an actor who "though short of stature, was the sort of actor Irving had in mind when he attributed popularity to

'physique'" and who was "the theatrical embodiment of the 'muscular Christianity'" able to "play the passions in the traditional manner" (158).

Nevertheless, Barrett' s style of acting was traditional and crafted for the specific roles he often created himself and as George Taylor further notices, when *The Silver King* was revived in 1899 "the artifice was painfully apparent" and "Barrett's mastery had turned into mannerism" (132). He highlights that at that time the theatre had changed greatly and not all performer could or wanted to adapt to the new tastes in drama. The end of century was in fact a specific time to produce plays as the tendencies of "the old" clashed with "the new". Taylor observes:

> Early in the century all actors, even in crude melodramas, used the same techniques as Siddons, Kean and Macready in Shakespeare. But by the end theatrical taste and theatrical techniques had diverged irretrivably. A performance like Wilson Barrett's, which grew out of the romantic tradition of demonstrating explicitly all that the characters felt, was considered by the cultured champions of naturalism to be contrived and artificial. This difference of perception made the 1890s a decade of controversy, even conflict (133).

Barrett occupation at the Princess's Theatre was crucial to his career and understanding of his contribution to the popular theatre because of the success he achieved there in both acting and managing field. The Princess's was a theatre with great historical tradition when Barret took it over from Walter Grooch in 1881. The beginnings of the theatre under the name in celebration of Princess Victoria, the future Queen date back to 1840. It was known for the debut of two famous American actors in 1945 and famous roles played there by William Macready at the high point of his career. In 1850 another legend, Charles Kean, became the manager and played mostly Shakespeare's pieces and adaptations of French plays, very successfully which was proved by Queen's Victoria presence at the performance in 1851 and 1856. When Kean finished his successful management appearing on stage in 1858 for the last time, it was the first instance of using limelight in the theatre. In the following years the place was mostly known for playing melodrama, which was a few times unsuccessfully attempted

to change for the more respected drama (*The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 662-663). It was not until Barrett took charge of the partially rebuilt Princess's in 1881 when he gradually managed to alter and elevate the types of plays that were performed there.

Because at that time he thought that the Princess's was his last theatre before retirement, Barrett could, and felt the need to, concentrate on the quality and type of plays he wanted to show to the English audience. As James Thomas observes, he modelled himself on Charles Kean's style of management and believed that the reason for the general poor state of British theatre that the critics complain about is mainly the popularity of adaptations of foreign plays[28], as they were "inexpensive to produce and resulted in more profits" (45). That is why he set himself a goal "to produce English plays on English themes by English authors" and of high quality, and as Thomas notes, he was "the only London manager to do so in 1881 and was still the only one at the time of his death in 1904" (45).

Barrett's first major successes at the Princess's were two melodramatic plays written by George R. Sims, a playwright but also a journalist – *The Lights o' London* produced in 1881 and *The Romany Rye*, which opened in 1882. The first play is a spectacular melodrama packed with scenes of escape, fights, trials, and crowd scenes. It is a story of Harold Armytage who gets disowned by his father after the elopement with his love, Bess. They story revolves around the motif of the poor and the rich, as

[28] The English term "well-made play" is associated with French playwright Eugène Scribe's *pièce bien faite*, which exerted tremendous influence on British theatre of the 1860s, 70s and 80s, until plays by such popular playwrights as Arthur Wing Pinero (greatly associated with the genre) "[were] losing or had lost its intellectual respectability" in 1890s (J. R. Taylor, 81).
Well-made plays were usually pieces with stock characters, clear moral at the end to which the plot arrived through withheld secrets and series of misunderstandings. The plays have a clear structure, in fact "each act of a well-made play is constructed like a miniature well-made play; that is, it passes from exposition to action, to seesaw and suspense, to reversal, *coup de theatre*, and resolution" (Stanton, 577). The formula of the genre turned out to be so versatile and successful that it was used by many writers, from Scribe's early followers, such as his students Victorien Sardou or Eugène Labiche, to many major English playwrights of the nineteenth century such as Henry Arthur Jones, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Tom Taylor, or even Oscar Wilde and G.B. Shaw.
The formula of the English version of *pièce bien faite* was introduced and adjusted to British theatre by Thomas William Robertson, the creator of the cup-and-saucer drama.

Harold's cousin Clifford and an acquaintance Seth try to frame him for a crime in order for Clifford to inherit Harold's father money. After Harold escapes from prison and reunites with Bess, he manages to save Seth from drowning and in return for the good deed. Seth tells him the whole truth and Clifford can be punished for his misdemeanours. Barret was cast in the leading role, the most important female role being played by Mary Eastlake. In turn, *The Romany Rye* is a story based on 1857 novel by George Borrow. It is set amongst the criminal classes in the slums of London and tells the story of Jack Hearne (his nickname the Romany Rye is slang for "Gipsy Gentleman"), a learned young gipsy man living among the poor Romanies. Both plays were written in accordance with Sims journalistic style with elements of social criticism, good knowledge of London underworld, including the culture of gipsy people, being unafraid of showing the unpleasant details of the world of crime, poverty and violence (Thomas, 47-53). The plays were also known for very detailed scenery[29] and the use of real objects on stage following the well-known to the viewers tradition set by T.W. Robertson, but adding the novelty of introducing real members of London's society, such as actual costermongers and people from slums as the extras on stage. These elements earned these plays the name of "the Gospel of Rags" – dramas using English rather than foreign sources, characters from London streets and settings of the London poor. The term appeared in Errol Sherson's book *London's lost theatres of the nineteenth century* from 1925 (Thomas, 50).

The plays can be viewed as filling a sort of transition period to achieve refinement in theatre and produce purely English plays. James Thomas highlights that what differentiated them from other melodramas that won the audiences was that they were "not just spectacle, but also drama" and points out that it was to become "one of

[29] The scenery in *The Lights o' London* cost more than any full production executed by Barret up to that time, as James Thomas notices (47).

the hallmarks of Barrett's future work (48). He writes in reference to the first play, *The Lights o' London*:

> ...its incidents were presented with proper attention to motivation, and its dialogue was carefully crafted – traits which earlier melodramas generally ignored. […] Barrett, on the other hand, took the form seriously and demonstrated this by helping a great deal in the careful dramatic shaping of this play. He tightened the structure, clarified the motives and characters, and made alterations and suggestions throughout the preparation period. Barrett applied to melodrama the craft of the French "well-made play." (48)

Barrett's efforts to produce plays on English themes, but most notably, written by good English playwrights fits in with the concept of creating National Theatre, present in Victorian times since 1840s and growing especially strong in late nineteenth century. Some interesting thoughts on that were presented in Anselm Heinrich's chapter in *Ruskin, The Theatre, and Victorian Visual Culture*, which understandably highlights John Ruskin's involvement in the movement, which is also relevant in this thesis as Ruskin and Barrett were good friends, and Ruskin also had a very specified, positive opinion of Barrett's new ideas for plays to be played at the Princess's.

The need to build a National Theatre where a certain repertoire could be played was first voiced by Effingham Wilson, London publisher, in 1848, and was strongly supported by novelist Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the author of *The Last Days of Pompeii* which served as a basis of one of the first toga plays, until his death in 1873 when he was even mistakenly acknowledged as the initiator of the concept (Elsom 11). Strongly supporting the idea of popular education, Wilson wanted the theatre to popularize "'good drama' (particularly Shakespeare)" and to educate "the public through 'the standardization of the best'" (Elsom 7). For many reasons the concept could not be realized in Britain of the 1840s, 50s and 60s, including various historical circumstances, but mostly because the theatre could not be redeemed until it had a low position in the eyes of the press and the society, which is obviously a paradoxical situation, as Elsom observes (12). He further notices that a more fertile ground was

found when the attitudes changed starting from the 1870s, when the feeling of 'monumentalism,' as he calls it, started to be present in theatre but at the same time the sense of "liberalism and enlightenment" prevailed Victorian society, following "the slight relaxation of social codes and conventions during the Naughty Nineties" (13).

Two key Victorian theatre figures had interesting thoughts on the shape of National Theatre – Matthew Arnold and Henry Irving, both differing slightly in their approach, probably because of their background – the first being a theoretician and the second knowing the stage as an actor. Arnold wanted to organise the British national theatre in the mode of Comédie-Française, known to be the oldest active theatre company in the world, with financial stability (from state grants), a permanent company of actors and "a constant diet of fine, classic plays," not having to rely on competition and private enterprise (Elsom 15). What is more, he had a view of theatre as a means of cultural evangelism and art as 'a criticism of life' which helped to differentiate between the good and bad in life. He believed that people need culture in order to be "humanized" in a society and they could achieve that by "exposure to art, which simultaneously teaches one both the style and the content of proper modes of living" (Elsom 19) and protects one from "the dangers of an ill-educated barbaric populace" (20). He stated that because of art's role as a critic of life, it has a clear moral role. His school of literary criticism posed questions like: "Without religion, without the external moral authority of a God, what is there to show us what is good?" and showed that the cause is not just providing popular education, but "a vision of Good Life" (20-21). According to John Elsom, Arnold's views became so popular in the movement of creating National Theatre, as they added ethical background to it and agreed with "philanthropic section of late-Victorian opinion" (20).

Irving, on the other hand, was preoccupied with providing the National Theatre with more freedom and flexibility, fearing that the involvement of the state might mean

greater control over the freedom of art (even using theatre for propaganda). For him, it would have been enough to create one National Theatre and retain healthy rivalry between it and the predominant enterprise system of commercial theatres. He rather encouraged "drawing talent from all branches of the theatre" understanding that great actors often do not want to be tied up with only one company (Elsom 17-18). He definitely wanted to keep some balance between the commercial and the National. John Elsom tries to Irving's dilemmas in the following words:

> The justification for the private enterprise system is that managers, whether they like it or not, have to stay in touch with the popular opinion; and so the theatre achieves its own form of social appropriateness, following inevitably the shifts and changes of thought and fashion. This system Irving basically wanted to retain, although he recognised … that Higher Drama might be lost in the process. A National, therefore, existed to complement commercial theatre – by providing an area in society where High Drama could be attempted without worrying too much about the box office. (18)

John Ruskin's well-known attention to visual beauty and keenness for preaching morality through art also stood in accordance with the ideas advanced by the proponents of the idea of National Theatre. Anselm Heinrich, in the before-mentioned chapter, analyses the not-often-acknowledged Ruskin's involvement in the movement. He seems to be closer to Irving's ideas of the co-existence of commercial and National theatre and the role of audience's likings and general fashion, as for him "both moral purpose and sheer entertainment supplied adequate justification for the theatre" (Heinrich 98). However, he had a stricter view on the money-issue. In 1880's letter to the Secretary of the dramatic Reform Association of Manchester he wrote:

> I have to say mainly is that the idea of making money by a theatre, and making it educational at the same time, is utterly to be got out of people's heads. You don't make money out of a Ship of the Line, nor should you out of a Church, nor should you out of a College, nor should you out of a Theatre. (*The Complete Works …, Volume 34*, 549)

Heinrich pinpoints that Ruskin always had a clear view what plays should be in the national repertoire, his first choice for them (just as for Irving) was Shakespeare and he did not steer away from congratulating both Irving and Barrett on their

Shakespearian productions (98-100). Shakespeare, though, was present in British theatre for more than two hundred years, naturally with fluctuating popularity, and could not replace the drama of contemporary times. Interestingly, his choice for the most suitable plays of his times were toga plays, as they perfectly combined what he was looking for – moral values, educational quality and sheer entertainment. Heinrich defines toga plays as "'educational' melodramas of the 1880s and 1890s set in Ancient Rome and the Roman World, characterized by their claim to archaeological accuracy and faithful reconstruction of the buildings, costumes and manners and, in their stressing of the moral values of Christianity, also a powerful ideological tool in late Victorian Britain" and gives the example of Tennyson's *The Cup* as one of the most successful ones, W. G. Wills's *Claudian*, Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross* and W. S. Gilbert's *Pygmalion and Galatea* (100). He states that it was after seeing *Claudian* in 1883, which he did three times for pure enjoyment regardless of not being able "to sit out a tragic play" (qtd. in Heinrich 100), when Ruskin formed his ultimate view of the purpose of theatre.

As Heinrich sums up, Ruskin wanted theatre to be characterized by "non-profit making, educational mission and moral role, its egalitarianism and professionalism" (102-3). In toga plays, apart from admiring their visual beauty, he saw mostly a great fulfilling of the educational quality. In his memoir book about Ruskin, Marion Harry Spielmann, an art critic, scholar and editor of two art magazines recalls that Ruskin told him after seeing *Claudian*: "It is not only that it is the most beautifully mounted piece I ever saw, but it is that every feeling that is expressed in the play, and every law of morality that is taught in it, is entirely right" (56). Because for Ruskin the play perfectly suited his expectations, it is no wonder that in a letter written to Wilson Barrett in 1884 he expressed his hopes for the actor-manager to create a whole series of such plays, which would educate the society on moral values, but also visual art (*The Complete*

Works …, Volume 37, 474). The mutual understanding between Ruskin and Barrett was proved in Barrett's speech "The Moral Influence of the Drama" delivered on 12 January 1902 in New Zealand, being the only remaining source on Barrett's dramatic theory. There he emphasized the role of the Drama and the dramatist in presenting a moral message and together with John Ruskin advised against literature and drama that may have bad influence on morality of people, presenting distorted ideas of womanhood and lack of respect for the sanctity of marriage. He admitted that plays should be rather 'right' (it might have been the reference to Ruskin's comment on *Claudian*) than clever, and defended the old-fashioned melodrama, which has the power to touch people's heart and 'speak' to them in a language that probably is better understood and more often heard than the sermons they hear in Church. He presented the attitude of a devout Christian, opening the speech with the biblical quote and referring to the listeners and himself as "we Christians" and aimed at showing that religion also has its place in theatre, as "Religion is not designed to kill our pleasures, or make them less; it *is* meant to purify and elevate them" ("The Moral Influence of Drama"). He presented ideas similar to those described by Richard Foulkes in *Church and Stage in Victorian England* about the similarity between the two media in exerting influence of society, stating that "the Drama is, and always will be a very powerful social instrument for good or for evil, according as it is rightly or wrongly directed," its popularity and skill to capture people's imagination and emotions makes it a powerful tool to that can be used to "purify and elevate" (a phrase used in the speech a few times). Barrett's stance bears some similarity with the twentieth century film director, who produced a hit film based on *The Sign of the Cross*, Cecil DeMille, who always kept Bible in his film studio and emphasized his will to spiritually uplift his viewers, at the same time not steering clear of showing a great spectacle full of eroticism and violence, and being a creator of

Hollywood blockbusters providing plenty of money, as discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

Closing this chapter, however, I would like to go back to the situation in theatre of the 1880s, which allowed, and even needed, such plays as Barrett's classical-revival melodramas. Most writers agree that the time was quite specific in British theatre. Heinrich summarizes his thoughts on Ruskin, toga plays and the National Theatre, writing that:

> It is certainly no coincidence that Ruskin's engagement with the 'Toga Plays' and his interest in the function of theatre in society came at a time of renewed interest in the National Theatre idea and growing respectability for the dramatic profession as a whole. After contemporary commentators had criticized London theatres in the first half of the nineteenth century as being set in dodgy neighbourhoods and playing host to rowdy audiences who had allegedly alienated sophisticated playgoers, managers in the second half of the century increasingly tried to present their theatres as 'respectable' and financed lavish renovation programmes[30]. (103)

One of the best examples of "contemporary commentators" of the theatre is William Archer and his essay "Are We Advancing?" analysing the period of time between 1882 to 1886 written on 18th March 1886. There he attempts to answer some basic questions about towards which direction the theatre of his times is heading. Right at the beginning he contends and asks: "The destination, the goal, or, in other words, the ideal of the drama, is a subject of unceasing controversy. Shall we steer for Realism or for Idealism, for culture or merely for amusement?" (1). He notices that there are numerous courses that theatre could undertake, such as cultivating the great Elizabethan tradition, following the Scribean models, trying Neo-Shakespeareanism or emulating Ibsen, but the major issue he wants to solve is if theatre, in its many courses, is appealing to the educated sections of society: "Is the theatre attracting, and does it deserve to attract, more and more attention from the educated and thoughtful portion of

[30] That is obviously also what was done at the Princess's when in 1879 the previous manager, Walter Gooch, carried out renovations, in which Barrett took personal interest. They led to equipping the theatre with 1 750 seats in total and sizeable backstage, ideal for producing spectacular melodramas (Thomas, 43-44).

the community?," he asks (2). Interestingly, he starts his analysis mentioning the last play he saw in 1882, which was George R. Sims and Wilson Barrett's *The Romany Rye*, in order to serve him as opening time frame. He instantly answers the posed question showing that theatre advanced dramatically in its rank, in comparison to the time 4 years ago when there was only one theatre offering worthy productions on a large scale, which was Henry Irving's Lyceum. In 1886, however, the "social vogue" of attending such productions could be realised in other, at least two, theatres as well. Seeing plays had become an integral part of the cultural life of the Royals, Prime Ministers and members of higher classes. He notes:

> Statesmen, painters and poets, men of law, men of science, soldiers and divines, all follow with more or less attention the movements of things theatrical. The theatre is now a stock topic of discussion in intellectual circles in which, a few years ago, the prize-ring was scarcely more loftily ignored. … The Universities no longer taboo, but rather encourage, the acted drama. (4-5)

Even the press, such a powerful force in Victorian culture, shifted from giving no, scarce or unfavourable coverage of drama to having sections strictly devoted to it in every leading newspaper, including two – *Punch* and *Saturday Review* – that could be even called strictly "theatrical journals" (6). For Archer, that is the final proof of the fact that theatre held a totally different position to that in the close past, as the press catered to what reader took greatest interest in.

The remaining, more complicated matter to resolve was put by Archer in the form of questions: "Does the stage deserve this increased attention? Is it doing anything worthy the consideration of intelligent men? Or is its present vogue a mere caprice of fashion, irrational and transient?" (9-10). The fact that in the press appeared alongside essays both on the revival in theatre and the decline, as Archer notices, made this matter more complex. The decline could be undeniably seen in the opera-bouffe, burlesque and the cup-and-saucer type of comedy and the revival in melodrama and the Gilbert-Sullivan operettas. For Archer, the evening of Sir Squire and Lady Marie Bancroft's,

known for popularizing the so called ‘drawing-room comedy or ‘cup and saucer drama, retirement from the Haymarket theatre in 1885 marked a closing time of the popularity of genre that prevailed the Victorian theatre of the 1860s and 70s and their final speech to the audience in which they assured that they listen to their changing tastes was an indicator of what the shape of theatre was. He wrote that “Sardou had left off producing the proper brand. He had insisted on dabbling in theology and archaeology-matters quite unfit for the tea-table,” (16) adding wittily that:

> This, then, is the moral of the Bancrofts’ retirement, and it is re-echoed to us from every quarter of the theatrical heavens; comedy, middle-class comedy, heart-and-coronet comedy, milk-and-moonshine comedy, baronet-and-butterman comedy, in short, original English comedy as licensed by the Lord Chamberlain and supplied to Mr. Gilbert's “young lady of fifteen,” is as dead as Aristophanes. (17)

In melodrama, practised most successfully by such playwrights as Jones, Sims, Pettitt, Buchanan, and Harris (two of who collaborated with Barret) he saw a new promising quality being developed – closeness to nature and observation of life, in one word – realism, while still being based on the framework of conventional methods of playwrights of the first half of the century such as Dion Boucicault and French dramatists. On the other hand, he did not steer away from pinpointing some flaws of melodramas produced mostly at the Princess’s, concerning their theology. He noticed that in general melodrama is a specific type of play dominating popular theatre and can be called an ”illogical tragedy” with a specific use of acts of providence. He further wrote about Barrett’s theatre:

> Still there are degrees of illogicality, and providences, like the editions of an evening newspaper, may be either special or extra-special. At the Princess's they are extra-special. The theology of the playwrights who supply this popular stage is characterized by what may be called a cheerful pessimism, or, in other words, a naive stoicism. (87)

He points out that the providence is used there only to suit the main heroes of Barrett’s plays, completely disregarding the sake of “background people” of the story, like in *The Silver King*’s scene with the train wreck, which was supposed to be read as a godsend to the sinful hero and first chance for future redemption.

Reviewing the 1882-1886 period of time Archer, quite distinguishably, starts and finishes with analysis of Wilson Barrett's play at the Princess's. He closes his paper "Are We Advancing?" with a play "so successful and so belauded … whose philosophy has been declared, by a critic so widely revered as Mr. Ruskin, to be 'entirely right'" (86-87). His words on the one hand prove that Ruskin's impression and review of *Claudian* was really noticeable in Victorian world, and on the other hand show that it in fact was a significant play in this given period of time. He, however, argues with Ruskin's general judgement showing that the morality, mostly in the before said use of methods of providence, is quite eccentric and "transparently non-sensical," which is not really noticed by the authors and the audience and mentions serious flaws in dramatic construction of this spectacle play (94-96).

In the final attempt to answer the question posed in the title of Archer's essay, he gives the reader some freedom of deciding if they want to look back to what was developed in British theatre in the middle of century or accept and wait for the changes proposed by the new playwrights. He summarizes:

> The reader must determine for himself what that answer shall be. If he regrets the decline of opera-bouffe; if he laments the decease of cup-and-saucer comedy; if he thinks frank farce and popular melodrama utterly hopeless and despicable forms of art; if he holds Messrs. Jones, Grundy, and Pinero inferior both as craftsmen and as artists to Messrs. Robertson, Byron, and Burnand – then he will doubtless conclude that the theatre does not deserve the increased attention it commands. If, on the other hand, he agrees with me in believing that the changes and developments I have indicated are on the whole for the better, he will let the dead past bury its dead without too much lamentation, and will look with sympathy upon the stage of the present – and of the future. (97)

It could be mere coincidence that presenting the most important playwrights and plays of the period he chose to review in his two major works – *English Dramatists of To-day* (1882) and *About the Theatre* (1886) William Archer chose to open and close his analysis with Wilson Barrett's melodramas from the Princess's, but there is a great possibility that he chose the two plays because they belonged to the most distinctive ones among the great number of melodramas produced in theatres. Barrett's ambition

was to introduce something new to theatre, achieve personal success and contribute to the general attempt to elevate the drama of those times. *Claudian*, considered the first major toga play, though being far from perfection, was undeniably a huge step in achieving all of these things and resonated greatly in Victorian theatre.

Having in mind the state of Victorian theatre of the 1880s and 1890s, it is clear that toga plays are a curious phenomenon not only for encompassing the visual culture that entered theatre from the world of art, but also found themselves on the verge of old and new tendencies of popular theatre, in times of looking for the new quality that could be ranked as highly as literature. The genre made attempts at combining tragedy and melodrama, like Irving's *The Cup*, offering quite unprecedented level of educational quality like *Claudian* and successfully introducing religion on stage like *The Sign of the Cross*. The fact that these plays were taken into consideration by figures like John Ruskin as good material for the repertoire of National Theatre, proves that they were deemed as respectable drama, while at the same time still staying within the world of melodramatic entertainment.

Chapter III

Toga Plays

There had not been many separate analyses of toga plays and even the major ones differ in categorizing different minor plays as the toga play genre, apart from the core ones, being mostly Wilson Barrett's works. The major separate toga play analysis that exists up to this time is David Mayer's *Playing Out the Empire: Ben-Hur and Other Toga Plays and Films, 1883-1908. A Critical Anthology* published in 1994. Mayer brought invaluable insight into the topic providing the readers and researchers with texts of the plays recovered from the manuscripts and his own commentary on the nature and elements of toga plays and early toga films. Mayer concentrates on the core of the toga play genre, that is on *Claudian* (1883) written by Henry Herman and W.G. Wills, which is sort of a prelude of the genre and the first attempt at bringing respectability, education and antique topics together to the Victorian stage, and on *The Sign of the Cross* (1895) written by Wilson Barrett, being not only the most popular and successful toga drama but one of the most popular Victorian melodramas of all, encompassing all the vital elements of toga plays, and in fact being responsible for creating the term itself. The third major toga drama usually mentioned by researchers is *Ben-Hur* (1899), a play written by an American playwright William Wallace Young based on the best-selling, and also American, 1880's novel by Lew Wallace. The play became a great Broadway show and confirmed the international expansion of toga drama. Apart from that, in his thesis, Mayer also examines *The Last Days of Pompeii*, a very special form of toga genre, namely an outdoor melodrama, called more precisely "a pyrodrama". It was based on Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 novel. Such outdoor spectacles with fireworks started to be popular in the late 1840s and expanded in 1850s as a city entertainment for large audiences. In 1879 James Pain, a firework manufacturer began to stage the shows

in Alexandra Palace in London and moved them to Coney Island in New York in 1882 (Mayer, 90-91). For their use of spectacle and tableaux paintings as well as production for as many as ten thousand spectators at once for Mayer, as well as other researchers the pyrodramas were a link between the stage and adaptation of plays in early cinema, hence the important place in Mayer's book devoted to both plays and toga films (Mayer, 94). Making the shift to the cinema he also discusses *The Charioteers* (1905), a 20-minute music-hall sketch being mostly a realisation of a popular Academy painting and a variation on *Ben Hur's* famous chariot race scene (Mayer, 291-93) and the first toga play films – an adaptation of *Ben-Hur* (1907) and *The Barbarian Ingomar* (1908), a film based on the play *Ingomar, the Barbarian* performed in London in 1851 and its original source, a German play by Friedrich Halm from 1842, *Son of the Wild (Der Sohn der Wildnis)* (300).

The other significant work on the topic of toga plays are the analyses of Jeffrey Richards, a scholar writing prominently on the topic of antiquity on the Victorian stage. Richards wrote a chapter on toga plays in his book about John Ruskin's influence on the Victorian Theatre and the other in his research focusing on the depiction of the Ancient World on the stage. The books, published in 2010 and 2009 respectively, obviously largely base the research on Mayer's work, but are also a fresh attempt to shed more light on the topic in question. In *John Ruskin and the Victorian Theatre*, Jeffrey Richards gives more background about what triggered the vogue for Greek and Roman-stylized dramas. He mentions the play *Agamemmnon* by Aeschylus produced in 1880 by New College student Frank Benson, who consulted famous painters (he greatly praised Lawrence Alma-Tadema for his suggestions) and professors about the details of Greek costumes and scenography. The play was an answer to the custom of staging the original Greek plays in their original language at universities in Edinburgh, Harvard and Westminster. Because of the great effort put into the aesthetic aspect of the play, it

received many letters of praise and the performance was also given in Harrow, Eton, Winchester and London (88).

The Greek plays staged at that time in London were obviously not 'toga plays' according to the characteristics given by David Mayer, but corresponded with the vogue for the Ancient Greek, and then Roman world to be represented on the Victorian stage. In the 1880s there was a classical cycle of plays, which all were characterized by "considerable efforts … made to ensure an authentic and artistic realization of the text, in line with the demand for archeology accurate and intellectually educational stage productions" (Newey and Richards, 89). They were highly influenced by classical Academy painting with leading visual artists such as Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Edward Poynter, George Frederick Watts and Sir Frederic Leighton responsible for scenery and tableaux painting, and usually staged before celebrity and high society audiences. The plays were mostly praised for their aesthetics, and undoubtedly could inspire Wilson Barrett, who created some "actual" toga plays, that is melodramatic stories set in ancient times, often read as a commentary on contemporary issues. In this classical cycle of productions Jeffrey Richards includes *The Tale of Troy* (1883), based on *Iliad* and *Odyssey* brought together by George C. Warr, Professor at London University and directed by actor-manager George Alexander, *The Story of Orestes* (1886), also translated by the Professor from Aeschylus, and Sophocles' *Helena in Troas* (1886) produced by architect-designer Edward William Godwin (89-92). That last play was the most notable, mostly because of the audience it was presented to – Prince and Princess of Wales, Oscar Wilde, Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, Frederic Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema saw it at the event for the British School of Archaeology in Rome. Wilde later praised it for the unity, harmony, perfection and artistry in using the archaeological details and even stated that "it is much to be regretted that Mr. Godwin's beautiful theatre cannot be made a permanent institution. Even looked at from the low

standpoint of educational value, such a performance as that given last Monday might be the greatest service to modern culture" (qtd. in Newey and Richards, 92) – these words bring to mind Ruskin's much-quoted remark about toga plays and their educational value given after seeing *Claudian* – "What a lovely thing it would be for you to play all the noble parts of Roman… history in a series of such plays… These things, with scene-painting like that at the Princess's Theatre, might do more for art teaching than all the galleries and professors in Christendom[31]" (*The Complete Works …, Volume 37,* 474). The press also saw a connection between Wilson Barrett's plays and the stagings of Greek plays that were created in the elite circles of society. Richards quotes the review of *Helena at Troas* that appeared in *The Era* journal, which also summarized the popularity of neo-classicism that after visual arts and novel, finally reached the stage. *The Era* review noted that the two significant forms of classical plays had a competition in drama – popular theatre plays at the Princess's and classical dramas created in the academic circle of major universities (Newey and Richards, 92).

In the chapter "Toga Plays" Jeffrey Richards starts discussing the proper toga plays by very briefly mentioning *The Cup* by Lord Alfred Tennyson, which is considered by most researchers (Mayer 20, Heinrich 109) as the first of toga plays, produced in 1881 by Henry Irving at the Lyceum Theatre. Richards concentrated mostly on *Pygmalion and Galatea, an Original Mythological Comedy* by W. S. Gilbert (1871) as the predecessor of toga plays. This play inspired one of the most famous works by G.B. Shaw – *Pygmalion*, a play first staged in 1913, a modern version of the myth (the story of Henry Higgins, a linguist and Eliza Doolittle, a poor flower girl) being an incisive commentary on social issues. When Gilbert's play premiered at Haymarket

[31] The sentence became so emblematic as it was quoted in numerous nineteenth century resources – articles, pamphlets, books and even in the official Dictionary of National Biography entry on Barrett as well as his obituary in *The Era* journal (Newey and Richards, 107). It shows not only how influential Ruskin was as a critic, but also how much Barrett fitted in with the educational and moral value of his plays, and that it was exactly what the audience and most critics craved for.

Theatre, it ran for very successful 184 performances and was later revived many times, including an 1883 New York production, 1884 and 1888 revival at the Lyceum Theatre starring Mary Anderson[32] as Galatea, an American actress perfectly suited for the role because of her statuesque beauty. Unmistakably, the play was a realisation of an especially popular among the Victorians Greek myth about the sculptor Pygmalion and his love for the perfect female statue he created and brought to life with the help of Aphrodite. The motif of Pygmalion and Galatea was often present in Victorian art and literature as it was a perfect opportunity to display nude female body, the reason underlying the entire classical revival in Victorian times (93-103). However, the play, even though briefly mentioned also by Anselm Heinrich as a successful toga play (109), considerably differs from the standard toga dramas as it is a comedy written in blank verse with a topic based on Greek mythology with the focus on marital issues mostly, without any comment on the fall (or at least debauchery) of an ancient Empire and high classes of society. Undeniably influential as it may have been, I would not categorize it as toga drama.

There is no uncertainty, however, in giving Wilson Barrett credit for his popularizing, or even creating, toga play genre. As the scholars point out (Thomas, 79, Richards, 107), after very positive reviews of *Claudian* and mostly because of the encouragement from John Ruskin, Barrett continued with toga play dramas. His less often discussed (the texts of the plays had not been published in any scholarly source) are plays he produced in want of a follow-up to his successful *Claudian* and then *The Sign of the Cross – Junius* (1885), *Clito* (1886), *The Daughters of Babylon* (1897), *Quo*

[32] She was an American actress, born in 1859, with a prolific career on stage in America and Britain, as well as in early silent films. She played many Shakespearian roles, and while her six-year stay in England, she appeared in the double role of Perdita and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* – the first such precedent. As Jeffrey Richards notes, around 1887 she discussed the potential revival of *The Cup*, for which Tennyson wrote four new scenes, but her personal plans made it unsuccessful (*Sir Henry Irving…,* 210).

Vadis (1900), and *The Christian King* (1902). *Junius, or the Household Gods* is described by James Thomas as the last play of Barrett's first cycle of classic-revival melodramas (81). The play, which was first offered to Henry Irving who decided not to get involved in it being busy with his American tour, opened at the Princess's Theatre on 26 February 1885. It was attended by Prince and Princess of Wales as well as many theatre and artistic world celebrities, with Barrett playing Junius, Mary Eastlake, as Lucretia, the music by Edward Jones (who later composed the famous hymn "Shepherd of Souls" for *The Sign of the Cross*) and the design by E.W. Godwin (Richards, The Ancient…, 109). The text is based on Edward Bulwer-Lytton's unfinished blank-verse tragedy *Brutus*, and it tells the story of a Roman statesman Junius Brutus who wants to revenge the rape and suicide of Lucretia. Barrett made some changes to the text (with the consultations with Lytton), including the title which "sounded newer" (Thomas 80) and giving more focus to domesticity rather than politics, probably making it more in the style of his toga melodramas. Even though the scenery and costumes were created with the usual effort and some critics in favour of Barrett stressed the play's educational value, it ran only for five weeks, forced Barrett to replace it with the revivals of old plays and consequently close the Princess's for summer season (Thomas 80). The reviews thought the play's rather pompous rhetoric to be misplaced in a work which presents a not innovative depiction of a dramatic episode, not differing substantially from what Shakespeare wrote in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Barrett's role was even described as "compounded of an imbecile Claudian and a political Hamlet" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 111). Austin Brereton, reviewing the play for *The Theatre* stated, what most critics also acknowledged, that "its story was too repulsive for one body of playgoers; it was too familiar for the general public" (qtd. in Newey and Richards, 107). Richards also notes that the subject of rape was too strong for some among the Victorian audience, however it was handled with rarely-seen in some other versions of the motif

delicacy and artistry, depicting Lucretia going to her apartment, being followed by Tarquin, when a thunderstorm and a bolt of lightning destroy the statues of the household gods – hence symbolising the destruction of the peace of the household by Tarquin's horrendous deed (*The Ancient…,*114).

Clito (1886) is an interesting play for a few reasons. Although it is mentioned by Jeffrey Richards as one of Barrett's toga plays (108-109) and by James Thomas as "classic-revival production" (86) just as with Gilbert's *Pygmalion and Galatea* it is a play with classical (Greek) topic and stylisation, not really part of the melodramatic toga play genre. Interestingly, it is the last play of that type produced at Princess's with which some phase of Barrett's management life was finished and a play with an attempt towards modernism. The plot revolves around Helle (played by Mary Eastlake), a mistress of Critias who is despotically ruling Athens and Clito (played by Barrett), a sculptor fighting for the liberation of his state. It uses liberally the motifs of hiding the true nature of characters, the revolt against tyranny, of an evil temptress Helle and her pursuit of the noble sister of Clito, Irene and ends with multiple characters killed as if it were a Shakespearian tragedy. It was believed to be a variety of the story of Samson and Delilah (Newey and Richards, 108) with the motifs of seduction and rebellion against the oppressiveness and corruption of the noble class. It is a blank verse tragedy co-written by Barrett (plot) and Sydney Grundy (dialogues), a dramatist well known as an adapter of French and German plays. E.W. Godwin was responsible for the scenery, and Mary Eastlake, a popular actress Barrett willingly collaborated with at those times, was the leading female. For many, the play had a lot of similarities with *Claudian*, mostly because of the scenery and costume designer, Godwin. The scenes in Athens, set in the market, palaces, courtyards, and gardens, gave great possibility to recreate the colourful details of the antique world. James Thomas even describes that Godwin used real goats in appropriate costumes making them thus resemble satyrs (86). What is remarkable

about the play, and at the same time distancing it from the toga plays like *Claudian* and *The Sign of the Cross*, is that it was really brutal and harsh in showing the moral contamination of Athenian society and quite explicit in the language used. James Thomas points out that it was an attempt unsuitable for the usual Barrett's audience and writes that "Princess's playgoers, used to being consoled and entertained, were instead harassed and depressed by the new play" and that "Barrett was trying to inject modern ideas into his productions, but he lacked the spiritual sympathy with them to make them convincing" (87). Critics used similar words as in relation to *Junius* and described the plot as "gloomy and repulsive" (Newey and Richards, 109). Clement Scott, usually very sympathetic towards Barrett, wrote in *The Drama of Yesterday and Today*:

> "Clito," by Sydney Grundy and Wilson Barrett, was a bold, unconventional, well-written, and powerful play, relentless in its sarcasm, uncompromising in its severity, fancifully clothed with flowers of speech, and superbly decorated with brilliant pictures of ancient Athens steeped in depravity and corruption. The skill of the dramatist, the art of the actor, the taste of the archaeologist, combined to interest and excite the audience. But we rose from the play jaded, harassed, depressed, frightened and not consoled, with the old, old truth ringing in our ears, that men may be weak and women vicious, that treachery is more powerful than truth, and deceit more omnipotent than love; that the sum total of existence is vileness, and that life is, indeed, a sorry and distressing tragedy.
> No one doubted the sincerity of the authors, no one questioned their cleverness; but, in order to enforce the truth of their moral lesson, they cultivated the real and despised the beautiful; they painted human nature in its most repulsive colours, with scarce a relief of contrast; they set before us a severe and relentless text, that sin has its punishment, and that for the sinner there is nothing but a degraded and pitiless death (334-335).

He also compares the depiction of the evil woman Helle to the realistic portrayal of Emil Zola's *Nana* – "So realistic a picture of feminine depravity, in look, in vindictiveness, in light attitude, and in shamelessness, had not been seen since "Nana" was performed in Paris" (336). It truly might have been too shocking (because too close to real life) a portrayal since at that time there appeared a series of articles in the press entitled "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," on the subject of young girls' prostitution in London, which one critic referred to in his review of *Clito* and its portrayal of the glamorous ancient courtesan (Richards, *The Ancient*…, 121). The choice of this topic in the toga plays is also quite unobvious, but interesting as it alludes

to the society plays written by Wilde and Shaw (an obvious example on the topic of prostitution being Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*) that Barrett spoke of as the "sex pieces" that he wanted to oppose by means of his own works. It is also a proof that the "woman question," concerning both the perfect virtuous heroines and the seductive fallen ones, was an important part of the toga genre.

Press critics also faulted the play for its exaggerated tendency to preach at the viewers. *The Times* wrote:

> More than once, a laudable endeavour has been made at the Princess's to educate popular taste. It has not always been successful, not because the public of that theatre are incapable of appreciating anything beyond the sensationalism of melodrama, but because the lesson taught has too often been in the nature of a homily, very well meant but rather tiresome (qtd. in Newey and Richards, 109).

Rosemary Barrow also notes that it might have been the choice of the play's setting in "pleasure-loving fifth century B.C" in Greece that did not really work for the audience as "popular perceptions of Rome converged around the misdeeds of the emperor and his circle, but expectations for Greece were of idealized versions of epic poetry, tragedy, and, most frequently, mythology" ("Toga Plays…", 218-219).

The play did not run for long, and two months after its premiere Barrett closed the Princess's with a farewell benefit, closing an era when he grew into the most important manager on the London stage even though his last plays were unsuccessful. When he went on to tour America a few times in the next ten years, he was able to take some time and started working on his very own play, a practice not common in the case of his style of work[33]. The play was Barrett's last attempt to bring back the toga play genre to the English stage, and also the greatest. The success of *The Sign of the Cross* prolonged its existence, which started in the 1880s with Tennyson's "introduction" in

[33] In fact, William Archer blamed the series of failures at the Princess's on the co-authorships in form of contracts between Barrett and the playwright, which allowed the manager to strongly interfere with the texts. He expressed his thoughts in a personal note to Barrett (Thomas, 87) as well as elaborated on it in his work *About the Theatre*, asking: "How many of our English authors possess enough force of character and mastery of the stage to impose their conceptions upon an autocratic actor-manager?" (52).

the form of the verse play *The Cup* and then with audiences being amazed with *Claudian* As a result, it was even possible for the toga play to expanded to America, which thus enabled the shift of the genre to early cinema. In order to try once again the classics revival play, this time also with a strong religious motif, Barrett had to fight some new tendencies and challenges that emerged in theatre, most of them discussed already in the previous chapter. However, James Thomas interestingly characterizes the beginning of the 1890s as the times when the influence of Ibsenism and William Archer's ideas of New Drama were starting to exert great influence on popular dramatists such as Shaw, Jones and Pinero, but not necessarily on Barrett. The latter was widely known as a conservative (114), which to some extent was shown in his speech "The Moral Influence of the Drama". Ibsen obviously stood in total opposition to the historical settings of the toga genre with his plays concentrating on contemporary topics taken from everyday life and is one of the strongest reasons why toga plays became unfashionable among the modern critics. Barrett's famous quote about the "sex pieces" that were a threat to family people attending the theatre shows his idea that "the new social drama was alienating the middle class" as well as does not respect true virtue and morality, as James Thomas puts it (144). As in the early 1890s modernism was in its infancy, Barrett was not the only one to have doubts about it. It may be the fact that it was easier to accept new ideas for genuine dramatists who enjoyed giving more thought to the study of character and discussion at the end of the play (Shaw, *Quintessence…* 141) and not to the construction and spectacle in the play, but not for actors-managers (and occasionally playwrights) like Barrett or Irving, who had a wider perspective of theatre-going. The main objection that they put forward was that in a way modernism moved theatre to the past as it "was becoming an entertainment for the select, only now it was the intellectuals and artists who were the select instead of, as in the past, the wealthy and royal" (Thomas, 115). George Bernard Shaw acknowledges his initial

resentment towards the plays by Ibsen and quotes in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* one of the first reactions to Ibsen's play by Clement Scott, whom he describes as "sentimentally good-natured gentleman" and "an emotional, impressionable, zealous, and sincere Roman Catholic" and says that:

> He accused Ibsen of dramatic impotence, ludicrous amateurishness, nastiness, vulgarity, egotisim, coarseness, absurdity, uninteresting verbosity, and "suburbanity," declaring that he has taken ideas that would have inspired a great tragic poet, and vulgarized and debased them in dull, hateful, loathsome, horrible plays. This criticism, which occurs in a notice of the first performance of Ghosts in England, is to be found in The Daily Telegraph for the 14th March 1891 and is supplemented by a leading article which compares the play to an open drain, a loathsome sore unbandaged, a dirty act done publicly, or a lazar house with all its doors and windows open (*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 13).

Being an experienced and skilful manager, Barrett adjusted to the new situation and using the popular press emphasized the populist aspect of his plays, trying to attract a great number of people who might have felt lost amidst the voices advancing the intellectual drama. That was his response to the articles written regularly by Archer and Shaw, making him an unofficial "leader of opposition," as Thomas notices (115). Noteworthily, he did not lack respect from his opponents, which can be seen in the already quoted Archer and Shaw's thoughts on his work and plays.

In fact, when we study more closely George Bernard Shaw's famous *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, an essay written in 1891, when British audiences were only gradually being introduced to the New Drama, we can notice that some of the essentials of the new approach do not differ greatly from what Barrett wanted to achieve in theatre. In the Chapter "The Technical Novelty in Ibsen's Plays" Shaw provides some commentary on the current state of theatre and observes that the majority of popular managers have quite old-fashioned attitude towards productions. He writes:

> In vain does the experienced acting manager declare that people want to be amused and not preached at in the theatre; that they will not stand long speeches; that a play must not contain more than 18,000 words; that it must not begin before nine nor last beyond eleven; that there must be no politics and no religion in it; that breach of these golden rules will drive people to the variety theatres; that there must be a woman of bad character, played by a very attractive actress, in the piece; and so on and so forth (143).

It is clear that we cannot classify Barrett as one of the managers Shaw was writing about knowing his ideas that plays should have educational value and his ambition to breach the ban of religion from stage. With his early plays like *The Lights o' London*, *The Romany Rye* or later *Clito*, he was also not afraid to show the crude reality of life, which could echo Ibsen's tendency towards realism and rationalism, but of course lacked the discussion of the character and moral arguments coming from something else besides twists of fate and misunderstandings, something which he attempted at in *The Sign of the Cross*. Of course, for Shaw and other early modernists the old theatrical tricks like accidents and misunderstandings, and above all the use of spectacle – so much loved by the mid-Victorian melodrama – in order to interest the audience were no longer features of a good play. When Shaw describes the novelty in modern plays, he also points to the problem that intellectual viewers are hard to be attracted to theatre, which sounds very much in accordance with Barrett's struggles to bring educated people to theatre (144). The highly praised element of Ibsen's plays is also their realism understood as making the viewers feel like they see situations that could happen in their lives. Shaw points out that Ibsen "gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our own situations. The things that happen to his stage figures are things that happen to us" (151). To show the audience the reality and problems that they know that was Barrett's strong goal in the early 1880s when he insisted to "produce English plays on English themes by English authors," and remained "the only London manager to do so in 1881 and was still the only one at the time of his death in 1904," once again quoting James Thomas' remark on that (45). Nevertheless, we cannot say about Barrett's toga plays, even *The Sign of the Cross*, written when modernism was spreading over all areas of art and culture, what Shaw wrote about the nature of modern theatre where "we are not flattered spectators killing an idle hour with an ingenious and amusing entertainment:

we are ‘guilty creatures sitting at a play’; and the technique of pastime is no more applicable than at a murder trial” (152).

When Barrett went back to his classic-revival plays after the previous ill-success with *Clito* and *Junius*, it was the time when he was the leader of the opposition against pure modernist plays, but being ambitious and determined to write a good play he did not look for a co-author, but wrote a play himself. In fact, it was his “first solo playwriting adventure in four years,” as James Thomas puts it (115). The play was *Pharaoh*, interestingly proving that the interest of the Victorians in ancient Empires was ranging from Roman, Hellenistic and Eastern to Southern-exotic world. It premiered in Grand Theatre in Leeds in 1892. Interested in Egyptology, a common vogue among the Victorians, Barrett set his play in Thebes in the times of Egypt’s greatest power and prosperity. The main hero is Prince Arni (played by Barrett), who deals with his own moral struggles prompted by living in the decadent court and having a noble nature. There are the usual female figures like Princess Latika (played by Maud Jeffries), who loves Arni and Tuaa, who loves the Pharaoh, Seti I, who only add more chaos to the secret plotting in the Pharaoh’s court, which finally gets revealed, and the two lovers die in a similar, dramatic way to *Romeo and Juliet,* when their pardon comes too late. Having the decadent living of the high class of ancient society motif as well as treachery and revenge it was similar to *Clito*, however James Thomas asserts that in *Pharaoh* the struggle between two moral extremes was more obvious than in the earlier plays (115). Of course, the topic of living among the higher classes and struggling with their deeply-rooted vices as in plays like *Pharaoh* and *Clito* is the example of the topic set in historical times but undoubtedly close to the members of Victorian society sitting in the audience, similar to other numerous Victorian works (like the realistic novels of Dickens or plays by Wilde and Shaw) tackling the issues of social class. It proves that the historical attire in toga play, the same as in neo-classical painting, worked as kind of

an overlay, while the story, topics and characters were quite universal and could to great effect happen in Victorian Britain as well.

The reviews of *Pharaoh* were positive with the scenery being highly praised[34], particularly the opening scenes in the royal palace in Thebes and the closing ones in the temple of Apis, which were depicted in a way that the *Theatre* described as combining together romance and realism, the elements believed to be two elements of drama almost irreconcilable in theatre (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 122). The study of the two central characters, Arni and Latika and the ambitions and emotions that are the driving force that leads them to achieve their goals, but also of the deadly fate that leads to their undoing was regarded as a true to nature study of human psyche, similar to what was done in *Claudian* (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 123). Taking into consideration Barrett's private struggles as an actor, manager and dramatist in the late nineteenth century, Thomas points out that from the psychological analysis perspective, the play can be seen as an illustration of "the popular *versus* artistic paradox" that he was faced with especially at the time of the birth of modernism (115). Even though the play was part of repertoire in Barrett's third tour in America, it was not revived in London.

When writing the next play set in an ancient eastern empire, *The Daughters of Babylon*, Barrett was at the highest point in his career. He wrote the play together with Louis Napoleon Parker in 1896 (with premiere at the Lyric Theatre in 1897), a year after *The Sign of the Cross*. The year of production of the "the ultimate" toga play, and the most important in Barrett's career, is the year brought back from the annals of Victorian theatre history and analysed by many researchers. Not only Richard Foulkes starts his chapter on two most important Victorian religion-themed plays, *The Sign of the Cross*

[34] Next to the usual collaborators of Barrett, scene painters Walter Hann and T.E. Ryan (usually also with William Telbin), who worked on his previous toga plays, in *Pharaoh* the third artist was Bruce Smith, later nicknamed Bruce 'Sensation' Smith, which I refer to writing about the last productions of *Ben-Hur* in the opening of the next chapter.

and *Michael and His Lost Angel* highlighting the same year of their production[35], as mentioned in the previous Chapter, but also Joel Kaplan gives the year a separate analysis in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, describing it "as crowded with both incident and premature experience" (422). Kaplan underlines the knighthood given by Queen Victoria to Henry Irving almost as a symbolic event of the year and the state of theatre at the end of the century. He writes:

> On the one hand it signalled the arrival of a social respectability and aesthetic seriousness that the acting profession had been lobbying for since the previous century. On the other, it seemed to endorse a safe, comfortable, rather old-fashioned concept of theatre-going in which spectacular entertainment was preferred to thought-provoking texts or truly troubling performances (423).

However, Kaplan gives even more credit as the most important event of that year to George Bernard Shaw's appointment as a drama critic of the *Saturday Review* and his battle with the conventions of Victorian popular theatre, which resulted in a "serious and sustained debate about drama, theatre, and the larger issues of performance" (424-25). Kaplan presents the analysis of the repertoire of popular theatres as well as minor ones through Shaw's influential criticism and ends his chapter with two plays that were written as one of the year's attempts "to bring the late Victorian stage into alignment with the contemporary world" (438). The plays are obviously *The Sign of the Cross* and *Michael and His Lost Angel*, which closed and, in a way, summed up the whole year, both being shown in London in January 1896. While Shaw's opinion about Jones's play was quite withering, suggesting that he could re-write the last three acts of the play, he saw some instances of modernity in Barrett's work. Because of the ending which

[35] Foulkes focuses on the year 1896 whereas Kaplan analyses the year 1895 as an important one when it comes to Victorian theatres' repertoire and they both discuss Jones and Barrett's plays. Giving one or the other year as the premiere of the both plays stems from the fact that the highly anticipated by Barrett premiere of *The Sign of the Cross* in London took place on 4th January 1896 in the Lyric Theatre but first he produced it during his American tour, on 28th March 1895 at the Grand Opera House in St. Louis, Missouri. Barrett even explained that he wanted to show it first in front of the St. Louis' audience and press to check the effect and possible accusations of 'sectarianism' of the play in highly Catholic and Protestant community (Thomas, 131). The first English production of the play was at the Grand Theatre, Leeds, on 26th August 1895. Henry Arthur Jones' play premiered at the Lyceum Theatre on 15th January 1896.

provoked the audience to try to answer some serious questions about their own moral choices and the state of empire, regardless of the obvious melodramatic elements, Shaw half-seriously and half-mockingly declared Barrett's play to be "not biblical at all, but a sly instance of getting Ibsen in by the back door" (Kaplan, 436).

The Daughters of Babylon is described by James Thomas as a Jewish sequel to *The Sign of the Cross*. The play was co-authored, but Barrett as usual put so much effort into the scenario and staging that the second author, Louis Napoleon Parker, even proposed to show the play as an individual work of Barrett, but he refused (139). The play was later turned into a novel version by Robert Hitchens (published in 1899), just like *The Sign of the Cross* was (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 134-135). This is an interesting phenomenon as it refers to the popularity that the historical novels like *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Ben-Hur* and *Quo Vadis* gained in the nineteenth century, with all the forms – novels, paintings, plays and then films intermingling, being inspiration for each other and showing ancient history in a similar, yet with means and tiny differences relevant to each form.

The main character of the story, shepherd Lemuel, was played by Barrett and he was a disguised Messiah figure who fell in love with Elna, played by Maud Jeffries, a woman betrothed to his brother, Jediah. When Lemuel goes to Babylon to take part in the revolt of the Jews, Elna goes after him disguised as a boy. He meets a courtesan Ishtar who jealous of their love has them arrested and then sold as slaves. They are to dye by stoning, but are saved by Isthar and Aloris, in love with Elna, who denounce the viciousness of Jediah. The cast included thirty-three people, which is noted by all critics an extraordinarily numerous, who appeared in Jewish and Babylonian scenes and depicted many scenes from the life and culture of the two nations, which was even appreciated by *The Jewish Chronicle* (Thomas, 140).

Both William Archer and George Bernard Shaw praised the play for the visual effects and criticized it for its literary merit, as it was often the case with Barrett's plays. It would be hard not to appreciate the scenery, which included paintings in the style of Gustave Doré, a French artist best known for his wood-engravings, including 241which were the illustrations for the Bible, as well as music including special composition by famous contemporary Dutch solo violinist Henri Seiffert (Shaw, *Dramatic opinions…*, Vol 2, 143-44). William Archer disliked Barrett's acting, but mostly skewered Barrett for the writing and not being a modernist. He even irreverently claimed that it must have been Barrett alone who wrote all the previous plays of Barrett-Jones authorship (Thomas 140).

Shaw summarized Barrett's efforts at playwriting in an essay "Mr. Wilson Barrett as The Messiah" devoted to *The Daughters of Babylon*:

> …metaphor is not drama, nor *tableau vivant* acting. I hold Mr. Wilson Barrett in high esteem as a stage manager and actor; and I have no doubt that Mr. Wilson Barrett would allow that I am a fairly competent workman with my pen. But when he takes up the tools of my craft and tries his hand at dramatic literature, he produces exactly the same effect on me as I should produce on him if I were to try my hand at playing Othello. A man cannot be everything. (*Dramatic opinions…*, Vol 2, 138)

Shaw concentrated on the fact that Barrett once again chose to show a religious topic on stage and resolved to writing it in a manner resembling real biblical fragments, with poor effects as he did not stay true to the real archaic culture but used the language to convey the melodramatic utterances and situations often close to contemporary ones that the audience could relate to (139-141). To please the audiences even more, Shaw noticed that "Mr. Wilson Barrett has found that he can always bring down the house with a hymn" (141). He of course referred to the immensely popular and reprinted on many occasions hymn from *The Sign of the Cross* – Edward Jones's "Shepherd of Souls". Shaw continues that "the first act of "The Daughters of Babylon," after driving the audience nearly to melancholy madness by its dullness, is triumphantly saved in that

way" (141). This proves that definitely not being a modernist which in 1897, almost at the end of the century, meant the condemnation from the critics, Barrett knew how to please and win his audiences.

The Daughters of Babylon was Wilson Barrett's last significant attempt at a play that could be labelled 'toga play,' being set in an ancient empire. When the plays that are now perceived as the typical of the genre – *Claudian, The Sign of the Cross, Quo Vadis* include the topics started by the historical novels about the early Christianity – they always tell a story of a hero from the noble class, who at first takes part in the lavish life of the Empire, then finds himself doubtful, which is usually triggered by his meeting a noble girl. In order to be united in love they have to go against the rules of the pagan Empire. The debauchery of the lives of high classes is often shown through a female femme fatale character, often characterized by the traits of nineteenth century 'New Woman.' Barrett's other plays, like *Clito, The Daughters of Babylon,* and *Junius* have, according to Jeffrey Richards, themes characteristic for Barrett – democratic resistance to aristocratic tyranny and celebration of female honour, perhaps in contrast to the depiction of the evil side of femininity (*The Ancient…*, 149-150). It might be the reason why the other plays are less often mentioned and discussed, as they made the toga play genre become increasingly different from popular historical novels.

Wilson Barrett died on 22 July 1904 and with him, a true Master of the genre, the popularity of toga plays began to decline. It is interesting to note down that Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, another famous London actor-manager, in the early years of twentieth century produced plays set in all of the ancient empires: *Hypatia* (1893), verse plays written by Stephen Phillips who enjoyed short-lived popularity as a dramatist – *Herod* (1900), *Ulysses*(1902) and *Nero* (1906), and *False Gods* (1909) (Newey and Richards, 110), proving that toga plays after Barrett were still interesting for theatre managers, most probably because of the recollection of their previous successes.

Nevertheless, none of these plays achieved success that could be comparable to Barrett's toga plays. Jeffrey Richards also views George Bernard Shaw's 1912 play *Androcles and the Lion* as a parody of Barrett's *Sign of the Cross* and the whole toga play genre (*John Ruskin*…, 112-113). Indeed, the play bears many similarities to Barrett's work. It is based on the common folktale figure of Androcles who became a friend with a lion. In Shaw's play he is a slave who is to be executed with other Christians in the Colosseum, but saves them and himself as the lion who was supposed to devour him is the tamed one that he met earlier. The play has characters similar to *The Sign of the Cross* – a new Christian convert called Ferrovius, a Roman guard who is attracted to a Christian girl, Lavinia, the Emperor. With a Preface longer than the play itself where Shaw (known for being an opponent of religion) gives his own analysis of the Gospels and teachings of Jesus Christ and with his use of witty language, slapstick and body comedy, Shaw's play becomes a pastiche of many scenes and conventions that can be found in the most famous toga drama. The fact that the last theatrical production alluding to toga play genre was a parody of it, shows that it was a significant widespread theatrical movement that captured many people's imagination and that in the theatre it was really a closed chapter. Interestingly, something similar to Shaw's parody d was done by the Italian director Federico Fellini when the toga genre was declining in the Hollywood movies, in the 1960s, after the last such films such as *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). In 1969 Fellini created *Fellini-Satyricon* an experimental film based on an ancient satirical novel by Petronius about the erotic adventures of two young friends. Not following the linear narrative, with camera focusing on less relevant details and shots imitating the style of fresco paintings, emphasizing the artificiality of sets, using the dubbing technique in which the lips of actors are desynchronized with the uttered words and filled with disturbing musical sounds, Fellini admitted that he wanted to defamiliarize the antique world, "to strip the

image of ancient Rome of its cultural accretions – the vision of it promulgated through the institutions of the school and the cinema, or the discipline of archeology" (Wyke, 191). Just like Shaw, he decided to experiment with the long history of the classic Hollywood depictions of the history of ancient Rome, proving that they have a potential to inspire new artistic movements, but also closing their chapter in the history of cinema.

When summarizing the decline of toga plays in theatre, Jeffrey Richards states that at the time of World War I and with the rise of the cinema the tastes of the audiences changed and the theatre itself changed (*John Ruskin*…, 112). With a new medium, a counterpart of theatre, where people could also see stories, not live but on the screen, the audiences got divided into a more elevated smaller circles that the modernists wanted to cater for and the middle-class masses who found a perfect pastime in watching the movies. And because toga plays, especially the ones produced by Wilson Barrett were designed to be popular mostly among the mass audience, their fluent shift to the screen was not a surprise. With their focus on the visuality in lavish sceneries and costumes, the use of spectacle and large casts they turned out to be perfect for the new capabilities of motion pictures. As Jeffrey Richards points out at the end of his chapter on toga plays, even though toga genre was a thing of the past and an object of disdain in the theatre, "cinemagoers still flocked to their local cinemas to see new and straight versions of *Ingomar*, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *The Sign of the Cross*, *Quo Vadis* and *Ben Hur*" (113).

In the next part of this and also next chapter I am going to analyse four plays from the toga genre that show its gradual evolvement from more literary to a truly popular one, eventually changing the cultural medium from theatre to cinema. For the first play to look into in more detail I chose the predecessor of the genre – *The Cup*, written by Sir Alfred Tennyson and performed in 1881 at the Lyceum Theatre at the

direction of Sir Henry Irving. The play introduces most of the topics that later appear in the most famous toga plays as well as was the first to charm audiences with its rich visual side. To show the development and rootedness of toga plays in English theatre for the last twenty years of the nineteenth century I will look more closely at two of Wilson Barrett's best known toga plays – *Claudian*, which successfully paved the way for developing the genre and was a kind of a bridge between the old tradition of spectacular melodramas and more respectable theatre, and the most successful toga play, and one of the most successful melodramas of Victorian times – *The Sign of the Cross*.

3.1 *The Cup* (1881): the predecessor

The first play that is considered a toga drama opened on 3 January 1881 at the Lyceum Theatre and run till April. It was written by the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson as a poetic verse drama, the inspiration for which he took from the stories *On the Bravery of Women* and the *Eroticus or Amatorius* by Plutarch, where he mentions the (unverified by other historical sources) Galatian princess and priestess Camma as a symbol of marital fidelity and love[36]. The play is an example of the so-called 'verse plays' that Michael Booth defined as "a compromise between tragedy and melodrama" (*Prefaces*, 43), Barrett's play *Clito*, being another example. Henry Irving, usually preferring the plays set in medieval times and Renaissance (mostly known for staging and acting in Shakespearian dramas) embarked on a project of bringing the dramas of the Britain's leading poet Alfred Tennyson to stage in honour of the highly respected English tradition of poetic tragedy. Initially, he was proposed to produce three plays by Tennyson – *Queen Mary*, *The Cup*, and *Becket*, but thought the short two acts of *The*

[36] There is a similar case with a play by Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, which pretends to be a Roman play but the there are no verified historical sources that would confirm the events being true and not almost purely fantastic.

Cup to be the most suitable for staging it first. As Percy Fitzgerald notes in Irving's biography, "the preparations for this elegant play were of the most lavish and unstinted kind. Nothing, literally, was spared in the outlay of either study, thought, money, or art" (120-121). Clement Scott recalls that the premiere of the play was attended by "most distinguished audience—one of the richest in literature, art, science, and politics that has ever been seen at the Lyceum; and in one of the stage boxes sat the Prime Minister, with Mrs. Gladstone and other members of the family," as it was usual in the Lyceum Theatre ("From 'The Bells'…," 204). Actress Ellen Terry played the role of Camma and Henry Irving Synorix. Terry writes about her colleague and manager in her memoirs, which provide valuable information about the play's production:

> Henry Irving was not able to look like the full-lipped, full-blooded Romans such as we see in long lines in marble at the British Museum, so he conceived his own type of the blend of Roman intellect and sensuality with barbarian cruelty and lust. Tennyson was not pleased with him as Synorix! *How* he failed to delight in it as a picture I can't conceive. With a pale, pale face, bright red hair, gold armor and a tiger-skin, a diabolical expression and very thin crimson lips, Henry looked handsome and sickening at the same time. *Lechery* was written across his forehead.

Irving wanted Tennyson to wait with his publishing of the text after the play premiere and suggested a few changes so that the play has a better stage flow, to which the poet agreed. Clemet Scott asserted that the text would definitely help the audience to appreciate the beauty of both the poetry and the scenery as he compared it to an Academy picture which requires more than a one visit to "absorb it entirely and satisfactory" ("From 'The Bells'…," 203). Interestingly, as Jeffrey Richards notes, the story of Galatian woman Camma and the revenge for killing her husband Sinnatus already existed as a full-length tragedy *Camma* written around 1855 especially for a famous Italian actress Adelaide Ristori by Italian playwright Giuseppe Montanelli, as a "pean to the sanctity of marriage and of marital fidelity" (*Sir Henry Irving*…, 202-205). William Archer ruthlessly sums up that "a comparison between the two [Montanelli and Tennyson] is extremely instructive, as showing how to write and how *not* to write a

drama" (*English Dramatists*…, 344). He adds that there were also two minor attempts at the story, by Thomas Corneille and a German playwright (344).

Ellen Terry noted that "'The Cup' was called a failure, but it ran 125 nights, and every night the house was crowded!" (Terry, "Ellen Terry as Camma in 'The Cup'"). It is interesting as Terry is not the only one to emphasize this interesting phenomenon – the play was shown to the full house, but itself was not considered particularly good, as all Tennyson's attempts at stage drama. William Archer begins his review of Tennyson's play with stating that it was the only play to achieve financial success but is "by far the feeblest of his dramatic productions" (*English Dramatists*…, 343). He asserts that the character of Sinnatus is not developed and thus superfluous, the dramatic motive of vengeance is very weak and in general the play is poorly constructed with "an unnecessary prologue [the whole Act I] and an unmotived catastrophe the drama he misses out" (348-350). Nevertheless, about Irving's mounting, he wrote in accordance with all the other reviewers of the play:

> He mounted the piece with a taste and lavishness positively unexampled. Each scene was a masterpiece in itself, but the supreme effort was the Temple of Artemis, in which the last act takes place. In the gloom of the background we saw the great Diana of the Ephesians "Artemis polymastos," the many-breasted mother looking down upon the fore-court, with its double row of solid, richly-sculptured marble pillars, and its roof of sandal-wood inlaid with gold. The air was heavy with incense, and the priestesses moved noiselessly among the sacred lamps. I doubt if a more elaborate and perfect stage-picture of its kind has ever been seen, and if so, certainly not in England. It almost seems as if stage decoration could go no further (*English Dramatists*…, 350-351).

The last though was obviously a wrong guess, as *The Cup* only triggered more plays with even more lavish stage decorations. Clement Scott who analysed the play in his collection of *Critical Records Of The First-Night Productions At The Lyceum Theatre From 1871 to 1895* was very impressed by it, both the poetic verse by Tennyson, the staging by Irving and his team which reminded him, among many others, of academic paintings, and the acting, especially of Irving and Terry. He recommended to see the

play more than once, which turned out to be a common practice in case of later toga plays. He wrote:

> If ever there was a play that from its intrinsic merits demanded a second, if not a third, visit, it is "The Cup." At present the landscape of Mr. W. Telbin, and the decorative splendour of Mr. Hawes Craven's Temple of Artemis absorb all attention. We seem to see before us the concentrated essence of such fascinating art as that of Sir Frederick Leighton, and Mr. Alma Tadema, in a breathing and tangible form. Not only do the grapes grow before us, and the myrtles blossom, the snow mountains change from silver-white at daytime to roseate hues at dawn ; not only are the Pagan ceremonies acted before us with a reality and a fidelity that almost baffle description, but in the midst of all this scenic allurement glide the classical draperies of Miss Ellen Terry, who is the exact representative of the period she enacts, while following her we find the eager glances of the fate-haunted Mr. Irving. The pictures that dwell on the memory are countless, and not to be effaced in spell or witchery by any of the most vaunted productions of the stage, even in an era devoted to archaeology. (201)

He also observed that some among the audience found the play too devoid of proper dramatic action, and getting familiar with the play's published text would change that – "The fastidious amongst the audience, who complained of dullness and want of action, possibly forgot that whilst their eyes were feasting on the scenery, their ears were closed to the poetry, and on another visit will confess how much meaning and study were at the first blush lost to them" (202).

Irving's production owes its success to its atmospheric, almost oneiric mood, mostly through the scenes set in the perfectly mounted Temple, as I will discuss in more detail a little further. Percy Fitzgerlad, Irving's early biographer recalls the charm of the piece, but also mentions some criticism:

> It still lingers in the memory with an inexpressible charm, breathing poetry and romance. We shall ever look back fondly to 'The Cup,' with its exquisite setting, and lament heartily that others did not so cordially or enthusiastically appreciate it. There was something so fascinating about the play, something so refining, and also so "fantastical," that though lacking the strong thews and muscles of a regular drama, it satisfied eye and ear. As it floated before us, in airy, evanescent fashion, it seemed to recall the lines that wind up the most charming of Shakespeare's plays, when the revels now had ended, and all had "melted into air, into thin air"… It was not a little disheartening to think that this "entire, perfect chrysolite" was received with a rather cold admiration, or at least not with the enthusiasm it richly merited. The apathetic crowd scarcely appreciated the too delicate fare set before it, we scarcely know why. I suppose that it had not sufficient robustness, as it is called. (121-123).

For the first time Irving hired an outside team of professional designers, with Edward William Godwin being responsible for designing costumes for Ellen Terry

(Camma), which were compared by many as a living realisation of neo-classical paintings of Albert Moore, known for depicting ancient women clad in elegant draperies of their togas, Alexander Murray, an assistant keeper of Greek antiquities at the British Museum who advised on other costumes and properties, and James Knowles, who designed Tennyson's house, in charge of two interiors on stage – the Tetrarch's House and the Temple of Artemis, based on recent publications on the temple at Ephesus stored in British Museum (Baldwin, 323). Godwin's version of the design of the play's cup was given to Tennyson on the hundredth night of the play's performance – it was a silver, three handled cup, pipkin-shaped, standing on three legs (Terry, "Ellen Terry as Camma in 'The Cup'"). For Godwin the involvement with Irving was the most prestigious commission up to that point. As Fanny Baldwin notes, "the opportunity of being even a transient contributor to the vibrant and experimental, artistically and commercially successful Lyceum team was an invaluable boost to Godwin's work in the theatre, and the lessons in lighting… later bore fruit in his work for the actor-manager Wilson Barrett at the Princess's Theatre" (323-324). The scenery was highly praised by figures such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema, for the atmospheric mood it created and the unique use of lighting. Alfred Darbyshire in his recollections entitled *The Art of The Victorian Stage* tells the story of Tadema's reaction to the play:

> All lovers of Stage art of our time are thankful for this result, which produced the beautiful play of "The Cup," and the fine play of "Becket"… Both of these Tennysonian plays have been the medium of accentuating what I have chosen to call the art of the Victorian era, in proof of this I may be pardoned, for introducing an account of an incident which occurred on the first night of "The Cup." On this occasion I sat next to Sir Alma Tadema… Some of those present were spellbound by the classic realism of this picture. While thunders of applause resounded through the theatre, the first man of the silent ones who spoke was Alma Tadema. With a sigh and a shrug of the shoulders, he exclaimed, "Ah! how poor my art is after this." The great artist repeated this opinion to the great actor-manager. Irving, with that sad smile which sometimes passed across his features, said, "Ah! Tadema, when I am dead and gone my art is gone, while yours lives for ever." (104-105)

This and the fact that "he also saw the publicity value in drawing on the services of established artists who were both revered by the intelligentsia and also had popular

appeal" (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 156) encouraged Irving to proceed with hiring professional artists in his future Shakespeare's productions – Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Maddox Brown for *King Lear* (1892), and Alma-Tadema for *Cymbeline* (1896) and *Coriolanus* (1901) (Barrow, "Toga plays…" 213). Oscar Wilde must have been under the impression of Tennyson and Irving's play, as he wrote a short poem "Camma" talking about love and hedonism, which he dedicated to actress Ellen Terry.

To describe the plot of the play in general, one has to state that it is a story of revenge, the titular cup being a symbol of it as well the tool, and at the same time the story of Galatians[37] and their inferiority to the power of Rome. It is the mixture of marital love-revenge story amid the politics of ancient Empire together with how Irving mounted the play that made it an inspiration for the next toga dramas which took the motifs and visual accuracy and grandeur and moulded them into a melodramatic form, which could be enjoyed by very wide and differentiated audience. All the flaws mentioned by William Archer and some other critics are to a great extent true – that the first Act seems like a Prologue to the more dramatic Act II, the characters are too facilely characterized to see the proper motifs for their actions (the viewer does not receive much information as to why Synorix is so in love with Camma and what thoughts drive Camma to the decision to marry him) with probably the weakest point in depiction of Sinnatus. Although he is praised and loved by his wife, and at one point described by the women as a good Tetrarch in comparison to Synorix: "He climbs the throne. Hot blood, ambition, pride | So bloat and redden his face – O would it were | His third last apoplexy! O bestial! | O how unlike our goodly Sinnatus[38]," we do not learn

[37] There is not a lot known about the history of the region of Galatia, apart from the fact that it was a province quite faithful to Rome when it was incorporated by Emperor Augustus into the Roman Empire around 25 B.C., however, possessing a strong sense of its own cultural identity and still speaking the Galatian language around 4th century A.D.

[38] The text of Alfred Tennyson's *The Cup* is available in various online sources, hence no pagination is given.

much more about him as husband and ruler. The most attention is devoted to him in the scene where he is joined by Synorix in hunting, whom he later invites as a guest and argues with him about whose arrow shot the stag. The hunting defines his whole personality on stage, which William Archer mocked stating that after Camma dies and happily joins her beloved Sinnatus in the Blessed Isles, "that Galatian Nimrod would probably feel more at home in the Happy Hunting-Grounds" (*English Dramatists*…, 350). I agree that the portrayal of Sinnatus is the weakest link in the play, nevertheless, the portrayals of Synorix, the wicked brute "who steep'd himself in all the lust of Rome" with an ambition worthy of Macbeth and particularly Camma, the loving wife, dutiful to her husband but also to her people and at the same time a vengeful Queen, as well as their background as Galatians trying to preserve their own identity under the supervision of Roman Empire is done very skilfully, evoking the thoughts of Shakespearian tragedies.

The play opens with not very elaborate stage directions: "SCENE I. *Distant View of a City of Galatia. As the curtain rises, Priestesses are heard singing in the Temple. Boy discovered on a pathway among rocks, picking grapes. A party of Roman Soldiers, guarding a prisoner in chains, come down the pathway and exeunt,"* but the account given by Clement Scott sheds light on how skillfully Irving directed the scene:

> Imagine, then, the city of Galatia, among the wooded hills, and a scene set before the Temple of Artemis, with its snow-bordered distance, its grape wreaths and myrtle groves, its luxurious disorder, and matchless colour—a very triumph of scene-painting... All eyes are turned upon this Synorix as the curtain has risen on the picture, and he stalks up the flower-covered rocks, concealing beneath his vestment the fatal marriage cup. ("From 'The Bells'…", 193-194)

With this in mind, the scene clearly anticipates stage tableaux that opened the subsequent toga plays. Act I starts with the soliloquy of Synorix, in its tone reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Hamlet's* soliloquies, in which he presents the key motifs of the story – his love for Camma, which is an additional stimulus to his ambitions to restore his Tetrarchy, the power of Rome which heavily punishes traitors, the cup used in marital

rites, which will be the tool of a crime, although he sends it to Camma as token of love, but also his way to insidiously win her favours. He also ponders the meaning of vengeance, a motif crucial at the end of the story:

> SYNORIX.
> Pine, beech and plane, oak, walnut, apricot,
> Vine, cypress, poplar, myrtle, bowering in
> The city where she dwells. She past me here
> Three years ago when I was flying from
> My Tetrarchy to Rome. I almost touch'd her—
> A maiden slowly moving on to music
> Among her maidens to this Temple—O Gods!
> She is my fate—else wherefore has my fate
> Brought me again to her own city? —married
> Since—married Sinnatus, the Tetrarch here—
> But if he be conspirator, Rome will chain,
> Or slay him. I may trust to gain her then
> When I shall have my tetrarchy restored
> By Rome, our mistress, grateful that I show'd her
> The weakness and the dissonance of our clans,
> And how to crush them easily. Wretched race!
> And once I wish'd to scourge them to the bones.
> But in this narrow breathing-time of life
> Is vengeance for its own sake worth the while,
> If once our ends are gain'd? and now this cup—
> I never felt such passion for a woman.
> [*Brings out a cup and scroll from under his cloak.*]
> What have I written to her?
> [*Reading the scroll.*]
> 'To the admired Gamma, wife of Sinnatus, the Tetrarch, one who years ago, himself an adorer of our great goddess, Artemis, beheld you afar off worshipping in her Temple, and loved you for it, sends you this cup rescued from the burning of one of her shrines in a city thro' which he past with the Roman army: it is the cup we use in our marriages. Receive it from one who cannot at present write himself other than 'A GALATIAN SERVING BY FORCE IN THE ROMAN LEGION.'

Shortly afterwards when he meets with the Roman General Antonius, he reveals the true destination of the cup: "You come here with your soldiers to enforce | The long-withholden tribute: you suspect | This Sinnatus of playing patriotism, | Which in your sense is treason. You have yet | No proof against him: now this pious cup | Is passport to their house…". Also, in this short fragment he hints at the 'patriotism' towards their own people of Galatia that might be treated like treason, something of this national unity can be felt throughout the play. Antonius confirms that he is there to investigate the rule of Sinnatus and enhances the ambitions of Synorix with an image of a crown:

> Our Senate, wearied of their tetrarchies,

Their quarrels with themselves, their spites at Rome,
Is like enough to cancel them, and throne
One king above them all, who shall be true
To the Roman: and from what I heard in Rome,
This tributary crown may fall to you.
SYNORIX.
The king, the crown! their talk in Rome? is it so?
[ANTONIUS *nods*.]
Well—I shall serve Galatia taking it,
And save her from herself, and be to Rome
More faithful than a Roman.

In Synorix's guarantees there is the will to serve his land, but also a boastful assertion that he will be more Roman than for instance Antonius. It turns out partly forecasting, as the conversation that follows presents Antonius's real thoughts of the politics of Rome and his awareness about the true nature of Synorix, deprived of his office by his own people:

ANTONIUS.
Hot-blooded! I have heard them say in Rome.
That your own people cast you from their bounds,
For some unprincely violence to a woman,
As Rome did Tarquin.
SYNORIX.
Well, if this were so,
I here return like Tarquin—for a crown.
ANTONIUS.
And may be foil'd like Tarquin, if you follow
Not the dry light of Rome's straight-going policy,
But the fool-fire of love or lust, which well
May make you lose yourself, may even drown you
In the good regard of Rome.
SYNORIX.
Tut—fear me not;
I ever had my victories among women.
I am most true to Rome.
ANTONIUS (*aside*).
I hate the man!
What filthy tools our Senate works with! Still
I must obey them. (*Aloud.*) Fare you well.

Antonius presents his sense of duty to Rome despite being aware of the unjustness and assentation of Synorix's crimes (boldly referred to by Synorix as "victories among women") presented by Rome's Senate. He also warns Synorix against putting his desires above duty giving the example of Tarquin. This is a reference to the story of the rape of Lucretia, probably done as one of Tennyson's references to Shakespeare's poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, as he is most probably Sextus Tarquinius, a

Roman general, who raped the wife of one of his kinsmen and was killed in revenge in a revolt led by Lucretia's husband's cousin, Lucius Junius Brutus, who overthrew the monarchy and enabled the beginning of the Roman Republic. Lucretia, who killed herself because of her shame, is a parallel to Camma and her struggles to remain faithful to her husband, also ending in a suicidal death. Antonius officially appoints Synorix to investigate if there are any treacherous deeds on the account of Sinnatus, which Synorix immediately does joining the hunting group of approaching Tetrarch, without any fear as he says "I am a Roman now, they dare not touch me" and introduces himself as by a Greek name Strato explaining "A Greek, my lord; you know | That we Galatians are both Greek and Gaul".

The thread about the treachery of Sinnatus is treated very generally – at one point he talks aside about his anti-Roman faction, which Synorix overhears – although could have been an interesting one to develop further. They engage in a talk about serving and fighting Rome to which Sinnatus says (when he sees Synorix's paper sent with the cup signed "A Galatian serving by force in the Roman legion") that no force would make him serve by force and Synorix tells a story of hunting for a lion, which symbolises the power of Rome:

> I once was at the hunting of a lion.
> Roused by the clamour of the chase he woke,
> Came to the front of the wood—his monarch mane
> Bristled about his quick ears—he stood there
> Staring upon the hunter. A score of dogs
> Gnaw'd at his ankles: at the last he felt
> The trouble of his feet, put forth one paw,
> Slew four, and knew it not, and so remain'd
> Staring upon the hunter: and this Rome
> Will crush you if you wrestle with her…

He repeatedly conjures up images of the brutality of the sovereign ("Rome never yet hath spar'd conspirator. | Horrible! flaying, scourging, crucifying—") in order to trick Camma to come to the Temple and plead for her husband to Antonius.

In Act I Camma is presented mostly as a loyal and loving wife. When Scene II opens, she is waiting for her husband to return from the hunting, anxious for him being late. The picture of her laying on the couch with a harp and singing a song is like a scene from a neo-classical painting showing a woman in her private chamber, and as many stage tableaux showing the antique women, either honourable ones, or even more often the villainous temptresses in future toga plays. Camma's song about the moon must have given a very atmospheric moment in the play, after which she immediately refers to potential conspiracy her husband might be part of and compares Rome to a wolf:

> CAMMA.
> No Sinnatus yet—and there the rising moon.
> [*Takes up a cithern and sits on couch. Plays and sings*.]
> 'Moon on the field and the foam,
> Moon on the waste and the wold,
> Moon bring him home, bring him home
> Safe from the dark and the cold,
> Home, sweet moon, bring him home,
> Home with the flock to the fold—
> Safe from the wolf'—
> (*Listening*.) Is he coming? I thought I heard
> A footstep. No not yet. They say that Rome
> Sprang from a wolf. I fear my dear lord mixt
> With some conspiracy against the wolf.
> This mountain shepherd never dream'd of Rome.
> (*Sings*.) 'Safe from the wolf to the fold'—
> And that great break of precipice that runs
> Thro' all the wood, where twenty years ago
> Huntsman, and hound, and deer were all neck-broken!

When she and her husband are provoked by Synorix in a conversation about war against Roman oppression she also demonstrates her strong will and devotion to her land and tells the story of her lost baby boy, whom, if he lived, she would rather see as a soldier than yield and produces a very encouraging speech about wars fought for freedom:

> Whereas in wars of freedom and defence
> The glory and grief of battle won or lost
> Solders a race together—yea—tho' they fail,
> The names of those who fought and fell are like
> A bank'd-up fire that flashes out again
> From century to century, and at last
> May lead them on to victory…

Her parting with Sinnatus is very affectionate, as she recalls their first confession of love and demands a kiss for good night as if it was to be their last.

By the end of Act I we see Synorix in his true colours of a villain[39]. When Sinnatus discovers his real identity, he describes his cruelty as a former Tetrarch:

> He should say this, that being Tetrarch once
> His own true people cast him from their doors
> Like a base coin.
> CAMMA.
> Not kindly to them?
> SINNATUS.
> Kindly?
> O the most kindly Prince in all the world!
> Would clap his honest citizens on the back,
> Bandy their own rude jests with them, be curious
> About the welfare of their babes, their wives,
> O ay—their wives—their wives. What should he say?
> He should say nothing to my wife if I
> Were by to throttle him! He steep'd himself
> In all the lust of Rome. How should you guess
> What manner of beast it is?
> CAMMA.
> Yet he seem'd kindly,
> And said he loathed the cruelties that Rome
> Wrought on her vassals.

Despite Antonius's warning he gets his feelings for Camma take over him, which he himself admits, and that would eventually bring him death from her hand:

> A woman I could live and die for. What!
> Die for a woman, what new faith is this?
> I am not mad, not sick, not old enough
> To doat on one alone. Yes, mad for her,
> Camma the stately, Camma the great-hearted,
> So mad, I fear some strange and evil chance
> Coming upon me, for by the Gods I seem
> Strange to myself.

Act II closes with another soliloquy from Synorix, very agitated as he just murdered Camma's husband. He contemplates the ambitions and passions that arise in a human being, that led him to killing Sinnatus who previously let him free:

> 'Adulterous dog!' that red-faced rage at me!
> Then with one quick short stab—eternal peace.

[39] The fact that the name resembles the name of the evil witch Sycorax, a symbol of dark evil magic and control over her son Caliban, from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* would be an interesting analogy and potential inspiration for Tennyson, however, Sinorix already appears in Plutarch's accounts together with Camma and her husband Sinatus.

So end all passions. Then what use in passions?
To warm the cold bounds of our dying life
And, lest we freeze in mortal apathy,
Employ us, heat us, quicken us, help us, keep us
From seeing all too near that urn, those ashes
Which all must be. Well used, they serve us well.
I heard a saying in Egypt, that ambition
Is like the sea wave, which the more you drink,
The more you thirst—yea—drink too much, as men
Have done on rafts of wreck—it drives you mad.
I will be no such wreck, am no such gamester
As, having won the stake, would dare the chance
Of double, or losing all. The Roman Senate,
For I have always play'd into their hands,
Means me the crown…

For a moment he dwells on the fact that he was too impetuous in his deed, but then concentrates on his aim to win Camma's feelings and obtain his promised crown.

The opening of the second Act in the Temple of Artemis and the impression it made is a shadow of the future impressive stage setting of ancient cities, palaces, temples and markets in the future toga plays. Act II opens with the following description, and a song, much like the impressive scene opening of Barrett's *Claudian*:

SCENE. *Interior of the Temple of Artemis. Small gold gates on platform in front of the veil before the colossal statue of the Goddess, and in the centre of the Temple a tripod altar, on which is a lighted lamp. Lamps (lighted) suspended between each pillar. Tripods, vases, garlands of flowers, etc., about stage. Altar at back close to Goddess, with two cups. Solemn music. Priestesses decorating the Temple.*
(*The Chorus of* PRIESTESSES *sing as they enter*.)
Artemis, Artemis, hear us, O Mother, hear us, and bless us!
Artemis, thou that art life to the wind, to the wave, to the glebe,
to the fire!
Hear thy people who praise thee! O help us from all that oppress us!
Hear thy priestesses hymn thy glory! O yield them all their desire!

There is a famous memoir by Ellen Terry describing the production of the play. She was under great impression of the scenery:

The production was one of the most beautiful things that Henry Irving ever accomplished. It has been described again and again, but none of the descriptions are very successful. There was a vastness, a spaciousness of proportion about the scene in the Temple of Artemis which I never saw again upon the stage… A great deal of the effect was due to the lighting. The gigantic figure of the many-breasted Artemis, placed far back in the scene-dock, loomed through a blue mist, while the foreground of the picture was in yellow light…Quite as wonderful as the Temple Scene was the setting of the first act, which represented the rocky side of a mountain with a glimpse of a fertile table-land and a pergola with vines growing over it at the top. (Terry, "Ellen Terry as Camma in 'The Cup'")

Rosemary Barrow notices that Irving took the inspiration for the giant statue of the Goddess from the peculiar statue, adorned with multiple breasts as a symbol of mother nature and fertility, from the great temple of Artemis at Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, known from the Roman copies and from its Victorian pictorial representation in the painting by Edwin Long *Diana or Christ?*, which was exhibited in 1881, shortly before the premiere of the play (Fig. 8), a painting particularly influential for toga plays ("Toga plays…," 212). It shows a crowded scene with the packed amphitheatre in the background, and the group of Priestesses of Artemis standing behind the statue of the goddess and Roman soldiers in the foreground surrounding a young girl looking up, dressed in a white toga, which stands out against the armours, dark-coloured togas and even leopard skins covering the men. Anthea Purkis, Curator of Art, in the museum where the painting is exhibited further describes the scene:

> The painting is set in the Roman city of Ephesus, on the coast of modern day Turkey. All eyes are on the central character, a young Christian woman whose expression is heavy with the burden of making a life or death decision. Will she give up Christianity by offering incense to the statue of Diana, the goddess of hunting or will she refuse and be dragged away by the soldiers to be killed? Behind her, a Roman official holds up the certificate which guarantees her freedom as it records she has given up Christianity for paganism. Although her eyes are looking up towards Heaven, her body is leaning towards the altar of Diana. What will she decide? Diana or Christ?

The worshipping of the Goddess and the marriage rituals in the Temple that take a great deal of the second act till its end were invented and managed by Irving himself with "something like a hundred beautiful young women chosen for Vestals" (qtd. in Richards, *Sir Henry Irving…,* 204) which had a great effect, also noticed by Terry:

> The thrilling effect always to be gained on the stage by the simple expedient of a great number of people doing the same thing in the same way at the same moment, was seen in "The Cup," when the stage was covered with a crowd of women who raised their arms above their heads with a large, rhythmic, sweeping movement and then bowed to the goddess with the regularity of a regiment saluting. (Terry, "Ellen Terry as Camma in 'The Cup'")

Act II, all taking place in the Temple six months after the murder, focuses more on Camma, who fled there, became the Priestess and was repeatedly asked by Synorix's

herald to marry him and accept the Queen's crown. Before the marriage rites that occupy a great deal of the Act, the reasons for coming to a decision to marry Synorix are unclear and come a little out of a sudden. The other Priestesses notice her strange and a little irrational behaviour and discuss her decision – "have you not mark'd | Her eyes were ever on the marble floor? | To-day they are fixt and bright—they look straight out. | Hath she made up her mind to marry him?" to which Camma mysteriously replies – "My girl, I am the bride of Death, and only | Marry the dead". It might be that Tennyson wanted to hide the revenge motif till the very end in order to build suspense and save the sudden reveal for the culmination scene. The only explanation she gives to the shocked women is that of wanting to serve the people of Galatia and "teach this Rome—from knowledge of our people— | Where to lay on her tribute—heavily here | And lightly there". She crowns herself with the diadem of the first Galatian Queen while Synorix is crowned the King with Roman symbols – gold laurel wreath and purple robes, while speaking ominously about the ghost of her husband and reminiscing that when she was marrying him, she spilt the wine from the marriage cup which looked like blood on the marble floor of the Temple. The contrast between the very poetic prayers spoken to Goddess Artemis by Synorix and Camma during the marriage celebrations is stark and very interesting, as Synorix prays for happiness in his marriage:

> O Thou, that dost inspire the germ with life,
> The child, a thread within the house of birth,
> And give him limbs, then air, and send him forth
> The glory of his father—Thou whose breath
> Is balmy wind to robe our hills with grass,
> And kindle all our vales with myrtle-blossom,
> And roll the golden oceans of our grain,
> And sway the long grape-bunches of our vines,
> And fill all hearts with fatness and the lust
> Of plenty—make me happy in my marriage!,

whereas Camma produces a call full of harsh images with passion similar to her speech about war from the previous Act (the prayer also starts with reference to a dead

unborn child) and addresses it specifically to their own Goddess in their own Temple, all ending with a thunder being heard:

> O Thou that slayest the babe within the womb
> Or in the being born, or after slayest him
> As boy or man, great Goddess, whose storm-voice
> Unsockets the strong oak, and rears his root
> Beyond his head, and strows our fruits, and lays
> Our golden grain, and runs to sea and makes it
> Foam over all the fleeted wealth of kings
> And peoples, hear.
> Whose arrow is the plague—whose quick flash splits
> The mid-sea mast, and rifts the tower to the rock,
> And hurls the victor's column down with him
> That crowns it, hear.
> Who causest the safe earth to shudder and gape,
> And gulf and flatten in her closing chasm
> Domed cities, hear.
> Whose lava-torrents blast and blacken a province
> To a cinder, hear.
> Whose winter-cataracts find a realm and leave it
> A waste of rock and ruin, hear. I call thee
> To make my marriage prosper to my wish!

Synorix is left pale and uneasy at her words and the sound of thunder, but Camma assures him that words are not always what they seem and that she will be faithful to him till he dies, at which point the rough imagery and Camma's apparently false words suggest the viewer the upcoming tragic end. Camma shows everybody the cup from the Temple's altar but insists that they drink from the cup given to her by Synorix, which she filled with poison.

The last scene resonates very much with references to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, also for the motif of a dead king and his wife marrying his rival, ending with Queen Gertrude drinking the poisoned wine that was intended for her son. Synorix dies in a theatrical way, shocked at the deed of Camma, and the final curtain leaves two dead bodies and the future ruler of the Province standing above them. To the very end the Galatian versus Roman relations are referenced. Camma questions Antonius about the day at the Temple when she was to meet him and what he would do with her husband to which he answers that because "Rome is fated to rule the world" he would take him as a prisoner. Camma does not question it, but to the last moments is a patriot to her own

country – when dying Synorix cries "O all ye Gods—Jupiter!—Jupiter!," she scorns him "Dost thou cry out upon the Gods of Rome? | Thou art Galatian-born. Our Artemis | Has vanquish'd their Diana". She reveals to Antonius that she meant to poison him as well, but is glad for not having done so as her people can be ruled by someone noble – "Nay, if my people must be thralls of Rome, | He is gentle, tho' a Roman," but laments that they have to be inferior to Rome, which she thankfully would not see. Appreciating her devotion, Antonius forgives her. In her final moments she realises she has to put away her crown in order to see Sinnatus waiting for her in the Blessed Islands[40], a place where worldly kingdoms, for which people fight and kill for do not matter, contrary to virtues of faithfulness and devotion.

The Cup was definitely a landmark for the lavish visual spectacles that developed together with the characteristic motifs of subsequent toga plays. As Clement Scott observed, Irving's play was something unprecedented on Victorian stage – "So strange and novel was the whole story, so different from all the Stage has given, and all the traditions of the theatre, so utterly unorthodox and unconventional…," with its different elements bound together to accomplish the visual spectacle and the exciting story of Galatia under the Roman power. It is interesting what prompted Scott to describe the play as so different was the historical setting and how it was presented, not so much the story itself, which contained a lot of inspiration from Shakespeare and attempted at more serious drama also with its verse form, but at the same time was quite close to the issues of Victorian society. Unquestionably, it was the set design and Irving's attitude towards making the historical setting of play as visually stunning as possible that was the main influence on other actor-managers who pursued producing

[40] Sometimes also called The Fortunate Isles and associated with Elysium, they were mentioned by Homer and Hesiod as a place to which some chosen heroes were transferred and where they lived a life of happiness. The islands were believed to be situated at the end of the world, on the shore of the earth-encircling ocean ("Islands of the Blessed," *Encyclopedia Mythica Online*).

plays set in Roman Empire. Of considerable importance was also the topic, taken from Plutarch and adapted for Victorian stage, with the character of Camma, who impersonated both the virtuous wife who stays faithful till the end and a woman of strength who is able to deceive a man to take her revenge. Hence, the figure of Camma with her complexity comes to the foreground of the play, it foreshadows the very common in later toga plays topic of the new roles of women, even their own version of the New Woman. As David Mayer notes,

> The women of toga drama are worthy of remark because it is chiefly they who act as catalysts for change in an empire that is conspicuously ruled by men. It is the Almidas, Mercias, and Lygias who speak for change and morally better lives… they spurn men's wealth and luxury and seem prepared to make their own way and to live without men, placing vocation above marriage. (*Playing Out…,* 14-15)

Camma is the first of the line of women, who oppose imperialism, the patriarchal authority associated with it and serve as a model for domestic peace (the later heroines being obviously impeccable examples of virtue), a topic – the role of a woman in society – common also in Victorian realistic literature, because it was an important current social issue in real life. The character of Synorix, with his political ambitions and plotting, having the reputation of seducing many women due to his lusts was a forerunner of the future Roman patricians who indulged in debauchery and cruelty. With the religious celebrations that were so atmospherically depicted amid the impressive architecture of the ancient Temple and the fortunes of people of that times enlivened with political ambitions, conspiring, lust, love, and revenge *The Cup* paved the way particularly for such toga melodramas as *Junius*, *Clito* (also a verse tragedy with the motif of rebellion against the oppressive higher classes) or *The Daughters of Babylon*, while Barrett's *Claudian* with its attempt to incorporate early Christianity into the topic, encouraged the productions of *The Sign of the Cross*, *Quo Vadis* and *Ben-Hur* – today best remembered toga dramas and then films.

3.2 *Claudian* (1883): towards respectability

Just as Barrett's later, and the most famous of toga plays, *The Sign of the Cross*, was described by the press and Barrett himself as "bridge spanning the gulf" between the Church and Theatre (*Kansas City Daily Journal,* 2), *Claudian* is definitely a bridge between the sensation melodramas (including Barrett's *The Silver King* with the train crash scene) and the more elevated educational historical plays with the religious subject, in the future given the name of toga dramas. As was common with the previous melodramas with a sensation scene, the first scene of *Claudian* that was written by Henry Herman was an earthquake, especially designed for the Princess's Theatre, and then Barrett and Herman decided "to write a play for it," which was finished in six weeks (Thomas, 64-65). Since Barrett wanted to elevate his melodramas into combination of "romance and poetry," he hired William Gorman Wills to write the dialogues (Thomas, 64). Barrett insisted on introducing some humour into the play so as it would not be too grim, and made sure that it was written in such a way that the audience would not lose sympathy for the cursed hero till the end. Mostly thanks to hiring Edward William Godwin and his successful collaboration with Barrett's team of painters and architects, the play also set the standard of working on the visual effects of future toga plays, something that Irving's *The Cup* was a predecessor of and important influence. The play had a premiere on 6 December 1883, its last stagings taking place in 1904, a year after Barrett's death. The role of Claudian was played by Wilson Barret and the role of Almida by Miss Mary Eastlake, who was to be his leading actress in future plays as well.

Claudian consists of a prologue containing two scenes, and three main acts of the play. Scenes in the Prologue are set in Byzantium 362 A.D., the first one at the slave market, and the second in the sanctuary of the Holy Clement. After the hero is cursed with eternal youth and inability to do good, a hundred years pass before the opening in

Act I. The three acts are set in city of Charydos in Bithynia with the first one presenting the story of peasant daughters of wealthy farmer Alcares, Edessa and Almida, and their beloved, Belos and Agazil with the sudden appearance of Claudian in their lives which brings misfortune. Act II presents the cruel rules of the Tetrarch and the mistreatment of the young citizens, famously ending with the earthquake and the destruction of the city. Short Act III presents Claudian as the only man alive and finally given a chance to repent and achieve peace.

Taking out the story and character of Claudian, the play is nothing, but a classic melodrama about a love triangle, with a great deal of comic elements. After the powerful introduction with the stunning vision of ancient Byzantine street and its people and the horrible curse on Claudian, Act I is a rural scene (although visually also very pleasing as I discuss further) where we see the peasant girls chatting about their love lives– quite in contrast with the vision of the decadent aristocrat disregarding the lives of ordinary people and the gloomy ending of the Prologue. Soon we can observe the comic couple of Edessa and Belos, who love each other but constantly banter, call themselves names and even turn on each other in a childish manner to Alcares, Edessa's father. There are a few conversations between them in the play, all in a similar style:

> BELOS [*sobbing*] She insulted me, sir, and she threw doubts on my unquestioned valour.
> EDESSA He hath said that I affected the lady and was stout.
> BELOS [talking very fast] She said that I swigger-swaggered and worse – that I bubble-gubbled and that I had been living with the pigs.
> EDESSA He said that I twitter-twattered.
> ALCARES Cease! Enough! You're a pair of fools, and here I solemnly and for ever break off the betrothal between you. Dog and cat can never pair.
> EDESSA [*suddenly changing tune*] What! Just when Almida was going to be married, Father? And Belos and I betrothed a month?
> BELOS Just when I've got the little cottage by the forest all snug.
> EDESSA The dear little cottage which some great man who has come into the country forced the Tetrarch to disgorge. Father [*half-crying*], you're a cruel man.
> BELOS You think nothing of blighting young innocent hearts[41]. (57)

[41] *Claudian* is published in David Mayer's book *Playing Out the Empire* on pages 36-89, based on a licensing copy deposited with the Lord Chamberlain in 1883. Mayer notes how Clement Scott, initially under great impression of the play, wrote to Barrett that *Claudian* needs to be published, but in the end it never was (32).

Their conversations remind me of Thomas William Robertson's comedy dramas like *Caste* (1867), where the comic characters of Polly Eccles and Sam Gerridge serve as a main comedic couple and have very similar bantering conversations with each other, among their cup-and-saucer setting; also, the sudden announcement without any explanation that Agazil is alive bears some resemblance with sudden reversal of fortune in *Caste* when one of the main characters who was presumably dead shows up alive (of course in Robertson's play the reversal was crucial to the play's ending, in *Claudian* it is much less important). Act II, in which due to the cruelty of the Tetrarch a set of misfortune happens to the characters – Belos is made a soldier against his will (right after laughingly boasting that he was made to be one, the scenes purely composed just for the comic effect and plot's complication), Agazil is thrown over the city's battlements into the river for his disobedience, Almida is abducted by the Tetrarch (who once wanted her to be his wife and got rejected) and saved from the assault in last minute by Claudian – is a melodrama like many others.

David Mayer sees *Claudian* as the initiator of the genre of toga plays; the play which developed the style and workshop used to create the next plays set in antiquity (*Playing Out…,* 32). For the design, for which *Claudian* was later to be so much admired, Barrett hired Edward William Godwin who worked with Walter Hann and Stafford Hall who were specializing in the architectural design, and a landscape painter William Telbin. Incidental music was created by Sir Julius Benedict and Edward Jones. They became a team who were to be part of Barrett's long-term workers. David Mayer notes that for *Claudian*, E.W. Godwin designed, most probably with some directions from Barrett himself, a new toga costume, which was more comfortable to wear and did not restrict the actors' movements and which was to be used in later plays and films, regardless of a few mocking pictures from the press that laughed at how much body the

toga revealed. Godwin's work was an "abbreviated Roman costume, a short, close-fitting jewelled tunic, open at the chest, worn with fleshings and high boots" (Mayer, *Playing Out…,* 32).

Godwin started to work with Barrett around the year 1880 and his first of Barrett's plays for which he was supposed to design scenery, costumes and properties in collaboration with Barrett's scenic painters William Beverley, Stafford Hall and Walter Hann, was *Juana*, a play not successful, but the scenery praised as being "fully up to the Lyceum standard" (Baldwin, 324). After *Claudian*, Godwin worked until he died in 1886 as a set-designer with Barrett, on the plays *Hamlet* (1884) and toga pieces *Junius* (1885) and *Clito* (1886). While working on all of the plays he was a frequent guest to the museums, galleries, and libraries where he sketched artefacts from the historical periods and read source materials. He also produced some critical work, writing for different journals, most notably producing a series of articles analysing the archeology and costumes of Shakespeare's plays, published from 1874 to 1875. In stage design he was a pioneer of using diagonal settings instead of the common parallel arrangements of flats and drops. As Fanny Baldwin observes, Godwin's "approach to stage design was fired by a philosophy of visual truth, realized in accuracy in re-creation of the appearance of the original, a perfect illusion of reality to be assimilated by the audience for their edification and aesthetic appreciation" (313) and Michael Booth sums up, "Godwin *credo* is an excellent summation, not only of archaeological principle, but also of the high-minded educational motives of the whole historical-realist movement in the Victorian theatre" (*Victorian Spectacular…,* 21).

Although Victorian toga plays were generally praised for their approach to accurate historical scenery, from today's perspective we can more easily observe that the approach was very much a Victorian interpretation of the details of ancient life. This is true about many variations of the representation of the historical past in Victorian

times – their understanding and staging of Shakespeare's plays, the academic neo-classical painting and visions of Rome presented mostly by Alma-Tadema, the historical events described in historical novels and plays that referred to actual times, the allusions to Roman Empire when talking about the economy and politics of British Empire. It was all of course based on some known historical sources, but to a great extent a Victorian interpretation, suited to the needs of Victorian rhetoric. The very name of the discussed plays – "toga," obviously taken from the popular (at least in nineteenth century, but also present day, people's imagination) Roman piece of clothing is problematic as in ancient Rome togas were worn only by men, only by members of the elite, and only on special occasions. The togas proposed by Godwin for *Claudian* as well as togas worn by men and women in other toga plays were Victorian variations of the real Roman attire and undoubtedly became one of the more characteristic feature of this genre (hence its name). The treatment of togas in the future toga films, was taken to an even bigger extreme as the costumes worn especially by women in Cecil DeMille's 1932 adaptation of *The Sign of the Cross* were very extravagant and rich (deep cuts showing flesh and lots of jewellery) and very much like female gowns of the 1930s American fashion, only cut and draped in a toga manner. The fact that costumes and other elements of scenery and props were subjected to the decisions of managers or directors who thought not only about accuracy, but also about what would have a better presence on stage is proved by the story concerning Godwin's design of a litter in which Claudian entered in the first scene. Although the design was based on the photographs of "an only known portrait of a Roman litter in existence" provided to the designer by the National Museum of Naples, Barrett wanted his character's first entrance to be in a more richly decorated litter, and refused the design (Baldwin, 328-329). Of course, the Victorian critics and press were aware of the approach taken by actor-managers as there were even satirical sketches showing Barrett rejecting Godwin's proposal in the press,

but I assume that general public did not pay much attention to it and just enjoyed the lavish, as a matter of fact to a great deal accurate, historical spectacle.

The precision of Godwin's work dedicated to *Claudian* can be observed in a letter entitled "A Few Notes on the Architecture and Costume of the Period of the Play 'Claudian'" that he sent to Wilson Barrett, in which he shows his method of thorough research and his findings on the clothes and jewellery worn both by rich and poor people of the era, accompanied by a few sketches of people in togas, as well as a woman's hairstyle of that time. He presents the historical outline of the period 360-460 A.D., which he describes as Christianised Roman because of the gradual spread of Christianity in Roman Empire at that time and sees it as "distinguished for gorgeous display, and that only in country places among simple folk could one find that refinement and delicate beauty which was characteristic of old Greek days" (Godwin, 3). We can see that fascination with the refinement and delicate beauty of simple country life in the opening scene of Act I (a hundred years after the events from the Prologue) in a village near Charydos during summer harvest, where we are presented with almost a pastoral scene, quite in contrast with the gloomy ending of the Prologue. The scene is accompanied by Harvest Song and at the rise of the curtain we see three country girls looking out for the wagon with the harvest procession, which is described as follows:

> [*Harvest Song heard in the distance. The Harvest Song is sung partly off, partly as the harvest procession crosses the stage, and then partly off again. During this song the procession crosses the stage.* ALCARES *and* EDESSA *join the group of girls and the other peasants with them, all in full swing of joy. Six girls precede the procession, dancing, then six boys with pipes, also dancing, then six girls with the musical instruments, then peasants girls and children and men, singing the Vintage Song. These group themselves to let Vintage Wagon pass. Then the Vintage Wagon, dragged by twelve young fellows, headed by the farm steward and the overseers, goes past, and the choristers fall in again and exeunt singing. All are decked out with flowers, leaves and grapes.*] (52)

It is no wonder that *Claudian* charmed the audiences and critics with its staging and scenery, as every major scenes opens with a detailed description of the set, the Harvest

procession in my opinion being one of the most atmospheric and impressive; the other ones that have to be mentioned is the opening setting in the Prologue, and the moonlit palace of Claudian and its later demolition.

As Fanny Baldwin notices, the opening scene of Act I was one of the first of the play's three tableaux, which "gave the audience the opportunity to compare the stage pictures with the Academy paintings of Alma-Tadema" (330). In fact, critic Clement Scott admitted that he was reminded of Alma-Tadema paintings, seeing the Byzantine city, soaked in sun, with the blue ocean waters in the background (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 104). Indeed, the opening of the play is very powerful, with the lengthy description of the setting, that must have given the impression of a real busy Byzantium street where a slave auction takes place. The description looks as if it were showing a few scenes from neo-classical paintings:

> *A slave market outside the public baths of Byzantium. The entrance to the baths, at back of street leading downhill, approaches stage from L., whilst panorama R. partly shows the Bosporus and the Asiatic shore. Continual movement of citizens to and fro. As the scene opens, a patrician lady is carried past in her palanquin – a train of slaves, black and white, following – a party of Goths – soldiers – cross, entering the public baths, and half a dozen public dancers cross with their musical instruments. At the left side of the entrance to the baths, about twelve or fifteen slaves of both sexes, but principally young (about two or three among them being black), are arranged. Some are standing, others are sitting in front of them.* SESIPHON, *the slave-dealer, is busy arranging them to the best advantage, whilst passers-by stop, look at, and sometimes examine them.* DEMOS, *the gladiator, lies half-asleep in the downstage R. of the passing crowd.* (36)

The opening dialogue between the citizens of Byzantium Zasimus, Symachus, Demos and Theorus about what is happiness that follows is an interesting one, but also a little naïve. Starting from wondering if Claudian – "the greatest man in all Byzantium" is also happy, having all the riches and power, the citizens of the Empire discuss what happiness is to them, with preferences in accordance with their nature. For Demos, the gladiator, the happiest man is the one who can drink and feast and sleep all day, and is so powerful that he can kill by command, for Zasimus, one of the citizens, happiness is wealth, as he says "There's no power on earth like boundless wealth" and Symachus,

another citizen, probably of Christian faith, asserts that "The happiest man is he who does most good," and he tells the story about a holy man living in a desert cave outside the city. Theorus, a young painter, mysteriously smiling during the whole conversation finally reveals that he thinks that he is the happiest man in the world as he is about to buy his slave wife Serena and their child to reunite the family and give her a happy, free household. When he beams with the feeling of young love and when we hear the conversation – "My cup of happiness is brimming over. Add no more drops for me. ZASIMUS What if it broke – even in your hand? THEORUS I'll drain it first…" (38) we can suspect something ominous is about to happen, knowing the reversals of fortune common in melodrama. The attention is for a moment shifted in a comic scene, in which Claudian encourages a play-fight between his servant Volpas and Demos, who brags about his strength, despite being intoxicated with wine. Amid the vividly painted scene at the slave market that makes the viewers feel like they are part of the antique world, the anticipated misfortune happens, and we immediately feel for the poor sculptor Theorus, who was saving money in order to happily live with his wife, but is ruthlessly and arrogantly outbid by Claudian, whose power and wealth, admired by the citizens at the beginning gives no hope for the ordinary man. Claudian, accustomed to the wealth, which "is but a curse unless 'tis used in heaven's service," as the Christian Symachus earlier stated, always gets what he wants, which is seen in his lines in which he concludes the sale – "[*With sudden sternness*] Are you for sale? Your silence makes confession. You stand in the market. This old gentleman[42] bid for you – I come in and have outbid and bought you" (44). As an imperial noble, he is not taught how to respect people's feelings, he is the emblem of decadence. The scene, although happens in an

[42] The word 'gentleman' sounds strikingly contemporary, in fact, with the occasional archaic forms such as 'hath,' or 'dost,' the language of *Claudian* is that of the contemporary Victorian audience, which might be why the play was so close to some situations from present life of the period. Barrett made more attempts to introduce more archaic, or even biblical, language in his future plays, such as *The Sign of the Cross* or *The Daughters of Babylon*, but with poor results.

ancient slave market, could be quite close to the industrial Victorian society of the 1880s – the one who are rich have more power over the poor, and pleading to their compassionate feelings turns pointless, especially when Claudian represents the arrogance and paganism of the imperial rich.

The famous earthquake takes place in Scene 3 of Act II, which opens with the description of Claudian's palace by moonlight:

> *Vast marble columns, court and garden showing terraces after terraces of the city beyond and, across a valley extending at the back, the sea, with its shores strewn with villas and houses. Lighted lamps are swinging from the arched colonnades, and brass standards with unlighted lamps are standing on each side of the stage. Huge bronze pots are filled with flowers. Marble statues are here and there, and the whole has the appearance of grandeur.* (82)

The scenery was one of the most admired in the play, as well as its demolition a few minutes later, preceded by the conversation of the two slave girls about the strange signs observed in nature, a prophetic dream one of them had, and a brief account of the destruction of the town of Issa. We can read in the reviews that the city before the earthquake looked very solid with all the massive columns and pillars, hence the effect of everything tumbling down was jaw-dropping. There is a report on this effect in *Modern Society*:

> … the effect was terrorizing. With a mighty upheaval the walls, pillars and arches shook, then split up and fell with a crash; and in a quarter of a minute, the magnificent palace was reduced to a fearful desolation amid which Claudian stood pale, dignified and unharmed. It was perfect, and the audience would fain have had on authors, actors, machinists and scene-painters then and there… (qtd. in Baldwin, 330)

The scene of the destruction of the city was undeniably inspired by the immensely popular novel *The Last Days of Pompeii*, especially that Almida who suffered from blindness survived, just as the popular character of Nydia, the blind girl who leads Glaucus and Ione to safety after the volcanic eruption in Bulwer-Lytton's work.

It is the set designs mentioned above, and a few minor ones from the plays that filled the viewers with awe. Oscar Wilde marvelled at the play's aestheticism and

success in showing the viewers' life under the conditions of art in his essay *The Truth of Masks* published in 1885:

> The ancient world wakes from its sleep, and history moves as a pageant before our eyes, without obliging us to have recourse to a dictionary or an encyclopaedia for the perfection of our enjoyment. Indeed, there is not the slightest necessity that the public should know the authorities for the mounting of any piece. From such materials, for instance, as the disk of Theodosius, materials with which the majority of people are probably not very familiar, Mr. E. W. Godwin, one of the most artistic spirits of this century in England, created the marvellous loveliness of the first act of *Claudian*, and showed us the life of Byzantium in the fourth century, not by a dreary lecture and a set of grimy casts, not by a novel which requires a glossary to explain it, but by the visible presentation before us of all the glory of that great town. … Only the foolish called it pedantry, only those who would neither look nor listen spoke of the passion of the play being killed by its paint. It was in reality a scene not merely perfect in its picturesqueness, but absolutely dramatic also, getting rid of any necessity for tedious descriptions, and showing us by the colour and character of Claudian's dress, and the dress of his attendants, the whole nature and life of the man… (237-239)

The topic of religion is treated in *Claudian*, in my opinion, both delicately and controversially. By delicately I mean that we can feel that the author wanted to introduce the topic, done it partly in a straightforward way by presenting the figure of the hermit Holy Clement, but at the same time wanted to steer clear of controversy of referencing by name the biblical persons and events. The words 'God', 'Christ' or 'Christian' do not appear at all in the play. The controversy was not evaded anyway, as the curse that Holy Clement casts on Claudian was frequently criticized:

> CLEMENT [*raising himself to his full height*] Be young for ever through the centuries. See generations born, and age, and die, and all who flattered, loved, or served thee – dust. Thy course like baneful star across the sky shall blight and wither all upon thy track. To love thee, or to be beloved by thee alike shall poison, maim or kill. The innocent sunshine shall die out before thee, and the black shadow of misfortune follow. Thy soul shall hanker, thirst, and famish to do good, and try in vain to do it. The happiness as pure and crystal at the well, touched by thy lips, shall muddy at its source. Thy pity shall envenom what 'twould soothe. Be poison to the wound – till thou couldst pray for the hard heart again thou hadst today. Thy charity, which may have comforted one half of the kingdom's poor, breed pestilence and ruin – until the vaulted rocks be split, a gulf be struck, 'twixt thee and me, then thou shalt choose either to die or live accurst till doom. From dying lips this curse from heaven is fallen. (48)

The very thought of the hypothetical Christian elder cursing Claudian is doubtful in its righteousness, especially that the curse brings death, illness and misery not only to sinful Claudian but to innocent people around him, the first being the Christian woman Serena, who fled to the sanctuary for safety, but dies when Claudian wants to give her

freedom. The curse sounds more like a bewitchment, and the character of Claudian is called a sorcerer by the angry crowd. It is not the best association for those still prejudiced against religious motifs being referenced on stage and stands in contrast with the full-scale religious story of Christians, with sermon-like speeches, prayers and songs, and descriptions of a religion full of love and forgiveness that is to be presented later in *The Sign of the Cross*. Barrett's efforts in keeping the audience sympathize with the sinful hero were successful, maybe partly thanks to the awfulness of his curse. It is confirmed by Clement Scott, who was aware that in moral sense the character is unredeemable for most of the play, but notes in form of a question "is there a woman in the audience who does not in her heart admire the grandeur of this man's hungry selfishness?" (qtd. in Mayer, *Playing Out*…, 32), which already hints at the toga plays peculiar duality – enjoying the vision of decadence with the moral comfort of the obvious triumph of virtue in the end.

The play was one of the first to represent the Roman Empire as a hegemonic power over the ordinary citizens and hinted at the Pagans versus Christian conflict, although not in such an apparent way as the later *The Sign of the Cross* set in times of Nero. The power of the Empire is mostly represented by the figure of Claudian in the Prologue, when he ruthlessly outbid the poor sculptor Theorus who then turned to the crowd gathering at the scene – "Will ye look on the while a silk-clad tyrant tramples down the fellow citizen and outrages his home?" (45). Claudian, who is the Prefect in the service of the emperor, is the forerunner of the future, even more cruel and decadent "silk-clad tyrants" from toga plays and movies. He is Pagan and does not respect sanctuary of Clement and the sanctity of marriage. When Holy Clement tells him that even pagans treat the sacred name of 'wife' with reverence, he replies "This woman is my slave. That name annuls the sacredness of wife. And who art thou to break thy country's laws, and hide away my bondswoman?," (47) proving that he puts the laws of

the Empire above the religious ones. When Clement identifies himself as "a humble servant of a god unknown to thee" Claudian mocks: "It seems, old man my gods, Venus and Mars, who give her to my hands, are mightier than thine" and hints that he knows the Jewish God, as his mockery continues with asking "Why dost thou not call the lightning back from heaven to strike me where I stand?... why not strike a gulf between us now, or bid the vaulted rocks to split and fall, and mass themselves between us a granite barrier?" (47), which brings to mind the Old Testament scenes with Moses. Claudian's fate after he commits the most dreadful crime in the sanctuary of the old man – his years of wandering and suffering in wait for him to repent and ask for forgiveness that we see in the three acts of the play are a metaphor of the self-destruction of the Pagan, decadent and sinful Roman Empire. In the three Acts we can also briefly observe how the hierarchical imperial structure works when Claudian shows his imperial signature to the Tetrarch of the province, who being another example of cruel oppression of the people, trembles upon. The Tetrarch is an interesting example of a supervisor who is more interested in satisfying his lusts (he almost rapes Almida) than governing the Province, he is cruel, cowardly and rather stupid.

David Mayer notices that *Claudian* is a variant of the myths of the Wandering Jew or Flying Dutchman, or even an open reference to the myth of Midas, through Claudian detrimental influence on everything he touches (*Playing Out…,* 31). In my view, it can be also easily interpreted as the vision of purgatory with Claudian wandering the earth as a condemned spirit, for whom God waits to understand his vile deeds and truly repent for them. The looks of Claudian even have some ghostly features, as he describes himself as "a spectre of the past" (85) and Almida is touched by the young, but sad appearance of the "pale, melancholy stranger" (65). The play's motif of the guilt and remorse of its main hero obviously reminds of Barrett's earlier famous play, *The Silver King*, but the guilt and questionable remorse of Claudian is more

complicated that of the wrongly accused Wilfred Denver, who truly regretted his alleged murderous deed. The terrible curse undeniably bears hard on Claudian, he describes it to Almida:

> Remember, until this morn the summer of your happiness seemed without one cloud – now all is overshadowed with black misery, and I – I – am the cause. The child is dead who had my charity. Even the poor peasant found my aid his ruin. The beggar has his mate who shares his crust, but I am as a leper, crouched aloof, without the walls – feared – hated – abhorred – alone!... (67)

Here, he is like the King Midas, only in the form of a leper, spurned by society. When the beautiful Almida truly pities him, he welcomes it as a compress on his wounds, as he reproaches that even heaven does not pity him – "Thou darest pity one whom heaven will not pity. Thou darest to cool this hell-parched tongued with water. The coil around my heart loosens its fastening pressure," and even asks her for more – "Thou angel. Thou hast brought the tears at last. Pray for me – say even in thy prayer, 'Lift, lift his punishment from his doomed head. 'Tis greater than he can bear.'" (67). The true repentance seems to come to him with real difficulty, even after, or maybe because of, the hundred years that had passed. In fact, Almida's love and gentleness temps him one more to be a man and make her his woman and even makes him think that it is her love, in truth a false one as brought by the curse, is enough to end his suffering – "Her love may be the talisman long sought. Haply the curse may lift and fly away from me" (84) – this brings the horrific earthquake which destroys the city, adding to the number of people suffering because of Claudian. To the last moments the battles his selfishness and at last it is a selfless deed that makes him free and gives him peace. At the last moments, after the earthquake, he is guided by the spectre of the Hermit, who even tells him that it is once again that woman's happiness with her beloved is in his hands, and it is Claudian's choice to live or die. Getting to know that Almida lives, he immediately chooses wrong and disputes with the Hermit – "Have I not done a long, soul-crushing penance? May I not now be trusted? Have I not learned the bitter lesson of the wage of

sin, until my heart was aching sore with yearning to atone – atonement that was never granted me? Have I not earned the respite, the relief?" (87). His arrogance is yet again his nature when he says to the spectre: "I did not tempt her. I thought heaven in pity sent me her – because I patiently endured so long" (87). It is the sight of Almida with her betrothed Agazil, who look for him that finally makes him realize that he has to ask for forgiveness for all he had done and it seems as if Almida really was sent by God to help him, because even before Claudian chooses death she is gradually getting her sight back.

Barrett was highly praised for the role of Claudian up to that point that the press started to see in him a certain star quality and a rival to the popularity and dominance of Henry Irving's acting and managing. His statuesque posture and gestures reminded some of the viewers of the classical statues, and William Winter described that

> Wilson Barrett as Claudian conveyed that essential meaning of the part, with subtle intuition and affluent artistic felicity. To the eye, the ear, the imagination there was something in his presence, his voice, and his fine reserve that showed this ideal to be in full possession of him; not so much executive ability as spiritual significance. (qtd. in Thomas, 69-70)

The public and press recognised the play's aim in showing them something of a new quality in theatre. There was some criticism mostly concerning the unequal in its quality and tension construction of the play and the dialogues written by Wills which were described as stilted and overstated (Thomas, 68-69). *The Illustrated London News*, however, wrote that "*Claudian* lifts us into a different atmosphere than the common-day melodrama. It has a loftier aim" and the *Fortnightly Review* stated that "the play is wholesome, of good tendency, and the public… are content to be led to the appreciation of better things" (qtd. in Thomas, 70). *The Times* even declared is as a "wholly English" production, "which is sound, vigorous and elevating in sentiment and dramatic purpose, and which, moreover, is written in a vein of poetic diction worthy to rank as literature, [it] is a very considerable event in the life of the English stage," (qtd. in Richards, *The*

Ancient…, 106) proving that Barrett's previous aim to produce plays that are written by English playwrights and concern English society was fulfilled even with a historical play, which had some sort of contemporaneity. Interestingly and tellingly of the play's novelty in visual representation and combination of melodramatic and more serious topics that aroused great interest, there were a couple of famous writers and critics, who went to see it three times – already mentioned John Ruskin, but also Clement Scott, and Revd Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as Lewis Caroll (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 106-107).

Claudian, being the first of Wilson Barrett's toga cycle was not the first play set in ancient Empire, as it was discussed at the beginning of the Chapter, but it was created in such a way that it enabled Victorian critics to see it as a potential for the whole series of pieces set in antiquity that could provide entertainment through different exciting stories based in melodramatic tradition and be a great lesson of history, highly educational through the archaeological accuracy and engaging through breath-taking visuals. For the modern scholars it was clear that the play stood out so much in its composition of all of these elements that it is Barrett's plays that are considered as the most typical toga plays – with their clear aim to bridge entertainment and education. Apart from setting a standard for the productions of such demanding historical spectacles, the play also initiated the topics repeated in various versions in other toga dramas, mostly the story of a male hero, who is Pagan and sinful and has to discover, with the help of a loving woman, how to truly repent in order to be saved – the melodramatic love triangles, femmes fatales, brutal rivals, cruel tyrants and sudden disasters complicating his life, but keeping the audience on the edge of their seats.

3.3 *The Sign of the Cross* (1895): encompassing antiquity, religion and popular theatre

Summing up the year 1895, mostly characterized by the clash between the old and the new in Victorian *fin de siècle* theatre, Joel Kaplan describes *The Sign of the Cross* as "a cultural phenomenon" (436). Jeffrey Richards quotes a newspaper article, in which it is apparent that there was great anticipation for the opening of the play in London, after it was shown in the United States, as it already had an opinion of an "epoch-making play" due to its spectacle, but also the strongly religion-based moral story, which was talked about as an alternative to the suggestiveness of society plays and depressing plays in Ibsen's style (*The Ancient…,* 127).

When the play debuted on March 27th in St. Louis while Barrett was touring with his company in America, it was a success declared by the audience as well as the press. In a short note from *Kansas City Daily Journal* from 29th March 1895 we can read about the St. Louis première of the play, where it is described as "a professed attempt to conciliate the prejudices which church members are said to have for the stage and to bring the two nearer together (2). A quote on the topic from Barrett himself is provided:

> With 'The Sign of the Cross' I stand to-day half way over the bridge that I have striven to construct to span the gulf between the two. I think it is but justice to expect the denouncers of my profession to come the other half of the way to meet me (2).

It can be said that Barrett's opponents in the "battle" over religion on stage *came* to meet him, as we can read from a memoir of a critic from *The Idler* after the night of the première in Leeds in August 1895. He describes the remarkable effect the play had on the audience:

> What I then beheld was an audience, notoriously addicted to the frothiest and most frivolous forms of entertainment, hushed to silence, spell-bound and thrilled by dramatic pictures of the gradual purification by love and faith of a licentious Pagan, and the ecstatic exaltation of the early Christian martyrs. The whole house, it was apparent, was unable to resist a certain undefinable but undeniable spiritual charm evolved from an atmosphere of unassailable purity, simplicity and faith, pervading the crucial scenes of the drama. The exquisite language of the Holy Writ – frequently pressed into the dramatist's service – was listened to with a reverence that bordered on awe. And as for the note of solemn reality struck during the final scene – of the gentle maiden martyr's last moments on earth – affected the vast throng as

> never before in my life I had seen a theatre audience impressed. (qtd. in Thomas 133)

Writing in 1948 in an Australian newspaper *The Age* (Barrett toured in Australia for the first time in 1897, the second in 1902), an author signed as R.W.B. entitled his article "Stage Prejudice Broken" and paid special attention to Barrett's credit for bringing religion to theatre. He calls *The Sign of the Cross* a "theatrical sensation" of the time and a play which "tapped a new public". He mentions that when *The Sign of the Cross* was first staged in Australia in 1902, Wilson Barrett was welcomed by bishops and clergy with cordiality and treated as "a valuable ally." He received many letters from theatre-goers, just as Lew Wallace after his publication of *Ben-Hur*, who described how the play changed their lives, mostly helping them to really understand Christianity and become better Christians.

David Mayer in his critical anthology on toga plays sums up that "the popular press and religious and family journals [were] siding with Barrett" (109). He also gives examples of the clergymen who encouraged their congregation to attend Barrett's play. Croydon's Reverend Sydney Fleming's sermon prompting all Christians to see the play was published in the local journal and later sold as a twopenny pamphlet. Bishop of Norwich was said to grant dispensation from the time of Lent's restrictions provided that it would be used to see *The Sign of the Cross* (109).

The popularity of the play and enormous success of Barrett can be proved by numbers. When the play finally premiered in London, on 4 January 1896 at the Lyric Theatre, it was performed 435 times (up till 30th January) and enabled Barrett to pay off his substantial debts (Thomas 134). James Thomas further sums up that by 1904 the play was seen by over 15 000 people, the illustrated program was sold in 80 000 copies and 2500000 copies of the novel version of the play written by Barret, were sold (162). Additionally, it was adapted into a few film versions, the most famous being directed by

Cecil B. DeMille in 1932. Wilson Barrett played the role of Marcus and Maud Jeffries played Mercia. Walter Hann and Stafford Hall did the scene-painting and Edward Jones composed music.

The opinions of critics after the London premiere varied. As it could have been expected, the proponents of New Drama such as William Archer and George Bernard Shaw were against Barrett's melodrama. William Archer even called the play a "series of tawdry tableaux, with their crude appeal to the shallowest sentiments and lowest instincts of the mob" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 130). G.B. Shaw mocked Barrett's use of biblical language, just as he did writing about *The Daughters of Babylon,* but his final opinion of the drama was not negative. He also saw in it the influence of Ibsen:

> The play is a monument of sacred and profane history. The influence of Ibsen is through-out, the Norwegian keynote being struck by Mr Barrett himself in the words: "How many crimes are committed under the cloak of duty!" With scathing, searching irony, and with resolute courage in the face of the prejudiced British public, he has drawn a terrible contrast between the Romans… with their straightforward sensuality, and the strange, perverted voluptuousness of the Christians, with their shuddering exaltations of longing for the whip, the rack, the stake and the lions. (*Our Theatres…*, 12-13)

The remark made by Shaw that there is considerable influence from Ibsen seen in Barrett's play is either purely a characteristic of Shaw and his love of Ibsen or a strange phenomenon (one of the aims of this thesis is to show that in fact, it was not so strange at all) that even though it is a play about real historical times and events of Christians under the persecution of Nero, the fictional story of Marcus, Mercia and other characters added to that is so relevant to Victorian issues in its purport and moral message that it even resembles the harsh realism of Ibsen. Of course, the Ibsenian influence was also part of the play's structure, its serious tone which concealed a little the fact that it was a melodrama,[43] and the peculiar open ending – peculiar, as we do not

[43] I would call *The Sign of the Cross* and other toga plays, those after *Claudian*, 'serious melodramas' – melodramatic in its base structure and portrayal of common topics and characters with the addition of

know what happens to Marcus and Mercia, yet due to the clear moral message and the real historical events, in fact we *do* know.

Shaw also, noticed that the audience could admire the spectacularly designed vision of Rome, and that is what people mostly wanted to enjoy in the play, especially that it was done in a way to make feel them familiar with the vision of antiquity:

> What we enjoy is being so familiarly in Rome… We come into the presence of Nero, and hear him ordering a set of living torches for that evening, and boasting of what an artist he is. We see the Roman ladies at home sticking pins into their slaves, and the Roman diner-out exhausted by his second vomit. We hear the thunder of the chariot race, and see die gladiator enter the arena. And we have, as aforesaid, whips and racks, chains and dungeons, uplifted crosses and Christian martyrs, not to mention plenty of music well handled by Mr Edward Jones, with hymns for the Christians… The mounting is handsome, and the stage management good and unselfish, all the parts being played with quite extraordinary spirit, and in no way sacrificed to the actor-manager's. I have never seen better work got out of a company. (*Our Theatres*…, 13-14)

The appeal the play had in and outside theatre was greatly thanks to the dedication for his role and for the goal of a conveying a deep moral message that Barrett himself expressed in his speech "The Moral Influence of Drama". Maurice Willson Disher quotes one fellow-actor who reminiscences:

> When I was brought to the presence ", said W. E. Holloway—an actor of the richest experience—" I felt almost impelled to drop on one knee, the way I was ushered into his dressing-room and the way he sat on a dais and extended his hand were so rarified. (Disher, 123)

His skill for promoting his plays was seen from his earlier years (when he wanted to make his bones as a London manager) – the already mentioned practices during his professional engagement with actress Helena Modrzejewska, and his immersion in the role of Wilfred Denver. This is also observed by M. W. Disher, who notes that Barrett's way of behaviour after playing Marcus Superbus was similar to his role of Denver:

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those new, rarely tackled in Victorian drama (religious figures, martyrdom in the arena) and presented in such a way (the archaeological spectacle, use of professional painting) that the melodrama was either concealed, or at least definitely did not come as a foreground fact. *Claudian* was the first play to start that, it was also the most visibly melodramatic.

> Formerly he had haunted Rotten Row in a velvet coat, a slouch hat and a Quartier Latin tie after the manner of *The Silver King*. Now he attended Church Parade dressed with simple dignity in top hat, frock coat, flannel shirt open at his Roman neck, and hair, grey at the roots, antiquely flaxen, while in deportment he was as much Superbus as on the stage. (Disher, 123)

He understood the power of a good advertising campaign even as an already popular actor-manager and just as with *Claudian* and the posters "Wilson Barrett *is* Claudian" he took care of promoting *The Sign of the Cross* well. The promotional posters that were hung in the whole country were designed according to Barrett's earlier (the posters with the word 'MODJESKA' or poster for *Claudian*), surprisingly minimalistic, style standing in total contrast to the lavishness of the production – a large red cross against a black background (Thomas, 134). Although there also were posters that resemble the later toga movies advertisements, presenting the most spectacular scenes from the play, this strategy of minimalism which creates mystery and arouses interest in discovering it deserves a note and acclaim. Apart from that, there were souvenirs to be bought in the theatre foyer – the copy of Edward Jones's hymn 'Shepherd of Souls' accessible in versions for different instruments, which ultimately sold in seventy-nine thousand copies (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 126) and a large coloured photolithograph of the scene when Mercia (Maud Jeffries) is holding a cross that stops the assault on her entitled *The Sign of the Cross.* It also shows that Barrett wanted people to associate the play's title with the Christian message but shown mostly through the love story of Marcus and Mercia, rather than the mystery cross drawn in the dirt of Roman street by the Christian Titus, associated more with the real history of hiding and persecutions of the early believers. There are many photographs of actors from the play, due to the fact that souvenir albums were created (Mayer, *Playing Out…,* 109-110). The photograph of Wilson Barrett as Marcus is in a similar style as the photographs taken of him in the role of Wilson Denver from *The Silver King* and *Claudian* – he is shown *en face* from his waist up, dressed in the bejewelled costume,

with a stern look and proud pose. All of the marketing strategies only added to people's interest in the play and the signs "House full" were displayed in front of the Lyric Theatre for over a year (Thomas, 134). The publicity actions taken by Barrett and his company in fact bear a lot of resemblance to the later actions taken by the famous Hollywood directors such as Cecil DeMille or William Wyler together with the film studios, which used the actor (the campaign were organized around the stars of the production), dressed in the costume from the toga movie to promote different commodities.

This aspect, which added to Barrett and toga plays' success did not come unnoticed by some critics who disliked Barrett's methods. Jeffery Richards provides an example of a very critical opinion of the playwright expressed by American critic John Ranken Towse, but also notes that it is typical of such 'high-brow' criticism: "He was a shrewd and clever showman, made a great splurge and much money, but as an actor never rose above the second class. He depended chiefly upon sensationalism, spectacle, sentimentalism, and advertisement, and he played his cards very well . . ." (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 100).

A review in *The Idler* summarizes the effect that play had, mostly due to introducing the religious story:

> The pulpit, the press, and the peoples of two great continents it has conquered. Thousands of unbelievers it has converted to faith in the power of the theatre for good. And it has made possible upon the stage the one supreme subject of absorbing interest to the civilised world – the subject of . . . religion . . . In doing this, Mr Barrett's play has done the stage inestimable service, and has surely set an imperishable seal upon a remarkable career. (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 134)

Alfred Darbyshire summarizes all of Barrett's achievements for the melodramatic Victorian stage and aestheticism. He concluded that:

> …in the higher phase of melodrama he was, however, supreme. Such pieces as "The Silver King," "The Sign of the Cross," and "Claudian" afforded Barrett opportunities of exercising his histrionic gifts to the pleasure and delight of his audiences. He may be justly classed with those who have contributed to the art of the Victorian Stage. (162)

The Sign of the Cross has a plot almost identical to Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis* and by many *The Sign of the Cross* could be called an abridged version of the novel's two main plots – the love story and persecutions of early Christians. Both works' central character is Marcus – Superbus in *The Sign of the Cr*oss and Vinicius in *Quo Vadis*, a young Roman soldier who falls in love with a Christian girl of great beauty, Mercia or Lygia correspondingly. The scenes when Marcus wants to take advantage of her during the Roman feast and the secret meetings of Christians that he witnesses are in both works. The characters of Nero, Tigellinus and Poppea appear in both the play and novel, and in both, Poppea lusts after Marcus, although in the play it is only mentioned once, but the more infatuated with Marcus Berenis. The very interesting figure of Petronius, a Roman courtier and uncle of Vinicius is not a character in *The Sign of the Cross* and the biggest difference regards the endings. While in Barrett's work, the couple of young lovers die tragically as Christian martyrs in Nero's arena games, Sienkiewicz's novel has a happy ending in which Ursus, Lygia's protector, defeats an aurochs and saves them. Later, Vinicius and Lygia marry and settle in Sicily.

Not only the plot bears many similarities but also the dates of publication happened to be in the same month and year. *Quo Vadis* was first published in instalments mostly in the journal *Gazeta Polska*, but also in *Czas* and *Dziennik Poznański,* between 26th March 1895 and 29th February 1896. Its first book version was published in 1896 whereas Barrett's play was first staged in St. Louis on 28th March 1895 and brought to London on 4th January 1896. David Mayer even mentions a lawsuit stating that *The Sign of the Cross* was plagiarized from *Quo Vadis,* but it is not clear if he refers to a lawsuit opened by Barrett in relation to other playwright's production of the novel at the same time or some other lawsuit that Barrett received, of which I found no information in any of the sources (*Playing Out…*, 18). Mayer asserts that Barrett was cleared out of the charges as it was proved that his play was shown to the audience

almost a year before the whole novel appeared in the journals and its full book version was released. Also, the resemblances between the characters and main plots were in Barrett's favour (18). Interestingly, Sienkiewicz himself also faced with accusations that the novel "was merely a reduction of Chateaubriand's *Les Martyrs*, Dumas's *Acte,* and Renan's *Anti-Christ*," and replied to them that he had read some François-René de Chateaubriand's works, but not his prose epic *Les Martyrs*, he did not know Alexandre Dumas' *Acté of Corinth* and treated Ernest Renan's *Antichrist* (the fourth volume of the *Origins of Christianity*[44]) as a historical source (Lednicki, 55). Writing about the sources that he used for his vision of Rome in *Quo Vadis* he always pointed mostly to Latin works by Tacitus, Suetonius, Dion Cassius. Wacław Lednicki also mentions that Sienkiewicz knew numerous German and English novels and stories dealing with the lives of Caesars and got an inspiration from Polish literary traditions connected with the period of the Caesars in Rome: Józef Ignacy Kraszewski's *Rome at the Time of Nero* and *Caprea and Roma* and Zygmunt Krasinski's drama *Iridion* (55). To sum up the explanation of the case, it would be perfect to quote the words of a critic who described it, as "one of the most remarkable cases of coincident thought on record" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…*, 144).

The construction of the four-act play is very neatly composed and as if divided into topical parts[45]. Act I is the introduction of the situation of Christians in Rome who

[44] All of the mentioned French works had a similar topic of the clash between early Christianity and paganism. Chateaubriand's prose epic, *Les Martyrs* (1809) was written after he travelled around Greece, Asia Minor, The Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Tunisia, and Spain, and is set during times of persecution of early Christianity. Alexander Dumas' *Acté of Corinth; or, The convert of St. Paul. a tale of Greece and Rome* (1839) was a novel about Rome, Nero, and early Christianity, and Ernest Renan's, who studied extensively the origins of early Christianity, *The Antichrist* (1876) was the fourth volume of *The History of the Origin of Christianity* and dealt with the reign of Nero. The mentioned works show that the times of Nero and persecutions of Christians were common among European writers of the nineteenth century.

[45] The only version of the text of the play is provided by David Mayer in his book *Playing Out the Empire*, on pages 125-187. Mayer notes that he also used the novelized version of the play as a source, even adding to the original stage directions some more expanded descriptions, mostly of characters' appearance, but also settings, and actions. He admits that the practice was rather an unorthodox one, and done to "recapture the full spectacle of this drama and to register its impact on late Victorian audiences"

are being hunted by Nero's soldiers, part of the introduction are the first appearances of Mercia – as a good-natured Christian and Marcus – as a proud and powerful soldier; there we also meet the patricians of Rome, most notably Dacia, a young married woman (changed after the instructions of Lord Chamberlain from a brothel-keeper Cytherea) and Berenis, who would later be the main reason why Mercia was imprisoned, the drunkard Glabrio, kind of a Petronius figure, whose drunken, but also witty comments show the real nature of Roman life of the rich and Nero's adviser and soldier Tigellinus, the cruel persecutor of Christians – thus having the cross-section of the inhabitants of the Empire. Act II concerns mostly Marcus's attempts to investigate into the Christian community, interestingly no so much because of Nero's orders but his own curiosity and obviously his interest in Mercia, which ends with him saving Mercia from the massacre of other Christians during their prayers and imprisoning her in his palace. It is not hard to guess that Act III depicts Marcus struggles with his unexpected to him feelings and emotions towards Mercia, which for the last time turn to his corrupted by the years living as a pagan Roman side and result in a rape attempt, all while Mercia's and his fate is being sealed with the plotting in the court of Nero. Act IV is mostly about the culminating scenes in the dungeon under amphitheatre, where the play memorably ends, to be followed in the future by toga movies showing the omitted in the play scenes in the arena. Such logically structured development of events with the main hero of Marcus, whose struggles with himself, but also with the imperial rulers and the privileged classes (we can suspect that because of them his efforts to save Mercia are cockeyed) made the play really smooth, tension-keeping and thus engaging to follow.

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(112). I fully agree that it is not a damage to the theatrical version and taking into account the usual paeans to the scenery and spectacle of Barrett's toga plays produced by critics, they are a way to make us imagine the precision and effort put into the visual aspects of the plays. which we cannot see with our own eyes.

There is no need to elaborate on the fact that the opening of each Act was like a realisation of a neo-classical painting as by that time it became a classic feature of toga dramas The opening of the play is something that deserves credit as the one scene in the afternoon busy street in Rome paints a picture for the viewers of the life of inhabitants of the Empire and shows the inner strains. The Christian topic becomes apparent from the very beginning (with even the reference to the title of the play) as the scene opens with two Roman spies Strabo and Servillius of an unkempt appearance suggesting their lower class, playing the dice, throwing suspectful looks at the crowd around them ad discussing "Christian-hunting" and the money it pays if they "trap a Christian or two". In a few first lines they present the stereotypical description of Christians that is spread among the people, and confirm that ordinary citizens believe in it – "STRABO Christian-hunting pays well – eh? SERVILLIUS It pays well and is good sport too. It is as exciting as wolf-hunting and has none of its dangers. For all their child-killing and secret murder, they are a poor-spirited lot… (125)". When shortly after their conversation we see two Christian men coming to the centre of stage and greet each other – drawing the sign of the cross in dust on the street, Strabo and Servillius listen closely, which makes the men speak quietly, as "even the stones of Rome have ears" and in fact they are followed by the spies when they go off stage. The introduction creates the atmosphere of tension (there is a sense as of a real hunting taking place) and immediately makes the viewer sympathize with the Christians and eager to follow their fate. The historical topic of the persecutions of Christians is in a great deal shown in the play through Marcus pursuing Mercia, observing her and talking to her. The figure of Nero is presenting his gruelling visions of sacrificing the Christians in the arena, but in these scenes they also mostly discuss the fate of Marcus and his loved one. Only in In Act II the scenes in wooden hut of Favius at first, the torture of the boy Stephanus in prison and the meeting of prayers in the Grove by the Cestine Bridge are the ones that

we can observe the secret Christian community by themselves. There also comes the adding of the strictly religious references, which was quite unthought-of before, although already delicately attempted in *Claudian*. The elder Christian Favius is preaching a sermon, a paraphrase of the sermon on the Mount of Olives, according to Mayer (*Playing Out*…, 107) to the kneeling "brethren" in front of him in a heavily Bible-stylised language. Through how the speech is given, together with the moonlit scenery of the secret meeting and the expected catastrophe, it exerts a profound influence of the audience, and undoubtedly was a novelty – there was a sermon given from the theatrical stage, something unthinkable before. The ending of the scene is the only scene in the play where we see the slaughtering of Christians, in which they sing their hymn while men, women and children are being killed by Tigellinus and his soldiers, with Mercia almost killed when she stands over the dying Favius. The scene is within the same tradition as Claudian's sensational earthquake, although in completely new, more profound form.

Equally powerful are Mercia's speeches about who God is to her and what being a real Christian is, mostly in the scene when the feeling of the spirit of Christ being with her lifts her from almost fainting and makes her so transformed that raising the cross in front of her is enough for Marcus to fall upon one knee and being unable to proceed with his rape attempt, and the very last scene before she goes out to the arena with Marcus. Through her words, she teaches Marcus, and the audience together with him about the nature of Christianity, and she is the right person to do it, as faith is to her as natural as breathing. She explains that she does not even need to think about her decision if deny it and be saved from the martyr's death.

Marcus is usually described as an arrogant soldier of Rome – "Next to the Emperor – he is the richest man in Rome," as described at the very beginning by the spy Servillius (126), who significantly changes after the meeting the beautiful and pure

Mercia, but from the first moments he appears on stage he seems to be different than the other corrupted patricians. We learn about his life up to that point mostly from the conversation between Dacia, her weak-natured husband Philodemus and Glabrio, when they chat in the street coming out of the feast in Dacia's house. Glabrio describes him as having a rare taste in wine and women while giving banquets for which he spares no money, to what Dacia replies in an interesting conversation, which also present Glabrio as having very true observations about the world:

> DACIA And remains unmoved by either.
> PHILODEMUS True – he's a head of iron for wine – and a heart of stone for women.
> GLABRIO Iron melts and stone breaks. He'll get caught some day.
> PHILODEMUS Marcus? Never.
> GLABRIO My son, let an older and a wiser and a more sober man advise thee – I have lived in this [*staggers*] somewhat unsteady world for two score years and ten – I have visited many lands – but never yet found I a young and high-mettled man who did not sooner or later – usually sooner – succumb to fair woman.
> PHILODEMUS Never Marcus – Woman? He values woman a little more than his dogs – a little less than his horses.
> GLABRIO To all of which I answer, 'Wait' – my Philodemus – 'wait'. (129)

The 'waiting' turns out not to be long, as right after Glabrio's words the scene is filled with the crowd assaulting Favius and shouting 'Death to the Christians' and it is the time when Mercia and shortly after Marcus appears. He appears in a rich attire of a Roman soldier –

> [*Marcus is dressed in military costume; a short, white linen tunic, barely reaching to the knee, is covered by a coat of mail, heavily studded with bosses and plates of brass, and jewelled with emeralds and rubies; from under this, fall lambrequins of white leather, heavily trimmed with gold and jewels and edged with gold fringe. A helmet of polished brass glistens on his head, and a short mantle of old-gold-coloured silk hangs from his shoulders. His sandals are topped with flat rings of gold, and over the centre of each is the head of a lion wrought in the same precious metal*] (131),

is respected by the crowd who chant his name and questions the civilians in soldier-like manner, briefly and firmly, with a sense of authority, adding aside his first words about Mercia – "By Venus, what a beauty." Even the short remark about her tells us that he is a pagan Roman, used to his Roman life – first he noticed her because of her beauty and referred to a Roman goddess. He shares his thoughts on marriage ("I may commit many acts of folly, but not matrimony") in the conversation with Glabrio and Dacia and sneers

"Innocence is a rare jewel in Rome and, for its rarity, much desired" (132-133) when he questions Favius. Thus, for the first time he hints that he is fed up with his life among high-class Romans and that something begins to change in him when he does not believe that the purity that Mercia represents could be a quality of a "despised Christian." He decides to investigate that and be their protective shepherd, even before he gets to know more.

Mercia is a character as if carved out of the marble, in a sense of a perfectly created being, she has little of a real woman qualities. From her introduction in the play and the first time that Marcus sees her when she stands between Favius and the crowd, she is placed already as a powerful figure not only because of her beauty, but as the defender of faith and the weak, as a bridge between the Pagan and Christian world. Her outside beauty is not the beauty of an ordinary woman – she differs from the Roman women, not only because they are dressed richly and she is not, but because her beauty is that of a Madonna, thus possessing some power over people:

> [She is in pure white. She stands calmly with her outstretched hands – the crowd fall back and gaze with awe at her, as if at some spirit] [Mercia[46] is tall beyond the common for her sixteen years; of beautiful but exquisitely fragile figure; with the face of a Madonna, clear cut as a cameo. It is no marvel that she should compel earthly love in the hearts of the men who were privileged to meet her…] (130)

Her role presented in her first appearance does not really change through the next acts until Act IV and scene in the dungeons. Even when she is with Marcus, captured at his palace, she is still a defender of faith, briefly also of her own purity when Marcus assaults her. During the assault, she grows into an even more powerful figure, starting to really be like Madonna on earth as she undergoes through epiphany or holy ecstasy feelings through which she exerts influence on Marcus who is left unable to touch her.

[46] The stage directions taken by Mayer form the novelized version of the play are provided in a separate brackets and with a smaller font.

Next to the pair leaving the dungeons for the arena, the scene is the most famous from the play:

> [*The Christians' Hymn is heard*] [*The darkened room was illumined by a soft white light*]
> MERCIA [*transfigured*] A sign – The Master has spoken – He is here – [*She throws Marcus from her*]
> MARCUS You are alone–
> MERCIA No – He is with me – He has saved me – [*Holding up cross*] All fear has fled – you cannot harm me now.
> MARCUS I will – I will – [*Marcus falls upon his knees, burying his face in his hands. A loud knocking. Tigellinus, off stage, calling 'Open in the name of Caesar! Make way, slaves. Open the door.' Sound of bolts being drawn back*] [*Enter TIGELLINUS and LICINIUS and soldiers*] [*bearing torches*]
> MARCUS How darest thou intrude? –
> TIGELLINUS A mandate form Caesar that you do instantly surrender the Christian girl, Mercia, into his keeping.
> MARCUS Ah, Mercia – thou goest to thy death –
> MERCIA Ah – no – I go to life everlasting – I am ready.
> [*Stands as if transfigured as soldiers come down to arrest her. The Christians' Hymn is heard until the curtain falls*] (173)

During the culminating scenes in the dungeons Mercia is not only devoid of fear (although the horrifying shouts come from the arena), but also becomes the spiritual leader and consoler as the elder men are taken by the guards and a maternal figure for Stephanus, who is terrified of the gruesome death but after Mercia comforts and asks to not shrink from his fate for the sake of his love for her – "Stephanus, thou didst ever say that thou didst love me. If that is true – by all the love thou bearest me – by all the love I bear thee – by all the love the Master bears to all – be true – Promise that thou wilt not shrink – promise" (184). It is his love for her that makes him see the cross in front of his eyes and walk calmly into the amphitheatre, which clearly resonates with the image of Madonna and her care for humanity. When Marcus joins her and asks her to be his wife she expresses maybe the only one thought close to real human nature when she says: "Hear me, Marcus – I know not how or whence it came – but love came for thee when first I saw thee" (185), although she then emphasizes that the love came from God. The portrayal of Mercia as the divine figure was in accordance with Barrett's intentions, which he explained in his much-quoted words about the two main characters of *The Sign of the Cross*, Marcus and Mercia:

> My heroine was emblematic of Christianity: my hero stands for a worn-out Paganism of decadent Rome. She is strong with the faith of a woman: he, strong in the self-reliance of a man. As I see her, she is beautiful with a half divine loveliness, and an exquisite soul looks out through a beautiful face. She has given up the world for the sake of her new-found faith, in which and for which she lives, and is resolved, if need be, to die. Nero is on the throne, and has decreed the extermination of the Christians. The execution of this decree is entrusted to my Pagan patrician, and thus he is brought into contact with the Christian girl. In her, he at once recognizes an almost sacred beauty, a beauty of holiness; and, voluptuary that he is, he sets himself to win her. Twice he stands between her and death, and she is consequently moved to regard him with tender interest. But his persuasive pleadings and soft arts are of no avail. Steadfast in her faith she resists all temptation and he is driven in spite of himself to seek a reason for her sovereign power and his own crushing defeat. He finds it in the uplifting and ennobling influence of her creed. And, his soul quickened by the breath of her spirit, and kindled into something of a likeness to itself, he flings honours, wealth, all to the winds, and hand in hand with her meets the martyrs' doom. (qtd. in Mayer, *Playing Out…*, 108)

He also confirmed that his character of Mercia was an answer to the "sex-piece play" *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893) by Pinero with his "woman with a past" Paula Tanqueray contrasted with Barrett's "woman with a future" Mercia, a New Woman possessing Christian virtues that can prevent the spreading immorality at the *fin de siècle* (Mayer, *Playing Out*…, 108-109).

Mercia seen as the emblematic of Christianity is undisputable, however Marcus, as the pagan who converts to Christianity almost at the last moment is a more complex case. We know from the other characters' descriptions that he was leading a life of luxury and soldier's duty, not differently than the other high-class Romans yet he clearly differs from the other brutal soldier characters like Tigellinus and Licinius, his male opponents. His feeling of disappointment and disillusionment with the life he leads, already hinted in his first appearance, are perfectly described in his speech in the atrium of his palace, while the song if love is heard in the background and one of his lavish banquets is taking place:

> MARCUS How they weary me! Men lie and flatter – women fawn and leer, and all are false as water and as transparent. Friends? All friends for what I have – not one for what I am. I'd freely give them all for one sweet look from Mercia. What is it possesses me? These people were well enough until she came – she, Mercia, and now – how loathsome their drunken antics seem to me. What is it in the girl that so uplifts her beyond the rest? Her beauty? No – yet, yes – but not the beauty of her face or form – some inward light there is that glows through the windows of her soul and dims the lustre of her body's loveliness. What is it? Virtue? I have seen other virtuous women. Is it this faith of hers? What is their faith? Certainly, not the foul

> idolatry, the ignorant superstition, men do say it is – one look of hers and the ribald jest that is on my tongue dies there, and yet I'm sick with longing for her – is this love or what? (165).

There is clearly the change beginning to grow in him on account of being fed up with his old life in which he know sees emptiness, but mostly because meeting Mercia caused him to feel true love for the first time, the moment for which Glabrio instructed his companions to wait came for Marcus, and with the seed of this new, interesting to him faith which he was willing to investigate into, not ignore like the others was sown. In the last scene in the dungeons, after confessing love for each other he begs Mercia to the last moments to be his wife and stay with him ("Teach me – and teach me how to keep thee ever by my side"). When he conjures up an image of him being chosen as Caesar and her with a crown of an Empress and she replies, "My crown is not of earth, Marcus – it awaits me there [*points upward*]" (186) once again the famous painting by Edwin Long *Diana or Christ?* (Fig. 8) has to be referenced as the obvious analogy, particularly through her spirited gaze that is turned heavenward and her hand resting on her heart, as if she sees something the rest cannot see. With the caption beneath the painting "Let her cast the incense,—but one grain and she is free," the hand of most probably her beloved trying to restrain her and talk her into saving herself, the scene is full of pathos and emotions, especially that her face shows the obvious choice. The captions describing the scene were taken from a poem written by J. B. Greenwood and exhibited together with the painting in 1894, being very similar to Mercia's choice to die: "Tempt me no more; not one grain will I cast, | Denying Him who gave His life for mine; | Into his hands my spirit I resign, | Lead on; the bitterness of death is past!" (qtd. in Purkis). Anthea Purkis asserts that the painting was so popular the Long painted two versions, and its popularity lay in the topic that spoke to the Victorians as well:

> Threats towards Christianity were also felt hundreds of years later in the Victorian period when this picture was painted in 1881. Christians were becoming increasingly concerned at new scientific ideas about the origins of life with the

publication of Charles Darwin's influence books on evolutionary theory and of increasing secularism in society.

Only in the last few lines of the play Marcus speaks in a firm tone that only Mercia used up to this time:

> MARCUS No, not farewell – death cannot part us – I, too, am ready. The light hath come – I know it now – Thou hast shown me the way – my lingering doubts are dead [*he takes Mercia's hand*]. Return to Caesar – Tell him Chrystos hath triumphed – Marcus, too, is a Christian – [*drawing her closer to him*] Come, my bride–
> MERCIA My bridegroom–
> MARCUS Thus, hand in hand, we go to our bridal [*they ascend the steps*]– There is no death for us, for Chrystos hath triumphed over death. The light hath come. Come, my bride. Come – to the light beyond.
> [*Exit, hand in hand, into the arena*] [*Curtain*] (187)

The depiction of Rome and the ruling class in the play is superb. The cruelty of Rome is surprisingly feminine, not only because of the femininity of Nero's figure but the three women, introduced on stage in the order which agrees with their social status – Dacia, Berenis and Poppea, loyal to each other in their scheming against men. The introduction of Berenis is truly composed like a neo-classical painting, reminding the viewer of the works by Alma-Tadema and other painters which depict Roman patrician women during their leisure time – numerous ladies laying on terraces or couches, adorned with flowers, with cups of wine, attended by slaves:

> [SCENE: *Room in* BERENIS'S *house. All in exquisite taste and refinement. Sweet incense burning.* BERENIS *discovered [reclining] on couch by table L., attended by* ZONA, *her slave girl, who [kneeling] is touching her eyebrows with a black pencil. BERENIS takes a [small steel] hand-mirror and is looking at herself. She is exquisitely dressed] [in a creamy white silk, her bust outlined by a massive band of many-coloured gems. A belt of the same rich character draws the robe together at the waist, while the hem of this garment is wrought so closely with jewels that the material is entirely hidden. A drapery of the most delicate shade of heliotrope, bordered with gold, and caught at the side with an immense jewelled clasp, seems to display rather than hide her figure. On her arms are bracelets; in her hair are entwined gems*] (153).

During her conversation with Dacia, she displays various objects – the eyebrow pencil, a lute, a plate of grapes, vase with roses, one of which she puts in her hair, a gold cup of coloured glass. Such scenes were later used in toga movies to promote the fashion for the Roman-stylized design and as adverts of objects like the toiletries that could be bought and used at home, and looking at the composition of the scene, it is unsurprising as it is almost a ready-made material for the display of commodities.

Berens's "picture" opens Act III (which is composed of the scenes in houses and palaces of the wealthy Romans – Berenis, Nero and Marcus thus depicting their life) and is clearly a display of woman's body dressed in Roman costume. Together with the slave girl Zona, who "*stretches herself out on a tiger's skin beside the couch, and, her head upon the beast's head, and prepares to doze*" (153), the scene particularly reminds me of the 1881 painting by Alma-Tadema *The Tepidarium* (Fig. 9), presenting a naked woman lying on a marble bench on the lion's skin, resting after the visit in the Roman baths – the quintessence of Victorian tolerance when it came to gazing upon female body when put in a world of antiquity. It is in this scene where there is a shadow of a Shakespearian motif of Roman soldier's duty and woman's revenge when she does not get what she wants. Marcus comments briefly on perception of duty in Rome when he says to Tigellinus "Duty? Ah – how many crimes are committed under the cloak of duty" (157). Marcus of course denies his duty when he disobeys Emperor's orders to exterminate Christians at any cost for the sake of the woman that he loves, but as the woman is not Cleopatra, but the emblem of Christianity and it is against the paganism that he goes, which is morally "entirely right," as Ruskin would put it. When Berenis confesses her love for Marcus and he rejects her, she promises revenge and it is this strong feeling, backed up by the loyal to Berenis, Poppea and Dacia, whom Nero only for a moment weakly opposes, that is the death sentence for Marcus and Mercia. She, together with Poppea, is the realisation of the 'adventuress' type of New Women usually depicted in society plays by Jones or Pinero shown in toga plays as a warning against the coming beyond the social norms. As David Mayer points out, "whereas the Christian female is self-sacrificing and, to some degree, accommodating to received domestic norms, the adventuress, Roman or Egyptian, is intelligent, humorous, power-seeking, and, like some males, a source of disruption or havoc which must be subdued" (*Playing Out…,* 15).

The gender roles are far from traditional in the play's portrayal of the Empire. Nero is described by the other characters and stage directions as fat, lame and half-drunk, dressed richly, but with "*a suggestion of effeminacy… which robs it of all dignity*," (161) seeing himself as a figure of Apollo, afraid of his authoritative wife Poppea, and most importantly suspecting conspiracy against him. His weakness as an Emperor who can be easily manipulated by everyone is perfectly described by Tigellinus:

> Excite his fears – he will believe anything. He starts at shadows –anything. Shudders at the fall of a leaf. Each bush to him doth hide an assassin – poison lurks in every dish. The very air to him is peopled with the ghosts of those he hath slaughtered. He dare not go on, yet dare not stay. (148)

He remains one of the most memorable persons from the play, and from any other work on the topic on persecutions of Christians as he is the famous Emperor, with his weaknesses and irrational and evil deeds which came down in history, but when analysed closer it is a female rule over Rome that is decisive, at least as shown in Barrett's play. Nero listens to his wife Poppea, even though he is almost tempted to let Marcus and Mercia free. She is firm, decisive and knows what she wants in total contrast with the easily manipulated and fearful Nero. It is her who has the male authoritative power, backed with brutal manly generals Tigellinus and Licinius.

It has been pointed out by critics about the later toga movies from 1950's that in post-war America the toga movies like *Ben-Hur* or *Spartacus* concentrate on showing the muscular male bodies in order to re-instate the subverted by the war conventional gender roles. It might be that for Barrett the inverted roles at the court of Nero, added to the cruelty of the manly figures of generals like Tigellinus and the general lack of moral code and licence stood as an example of the fall of humanity (and with humanity all political and economic liaisons they created) if the values that, in contrast, Mercia and Marcus represent will not be followed. Of course, the warning is strictly intended for the well-known Victorian audience which takes it for certain that Christianity must win,

also is at least basically educated in ancient history and knows that Rome eventually fell, as the play does not give us insight into the fortunes of Berenis, Poppea and Nero, but powerfully ends with Mercia and Marcus, the Christian bride and groom stepping into the light beyond – the light of the rightful future.

The already mentioned half-comic figure of Glabrio has a lot of similarity with the figure of Petronius from *Quo Vadis.* He was undoubtedly introduced, together with the Roman woman Dacia, as a comic relief characteristic to melodrama, but he is one of the most interesting characters. The lover of wine and banquets, drunk in almost every scene he appears and helping Marcus to intoxicate Mercia with wine, he seems wiser and more critical about the world around him than the others. He is last seen in Act IV in a scene seemingly of lesser importance, right before the scene in the dungeons. When he talks to Dacia he expresses sympathy towards Marcus and Mercia, is aware that Dacia and Berenis greatly contributed to Mercia's doom because of jealousy and explains why he is not interested to see the massacre of Christians in the amphitheatre:

> GLABRIO Well – [*gravely shaking his head*] I am ever tender-hearted, and this slaughtering of Christians pleaseth me but little.
> DACIA Art growing effeminate in thine old age, Glabrio?
> GLABRIO Effeminate? – By Vulcan, no. It is no longer feminine to pity or to be tender. The sexes are changing – women do all the wooing nowadays. Men are no longer the hunters – they are the hunted. The wounded gladiators looks up to the circles for mercy, and 'tis the woman's thumbs that are turned down for his death. Bah – there is nothing left for us poor men but the wine cup – and even at that game some of the weaker sex are our masters. (179)

He directly comments on the changing of gender roles and references, yet again in the play, the hypocrisy of women's nature, being ruthless and cruel in achieving their personal goals. The good strings of his soul are mockingly described by Dacia as "effeminate," manliness for her would be the brutality as represented by men of Tigellinus's type, which is in fact also represented by women such as Poppea, only hidden by the coat of hypocrisy and the body of a woman.

David Mayer observes that "as much as *The Sign of the Cross* meets the configurations of popular melodrama, it also invades the territory of the New Drama" (*Playing Out…,* 104). It is certainly both of those elements that add to the play's success, but even more such elements can be mentioned. The play's central story of the love between Marcus and Mercia, with Berenis as the rejected and hurt woman and Tigellinus as Marcus's foe is the common melodramatic topic with the usual antagonistic pairs of characters. Even in a play with such a weighty historical topic, the background for the love story, but not just any type of background in order to make the story more colourful but a background of great importance, there is a place for comic relief thanks to the characters of Glabrio and Dacia, like in every melodrama. The clear division between the good and bad characters and the emphasis on promoting the virtue, that M.W. Disher named as the dominant feature of Victorian melodrama, are the examples of "melodramatic excess," according to Mayer. There is the "sensation" scene of the massacre of Christians in the middle of the play, although it is not based on the spectacular effects pulled by some machinery like in train wrecks or earthquake scenes, it still is playing on the viewers' emotions e. With the teaching about the nature of Christianity, done in a way stylized as biblical language, almost Church sermon-like, Barrett wanted to realize his aim of making theatre worthy of taking up religious subjects thanks to showing something containing a deeply moral lesson needed by modern-day church-goers. The historical topic showed that the play has an educational lesson of history to offer, and combined with the preaching, it made the play a respectable one, aimed at respectable audiences, who can appreciate the aims to expand their knowledge of history and enrich their faith. What is interesting, the scenes like the conversation of Dacia, Philodemus and Glabrio in the street, Berenis trying to seduce Marcus, her meeting with Dacia and Poppea "are similar in dialogue and characterization to episodes from contemporary West End Society plays which weights

the values of worldliness, sophistication, and dissimulation against innocence, virtue, and duty" (Mayer, *Playing Out…*, 105). With the interesting discussions of marriage, to which Marcus first eagerly opposes, but then ends up spiritually marrying Mercia and marching to their horrible bridal feast in death, Barrett is realising his "melodrama/society-play strategy," as Mayer describes it (*Playing Out…,* 106). The open ending, where we do not see what happens in the arena, what the future of other Christians and Nero's rule are going to be, adds to the more experimental elements assigned to the new type of drama, that prompted Shaw to describe Barrett's efforts as "a sly instance of getting Ibsen in by the back door" (Kaplan, 436). The ending of the play, always mentioned as the crucial difference between Barrett's work and *Quo Vadis*, truly differentiates *The Sign of the Cross* from Sienkiewicz's novel. Probably it is the reason why the play gained its own popularity, was not treated just as the theatrical version of the story in the novel, and was turned into film versions, next to *Quo Vadis*. When William Fitzgerald mentions the duality of the structure of toga movies – the obvious opposition of Christians and Romans, but also the less obvious clash between enjoying the pleasures of watching the richness of Romans and violent scenes in the arena while at the same time relating to the Christians:

> Here again, the genre allows the audience to have it both ways. We can dream, even actively will, the fall of the oppressor Rome under the comforting knowledge that it will remain there, at least for a century or so, preserving the status quo in all its spectacular glory but without commanding our respect or loyalty any more. (32)

He also mentions that in the movies and their literary sources somehow "the Rome does not fall," (32) even though the message had always been quite clear for the audience – the plays or the films are about the subsequent fall of the Empire due to lack of accepting Christian values.

Maurice Willson Disher, analysing *The Sign of the Cross* in a chapter "Sex and Salvation" in his book *Melodrama: plots that thrilled* sees the play as a melodrama combining the two topics – offering both excitement and moral lesson in its very unique

and unprecedented way. He writes – "Excitement was what each playgoer found in the play. Yet it was never mentioned in unsolicited testimonials. Writers of these spoke as though they had mistaken the Lyric for something between cathedral crypt and lecture hall" (122). As a proof, Mayer notes that audiences praised, even more than critics did, the scenes of the massacre of Christians at the Cestian Bridge, and the torture of Stephanus, which, in fact was so popular that those who came late often asked "Has he screamed yet?" (*Playing Out…,* 107, 148).

M.W. Disher further mentions the uniqueness of the combination of the topics in Barrett's play:

> Bestiality, sexuality and Christianity are not in *The Sign Of The Cross*. Yet the compound of all these three was what its audiences saw. There can be no denying that something was there which is no longer there. What its performances did to the public in 1896 can be likened to chemical action. The shriek of Haidee Wright when eaten alive as the mangled Christian boy, the spiritual agony of Maud Jeffries when running the risk of rape, the nobility of Barrett when preferring lions and love to lust and luxury, had meaning. (122-123)

Thus, Barrett's melodramatic play, packed heavily with the moral lessons and sensing that right before the end of the century it is the right time to introduce the story of Christians on stage, created a unique combination of topics and offered an unprecedented experience to audiences.

The three plays chosen by me for analysis not only present the history of toga plays, from the inspiring Irving's production, through the first toga melodrama encouraged to be developed further by John Ruskin to the toga genre masterpiece which became a cultural phenomenon later taken over by the cinema and adjusted to its needs. They also show the development of the genre, its clue of expression and what they wanted to communicate with the audience. *The Cup*, although had a story with the topics often repeated by other toga plays, mostly amazed people with the visual spectacle, the scenes inspired by neo-classical paintings and presented as if a painting

on stage together with archaeological accuracy set the standard for producing the toga topic on stage. *Claudian* had two major elements of every future toga drama – the melodramatic story of a hero struggling with overcoming his sins against Christian morality, supported in his spiritual change by the love of a woman, and the stage design worthy of the best Academy paintings. Both components elevated the melodrama to a higher quality and broadened the audience to those who for long wanted to see something more educational in popular theatre. *The Sign of the Cross* encompassed all of the elements introduced by the previous plays, attempted at in other toga dramas in the meantime and created a popular phenomenon, the hybrid melodramatic form with elements of New Drama, designed for educated audience, but remaining within the norms of popular theatre – a predecessor of the classical twentieth century form of popular culture – films. The genre was a one-of-a-kind mixture in the Victorian theatre.

Chapter IV

From Victorian Popular Stage to Early American Cinema: the Rise of Popular Culture

4.1 The twilight of toga play in Britain and America: *Ben-Hur* (1899) and *Quo Vadis* (1900)

The researchers dealing with the representation of antiquity on Victorian and Edwardian stage, Rosemary Barrow and Jeffrey Richards, both notice that the last production of *Ben-Hur* in British Drury Lane theatre in 1912 proved to be the last major staging of a toga play, which closed the chapter for the genre on stage, but also opened it in cinema (Barrow, *The use of…,* 222; Richards, *The Ancient…,* 222). A staged version of Lew Wallace's novel written by American dramatist William Young ran at Drury Lane from 3 April to 18 July 1902, 122 performances in total, and was revived in 1912 with Bruce Smith, nicknamed "Sensation Smith," directing the famous chariot race scene (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 229) in a way that could be now described as "the last blow out" of the genre on stage. The place of the last production of the toga play is quite symptomatic as Drury Lane was one of the oldest patent theatres, which often staged its specific type of melodrama during Victorian times. The street itself was a place for different kinds of entertainment, also the one that gave a start for the first cinematic shows, as Maurice Willson describes, opening his chapter "Melodrama on Screen. *Ben-Hur*" – "Flickering shadows on a white sheet, formerly regarded as "last turn" in music-halls or side-shows in booths at fairs, or entertainments for vacant dates between jumble sale and flower show at village halls, at last established their dignity by taking over Drury Lane" (180). This emphasized the duality of the toga play creation – the educational and respectable aspect, and melodrama which was its base. The fact that the production in 1912 still had the spectacle as the main focus and appeal, was almost

an indication that all the resources possible in theatre had been used for staging toga plays, and hence theatre was going in a different, modern direction, the new technologies in the film could give the genre new opportunities, and definitely longer 'life'.

The novel, despite being immensely popular after its publication by Civil War General Lew Wallace in 1880, reaching second place, after the Bible, as the best-selling book in America, has not been dramatized for the next almost twenty years. The main reason the author refused multiple proposals to stage the popular novel throughout the years was its strong religious motif, evident already in the title – *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ.* As David Mayer points out, "although there was no official censorship in New York (as there was in Britain) which forbade the representation of Jesus or deity on the stage, Lew Wallace was aware that the play would offend public taste if Christ were portrayed" (*Playing Out*…, 191). What is more, he expressed his concern that "a mere mortal could not represent the Saviour on the stage" (H. Miller, 162). That facts that the novel was written in America, it was used by the clergy as Sunday readings, and became a trigger for conversion for many readers did not dispel the concerns of the author, which proves that the theatrical stage was not a place for direct religious subjects not only in Britain, but also in America. Also, not without relevance is the fact that it was only in 1896 when Wilson Barrett successfully "bridged the gulf" between stage and religion, as the press described it, staging *The Sign of the Cross* in St. Louis, and then in London.

The dilemma of producing the theatrical version of the story, which with time became well-known also in Europe, took almost twenty years because it was not possible to omit the "Tale of the Christ" from the plot. The stories of Judah Ben-Hur and Jesus Christ are parallel, and it seems that Wallace wanted to present his readers with a story of an individual hero of those times and his reaction to the events known

from the Bible. Thanks to the fictional and biblical heroes it was possible and justifiable to present the rich world of old cultures – Romans, Hebrews, Arabs, Egyptians, Cypriots, Cretans and other Greeks, which David Mayer identified as an unintentional representation of American melting pot in the nineteenth century (*Playing Out*…, 190). Engaging the readers with the ups and downs of Ben-Hur's life, they could place themselves in the position of the Jerusalem Prince and wonder how they would react to meeting Christ, something that the parable style of the Bible did not really allow, or at least made so simple and engaging. Not without reason most studies acknowledge the "unique position between the sacred and the secular" in Wallace's work (H. Miller, 161).

It was in 1899 when the famous entertainment management and production partnership of Marc Klaw and Abraham Lincoln Erlanger (called in short 'Klaw and Erlanger,' and operating from 1888 to 1919) staging multiple plays on Broadway, persuaded Wallace to give rights for staging the play to William Young. They assured that they did not intend to offend, but rather wanted to attract the Christian audience by preserving the religious atmosphere of the play. They proposed that the biblical story will not be shown in a straightforward manner on stage, and the figure of Christ will be represented as a beam of light and will be shown only once, in the crucial scene at the end of the play. Knowing that he is assured the final approval of the script, Wallace finally agreed (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 223). The chosen dramatist was William Young (1847-1920), who started his career as an actor. As a playwright he was an author of a few blank verse tragedies about the times of King Arthur and Joan of Arc – *Jonquil* (1871), *Pendragon* (1881), *Ganelon* (1889), *Joan of Arc* (1890, adapted from a novel). Before writing the dramatic version of *Ben-Hur*, he achieved his greatest success with the comedy *The Rajah* (1883).

The play consists of six acts and thirteen scenes, being considerably shortened in comparison to around four hundred page novel but retains most of the dialogues written by the original author (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 223). It starts with a Prelude depicting, in a pantomime style with the background music, the biblical event of the Three Magi seeing the Star. It is the meeting of the three men, who arrive in the desert on camels, attired in costumes in accordance with their nationalities – Hindu, Greek and Egyptian[47] and greet each other when they suddenly see the illuminated sky and kneel. The effect of the Star shining in the night sky, achieved by electric lights and electric motors applied to earlier backstage technology, was criticized by *New York Daily Tribune*, which wrote that "Divinity flamed in the wintry sky, can never be expressed by canvas and calciums. A glorified circular buzz-saw, in a mist of paint and gauze, is no adequate representation of the Star of Bethlehem" (qtd. in Mayer, Playing Out…, 193). This somehow proves the concerns that Wallace had in connection with depicting "The Tale of the Christ" elements in the play. Even though the play was American and was staged in America, not in Great Britain, where for long there was even the assumption that theatre is too low a type of entertainment, and not high art like painting or poetry that showing religious motifs on stage is strictly forbidden, as discussed in the previous Chapter, there was even the belief that it is not worthy to depict biblical characters on the stage. Without them, however, *Ben-Hur* would be a totally different play, precisely a toga melodrama like many others.

William Young's challenge was handled quite skilfully. After the Prelude, which settled the religious atmosphere with light and music, the means that were used in the whole play instead of real biblical characters (apart from the Magus Balthasar, father of Iras), the tale of Christ is really treated as a 'tale' – it is told by others as memoirs or

[47] Here, the nationalities come inconsistent with the traditional perception of the biblical Magi, who came from the countries from the East – Ethiopia, Persia and Babylon.

reports from their travels. From Act I to V, Jesus is mentioned only twice – in Act II, when Ben-Hur, being a slave at the Roman galley, reminisces about the only person who was kind to him when he was boarded on the ship, and in Act IV in the story of Balthasar. The last Act, opening after the chariot race scene with which Act V ends, is visibly the shortened version of the events from the novel, which combines the fortunes of Judah after winning the race and the events of the last years of life of Christ. We learn from Simonides that Judah went to Galilee to see who the Messiah that people talk about was and when he returns, he tells the story himself, mentioning the miracles he saw. He comes back from Galilee already with the understanding that "Upon the throne of Solomon He will never sit" as he has "The face of one born not to rule, but to suffer and, I fear, to die!" and "there will be no swords drawn," although there are three legions of Galileans under the command of Ben-Hur (278[48]). Judah is already a changed man, who sometime during his travel abandoned the idea to fight and make Christ the King of earthly Jerusalem. The change is also confirmed by his sudden confession of love to Esther, right after his story of the events in Galilee, which makes it not fully believable, as in the previous Act he was strongly infatuated with Iras. He finally finds his place, peace of mind and happiness on earth when he learns that his mother and sister live and are lepers, rushes to find them against all odds, and is finally reunited with them – healed by "*a dazzling radiance pouring upon them from above*" (288).

The tight bond he has with his closest family is felt throughout the whole play, mostly because of their interaction in Act I (Mother and Tirzah, the sister, appear in Act I and then in Act VI), where they are presented as a very close to each other and loving family. It is even depicted in kind of a tableaux form, right before the accident that

[48] All the quotes from William Young's play come from the book *Playing Out The Empire* by David Mayer, who noted that the Harper and Brothers publishers deposited the original script as the British licensing copy. The text of the play comes from New York 1899 printing, with spelling and punctuation adjusted for clarity and is provided on pages 204-290.

changed their lives, when Mother is embracing Judah kneeling beside her and Tirzah asks if she can join them, and they are seen in close embrace – Mother in the centre stretching her right and left arm in loving, protective and tender embrace of her children – a picture with biblical associations of the Virgin Mary and her love of her Son and all people. In the last Scene of the play, which is only a description (just as the Prelude) of what we see on stage, on the Mount of Olives. We are presented with what could be the reference to the picture of a family, seen in Act I, afflicted by the injustice and pride of the Romans, with the addition of Esther, which the stage directions are precise about: "*Recognizing his mother and TIRZAH, BEN-HUR, with a cry of joy, rushes to meet them. He embraces them – then, turning, he draws ESTHER into the group, and she, too embraces and is embraced by the MOTHER and TIZRAH in turn*" (290). The final image that we see is all the characters on their knees absorbed in a chanted prayer, rising when the music changes into "*a joyous and triumphant strain*" (290). Their rise, together with the triumphant hymn seems to be an allusion to the Death on the Cross and the Ascension of Jesus, as was observed by the characters in the novel. The final message of the play, as seen in the final images reinforced with music, is concentrated on the power of the reunited family, brought together and consolidated by their belief in One God. The ending brings back the religious subject that the viewers could get distracted from by following the exciting fortunes of Ben-Hur – his liberation from slavery due to the sinking of the Roman galley, having the mysterious new identity, revealing himself to old Simonides and then his rival Messala, becoming rich again, being seduced by Iras, and winning the chariot race, which was of course the aim of the play, and which made it a melodrama with a Christian message at the end like the other toga plays. As the toga plays typically referred to present times through the depiction of ancient Roman empire and had a moral message to people, *Ben-Hur* can be interpreted as showing a Christian family deeply caring about each other on earth, but also knowing

that there is a higher power in heaven, and the future salvation awaits them, as the basic entity that has the power to win over the evil in the world, just like the final miracle helped Judah to find himself and his family despite the injustice and pain he suffered from his Roman opponent and Roman superiors.

The first staging of Young's *Ben-Hur* was at the Broadway Theatre in New York on 29 November 1899 and it ran for 194 performances, becoming one of the greatest hits in the history of Broadway. Jeffrey Richards notes that when "the play closed in 1920 it had been performed 6000 times, had been seen by twenty million people and brought in receipts of over $10 million" (*The Ancient…,* 224). The leading roles of Ben-Hur and his opponent Messala were played by Edward J. Morgan and William S. Hart, who later became the star of the first Western movies, and impressed the author of *Ben-Hur* with his truthful to the novel's portrayal of the villain. When they play reopened after three months break, in 1900, the role of Ben-Hur was taken over by William Farnum, the most famous interpreter of the character (Richards, *The Ancient…,* 224). The play was directed by Ben Teal with the score prepared by Edgar Stillman Kelley and the sets by Ernest Albert and Ernest Gros. The Klaw and Erlanger management wanted to use new technologies for the most spectacular scenes and advertised it in the press as a wooing secret new technological resolutions. Their promotional technique was to first deny all press access and then allow a few favoured journalists to see the rehearsals (Mayer, *Playing Out…,* 193). Ernest Albert was responsible for the famous chariot race scene, for which he used two chariots with four real horses each galloping on treadmills with background paintings split into three moving backcloths, "synchronised so as to create the illusion of the racecourse and spectators retreating behind the rapidly advancing chariots," as David Mayer describes it (*Playing Out…,* 194). The realisation of the scene was inspired by 1893 painting by Hungarian artist Alexander von Wagner – *The Chariot-Race* (Fig. 8), known due to its numerous

lithographic and engraved copies. The painting shows a very dynamic scene of the race in the Circus Maximus, the oldest and largest arena in Rome. Giving the impression that the two leading chariots with four horses each will come right at the viewer in front of them, the artwork conveys the danger of the sport. In the circular tribunes seen on the right and left side there are crowds of excited spectators forming groups of entangled bodies. As the description on the Manchester Art Gallery's, where the painting is displayed, website mentions "this painting vividly captures the wild excitement of the race, the perspective intended to satisfy the same popular taste for danger as would films in the following century". The poster of *Ben-Hur* production created in 1901 uses the scene from the painting with some small adjustments such as the colours representing Judah Ben-Hur and Messala (Mayer, *Playing Out…,* 194). Howard Miller notes that "subsequent production tours added more and more chariots to the spectacle, until ultimately five chariots raced with Messala and Judah" (162).

The London production of *Ben-Hur* was staged at Drury Lane on 3 April 1902. Because the Klaw and Erlanger management took care of securing the rights to the various elements of their dramatic production, such as the script and Edgar Kelley's vocal score (Mayer, *Playing Out…,* 195) hence the Drury Lane staging was based on the American version and directed by the same director – Ben Teal. The changes proposed by the British producer Arthur Collins, the manager of Drury Lane, involved mostly the scenery. Having such great background of historical scenes painters and use of spectacular scenery in their productions of toga plays it was certain that they would use their own resources. New scenery was painted by expert British scene painters as well as new costumes, wigs and dance scenes were newly prepared. The already mentioned Bruce Smith worked solo on the sinking of the Roman slave galley spectacular scene and together with the American producer of the race scene Ernest Albert on the chariot race with the effect that "Drury Lane used twenty horses where there had been only

twelve on Broadway," as Richards points out (*The Ancient…,* 224). He also notes that the two leading actors Robert Taber (as Ben-Hur) and Basil Gill (as Messala), were both veterans of stage productions of *Quo Vadis* (*The Ancient…,* 224).

The reviews of the 1902 Drury Lane production quoted by Jeffrey Richards in *The Ancient World on the Victorian and Edwardian Stage,* both from 4 April, show the dichotomy in the attitude to toga dramas at the beginning of the new century. *The Daily Telegraph* referred to the already enormously successful reception by the American audience and it seems that its reporters would not dare to diminish their native success of the play. Nevertheless, the audience's reactions must have been very enthusiastic as they reported:

> Success, decisive, emphatic, and undoubted was their verdict, and the verdict is one which the merits of the play thoroughly deserve. But even were the piece itself less attractive and less interesting, it is practically certain that the great chariot race, with its amazing effects, would carry the fortunes of 'Ben-Hur' shoulder-high for many weeks and months to come (qtd. in *The Ancient…,* 226-227).

Typically of the reviews of earlier-in-the-century toga plays, they marvelled at the spectacular scene of the chariot race and the authenticity in depicting the ancient past. Not so typically, however, they also praised other elements of the drama, which had "a story of absorbing interest," something in which previous toga plays were often flawed, and summarized the production as "exquisitely mounted, superbly played and beautifully costumed" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 227). This cloying review seems to be the last swoon over all the elements of toga plays that were enchanting theatre-goers from 1880s – bringing the antiquity to life in real and authentic way, the visual and technical effects that were prepared with the help of professional and well-known painters, a melodramatic story with its culmination in form of a spectacular event that kept people in suspense and the emotional, often sad, or partly sad, ending.

The opposing view of *The Times* is very interesting as it seems to be the view of people who already stepped into the new century and are greatly bored with the

conventionality of toga plays that *Ben-Hur* followed. In truth, *Ben-Hur*, with its main protagonist who is a fallible hero like Claudian (struggling with his sins, here the desire for revenge), but overall is too perfect in his nature to be true, almost like Mercia from *The Sign*, without the shadow of a doubt repeats the convention of toga drama. As much as the *Daily Telegraph's* words were honeyed the review of *The Times* did not hesitate to state that "any capable hack playwright could have put together a better setting than is provided by the story for the features of the spectacle produced last night," and call the story "the unedifying mixture of religious elements with that particular kind of melodrama which in London has its home at Drury-lane"(qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 227). Indeed, mostly, they criticized the melodramatic conventions, in which William Young's play was written and then staged, showing that melodrama on London stage in 1902 was very unwanted and probably opening the years of heavy critique that it was to receive through most of the twentieth century, together with the Victorian painting. They unhesitatingly stated that *Ben-Hur* is simply "a Drury Lane melodrama of the first century" and enumerated its stock characters, only without the, characteristic of melodrama, comic relief, and finished off with a statement that could be read in many toga plays' reviews during the previous twenty years – "if the piece succeeds, it will succeed by virtue of the scenery and in spite of the tediousness of the drama" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 227-228).

The Times heavily criticized the "*pseudo*-archaic" language of the play and mockingly pointed out the "thees and thous, and "cometh" and "goeth" and mayhap and peradventure" and other "flowers of archaism (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 227). The language is a mixture of making the utterances sound more archaic with an occasional modern saying slipping in. The artificiality of the language is especially striking in the first Act when the accumulation of the "thees and thous, and "cometh" and "goeth" happens often and the reader/viewer is not accustomed to it yet. In the

opening conversation of Ben-Hur's mother with Simonides, when he talks about his devotion to the family of Hur and their finances: "But how greatly He hath prospered me – or rather thee and thine – thou mayst not fully estimate. The sum that thy husband – my master – entrusted to me hath grown beyond all foreseeing. It hath multiplied ten – yea, twenty fold …" (205). The accumulation of the archaic forms makes the utterance very artificial and the strong intentions of the playwright to make the characters speak as if they really were from an ancient society show through. The critique bears strong similarities with George Bernard Shaw's also quizzical remarks about the same manner of making the language sound archaic in Wilson Barrett's *The Daughters of Babylon* (as quoted in previous chapter).

The British reviews agreed on praising the work of scenery painters and preparing the most visually stunning scenes – the slave galley and its sinking, the view of Jerusalem over the rooftops, the scenes of celebrities in the grove of Daphne and the Mount of Olives landscape from the last scene, and the performance of the leading actors, including the female role of the seductive Iras. The reviews of American production hold the same assumptions with one very telling statement from a viewer Charles Frohman, a famous American theatre manager and producer who also worked in London, that he thought that "the American public would never stand for a play featuring both Christ and a horse race" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 224). Just as in the case of *The Sign of the Cross* in 1896, the theatrical production in New York gained favour with the Catholic clergy, who encouraged people to attend the play, "setting aside any reservations they might have about the morality of attending the theatre," as Howard Miller notices (162). He further mentions a very similar situation to the descriptions of the social profile of the audience that the journalist wrote about *The Sign of the Cross*: "reviews of the staged version of *Ben-Hur* regularly reported on the number of people in the audiences who appeared not to be regular theatregoers – one

review called the audience the 'assembled worshippers'" (162). It was precisely in the combination of both elements – religion, or rather respectability that the religious elements provided, and spectacular visual and historically accurate effects – that toga plays held their esteem and popularity for so long. David Mayer sums up, writing that "it was generally held by New York critics in 1899 and by London critics in 1902 that the drama's intellectual and dramatic content were both less effective and less significant than its spectacle" (*Playing Out…,* 193).

For David Mayer, the dramatized version of *Ben-Hur* is mostly the realisation of the conventions of toga plays for American audiences and tackling American problems through the depiction of antiquity, much as the whole nineteenth century revival of antiquity, which has been discussed in Chapter I. He even claims that the novel was influenced by Wallace's time as governor of the territory of New Mexico, where there was a mixture of people of different racial backgrounds and a desert landscape, both of which were vaguely similar to Judea and Syria at the times of Christ. Hence, he states that "the Roman Empire of *Ben-Hur* is not the empire of the British toga drama … All cultures, even the Judaeans, are 'other' cultures. The Romans may be the dominant culture, as the British had been in America, but their hegemonic influence is merely political and military" (*Playing Out…,* 190). He notices that the Romans in the novel and play did not fully control the local rituals and had to get accustomed to and tolerate the 'otherness' of people from different cultures that they met along their way and did business with (190). The difference of course stems from the fact that such plays as *The Sign of the Cross* are set specifically in Rome, the heart of Roman civilization and hence could show the dominance and the peak of degeneration of the Roman rulers, and even *Claudian*, set around 360 AD Byzantium, part of Eastern Roman Empire, concentrating on the curse placed on the main hero and the spectacle (the earthquake scene) like in earlier melodramas of the century, does not tackle the issue of racial diversity. Indeed,

through most of *Ben-Hur* Rome feels more like being "the other" in contrast to all the other cultures that seem to be embracing their differences and live their everyday life next to each other. The choice of the place to set the novel in and the abundance of very interesting characters from different backgrounds like Balthasar and Iras, the old nurse Amrah, or Sheikh Ilderim, for a moment shift the focus from Rome as a tyrant and hegemon and rather show the cooperation between the races and hint at the peaceful, not militant Christianity as the possible unifying power.

Nevertheless, the opposition of Rome to the other cultures is clearly seen in the play, even though there are definitely fewer lines devoted to that than in the other British toga plays. There is one funny and straightforward line that stands out as the direct allusion to Rome as the hegemon, uttered before the chariot race. A young drunk Roman, Cecilius yells while taking bets "Rome against the world!" (266). This brief introduction of this character at the beginning of Act V is also reminiscent of the typical comic relief that was part of melodramas, and toga plays, as their used the formula of melodramatic play as their core. In *Ben-Hur*, due to plenty of characters of various races, the common toga play motif that could be also described by the blunt statement "Rome against the world" is the most conspicuous and accurately shows that in ancient times Roman Empire was inhabited by dozens of races. This was less apparent in British toga dramas and quite obviously appeared in American work, as multiculturalism was part of their culture. The chariot itself was symptomatic as the main rivals were a Roman and a Jew (the other charioteers are all mentioned in the hanging poster, but the crowds cheer only for Messala and Judah, and Drusus, Messala's young Roman companion says "All the others are forgotten. Thy contest is with him" and in fact they are). It is in this moment that Judah is seen as a national Jewish hero and a great enemy of Rome (represented in the chariot by his rival Messala), something that is more emphasized in the novel. The realisation of the chariot race on stage,

something that we can imagine thanks to the reports of the viewers, is the moment of triumph of the Jewish hero over Rome, as the remaining story hints that Rome will eventually fall due to self-destruction, and the Jew will abandon his nationalism and become a follower of Christ.

But, apart from this somewhat funny sentence, all the features of Rome as a dominant (until its fall) and proud power are represented by one character – Messala, much like the figure of Emperor Nero in *The Sign of the Cross* and other novels and plays on the topic of early Christianity. We can learn plenty about the character of Roman Empire from the meeting of Judah and Messala in Act I. Even before Messala arrives there is a quick presentation of the main characters' attitudes towards Rome. The sound of the Roman trumpet announcing the arrival of the new Procurator raises concern in Simonides and Ben-Hur's Mother who asks him if they should fear him more than the previous governors, to what Simonides replies: "All underlings of Rome are birds of prey, and the nearer to the eagle in size and power, the greater the maw that must be filled" (206). Even though he assures the Mother that they have no reason to worry she is displeased and concerned when Judah returns home with his childhood friend, saying she "could have wished that Rome had kept him" (208).

From the first glance at the character of Messala as he "*bows with a mixture of condescension and haughty indifference,*" as the stage directions tell us (208) and his cold greeting with Ben-Hur's Mother, which she immediately acknowledges and Judah is completely unaware of, we see that he is the epitome of Roman pride and power. In his first remark towards Judah's sister, Tizrah, he offends her telling her that blushing would not commend her in Rome and after that the ladies go out and he stays alone with his old friend he reacts very arrogantly and mocks Judah's simple and hearty proposal for supper. To that he replies, mentioning his lavish suppers at the palace: "And what wilt thou give me? A turbot? A collop of wild boar from the Rhine? Larks' tongues?

Honey of Hymettus? And, for libation to the gods, a draught of Falernian?" (209). When he briefly asks Judah about relations with his family, he proceeds to pity his loving family lifestyle and boldly states that there is no such thing as love – "Love is nothing – war everything" (210), after which he greatly elaborates on his ambitious life as a Roman soldier. Judah's simple life he opposes with "life in Rome with money – money, wine, women, games; poets at the banquet; intrigues in the court; dice all the year round!" (210). This stark opposition of love and war does not sound very convincing. We should realize of course that love in a Christian understanding did not exist in Messala's Roman life, as for a Roman soldier war and love (understood as a sexual conquest much like in Ovid's *Art of Love* where it meant the art of seducing girls) were strictly connected. War provided a great opportunity for Roman soldiers to make love conquests and have sex, and the character of Messala definitely is a sexual predator.

The direct opposition of the two races, Roman and Jewish, is the most clearly seen in the folllowing fragment of the play. Praising the life in Roman palaces, Messala proposes a place for Ben-Hur in Procurator Gratus's suite, but on one condition – "Only get rid of thine antiquated notions-teachings of women and priests-and forget thou art a Jew," (210) which deeply offends Judah (it is even possible that was Messala's aim and the proposal was not sincere), to which he impulsively replies: "Forget *thou* that thou art a Roman, before the day cometh when the remembrance will bring neither pride nor profit to *thee*!" (211). It causes the final disagreement between them and definite end of their friendship, as Messala proclaims that Judah's words could be treated as treason, definitely mean the rejection of his friendship, and cannot be forgotten. In his last words he repeats his earlier statement about how Romans view love and war, which this time may also refer to their relation from that moment – "Thou forget? But that is what Roman never doth. Down Eros! Up Mars!" (211).

There is one very telling fragment, in which Judah is emotionally crushed after the meeting with Messala, and in fact temporarily crashed by him as a person and as a Jew by a Roman. Judah seeks comfort in his Mother and share his doubts connected with their race that Messala triggered:

> BEN-HUR [*passionately*] Tell me, my mother, wherein am I inferior to a Roman? Why, even before Caesar, should I cringe like a slave?
> MOTHER It hath come. I feared it. He hath revealed himself. He hath taunted thee with the condition of thy race?
> BEN-HUR [*again giving way to his emotion*] Mother! Mother!
> MOTHER Yet it may be thou art the gainer, for now thou wilt no longer be deceived in him. But oh, the pride, the arrogance of the Roman! [*She sinks into seat*] Ruthless robbers! Under their trampling the earth trembles, like a floor beaten with flails.
> BEN-HUR And shall it ever be so?
> MOTHER Heaven forbid it!
> BEN-HUR Why, if there be the blood of warriors in our veins, as our books tell, why submit we to be trodden upon, crushed, ground into the dust? And fell we to such an estate [*casting himself down beside her*]?
> MOTHER And dost thou ask of me, my son? For our sins have we been chastened, and oh, how heavily! Yet we know that is it not for ever. The yoke shall be lifted.
> BEN-HUR Ah! But when?
> MOTHER When the King cometh. We have the promise; thou hast heard it from thy teachers. (211-212)

It can be observed that in a situation when they were mistreated by a Roman, Judah's Mother turns to their religion as a calming and hopeful force, hinting that it is something that make them stand above pagan Romans.

During the conversation with Messala we can observe a handful of emotions on Judah's side, which even show how he changes from the young and naïve boy to a young man, displeased with the rules of the world he lives in and seeking guidance and his own destination. Shortly after the meeting, when his emotions cool down he even tells his Mother (to her horror) that he wants to be a soldier, visibly influenced by what Messala told him. When he comes back home with his long-not-seen friend he displays almost childish cheerfulness, and it takes him a while to see that his friend is not the same person he used to be, something his Mother is aware of immediately, even before she sees Messala, as she knows what it means to pursue a career in Rome. On the way to realisation there are two more emotions –sadness and anger that lead to the final disenchantment. Judah gets sad when Messala very unpleasantly rejects his offer of

"spreading the table as in the old days," an offer presented spontaneously in a happy, warm, boyish manner. When his boyish enthusiasm gest quickly quenched, he slowly sees that Messala's priorities became drastically changed, although it is hard for him to believe, even when Messala insults him more and more openly, that his friend is a bad person. He still quite naively says: "I saw thee princely, accomplished; but I did not suspect – how could I? – that thy heart–" to what Messala laughs and scoffs: "'Heart'!" (210). When Judah utters the treacherous, according to Messala, words against Rome and Messala prepares to leave, Judah tries to stop him calling with a voice "*in which anger contends with affection*" and then "*in a conciliatory, almost appealing tone*" he pleads for them not to leave in anger and even tries to persuade him that he misunderstood his intentions. This is the last display of his childish hopes as he finishes with a strong statement "For all but mine people, hate for hate. And for the Roman, above all, evil for evil!" (211).

His last words are kind of a shadow of the main force that propelled Judah to win the chariot race – revenge. The line he delivers when he learns that Messala is to be his rival – "I will win for thee [Ilderim] – not for thy gold, not yet for glory, but for a prize more precious – revenge" (246) is the only straightforward reference in the play to the motif of revenge. In the play it is vital in the moment of the preparations to the race and in the scene with the actual chariot race, which precisely is Judah's moment of victory and revenge over his rival. The motif was elaborated more in the novel and brought upon to the last scenes when Judah finally cast it away under the influence of seeing Christ's death on the Cross. This was crucial to the final inner change that Judah underwent, truly understanding and accepting Christian values. When we see Judah in the next, and last Act of the play, the final fate of Messala is briefly discussed when Judah is visited by Iras, who tries to persuade him to help Messala:

> Forget the past – as he hath forgiven. Admit him again to thy friendship, and restore the fortune he lost in the great wager. To thee the amount is as nothing, but to him – Oh, take counsel of thy generous heart, and save him from poverty-which to a Roman, nobly born, is more odious than death (282).

Noticing that his rival does not ask for forgiveness, only for gold, Judah closes his relationship with the childhood friend, who brought misfortune upon his family saying that he would give him nothing, neither the money nor even a curse. This seems to be quite a flat ending of their interesting rivalry, and not satisfactory in terms of Christian morality, which only proves that the revenge and the renunciation of it was not central part of the play.

Rather than being a story of revenge, William Young's *Ben-Hur* concentrates on Judah's re-building of everything he had lost as a result of the unjust imprisonment – his name, his home, and above all, his family. Both David Mayer and Howard Miller briefly mention similar observations. Mayer starts summary of the play's plot by stating that "Ben-Hur meets the configurations of the second archetypal toga drama – a quest for self and intimations of salvation in an alien world" (190). Howard Miller in his article, in which he mostly writes about the film versions that followed the staged adaptation of the novel, makes an interesting remark definitely worth elaborating. He states that "neither the charioteer nor the Christ was central to the stage version of *Ben-Hur*... Instead, the focus was on the mystery of Judah's true identity – how does the young man emerge from slavery a rich and powerful Roman citizen?" (162).

As I have already described, apart from the first Act, which introduces the story of the misfortunes of Ben-Hur and presents the features of Roman hegemony over the other lands and cultures by the figure of Messala, and the last Act which is visibly very shortened and leaves most of the threads of the story only briefly tackled, most acts cover the action that takes place right before the chariot race, when Judah's identity is being uncovered and the love story with Iras develops. For some time there is even the mystery of Judah's identity in Act II, which starts with Arrius, a Roman tribune,

becoming interested in Judah, then a galley slave, who visibly differs from the other slaves in appearance and behaviour. In the central Acts of the play – II, IV and V, there are some elements of the American myth of "from rags to riches," but possibly also some references to the biblical Joseph who was a Jew who made 'a career' in a country that was inimical to the Jews. Judah first appears, after 8 years, before Simonides as a young Roman soldier, just as Messala inspired him to become in Act I, under the name of Arrius who inquiries about the house of Hur and his lost mother and sister. He soon reveals himself in a very "theatrical" way (from today's perspective we could say "film-like way" which only proves that toga plays were the obvious choice for early cinematography): "I am Judah, son of that Ithamar, Prince of Hur" (232). We then learn from Simonides that he and his daughter are his slaves, and that Judah is a rich man – "thou canst bid against Caesar himself. And since wealth is a means to every end, there is no dream of thy heart that thou canst not now realize, for thou art the richest subject in the world" (257). While his identity is a source of mystery and curiosity for a few characters, as Messala sends his companion Drusus to check whether he is rightfully called Arrius and Sheikh Ilderim proclaims: "Son of Arrius, hardly can I believe thou art a Roman" based on Judah's behaviour and Judah himself discovers that he was accompanied to the Grove of Daphne by Simonides's servant Malluch, Judah's main goal remains to find his lost family. It is only briefly interrupted by the unexpected chance of getting his revenge on Messala and his mind being for a moment taken by the romance with Iras. Following his adventures we can observe the changes that he undergoes – from being a young and naïve boy, a slave, a young Roman soldier to whom Rome was a prison as he was forbidden to look for his family, a winning charioteer, a participant in the historical events in Galilee, supported by his own legions to a man who finally found his place and happiness, because he was reunited with his

family and saw the miraculous power of Christian religion that in the end became his faith.

Jeffrey Richards states that there are apparent similarities between Young's version of *Ben-Hur* and *The Sign of the Cross*, as the whole play is based on the classic melodramatic pairs of opposites (*The Ancient*…, 226). The most evident is the main hero and his opponent, although once a childhood friend – a Jew, Ben-Hur and a Roman, Messala. Their different races only reinforce the preferred in toga plays message that only accepting the Christian religion could save the Roman Empire, or at least stop the debauchery and moral corruption that contributed to its fall. The next strong opposition is Iras – the temptress, like the archetypical Shakespeare's Cleopatra who could have been a point of reference, involved in love triangle between Ben-Hur and Messala, a figure of the adventuress "New Woman" that Mayer identifies as usually present in toga plays and Esther, the noble and modest woman Ben-Hur finally chooses. His choice is an obvious one as the tempting woman serves as a test for his character and a lesson for the audience that a real Christian should not give in to earthly and sensual pleasures but to higher feelings and resembles the choice between Berenis and Mercia. The famous Christian hymn from *The Sign of the Cross* which interrupts the banquet during which Marcus assaults Mercia is emulated in *Ben-Hur's* scene of the festivities for Apollo contrasted with Hosanna sang by the crowd when Jesus comes to Jerusalem. When it comes to religion, there is also a similar influence that conversion to Christianity brings upon the main character – Ben-Hur abandons the plans to fight the Romans and free Christ and learns about forgiveness towards the man responsible for his and his family misfortunes just as religion changes Marcus who bravely and peacefully marches into the arena to die with other Christians. Jeffery Richards neatly summarizes the tone emphasized in Young's play, which through its direct references to Christ and showing how the main hero reacted to his tests, misfortunes and the figure of

Jesus condemned to death and how they shaped him is even more perfectly Christian than the earlier attempt of that – *The Sign of the Cross*. Richards writes that *Ben-Hur* is "thus a play which favours Christian love and devotion to peace over Roman military might and injustice, spiritual faith over erotic paganism, true love over sexual desire, duty over self-indulgence: the recipe for a decent society" (*The Ancient*…, 226) – a perfect lesson for the end of century British and American people, tempted by various stimuli to lead a life of pleasure and no religion.

In my view the most conspicuous similarity between the two toga plays dealing with the times of Christ and early Christians is the elaborated romantic sub-plot, which also makes the two plays feel like a typical melodrama for most time. Interestingly, the treatment of the two opposite love interests of the main heroes – the lustful Poppea and Berenis and gentle and pure Mercia in *The Sign of the Cross* and the tempting Iras and modest Esther[49] in Ben-Hur is reversed. Whereas in Barrett's play there is a lot of time and lines devoted to Mercia, who at some point of the play turns out to be a leading figure together with the male character Marcus, as proved by Barrett's often quoted words about his play – "My heroine is emblematic of Christianity; my hero stands for the worn-out Paganism of decadent Rome…" (qtd. in Mayer, *Playing Out…,* 108) and Poppea appears only in one scene (Berenis in two more), in *Ben-Hur,* Iras is presented in colourful and elaborated way, as in a detailed neo-classical series of paintings, while Esther appears only in a few scenes next to her father and although she is noble, modest and honest, there is very little interaction between her and Judah and his sudden strong feelings towards her in the last Act would be hardly believable if the viewers were not accustomed to the model of the positive heroes choosing the epitomes of Christian

[49] The opposition of the two women strongly resembles the portrayal of Kama and Sarah from Bolesław Prus's *Pharaoh* – Kama, a Phoenician priestess, the mistress of Ramses who is spoilt and pleasure loving, but interesting, and Sarah, Ramses' Jewish mistress, noble-natured, but boring.

morality rather than the symbols of sensuality. In fact, in Young's play there is more place devoted to why Judah could have rejected Iras in the end than why he chose Esther, but either way the choice undoubtedly remains obvious for the viewer.

The depiction of Iras in William Young's play is a marvellous example of the popularity of the oriental motifs among the nineteenth century people. Her figure is a classic representation of the female seductress, associated with all things sensual, based on popular in nineteenth century eroticized renditions of Shakespeare's Cleopatra but also others, including biblical, femme-fatales, to use the twentieth century popular name. When Judah first sees the Egyptian daughter of one of the Three Wise Men, Balthasar, next to the Fountain of Castalia in the Grove of Daphne while the pagan festivities depict the scenes of a maiden seduced by Eros (the places being emblematic as Esther is mostly seen at home, next to her father and hence is associated with domesticity and Iras with wilderness and nature) she is described as "Pharaoh's daughter" (based on her rich attire) and Judah is immediately swept by her beauty. His first words about her are "Is it not Sheba's queen – she that bedazzled Solomon?" (243). Their first meeting is depicted in a very sensual way, with rich imagery as Judah assists her with the cup of water from the fountain as the revellers from the Grove wildly dance around them singing, only to be almost trampled by the Messala's scorched chariot coming to a sudden stop, as if presenting the clash of the soon two rivals in a race and in love.

From the first appearance of Iras getting off a camel, behaving seductively and clearly showing that she is aware of her charm and beauty brings the reader/viewer immediate connotations with Cleopatra (both were Egyptians), who was also perceived by the Romans, those who saw her pernicious influence on Antony, through her beauty and open sexuality as a threat. The inspiration is even more apparent when we take into account that the name of Iras was used by Shakespeare as the name of one of

Cleopatra's maids. Interestingly, at one moment in the play it is Iras who directly compares herself to the Egyptian Queen, saying:

> IRAS Listen. There was once a woman who was loved – one only – a queen of my race. For her a great soldier forgot his duty, forsook his people, forswore his gods. For her he dared, and was fain not to win kingdoms, but to cast them away. Ah; that in truth was love – and of such love I dream. Wouldst thou do as much for me? (262)

The image is later confirmed by Messala himself, who exclaims "Antony's own charmer!" when he sees her leaning out of the litter outside the circus, where the race is to be held; an image possibly directly inspired by painting by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (Fig. 7). When he approaches her in the litter and reintroduces himself, he says to grab her attention: "Cleopatra art thou; and I, of the blood of the Caesars" (271), and the description of their passionate looks at each other that follows is the only thing in the play that refers to their love story from the novel. What is interesting in the story of Iras and her lovers, being undoubtedly inspired by Shakespeare's story of *Antony and Cleopatra* that even though it is Judah Ben-Hur whom we first see in the role of Antony, later it is rather Messala whom we could see in the role of this Roman general, as his fascination with Iras ends with his death, something we do not see in the play. Judah, in turn, doesn't let himself be used or exploited by Iras. In *Ben-Hur*, Iras and Messala, that is the Egyptian beauty and Roman soldier, get to be together, the outcome is disastrous for both of them, and it is Judah who in a way defeated both of them that came victorious.

In the language used to describe her by various characters there are many references to the witch-like powers that she may have, which obviously shifts the responsibility for the actions of men to the magical influence the *femme fatale* exerted upon them. It starts from Ben-Hur first words about her "bedazzling" powers, through describing her proposition to read Judah's deep thoughts as "witchcraft" and her being "a sorceress" to Simonides telling Esther that "the spell of the Egyptian hath been broken, and that [Judah's] eyes are now turned to loftier things" (275). Iras's powers are

even seen in the two scenes that depict her alone meetings with Judah, when her singing 'The Lament' interrupts the first sweet thought that he has of Esther – "And Esther – that to her I should owe it all! How sweet her face, how pure, how fair! Like a lily against the other's gorgeous beauty. And yet, were that other at the feast, would I linger?" (260) and in fact, the rising luring song helps him to decide not to go to the feast with Balthasar and Ilderim, but follow Iras's Ethiopian servant, who gives him the badge in his colours that his mistress finally accepted rather than taking the one from Messala, and spend the night with her (shown on stage as the moment of prolonged darkness with her singing heard throughout the time). At the opening of the Scene 2 of Act IV, we see them, in a tableaux form, sitting close to each other by the lake in the Orchard of Palms by moonlight, Iras with her harp, having a conversation in a slightly different tone that suggest that they had become lovers – it is Ben-Hur who confesses love to Iras, after which she demands him to abandon his duties and give her all his heart. At first, he is left speechless and torn apart, but when she makes a scene, he responds:

> BEN-HUR [w*ith sudden mad resolve, catching up the harp, which she has left on the bank*] Stay! Thou shalt not go alone.
> IRAS Ah! But thy duty?
> BEN-HUR [*passionately*] Already hast thou charmed me from it past forgiveness and past return.
> IRAS And Heaven?
> BEN-HUR [*stepping into boat*] Is where thou art. Now, if a spell thou knowest, O Egypt, to slay remorse and stifle care, take thy harp and weave it.

His violent emotions and actions stand in opposition to how he behaved when he came to Antioch from Rome, bewildering Sheikh with his refinement not typical of Roman soldiers, which shows that Iras play with his feelings changes him, but even then the audience may suspect that it is only temporary.

Iras's relation with Ben-Hur is full of tension as she is very outspoken and has her own opinions, which, at first, only enhances the excitement that surrounds their romance. They quarrel about her wearing Messala's ribbons during the race, as she

accepted it as a gift and teases Ben-Hur with it and in the last argument, right before coming into the arena he tells her what he expects from a woman: "I would have thee so esteem thyself, and see thee so esteemed by others, that thy beauty might be all but forgotten, through reverence for thy purity and modesty" to which she boldly replies "Mistake me not for the other. I am not thy slave," (271) being actually right as she did not pretend to have such qualities and it was Ben-Hur who got enchanted only by her beauty and sexuality, while clearly having preferences for a woman of Esther's type. The scene at the entrance of the circus at Antioch is the only one when Iras and Esther are together as they arrive in one litter and their contrariety can be clearly seen in the way they are dressed and behave, Iras being the one attracting everyone's attention. Iras's clothing is described as "*gorgeous, with face and neck bare*" and Esther as "*modestly garbed and veiled*." When she enthusiastically leans out of the litter to chat with people around, while Esther remains in the shadow, she causes stir among the crowds of citizens who gaze at her to what she reacts saying:

> IRAS What strange people! Saw they never a woman's face before? Come, show them thine – for their great wonder.
> [*She approaches ESTHER and makes movement as if to remove her veil*]
> ESTHER [*shrinking back, with protesting gesture*] Oh, I pray thee!
> IRAS [*observing her*] Why, thou dost not wear his colours. Dost thou not wish him to win? To be sure, he will have no easy task. Hast thou seen Messala? He is beautiful as Apollo. (268)

Their short interaction is absolutely sufficient to compare the two young women and see the opposite types of female youth and beauty they represent – the flirtatious and unintimidated and bold one and, on the other hand, the unexperienced, sweet, shy and modest one. Through her standing out in the crowd because of the different and exotic attire in comparison to all other women, including Esther, Iras is also a representation to the exotic "other," head-turning, but ultimately not accepted in a dominant culture, although her portrayal in the play is far less negative and tragic than in the novel, as there is no mention of her being an assassin of her second lover and her dying by

suicide. All is "hidden" in the final words Judah addresses to her: "I send him [Messala] thee, whom he shall find the sum of all curses" (282). What the audience of William Young's play could see in Iras was basically the colourful and exciting oriental sensual seductress, like in oriental scenes depicted by neo-classical painters – a female beauty to gaze upon.

Margaret Malamud, writing about the first films based on toga plays, states that in Wilson Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross* (and DeMille's film as well) "the conflict between Romans and Christians is structured around a romance" (187). It is a true observation, as the historical events of the persecution of Christians, their secret gatherings and Nero's decisions is just a background to Marcus and Mercia love story, which pervades every act, as discussed in the previous Chapter. In *Ben-Hur*, the romance, mostly the sensual infatuation with tempting and outspoken Iras, plays an important part and takes a generous amount of the script, but overall the reader/viewer does not have the impression that it is the story of the love life of Judah Ben-Hur, but rather of his entire life, shaped by the misfortunes he experienced and the meeting with Christ, so that uncovering his real identity and reuniting with his family comes to the foreground of the story.

Ben-Hur clearly distinguishes itself from the English toga plays, although definitely stays in the genre – it is set in Roman empire and shows the oppression of people under its rule, the hero's path to become a real Christian and a love story – central elements of the narrative of toga plays. The love story is treated very similarly to other toga plays, *The Sign of the Cross* in particular, with the classical set of good and bad female characters and male rivals and is the most lingering element of melodramatic plays. The staging of the play follows the direction of the genre as well – the use of complex theatre machinery, light and music to enhance the spectacle, and the most spectacular scenes like the race or the sinking of the galley in particular. The stage

painting and costumes created the perfect and impressive illusion of life in antiquity and were admired by the critics. Yet, on the narrative level, which obviously stems from the novel written by an American author, it gives the impression of being more complex, with more better developed individual characters, thus presenting a society of people from different cultures and backgrounds, united in the fight for freedom. Its central figure is a young boy, then a young male, whose development is shown in a more detailed way than the soldier figure of *The Sign of the Cross*, Marcus, who from the start seems to be doubtful about the duty assigned to him and converts to Christianity being besotted with the Mary-like figure of Mercia and due to her. Marcus's fight is very internal and concentrated on two things – the rejection of worldly pleasures he was accustomed to and the doubt about the rightfulness of his duty to Rome. In turn, we see Judah as a young boy who searches his path in life who then changes into a young man who relentlessly fights for his family. The family motif particularly stands out as different from the Victorian toga plays – the ending is a triumph of Christianity realised in a unit of a family, which very much resonates with American values (and makes it definitely an American version of toga play) of putting family in the centre, just as the quite peaceful co-existing of different cultures, which is felt throughout the play. The view of imperial Rome is also slightly different due to the historical differences of the two countries which saw themselves as the successors of Roman Empire. While in *The Sign of the Cross* the world of Romans is divided into the evil ones – most of the patricians and the court of Nero and the good ones that are Christians with Marcus, also a Roman, standing in-between (throughout the events depicted in the play), in *Ben-Hur* Judah, the Jew, stands against the evil Romans. Marcus's struggle is with his own awakened conscience and his duty to Rome, in which he was raised, it is the story of a hero who has to redeem himself morally in order not to fall, as Rome subsequently will. In *Ben-Hur* there is even a sub-plot (briefly described in the play) of Judah's gathering a

legion of soldiers to fight the Roman oppression and make Christ the king of Jerusalem, and the Romans are seen first of all as foreign occupiers. Even the one Roman who seemed to be kind towards the main hero, the galley's Tribune Arrius, is the cause of Judah's imprisonment in Rome, as he does not allow him to look for his family. Much like American 'Empire' threatened by countries that had older imperial traditions than them, in Wallace's book and then the play, the Jews fought with the foreign oppressors. This will be even more emphasized in Hollywood toga movies. The internal moral fight which was shown in *The Sign of the Cross* was closed within one Empire. In *Ben-Hur*, apart from the division between good Jews (who were, in fact, more influential and respected in America than in Europe) and bad Romans, there is also a similar internal struggle present in Judah's path of becoming a Jewish follower of Christ. The obvious triumph of virtue and Christianity in the end is present in both plays as a common motif of toga drama.

Let me now analyse and compare how Wilson Barrett, next to William Young, dealt with the stage adaptation of another popular historical novel, *Quo Vadis*, and why his play was less successful than Young's. Before Barrett's staging of *Quo Vadis* in June 1900, a year after Young's *Ben-Hur*, there were already three theatrical adaptations of the Polish novel, about which there is little information. The first two were by Jeannette Leonard Gilder and Charles Case. There is a little information on the staging by Gilder on Broadway at the Herald Square Theatre in 1900, which stayed true to Sienkiewicz's narrative, but eliminated the New Testament figures of apostles Peter and Paul in order to avoid religious offence (Richards, *The Ancient World…*, 144), a practice not uncommon, as was already discussed in this thesis.

More well-known is the third production – a six acts play written by Stanislaus Stange, an English-born but living in America playwright, which premiered in Chicago at McVicker's Theater's on December 13, 1899, and later on April 9, 1900, on

Broadway in production by F. C. Whitney. The year 1900 really experienced an accumulation of *Quo Vadis* stagings, both in America and in England, maybe hence the surfeit and general lack of success of these stagings. The curious situation can be observed in the titles of reviews from American press, such as "The Other Quo Vadis" by *The New York Times* and "A Drama in Duplication" by *The Sun* where we can read:

> Henryk Sienkiewicz's "Quo Vadis" was acted in rivalry at two of our theatres last night. Jeanette L. Gilder's dramatic version was used at the Herald Square, and Stanislaus Stange's at the New York. The place where much alike in a general way, as they contained about the same drafts from the novel, and they resembled, also, the familiar melodrama of "The Sign if the Cross," which had been derived from the Polish author's composition. The two newer pieces adhered closer to the book, however, though necessarily omitting far more than they contained of the very abundant material… Miss Gilder's version was the more intellectual, and Mr. Stange the more theatrical, but both were to be classed as melodrama in the best modern meaning of the word.
> The performance of "Quo Vadis" at the Herald Square was less faulty than the hasty performance would have excused… Perhaps there was rather less of spectacle than had been generally expected… And a first-rate melodrama it was, with coherent rapidity of action, and a well-mingled interest of love and religion to popularize it. The audience was very friendly to Miss Gilder and would doubtless have stood by her right loyally in defeat; but she won a victory surely, if not greatly, and the applause became more and more sincere until the end… (7)

On Stange's production *The Sun* reviewers had more bitter words:

> A kindly disposed audience applauds, but does not hide its tired feeling. The dramatization was crudely constructed and stiltedly worded. Some situations that should have been effective were robbed of all value by being thrown at the audience without warning or preparation. Aside from the acting, Mr Stange received no aid from others. Ineffective music was supplied by Julian Edwards, and commonplace stage management by Max Freeman. The scenery was not up to the standard of Broadway production. Twenty-five years ago it would have been called handsome, but nowadays it must be put down as cheaply garish. (7)

The New York Times review entitled "The Other Quo Vadis," by 'the other' meant the staging at the New York Theatre the version by F. C. Whitney and produced "an amiable view," as the subheading states. The author writes that the version was continuously played from its initial staging in December in Chicago, and amicably, but also briefly and not under great impression, summarizes:

> The stage people know their line well and have become accustomed to each other. In the stage setting, the parts fit and seem appropriate to the period depicted, as does the costuming. There has been no neglect of detail, and the stage of this theater afford ample space for effective display. (7)

The New York version of Stange's *Quo Vadis* was produced in London's Adelphi Theatre on 5 May 1900. The leading role of Marcus was played by an American actor, Robert Taber, the rest of the cast was British. The play closed on June 1, 1900, after only 28 performances. The reviews of the staging show a similar sense of being fed up with the genre as in the case of the British staging of Young's *Ben-Hur*. The production was called vulgar, in a meaning slightly different from the modern one, presenting a vulgar dialogue composed of "modern journalistic cliché" and the outdated tendency to produce plays "compounded of crude sensationalism and quasi-religious 'sentiment'" (*The Times*, qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,* 145-146). The vulgarity was also that it turned "powerful and not ungraceful work of fiction into a commonplace spectacular melodrama" (*Athenaeum*, qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,*146) and the *Era* observed that it was nothing more, but "an 'entertainment of the stage', connected with the intention of appealing to a certain class of the playgoer – the class which makes cheap melodrama and cheap art generally profitable and popular (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,*146). This contempt for melodrama and pointing out with 'a finger' the pieces that bore some resemblance to it is characteristic to the-end-of-Victorian-era criticism, and the fact that toga plays really had a lot of melodramatic base added to the reasons why the theatre (at least the critics) was negatively orientated towards it and the late plays were not successful. The scenery and spectacle was typically acknowledged as admirable, but even this did not change the negative tone of the reviews, as for instance the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* wrote on 9 June 1900 that, "so ambitious, indeed, is the *mise-en-scène* of *Quo Vadis*, that the story and its interpreters are practically dwarfed into a very minor place" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,*145).

In need of a new play around the year 1900 Barrett decided to purchase the rights to dramatize Sienkiewicz's work. What made him become interested in *Quo Vadis* was most probably the great popularity of the novel in Europe. In an article

"Sienkiewicz's First Translator, Jeremiah Curtin" H. B. Segel describes a situation known from Curtin's memoirs when Curtin complained that even though Sienkiewicz promised him to be the only person to get the rights for the play based on *Quo Vadis*, the author gave the rights to Wilson Barrett. Sienkiewicz explained that he had forgotten about the earlier promise, tried to persuade Barrett to stop working on the play and when it was impossible, he sent the money he got as an honorarium back as he thought it would have been unfair to keep it (200). The fact that Barrett bought the performing rights helped him win a lawsuit he opened when he discovered that Stanislaus Stange staged a private version of *Quo Vadis* around the same time in Chicago with plans to show it in London (James Thomas, 148). Stanislaus Stange commented on the legal confusion, as reported by the review "A Drama in Duplication" by *The Sun*:

> At the end of the third act of the New York's play Mr. Stange came out and defended his right to dramatize the book. He said that after the play had been produced he had cabled to Sienkiewicz: "'Quo Vadis' a great success. [Laughter] "Who shall I send royalty to." The answer was: "To William Barrett." Mr. Stange went on to say no other version was authorized, and then contradicted himself by saying that neither his nor Miss Gilder's play was authorized. (7)

Wilson Barrett apparently got to know about Stange's act as when he went to the cheering audience after the curtain after his production fell, he asked if he might have telegraphed Warsaw to report to Sienkiewicz the success of the piece, to what the viewers cheerfully agreed (Richards, *The Ancient*…, 148).

After the turbulences, Barrett produced his staged version of the novel on 11th June 1900 at the Lyceum in Edinburgh, which was later transferred to the Princess of Wales's Theatre in Kennington. He admitted that he struggled to provide a good script that would not duplicate *The Sign of the Cross*, and taking into account that *Quo Vadis* had many more plots, it must not have been easy, and in fact the result was poor. According to James Thomas, Barrett in the role of Petronius did not repeat the success of playing Marcus Superbus as it was not his strong side to portray characters with a great dose of cynicism and humour (152). At the age of fifty-four Barrett must have

thought the role of Petronius more suited for him than the young soldier Vinicius and indeed centred his play in four acts on his character and the love story with a slave girl Eunice, right next to the romance of Marcus and Lygia with the very pathetic culmination scene of helping the young couple to escape and then taking the poison in order to avoid being caught. It is possible that he chose to concentrate the play on the character of Petronius, as he was not only one of the most interesting and liked by the critics characters, but also the one that clearly differentiated the play from *The Sign of the Cross*. The reviews claimed that despite the role was not his best one, Barrett won the audience with his portrayal of Petronius and in the last scene, although stiltedly prolonged, he "held the audience quite silent and interested by the simple spell of some moving and direct acting, instinct with pathos and the serenity of death" (*Era*, qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,*147). Of other actors, it was not Maud Jeffries (Mercia in *The Sign*), who played Lygia, that stood out as the female role, as the script made her "at best a shadowy one," but Edyth Latimer as Eunice, whose more natural acting and the power of devotion to her lover earned the praise from the critics (Richards, *The Ancient*…,148). The *Era* review admired the scenery, which gave "one a haunting reminiscence of the exquisite art work of Mr Alma-Tadema" (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,*148). The reporter from *The Daily Telegraph* quite accurately noticed that Barrett's version in comparison with Stange's had a privileged position, being the work of the native artist, even noted that some of the performances of Stange's production were of better quality and most importantly, stated that the play is a reminiscence of everything already seen in *The Sign if the Cross*. He wrote about Barrett:

> He knows his public – especially the provincial public of these islands; he knows the ins and outs of stagecraft as well as ever Boucicault did; he knows what is dramatically effective, and is not afraid to employ it… Added to these qualifications he has never shown any disposition to stint expenditure in the mounting of any piece on which he has set his heart. (qtd. in Richards, *The Ancient…,*148)

The words can be interpreted as a general explanation of the success of Barrett's dealings with toga dramas (as well as some others) – he spent years of his work both as an actor and manager of theatres (hence knew how the theatre operates in order to be profitable and what the audience best reacts to) and also a playwright (hence he had the sense of what makes a good, popular, but also more ambitious drama).

Both Young's *Ben-Hur* and Barrett's *Quo Vadis*, two dramas turned from their novel versions to stage, were in fact a twilight of the toga genre in the theatre, which by no means meant that the two historical novels on which they were based passed into oblivion, both at the beginning of twentieth century and even now. There is a fairly new Oxford academic publication specifically on *Quo Vadis* as it "began to detach itself from the person of its author and to become a multimedial, mass–culture phenomenon," (online Abstract) very much like Wallace's *Ben-Hur, – The Novel of Neronian Rome and its Multimedial Transformations: Sienkiewicz's Quo Vadis* (2020) edited by Monika Woźniak and Maria Wyke, for which the toga genre guru, David Mayer, wrote a Chapter on all of the stage adaptations. In an abstract of the chapter we can read on Oxford academic's website, Mayer emphasizes that there is a stark contrast between the success of *Quo Vadis* films and the theatre adaptations, due to the fact that "theatre was not able to realise the strongly physical episodes the novelist had imagined." As an example, he gives one of the most iconic *Quo Vadis* scenes, usually chosen for films' posters – Lygia being saved in the arena by Ursus wrestling the aurochs, which was never shown on the stage. Although there were some more successful stage adaptations of the novel in Italy and France, in England and America all the three stage versions that were created after 1900, even Wilson Barrett's adaptation, as Mayer highlights, "failed to generate much enthusiasm and was readily replaced by his money-spinning biblical dramas and toga-plays" (online Abstract). Why the 'standard' (not adapted from a historical novel) toga dramas like *Claudian, The Sign of the Cross* or *The Daughters of Babylon* could still

generate interest while *Quo Vadis* was doomed to failure? Was it because at that time another new staging of a toga play was already too much? Or was the play whose plot was already so well-known as it existed as a highly popular historical novel unattractive to the audience in a shortened version of a stage play; or maybe at the time of the first proto-cinematic shows (the first attempt at *Quo Vadis* topic in 1901), everyone would prefer the 'old' historical hits to be displayed in this new form? David Mayer provides a brief explanation that "it wasn't merely that these earlier plays had consumed the oxygen that might have given life to *Quo Vadis,* it was also that stage versions of *Quo Vadis* relied on similar configurations of characters found in *The Sign of the Cross*, of Christian-Pagan conflict, and of plots of martyrdom at the whims of despotic Roman emperors and their lubricious wives," (online Abstract) as proved in the quoted above review entitled "A Drama in Duplication." I believe that the reason is the mixture of all the above-mentioned facts, and the fact that theatre was entering a different phase, in which more experimental, plays were written, more minimalistic *mise en scène* deployed, and there was more focus on the textual aspect, while the spectacle, one of the strongest elements of the toga genre, next to the emotional story with melodramatic elements, could more perfectly be realised by the new techniques in the cinematic world.

4.2 Toga plays in early cinema

It was not a mere coincidence that the historical novels and plays from the nineteenth century became the topics of the first silent films, as well as the source for the great Hollywood epics of the 1930s and 1950s. There are several reasons why toga plays are such an interesting phenomenon of morphing from theatre to cinema, from high to popular culture, being an exceptional dramatic genre that can be analysed also through its cinematic counterparts. Firstly, the connection, or rather natural shift from

theatrical stage to cinema and its choice of history plays to be adapted into films has been a subject for many studies, the most notable being *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* written by Maria Wyke and *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* by Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs. Maria Wyke states that:

> Film is a medium that initially located itself as an extension of nineteenth-century representational forms. The new technology of the moving image could be seen as further development of a nineteenth-century technical progression through engraving, lithography, and photography towards ever more refined "realistic" representations, whether of the present or of the past. Such technological developments further abetted the nineteenth-century historical sensibility that sought to make the past live again in the present. Thus one of the most fascinating attractions which the new medium soon claimed to offer was the possibility of reconstructing the past with a precision and a vivacity superior to that of documentary sources or the nineteenth-century historical fictions of painting, theater, and the novel. (9)

The linkage between the end of nineteenth century theatre and the early film took place at the time where the two forms, one with the tradition dating back to ancient times, and the other brand new, based on a technology which was a total novelty, coexisted and had a lot in common. They were two entertainment mediums that presented people with pictures, situations and narrative stories, but and in the period of around fifteen years the film developed into a totally independent new form of art with its own techniques and means of aesthetic expression. One might suspect that the two forms would compete with each other and in many cases they did, but on the other hand, it turned out that the film quite naturally and gradually developed next to the theatre:

> The first attempts to relate cinematography to the world of art were naturally bound up with the Theatre. Similarly only as a novelty, like the shots of the railway-engine and the moving sea, primitive scenes of comic or dramatic character, played by actors, began to be recorded… The first experiments in recording serious and significant material appeared. The relationship with the Theatre could not, however, yet be dissolved, and it is easy to understand how, once again, the first steps of the film producer consisted in attempts to carry plays over on to celluloid. (Pudovkin, *Film Technique,* qtd. in Brewster and Jacobs, 5)

Maurice Willson Disher claims that early films "made plain what the screen could do and what the stage should never again attempt to do" (182), suggesting that rather a takeover than rivalry between the two media, and they accepted the fact that

they have their own, characteristic aesthetic and technical means. He describes an example from *Ben-Hur* where an imperfect illusion of reality in Young's theatrical productions can be compared to what was possible in cinema:

> In 1902 and again in 1912 Drury Lane had presented W. Young's dramatized version of Lew Wallace's novel. On this vast stage the lower deck of a trireme had exposed itself as a vast empty space, decorated on either side by supers, sparsely ranged at varying levels, with bars of wood in their hands. Make-believe had to exert itself to assume that these stumps represented oars, that each slave had the inconceivable strength needed to move such oars by holding the tips, that a vessel as large as the one represented could be moved by whatever influence their exertions had upon the water. "Noises off" on a darkened stage would have put much less strain upon imagination, but as long as the old awe of realism remained, the spectacular drama might be counted upon to use something tangible for the representation of any impossibility. (182)

Because the first cinematic attempts were just so called "moving pictures," with the lack of three dimensions, natural colour and probably most importantly, dialogue, they were not a competition to drama, which provided all of these, and in a very skilful way with the use of theatrical machinery, light, costumes, music and real-life acting. Besides, both Maria Wyke and Ben Brewster notice that it was not only theatre that the early film took inspiration and certain techniques from, but many more sources, even unlinked to the theatre, such as short novels, strip cartoons, political caricatures, lantern slides, wax museums, pyrotechnic displays (Brewster and Jacobs, 5). Maria Wyke writes more specifically about the early historical films, which "borrowed additionally from much broader repertoire of nineteenth-century aesthetic forms than the historical novel, drawing on the sensational technologies of circus shows and pyrodramas, theatrical and operatic codes, and the visual arts, in pursuit of audience pleasure, profitability, and the legitimation felt to accrue to a mode of high culture" (119).

After the first decade of experiments with new cinematic technique and its possibilities, around the years 1912-13, there was a significant change in the length and complexity of the films that were being created, due to the filmmakers already possessing a "sophisticated battery of filmmaking techniques that were relatively independent of the theatre" and being "perfectly aware of the technical differences

between the two media" (Brewster and Jacobs, 9). The emphasis on the spectacular and the pictorial (especially the use of tableaux to emphasize in a visual way an important moment of a given situation in a play) in late nineteenth century theatre made it perfect for the film to use it in its own way – early filmmakers "shared the widespread conception of the theatre as a matter of pictures, and sought ways to find equivalents of these pictures for a new kind of cinema" (Brewster and Jacobs, 9).

Because the early films with more complex plots from after 1910s were created in a way that was copied from theatrical productions – assembled from a series of situations, each act with its own climax at the end, most often realised in a form of a tableaux, it was observed by many scholars researching the topic of early cinematography that it was mostly melodrama that provided a ready set of "staging" methods (Brewster and Jacobs, 29). Hence, Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs substantially refer to a canonical work on the relationship between film and theatre *Stage to Screen — Theatrical Origins of Early Film: From Garrick to Griffith* written in 1949 by A. Nicolas Vardac, who mentions a few "proto-cinematic" genres from nineteenth century American and English theatre – popular sensational drama of Dion Boucicault, the historical drama of Charles Kean, the pantomime and more respectable spectacle drama of Henry Irving and David Belasco. He gives the most credit to melodrama as the genre that shaped early films, and even disappeared from stage "once moving pictures took over its subject-matter and adapted its techniques" (Brewster and Jacobs, 6). Brewster and Jacobs write that, according to Vardac:

> Melodrama was particularly constrained by the stage, because its audience's craving for sensation demanded rapid changes of place, time and situation, but the illusory representation of such sensational incidents as volcanic eruptions, burning buildings, railway accidents, shipwrecks, and so on, demanded very elaborate mechanical sets, which were hard to change rapidly even in big, well-staffed metropolitan theatres; this problem was exacerbated by the fact that, as a popular form, melodrama had to be able to tour, and the smaller, less well-equipped and staffed provincial theatres in the U.S. could not accommodate elaborate three-dimensional sets, but tended to retain the older system of backdrops, borders and wings. As a result, the contrast between the desire for complete illusion and what was actually seen on the stage became acute. Film solved these problems. (6)

The audience, accustomed to and still loving (most of the reviews of the late toga plays criticize them, but state that the audience got exactly what it wanted) the melodramatic plays that they saw in the theatre, was almost sure to enjoy and come in great numbers to the first proto-cinematic shows. As Maurice Willson Disher notices, "realizing this power of the old world over the new, the films decided on a policy of piety. Money was spent lavishly on entertainments that justified their existence by claiming to be historical or patriotic, Biblical or religious" (181). He even comments on toga plays by briefly describing one of the most influential films of the silent era, *Intolerance* (created in 1916 and subtitled *Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages* or *A Sun-Play of the Ages*) by D. W. Griffith, set in several different centuries (ancient Babylon, Judea in the times of Christ, Renaissance France, and contemporary America) and including four parallel storylines. Disher's comment (without adding anything more) on the toga plays that became toga movies is – "The easier way was Wilson Barrett's way" (182). Toga plays were created in such a way that made them almost a ready-made products perfectly fitted to what the cinema wanted – a gripping story with the elements of romance and misery (disasters, tortures, persecutions) that always evoked emotions in viewers and the focus on visuality and spectacle. Their exceptional concentration on visuality, but at the same taking care of the financial profit by attracting people with a melodramatic story, has its exact counterpart in the main elements of the early films, but especially in what the later great Hollywood classics directed by Cecil DeMille and D. W. Griffith were composed around – the visual spectacle and a gripping, exciting, morally challenging story. The early films were certainly based on what made the historical literature of the nineteenth century so popular, as Maria Wyke points out:

> According to the "classical" narrative strategies of historical epics to which films about ancient Rome largely conform, romance is the point of the historical discourse

> – very often pagan boy meets Christian girl. History is contained within domestic conflict and provided with the perfection of a story and an end in the rescue or the death of the loving couple. (10)

There is a strong similarity between the way the ancient, mostly, Roman history is treated in toga plays and in toga movies. As I mentioned before, the choice of antiquity to be depicted in the arts at the end of the nineteenth century was a response to the uncertainty of the century coming to an end, new decadent movements appearing and the world gradually heading for the World War I, so that the similarities between the Roman world that doomed itself by the rejection of moral values and what was happening in present times were used to guide, educate and uplift people and their morality. Maria Wyke notices that the same case was with historical films that can be read as studies of contemporary societies for which they were made. She writes:

> The cinematic representations of Roman history then are fictions, but fictions that share the usage of a well-defined and limited historical period that calls up a constellation of a specific meanings for its mass audiences. And the cinema-tic resurrection of ancient Rome operates not as mere substitute for a narrative of present times, but as one of the chief transmitters of twentieth-century historical knowledge of the Roman world. (13)

Of course, it is not without importance that the film industry that produced historical films was first developing in Italy, then its centre moved to America, the two countries that deployed ancient Rome in the formation of their national identities (Wyke, 14), Italy did so for obvious reasons, America for reasons similar to Great Britain in the nineteenth century, as already mentioned in Chapter I, but at the same time with considerable differences. In Britain, Rome could be seen as a basically positive force, the Roman Empire being somewhat similar to the British Empire, while in America, as for instance in *Ben-Hur*, it was seen as a negative, oppressive force. The Americans distanced themselves from the European empires (they hated the idea of America getting involved in European or colonial affairs), and they did not think of America in terms of another such empire, or even if they did, it happened less frequently than in Britain. Rome in American historical films was clearly seen as the main opponent of the

Christian hero. Films were an especially important factor in creating a sense of unity in a given nation as they are a more collective experience than reading historical novels, they have a function similar to its predecessor – the popular theatre.

The reasons why Roman history appeared as the topic of the early films is almost a calque to why John Ruskin and Wilson Barrett wanted to introduce such a series of plays set in ancient Rome to the 1880's Victorian theatre – to elevate the drama, but also bring great audiences to theatres and educate them, as described in Chapter II. Maria Wyke notices that the same reasons and the same means (historical productions) were undertaken by the early cinema:

> Feature-length film narratives set in antiquity… formed part of a strategy to win over the bourgeoisie to the new cinematic art-form by bestowing on the modern medium a grandiose register and an educative justification. Such films borrowed from the whole spectrum of nineteenth-century modes of historical representation (literary, dramatic, and pictorial) in pursuit of authenticity for cinema as a mode of high culture, and to guarantee mass, international audiences through the reconstruction in moving images of familiar and accessible events of Roman history. (25)

The only difference was that in the theatre there was the need to bring back prestige after long years of lower kinds of entertainment like melodramas, pantomimes or music halls, and cinema as the new entertainment medium did not hide the fact that it was meant for the general public and only in later years also wanted to include a higher number of more educated viewers. David Mayer in the "Introduction" to Oxford edition to Lew Wallace's novel notes that, "by the time of Wallace's death [1905], films were being widely exhibited, chiefly in music halls, waxworks, and 'nickelodeon' theatres – all of these venues associated with working-class or 'low' entertainment" (xxi).

The early films based on literary sources were made in Italy, but when during the times of the II World War, they started to be used by Fascist propaganda, the shift was made to the fast-developing cinema industry in America. Margaret Malamud summarizes the earliest realisations of toga plays in cinema as follows:

> Between the years 1907 and 1917, the film industry devoted itself to literary, historical, and Biblical subjects, which were shown in elegant movie theaters. *Ben-*

> *Hur* was turned into a film in 1907 and again in 1925; *Quo Vadis* in 1912 and 1924; *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1908, 1913, and 1926; and Wilson Barrett's 1895 toga play, *The Sign of the Cross*, in 1904 and 1914. All were endorsed by churches and uplift movements as excellent ways to inculcate Christian values and, at the same time, offer entertaining adventure and romance. By 1910, 26 million people, nearly one-third of the population, went to the movies each week. By the 1920s, cinema had become the nation's favorite form of commercial entertainment and the film industry was a major economic and cultural institution. (187)

There can be three periods in the history of cinema differentiated when toga movies[50] were made – the early cinema of the 1910s, when toga films meshed with the last theatrical productions of toga plays, then after the turbulent times of World War I, the 1930s when the Hollywood started to dominate the industry and finally, the 1950s. Maria Wyke observes that each of the periods turned to toga genre for a particular reason: "in the 1910s… they [the historical productions] were utilized to legitimate cinema as a new art form and win international cultural prestige for their country of origin, in the 1930s to showcase commodities, and in the 1950s to combat television's assault on film industry profits" (24).

The proof of how popular the historical films were in Hollywood for quite a long time is the criticism, with its open contempt, and branding as kitsch, that the films were subjected to from the 1960s, as was the case with Victorian painting, popular literature, and theatre. Maria Wyke quotes some scholars who mocked the films as a well-tried formula of a religious spectacle to make a blockbuster hit, which is "as old as the cinema itself." Penelope Houston and John Gillett further wrote about the films that:

> Hollywood carried on from where the silent Italians left off, and Cecil B. DeMille converted the formula into his own personal (and profitable) mixture of would-be eroticism and biblical tub-thumping. With wider screens and greater facilities, there

[50] In this thesis, the name 'toga movie' or 'toga film' obviously mostly refers to the film based on the toga plays, and it has to be differentiated that films based on a theatrical play (sometimes combined with a historical novel the plays was based on) are different than other numerous historical epics that can be also generally called 'toga movies'. The early films based on the Victorian and American toga plays (*The Sign* and *Ben-Hur*), most probably chosen to be filmed because of the success they achieved on stage, and the success they had on screen certainly allowed the series of historical epics to develop in future years. The late films such as *Cleopatra* (1963) (based on 1957 book *The Life and Times of Cleopatra* by Carlo Maria Franzero) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964)(inspired by Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) and even modern productions such as Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) or *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) by Mel Gibson, even though use some themes that were relevant to toga plays, are too distant, and different, from the adaptations of theatrical toga plays.

> seemed no reason why even his grandiose flights of fancy should not be surpassed. And the audience was ready-made, waiting to respond with the proper degree of self-satisfaction to the overwhelming righteousness of it all. (qtd. in Wyke, 11)

The transfer of the genre dying on theatrical stages, as the one exploited to the maximum – with the story of the clash between Christians and Romans, and the romance of two "star-crossed" lovers being repeated numerous times and the lavish sceneries and spectacular effects that used all the possible theatrical resources to depict them – to the cinema is beautifully, in its plainness, summarized (although it is the opening of the chapter "Melodrama on the Screen. *Ben-Hur*") by Maurice Willson Disher:

> The new medium had a magic of its own. No matter how old the story acted before the camera it became up to date when it became a "movie". What was stale on the stage was fresh on the screen. Consequently the invention that looked like progress put back the clock: twentieth-century means served nineteenth-century ends… The vast public who attended the flicks enjoyed no matter what they saw in the very same way that they enjoyed no matter what they heard while playing early gramophone records (Disher, 180)

Although the going back in time is controversial, it is true that the new medium first prolonged the life of toga plays, as the closeness of theatre and early cinematic shows was quite natural, and then even converted the genre into its own, with its new means of expression and a new dialogue with the audience.

The Sign of the Cross (film)

Before the great Hollywood hit of 1932, which set an example for other future historical film epics, *The Sign of the Cross* was filmed first in 1904, a very early production of which little is known, and in 1914, a silent film directed by Frederick A. Thomson. David Mayes notes that Thomson's film, of which a great part of the beginning had been lost, is generally created in accordance with Barrett's play and with a sense of admiration to its original source and its theatrical realisation (*Playing Out*…, 110). However, there are some parts of scenes and dialogues added by the director. The story of early Christians is enlivened by the screens presenting images from the early

life of Christ, his miracles and The Last Supper and Crucifixion appearing while Mercia tells the story of the Cross upon Marcus's request. Also, Thomson makes Berenis kill herself when she is finally rejected by Marcus and most importantly, the film does not end in the dungeons of the arena but shows Marcus and Mercia at the Coliseum next to the lions (Mayer, *Playing Out*…, 110). This shows that already in the early film, the scenes of the torment of Christians were not just hinted at by descriptions and terrifying sounds, like in Barrett's play, but were part of the spectacle that films wanted to explore.

The 1932's *The Sign of the Cross* was directed by Cecil DeMille, an American film director, producer, and briefly a stage actor, born in 1881, described by Margaret Malamud as "'straddling'" the late Victorian era and a consumer culture that shifted into high gear in the 1920s" (193). In his years as a director, he made 70 films and is known as a founding father of the American cinema and the most commercially successful producer-director in film history. *The Sign of the Cross*, which premiered in November 1932, was the third DeMille's film with biblical motif – the earlier were *The Ten Commandments* (1923), which was divided into a part showing the biblical story of Exodus and a part taking place in modern times, and *The King of Kings* (1927) about the last weeks of the life of Jesus Christ. Of the three movies, *The Sign of the Cross* was the only sound film believed to be the first one to integrate all aspects of cinematic technique. Having a strong conservative and Protestant background (he had Protestant Dutch ancestors who moved to America in 1658, his father Henry DeMille was a deeply religious teacher and a playwright and DeMille himself always kept a Bible in his studio) and the mission to bring biblical stories to life in cinema. As Malamud puts it, "DeMille understood the power of film to shape and manipulate audiences, and he claimed he wanted his films to kindle Christian piety" (Malamud, 188-189). Interestingly, DeMille chose Wilson Barrett's play rather than Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* (which was filmed in 1913 and 1924, not by American, but by Italian directors;

American great epic production by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and director Mervyn LeRoy was not made until 1951) as it provided him with a "more usable past", according to Maria Wyke (132). Its story better reflected the need of turning to God in the times of American crisis, the years of Great Depression, and did not include the sub-plot of the Apostle Peter, which, in contrast, spoke to the Italian film-makers and audiences and their own country's story of establishing the centre of the Catholic Church in Rome. As Maria Wyke observes, the play's "non-sectarian, nondoctrinal evangelism transferred well to American screens, becoming a vehicle to draw a mass audience of liberal Protestants and religious fundamentalists as well as urban Catholics. The purpose of religious parable and commercial profit were thus satisfied simultaneously" (132-133). The choice of the literary sources, which differed from each other seemingly little, in the case of 1932 DeMille's and 1951 LeRoy's films also shows how the presentation of the historical past could be used in reference to modern history, just like in the nineteenth century. *The Sign of the Cross* created before II World War, with its plot concentrating on the personal story of Marcus Superbus who renounced the life of richness and excess and converted to Christianity, which secured the salvation of his soul, was supposed to guide American people into moral and decent life, whereas *Quo Vadis* created after the War, focused on collective suffering and the military overthrow of Nero. Most importantly, Sienkiewicz's novel describes the events leading to Nero's (in the film played with an English accent by Peter Ustinov) death and leaves the two lovers, Marcus (played by American actor Robert Taylor) and Lygia, alive, while in Barrett's play they sacrifice themselves for their own salvation, but we do not know what happened to Nero, Poppea and Berenis, who were responsible for their deaths. The screening of *Quo Vadis* in 1951 could remind Americans of their country's recent successful opposition to European imperialism and dictatorship (Wyke, 139-140).

The film was released by Paramount Pictures, who turned to DeMille, as he was an expert in spectacle, and that was what the audience wanted, and he selected the "topic he knew would be a box-office smash: the pagans versus the Christians," in which "the combination between spectacle, sex, and sadism was a box-office bonanza" both for the director and the studio (Black, 65-66). In realising this once spectacular play on screen, Cecile DeMille concentrated on both aspects that were also important for Barrett and played a crucial role in early historical films – spectacle and historical accuracy, the first one, though, was a priority. Just as around thirty years earlier in St. Louis and London productions of the play, in DeMille's film "accurate historical settings of a magnitude and magnificence never attempted before were built to ensure true realism," (Malamud, 189) – a similar description that could have been seen in most reviews of toga plays. DeMille ordered to build a huge miniature set of the city of Rome and the amphitheatre. He hired thousands of extras, including giants, dwarfs, and other extraordinary looking people, who could take part in the lavish Roman banquet scenes and borrowed wild animals from local zoos to use them in the arena (Black, 66). The costumes, designed by Mitchell Leisen were also striking – Roman women were wearing backless togas cut to the waist in front and slit to each thigh so that viewers could see a lot of naked body when they moved and the camera was at a low point, a measure not different from the one undertaken in Victorian neo-classical painting in order to present the nude female body in a conventionally acceptable way. In contrast, Christian women were clothed in plain togas covering their whole body (Black, 66).

As noticed by Maria Wyke and described earlier, the lavish sets of historical movies from the 1930s were a great opportunity to advertise certain products, which was not uncommon also in the case of the toga genre in literature and drama, as I mentioned in Chapter I. Just as with Wallace's and Sienkiewicz's novels, which triggered the craze for antique-style products or using the titles and characters from the

novels to name places, buildings, cafes, and just as Barrett used his play to sell different souvenirs, Cecil DeMille's films and their sets "were 'display windows' for cosmetics, clothes, and household furnishings" and "marketed a range of products from soaps to cigarettes", setting trends also in fashion and interior decoration (Malamud, 193). Regardless of the common vision presented in the novels and plays, which showed the luxury of Roman interiors and clothing as a sign of their decadence and juxtaposed it with the plain interiors and togas of Christians, the highly decorative items boosted people's imaginations. Especially in the 1930s movies, when the consumer culture was developing, but also the years of Great Depression made many people poor, the films gave them at least the visual pleasures of luxury. There were also voices critical of materialism and the consumerism they encouraged, as for instance the playwright Robert E. Sherwood who cuttingly observed that in DeMille's films "bathrooms are represented as glorified soda fountains. . . and beds constructed of the classiest Carrara marble and equipped with patent leather sheets" (qtd. in Malamud, 193).

The Paramount Pictures advertised *The Sign of the Cross* both as a sensational melodramatic story, something that was sure to be popular with audiences, describing it as "the story of a love that attains fruition on the sun-baked, blood-red sands of the Roman arena" and as an answer to the Great Depression times, writing: "In an America darkened by shattered dreams, empty words, unfilled promises a Spectacle that lifts up the Spirit. A Love that holds forth hope to an unhappy world" (qtd. in Malamud, 189-190).

The comparisons between the ancient Roman Empire with present life problems, no matter if British, as the author of the play, or American, proved to be of use once again, just as with historical-themed literature (novels and drama) and painting in the nineteenth century, as discussed in Chapter I. Because of its depiction of one of the most infamous Emperors – Nero in comparison to the misfortunes of his people, *The Sign of*

the Cross, served as an analogy of what lead to the Great Depression in America and the fall of imperial Rome symbolized the extravagance and decadence of the contemporary American life. Margaret Malamud observes that Cecile DeMille was strongly aware of the parallel between the British play, together with other toga plays and novels, and the situation in America in the 1930s and was sure that the moral message of the play is what people should also see on the screen – "like Barrett, DeMille looked back to the age of the Christian martyrs for an inspirational model of a strongly knit community whose moral certitude enabled it to triumph even in the midst of worldly calamities. Both men believed temporal ills could be overcome by moral regeneration (188). She further writes:

> DeMille told a reporter from the *New York American* on June 15, 1932: "Do you realize the close analogy between conditions today in the United States and the Roman Empire prior to its fall? Multitudes in Rome were then oppressed by distressing laws, overtaxed and ruled by a chosen few. Unless America returns to the pure ideals of our legendary forebears, it will pass into oblivion as Rome did."
> For DeMille, "our legendary forebears" were the early Christian martyrs and their Puritan and Protestant descendents in the New World. Like the earlier Victorian literature from which he drew, DeMille's cinematic trilogy suggested a deep historical and Christian identity for the nation. In DeMille's screening of history it would seem that the Romans have value only to the extent they are "decadent" and rich – a truism and a construction of popular culture; and, secondly, that they persecuted Christians. *The Sign of the Cross* urges a reaffirmation of the early ideals of the first Christians and their descendents in America; it is a call for a spiritual nationalism and renewal based on a revivified Christianity. (190)

Some critics also note that the choice of an American actor, Fredric March, to play Marcus Superbus and British actor, Charles Laughton, in the role of Nero was made to emphasize the role of the post-war America in fighting foreign evils. Nero spoke with identifiable British accent and was the embodiment of British colonial rule, while Marcus and other Christians could be identified with American rebels against it (Wyke, 133-134), a practice common also in later toga movies.

Apart from the uplifting message, Cecil DeMille wanted to give his audience some visual pleasures that were often controversial and by some deemed immoral. Being an experienced cinematographer, he knew the power of combining spectacle with

a moral, here even Christian, message. One thing did not exclude the other. Margaret Malamud notices that:

> DeMille's signature cinematic style added a rich visual dimension to Wilson Barrett's nineteenth-century morality play… DeMille's film spices up old-time Christian morality and the pious sentimentalism of Victorian melodrama and fiction with generous amounts of sex and sadism; in *The Sign of the Cross*, religious uplift is sensationalized and given spectacle form. (190)

While for the nineteenth century theatre audience in America, Great Britain and Australia seeing the spectacular scenes of volcano eruptions, earthquakes, storms, sinkings, and chariot races was, together with the melodramatic love story, what brought them to theatres in great numbers, in cinema the possibilities of showing such scenes were far greater and thus film directors sought the elements people wanted to see the most and which they could realise in an even grander manner. Another fact is that Wilson Barrett's play relied not so much on one spectacular scene, as spectacular melodramas of the first half of the century or even like in his toga play, *Claudian* (the earthquake). The thrill and possibilities of showing the audience something spectacular laid in the extravagance of Roman interiors and exteriors, entertainments like banquets and generally their lavish lifestyle as well as the persecutions of Christians with its culmination in the arena. The last, and the most spectacular in visual terms scene is not seen in the play, however, people's reactions to the cry of the tortured boy Stephanus heard off-stage mentioned in the previous chapter were good indicators of what arouses the audience's emotions.

Margaret Malamud further elaborates on what DeMille's spectacle put emphasis on. The two most famous controversial scenes from DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* are the Roman banquet providing a chance to fill the scene with excessive sexuality, together with homoerotic motifs, and the brutal deaths of Christians in the amphitheatre with an abundance of torture and sadism. Margaret Malamud describes them in the following way:

> Particularly noteworthy are a Roman orgy: a lesbian dancer, Ancaria, attempts to seduce the chaste Christian Mercia through an erotic dance; naked male courtiers attend to Nero, suggesting the emperor's homosexuality; lesbian handmaidens cater to his mistress Poppaea; a young Christian boy endures agonizing torture; and numerous sexual images of hands, lips, thighs, and feet litter the screen. *The Sign of the Cross* also contains one of the most lurid Roman arena scenes in all of the Hollywood epics that feature blood in the arena. When the camera pans to the Roman audience in the amphitheater, their faces are contorted with avid desire for the kill, and the camera lingers on the gory slaughter of Christians. These Romans are so jaded that only the most depraved forms of sadism and cruelty can give them pleasure: naked women garlanded in flowers devoured by crocodiles, attacked by gorillas, and gored by bulls; elephants crushing the heads of chained men; and Amazon women spearing dwarfs and raising them aloft on their spears. (191-192)

The scene that many researchers elaborate on is the mentioned above so called "lesbian dance of the naked moon" – the added scene when desperate Marcus hires the beautiful lesbian dancer Ancaria to seduce, or entrance, Mercia during his feast, of course unsuccessfully. Additionally, Gregory Black mentions quite humorously that "no DeMille film was ever complete without a beautiful woman taking a bath" (66). Here, there is a "eye-openingly erotic" scene of Empress Poppaea (played by Claudette Colbert) taking a bath in real milk, a popular Cleopatra motif, in a specially built huge Roman bath based on real models, assisted by her scantily clad maidens (Black, 66). Interestingly, William Fitzgerald notices that while the earlier toga movies like *The Sign of the Cross* and *Quo Vadis* pointed back to the tradition of Victorian painting "in making a semi-naked woman the centerpiece of the sadistic spectacle of the arena" (37), the later movies such as *Spartacus*, *The Robe* and other 1950s movies (which includes 1959's *Ben-Hur*), preferred to display the male and its manliness rather than female body – "where Victorian bath scenes, for instance, feature naked women, the bath scenes of the toga movie are populated by well-oiled male bodies" (36).

Despite the fact that the film "was so violent that women fainted at its New York premiere" and "it brought screams of wrath and outrage from pulpits nationwide" (Black, 66), it was not censored. The only minor changes were made by only some of the states' censorship boards, and it concerned the milk-bath scene and a naked tied girl attacked by a gorilla. Some of the press reactions were very unconventional, like

Harrison's Reports which often concerned the immorality of the films currently made in Hollywood, stated that few in the audience would understand the lesbian dance (Black, 69); the *Boston Herald* commented that "After DeMille's lavish depiction of court orgies, wholesale slaughters,[and] unabashed sensuality, Christianity comes out a rather poor second," and other critics banteringly wrote that "nobody likes DeMille pictures except the public" (qtd. in Malamud, 192). The combination of religion and spectacle in a form as DeMille understood it, was not uncommon in early historical films and hence critics accepted these two elements – one has to appreciate the help from the theatrical stage which first showed these two motifs together, erasing the stereotypes that religious motifs should not be elements of a play which the cinema did not have as the new medium. Margaret Malamud quotes William Fitzgerald's words explaining the possibility of the two elements existing together, simply on two different levels: "there is a distinction to be made between the identifications that are encouraged on the narrative level and the thrills that are experienced on the level of spectacle, a distinction that allows the audience to have its cake and eat it…" (193). Fitzgerald further explains in his chapter "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie" in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* the duality of toga movies that could be part of the audience's experience – they could enjoy the lavishness of the production itself as well as the luxury of the life of the Romans, but all the time identify with the persecuted Christians:

> …the structure of the toga movie's world enables us to be in the two places at the same time, to have an alibi. When the arena's endlessly varied bill of sadistic fare turns surfeit into nausea (for instance, in *The Sign of the Cross*), we can pretend that we have been waiting all along in the dungeon with the Christians… (28).

A similar distinction was present in the original toga play, however, the way in which DeMille shaped his spectacle was not possible there, not so much from the technological point of view, but because of an old tradition of the genre, which, in the history of the Victorian theatre, wanted to attract a huge public, but also be respectable

and have an educated audience. For the Victorian stage, in short, the spectacle that its public wanted was the melodrama, and the novelty that was supposed to cater for the new circles of theatre-goers were the religious stories.

Ben-Hur (film)

In almost all scholarly analyses of toga plays, *Ben-Hur*, the novel, the play, and then the films serve as showing the connection between theatre and cinema, and the shift of toga genre from stage to screen. It can probably be a perfect example of even greater number of cultural connections – first being written as a novel in the period of great popularity of historical novels in America, Britain and many European countries, triggered by many archaeological discoveries and studies, which caused the classical revival in architecture, design and visual arts. It also became a toga play, after the period when toga plays appeared and settled in Victorian theatre and proved to be highly successful on the theatrical stage, in Britain and America. From the stage it was obviously only one little step to be transferred to cinema. *Ben-Hur* would have been probably made into film even without the theatrical phase, as it was immensely popular as a novel right next to *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *Quo Vadis*, being full of adventures and presenting valuable morals, but the fact that all of the novels were turned into plays (or a pyrodrama as *The Last Days*) shows that the vogue for antiquity and religious-themed stories could not omit the theatre as the first performative and visual medium, providing entertainment and education before the invention of cinema. It is also not at all surprising that *Ben-Hur* became the symbol of transition and linkage between the toga genre in the theatre and in cinema, as its first film version became known as the first case of copyright infringement The matter was raised by the publishers of the book Harper and Brothers and the stage producers Klaw and Erlanger and provided another connection between the stage and the screen.

The first film version of *Ben-Hur*, an example of the very early so-called 'moving pictures" rather than a feature film, created in 1907 by the Kalem Company and co-directed by Sidney Olcott and Frank Oakes Rose was sued a year after its release. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs comment on the fact the theatre producers duo

protected their rights for adaptation of Wallace's novel and established "an important precedent that a film screening was the equivalent for copyright purposes of the performance of a stage adaptation, [which] may suggest that they feared competition from the cinema" (15). The reality showed that they simply took good care of their business and as they won the case, the film was withdrawn from screening.

The Kalem *Ben-Hur* advertised itself as a great spectacle – "Positively the Most Superb Moving Picture Spectacle Ever Produced in America. Sixteen Magnificent Scenes" and concentrated on showing the chariot race. Interestingly, the stage manager was Henry J. Pain's Fireworks Company, the producer of the pyrodrama shows presenting *The Last Days of Pompeii*, and the same background and pieces of setting from it were transported and used at the Brighton Beach Racecourse on Coney Island. As advertised, the chariots and horses came from Third Battery of National Guard artillery and it is possible the characters of Judah and Messala were "played" by the members of the artillery battery (Mayer, *Playing Out…,* 298-299). The quality of the picture is summed up by David Mayer in two accurate remarks, first enumerating the film's races: "a parade of riders and their attendants in Roman costume, several chariot-races, some 'cowboy' races, 'Roman riding' (i.e. controlling two unsaddled horses whilst the rider stands with one foot on the back of each), and conventional races with jockeys up," and finishing with: "There were no retakes. What did it matter that a dog ran in front of the camera to chase after the horses?" (299). It only shows that the early motion pictures were treated as a technical novelty and were on their way to develop their aesthetic language.

Apparently David Mayer described the film from his modern perspective, as the 1908 reviews accumulated in *The Moving Picture World* journal show that it was positively received, up to a point, when the film "drew such crowds to a theater in Atlanta, Ga., that the police had to aid in clearing the aisles and lobby" (*TMPW,*

February 1, 1908, 76). They also added that "a Western newspaper in commenting on a local show refers to 'Ben Hur' as 'a wonderfully realistic and pleasing presentation of Lew Wallace's famous story and a triumph of the kinetoscopic art" (*TMPW,* February 29, 1908, 159). The fact that it was popular with the audience, also as part of the Coney Island attractions, did not stop the novel's publishers and the Broadway theatrical producers to view the film as the type of a 'low' spectacle, something its author always feared, and bring a case against the company, which was resolved in 1912 on their behalf (Mayer, "Introduction," xxi).

The first feature-length adaptation of *Ben-Hur* and the first of the two produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer company was created in 1925, and as David Mayer states, follows "the set-piece sequence of William Young's stageplay" and is the "preferable choice for a reader who wishes to see the film version after reading the book" ("Introduction," xxii). It is a silent epic adventure-drama directed by Fred Niblo, "hailed as one of the biggest, most expensive and complicated productions ever to come out of the American film industry" (Kramer). Howard Miller suggests that the keeper of Lew Wallace's body of work, his son Henry wanted for everything connected with the famous novel to be of high quality and be sure that the film industry is well-developed in its technical and aesthetic ways (163). The rights to the novel were sold for a huge sum of six hundred thousand dollars (around 10 million in present days) for the first film of a new company MGM. As Howard Miller states, in the 1920s, "the film industry was seeking ways to escape its early association with inexpensive lower-class entertainment while still attracting as many viewers as possible. The combined stories of the charioteer and the Christ seemed ideal for the industry's purposes…" (163).

The narrative level of the film had some shortcomings – the story of Christ was treated with extra caution, avoiding all controversy. The story of Jesus is told in six scenes in the 141-minute movie in a form close to the theatrical *tableaux vivants,* and

they never show his face, only parts of the body. Instead, the Nativity scenes willingly present the figure of Virgin Mary, who was very well received as sweet, gentle and radiant ("The Shadow Stage," 54). There is an omission of who is responsible for the death sentence on Christ, his death, and when Judah says looking at the empty cross: "He is not dead. He will live forever in the hearts of men" this is not a traditional portrayal and meaning of Christ's sacrifice (H. Miller, 164-165) as Christ is represented as an ordinary man, rather than God, and his resurrection is shown as purely metaphorical. The last scene is the picture of an empty cross in the tradition of medieval passion plays (H. Miller, 164-165). Also, there was some initial prejudice against the choice of the leading actor of Mexican origin – Ramon Novarro, who was perceived by many as too young and too lightly built to play "the greatest athlete of his day," as he was described in one of the film's intertitles (H. Miller, 165). He turned out to be praised for his role, as he had an "ability to bring light, boyish charisma to a role while also avoiding being swallowed up by epic sets and scenery; this skill is displayed to great effect in 'Ben-Hur'" (Kramer). In Hollywood in those times the advertising of films started to be built mostly around the "film stars" and selling different products, as earlier noted by Maria Wyke, and Novarro often acted in adverts promoting variety of products dressed in costume of Judah (H. Miller, 167).

Despite the mostly modern-day criticism presented by Howard Miller, the film was a huge success and made MGM a prospering new studio. The review in a magazine *Photoplay* marvelled at both the story, leading actors, and visuality – "'Ben-Hur' is not a flat picture upon a screen. It is a thing of beauty and a joy for ten years at least. Reverence and emotion serve as background for the un-dying drama of Christ interwoven with the story of *Ben-Hur*, the young Jew who aimed to serve Him." They concluded with a remark that "this is a truly great picture. No one, no matter what his age or religion, should miss it. And take the children," ("The Shadow Stage," 54)

showing that the epic pictures were perfectly suited for family audience due to their historical and religious, hence educational aspect. Not surprisingly, as the same happened with the reception of toga plays, the religious circles also praised and recommended the film. Miller even states that the success of the production in this aspect may have encouraged Cecil DeMille to create in 1927 the second in his biblical trilogy film *The King of Kings* and the first film ever to show the life of Christ (H. Miller, 168).

Howard Miller admits that the success of 1925 *Ben-Hur* laid in the visual and technical aspect of the production and was the beginning of the grand-scale realisations of epic historical movies (167). The director Fred Niblo built huge sets of Jerusalem and the Great Circus in Antioch and hired thousands of extras, whom he very skilfully moved in front of the camera. The *tableaux vivants* of Mary and Christ, individually colorized, and the blazing Star shining over Bethlehem were visually stupendous, but the most stunning was the realisation of the chariot race. The highest to that point number of cameras (42) was used on set at different angles, and the effect was "a nine-minute race of breathtaking speed, intensity, danger, and excitement that may be the most effective rendering of the great contest in the entire *Ben-Hur* tradition" (H. Miller, 167).

The story of adaptations of *Ben-Hur* is in itself a truly cinematic story. The director William Wyler worked on the set of Fred Nieblo's film as one of sixty assistant directors of the chariot scene and was in charge of the extras who were supposed to stand up and cheer in the arena. When in 1958 he was persuaded to create a remake of the MGM old version he claimed that his ambition was to make a film in every genre and that he wanted to outdo Cecil B. DeMille's epic historical productions. Also, the topic of the struggle of Jews and Romans spoke to him as he was an enthusiastic supporter of present-day Israeli political struggles for independence (G. Miller). His

version of the film referred to the current American history and the 1951 investigations of HUAC, an organization created in 1938 to investigate Communist ties of organizations and citizens, also within film industry. According to Gabriel Miller, "when Judah resists Messala's demand that he inform on his people, Wyler was comparing America to the Roman Empire in its attempt to subvert civil liberties". In the main role of Judah Charlton Heston, who played Moses in Cecil DeMille's film *The Ten Commandments*, was cast. In opposition to the delicate and youthful Ramon Novarro, Heston was thirty-five at the time, tall and athletically built. In Howard Miller's words, he "brought to the role none of the unformed boyishness of Wallace's seventeen-year-old hero" and is "the epitome of mature, solid, unambiguous masculinity" (169), something that the films in the 1950s preferred to show on the screen, as mentioned earlier.

The film seems to be a well-balanced mixture of the spectacle and the narrative story both of Judah and Christ, although it concentrates on the love story and struggle for freedom of Christian Jews finally united by one religion – as seen in the changed subtitle to "A Tale of the People and the Times of the Christ" (H. Miller, 171). Interestingly, the plot of the film eliminates the character of Iras (something that would be unthinkable in a melodramatic play) and shows the love story between Judah and Esther, but mostly concentrates on the relations between men, which was typical of toga films after *Quo Vadis* (1951) in showing predominantly male bodies and relationships (Fitzgerald, 38). In the producer's, Sam Zimbalist, mind he was to take care of the film's spectacle and Wyler was hired to add his sense of intimacy and personal scenes. The spectacle was prepared in the usual Hollywood way – three hundred sets were built, among them a replica of Ancient Jerusalem covering half a square mile, the Jaffa Gate – entrance to the city, which was over seven feet high, the arena for the chariot race was six times the size of the arena built for 2000's *Gladiator*, and an artificial lake was

especially dug for the naval battle scenes (G. Miller). The race was spectacular, but, in Howard Miller's opinion, "did not overwhelm all other aspects of the story," even though "many consider it, even in the age of computer imaging, the greatest action sequence in film history," (170), which is proved by the fact that George Lucas admitted that he relied on this scene and on the film in general for his "Star Wars" films (G. Miller). The film won a record number of Oscars (eleven), including the third award for Best Director for Wyler and the first and only a posthumous Oscar for the Best Picture for Sam Zimbalist, who died on the set in Rome from a heart attack.

William Wyler's touch is seen in the treatment of the story of Jesus – his face is never seen and He never speaks, but the close facial reactions of other character to the stores of Him are shown (H. Miller, 169), which resembles the way William Young present the events concerning Jesus in the play, through the characters sharing stories and memories about him in an affectionate way. The religious scenes are accompanied by minimal pipe-organ music called "Jesus theme," and images of water in form of rain, drawn from a well or a stream (H. Miller, 169). The final scenes of the movie are created in a different way to the novel in order to leave more powerful effect – they happen in a storm and lightning, with the group hiding in a cave and the final images of quick cuts with flashes of lightning showing the healed hands of Miriam and Esther and the fingers of Christ impaled hand reaching towards Heaven (H. Miller, 170). Wyler also insisted on altering the stilted, archaic language of the first script, for which toga plays were also often criticized, and hired British playwright Christopher Fry, who according to Wyler's will, elevated the language, giving it a more biblical tone without making it sound artificially archaic (G. Miller).

Just as the 1912 Drury Lane production of *Ben-Hur* marked the definitive end of toga plays era in the theatre, the 1959 production of *Ben-Hur*, together with a few other 1960s films (*Spartacus, The Fall of the Roman Empire*) ends this era of epic historical

Hollywood productions. What awaited was the usual period of heavy criticism, like with every highly popular for a long time phenomenon of popular culture. The studios had all the means and techniques necessary to create an epic grand-scale blockbuster production for mass audiences, in fact they created a "standardized, sanitized, and glamorized conception of ancient Rome that relied heavily on the star system, conventionality of narration, and visually clichéd production values – fabulous costumes, huge sets, and the requisite battle or arena sequence" (Wyke, 184). However, the competition between studios was far more demanding than in earlier years and financial means needed for such productions were huge while the success and profitability less and less sure. The films started to lose its huge, mostly family audiences as young people in the sixties found the historical films too old-fashioned in their narrative form and visual style, with its use of widescreen and the spectacular, which by early 1960s became the norm and commonplace, depicting a world too distant and not convincing for their more and more liberated youth culture (Wyke, 184-185).

The 1959 production of *Ben-Hur* still belongs to the 1950s period of historical epics in Hollywood and even though the ancient history spoke less and less to the minds of ordinary people, the critics and later scholars found a metaphor for using the historical subject at that time. The 1950s in America were certainly different times in comparison to the end of the century as in the case of the toga plays in the Victorian theatre, or the Great Depression as depicted in Cecil DeMille films, but as Maria Wyke described it, in context of production of historical films they were seen as competition with the popularity of television and as a metaphor of the Hollywood industry itself (28-31), being the end of a certain era of it. Quite logically, to compete with the type of entertainment presented on television, films used their means not attainable for TV-productions – Technicolor, widescreen and stereophonic sound, all used in big-budget spectacular productions with lavish sets. The spectacular productions created with much

panache with the use of press, radio and television advertising and coverage that described their extravagant premieres, make some critics see the films as “a huge, many-faceted metaphor for Hollywood itself” (qtd. in Wyke, 31) – created with plenty of money and labour, showing off its technology and capability of creating huge spectacles, demanding attention and praise, being like the extravagant Romans proud of their Empire and willingly enjoying its pleasures and offering the same to the viewers. The promotional activities of MGM studio for *Ben-Hur* perfectly illustrate the operational mode in Hollywood. The international press studio was set-up more than a year before the film’s premiere and thousands of releases were issued, containing facts, legends, and anecdotes about the whole *Ben-Hur* “universum,” to use a modern-day expression, created through the years. The fact that the studio desperately wanted to attract a wide and differentiated audience is emphasized by Howard Miller, who writes that:

> The studio repeatedly assured the public that the mighty epic was intended for everybody; its *Exhibitor's Promotion Portfolio* included "instructions for the proper presentation" of *Ben-Hur* to the widest audience possible: students of all ages from both public and private schools, the YMCA and the YWCA, Boy and Girl Scouts, service and fraternal organizations, and religious groups. (170)

Just as in the case of *The Sign of the Cross*, but even on a larger scale, the promotional campaign included the manufacture of different items, such as designs for clothing, household goods, jewellery, food products, “paint-by-number” art sets, charioteer action figures “’for every room in the house and every member of the family,’ and for all faiths, that would bear the *Ben-Hur* name,” many of them depicting the chariot race (H. Miller, 171). Howard Miller even states that the campaign, which resembles present times marketing strategies to promote a movie, created a new model: “a film that combined unprecedented spectacle and action with deep spirituality, the whole of which was then skillfully sold in the marketplace to a wide general audience” (171).

Some scholars even stated that "the awesome splendour of Rome is not so much represented in these movies as recreated by the power of American technology and money" (Fitzgerald, 27). In fact, the way we imagine the imperial Rome up till present day was most probably shaped by those great Hollywood toga epics. William Fitzgerald gives a comparative example of the panache with which 1959's *Ben-Hur* and Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* were created, suggesting that the immersion of the artists in depicting the decadent Roman life sometimes required some degree of extravagance. The full-scale arena on the set of *Ben-Hur* in Italy was filled with forty thousand tonnes of sand, but already in 1888 Tadema ordered a huge amount of roses from France paying an excessive sum of money (27). Providing work for professional teams and while working on a movie, the "Hollywood directors saw themselves, and were seen, as emperors, but they reflected a more benign version of the Roman emperor's power" (Fitzgerald, 28).

1959 *Ben-Hur* is a perfect example of the metaphor for the Hollywood industry as it was created as a remake of the 1925 hit, by the same film studio, which – new at the time of creation of Nieblo's film - by 1957 was facing bankruptcy. The well-known producer of the film Sam Zimbalist, who also worked on 1951's hit version of *Quo Vadis* allegedly begged Wyler to direct a remake that would either save the studio or finally destroy it (G. Miller). It beat the original in scale and numbers – *Ben-Hur* had the largest budget ($15.175 million) and sets of any film produced at the time – once again, just as Fred Nieblo's film, to be hailed the best, the biggest, the unprecedented. It shows the power of the industry, the fast development of technology and resources, the voracity of the studios, which 'devoured' their previous works in order to create something bigger and better.

Also, the references to present-day American history, in the American popular culture, were made in a way that was typical of historical novels, paintings, plays, and

films. The times of the Cold War when America wanted to be seen as the conservative "defender of Faith against the godlessness of Communism" turned out to be perfect for choosing the historical topics that were "prestigious yet familiar, seemly uncontroversial, educational, spiritually uplifting" (Wyke, 28). Maria Wyke observes that "films like *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), and *Ben-Hur* (1959) had frequently been interpreted in the press as capable of providing salutary lessons for their contemporary audiences about the outcome of the Cold War, for they appeared to demonstrate by familiar analogy the historically inevitable victory of American godliness [the Christianity] over the Soviet Antichrist [Roman Empire]" (187). In *Ben-Hur*, the long scene before the opening credits depicting the birth of Christ was used to foreshadow the conflict between Judeans and Romans, in which the former tried to resist the pagan, totalitarian rules (Wyke, 63). William Fitzgerald observes that the shift to concentrate on the male body and relationships between men in toga movies after 1951 was connected with the want to re-establish the old masculine roles:

> The postwar years were a time of crisis for American masculinity. Returning from the all-male world of a successfully waged, heroic war, the soldier settling into civilian life had to negotiate his own domestication, as well as the new understanding of gender relations in the wake of women's entry into the workplace on the home front. (45)

It seems that the toga topic could satisfy the need for references to present history not only in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Great Britain and America, at the times of creating their own Empires and seeing their twilight, but also well into the twentieth century. It might be the case that it would be possible to apply the toga stories to many more historical events of any century as they have their specific features and a certain sense of universality – they present history and try to be accurate about its details, but at the same time concentrate on the fictional characters who appear next to the historical ones and show their personal stories that can be moulded into whatever suits the times of the production.

For most researchers investigating the nineteenth century theatre, in particular melodrama, and its links with early cinema, it has been clear that the shift from one medium to the other is inevitable. Especially melodrama with its clear construction, the focus on the emotional and the incorporation of music and spectacle was a natural choice to be used in this new medium. After all, Victorian theatre had already a lot of connections with purely popular culture. And within the melodrama genre, the toga play – the hybrid of popular and high culture – with its use of history, archaeology, realism, spectacle, and religion that provided both relief, visual pleasures, uplift of morals and educational quality, all in a form easily absorbed where what was taken from the theatre (leaving it a leisure for the elites) was applied to the more popular form of cinema.

It is clearly seen that on the visual level, toga movies adopted the strategies used in the genre as performed on a theatrical stage – the archaeological accuracy was involved in order to show people the details of life in ancient Rome, but the directors, in their final word, always put focus on the spectacle, which, already lavish on the theatrical stage, was taken to the highest level by the possibilities of cinematic art, with the inclusion, and even focus on the scenes of torture and violence. Thanks to the magnificent spectacle, toga movies could literally enter the popular culture with the promotion and selling of commodities that were seen on the screen. The spectacle offered the same duality of enjoying pleasures and knowing what and who is virtuous, the same melodramatic relief in taming the symbolic hardships and evil in the world, symbolized here by the Roman Empire, only the relief was even deeper than the quite gentle one in the Victorian theatre. Thus the scenes shown were both more eroticized and more violent, because such were the times after World War I. The narrative story shared the portrayal of the Empire as a reference to the present-day problems and events, but the details of the stories and depiction of heroes were of course adjusted to

the American history and culture and to the lesson that was to be taught to American society. The common practice of casting actors with British accent in the roles of villains, like Nero in *The Sign of the Cross* and Messala in *Ben-Hur,* while the Christian heroes spoke with American accent, shows that toga genre served America to emphasize their struggles with foreign evil forces and that they wanted to highlight the superiority over the older British Empire. Victorian Britain, in turn, in their toga plays polemics with the imperial topic always focused on the internal problems and anxieties, mostly involving the fear of lowering the moral standards. Hence, the choice made by Cecil DeMille to convert the British *The Sign of the Cross* into a cinematic spectacle in his style which was suitable for the times of Great Depression, the internal struggle of the U.S. and tragedy and poverty of their own people, who needed a moral reassurance. Unsurprisingly, the toga 'woman question' seems to be quite similar in both plays and movies, and in both American and British Empire. It served to remind their societies of the need of the traditional roles and qualities of women in a modern world – being in the centre of hearth and home, having the resolute faith, being ready for the self-sacrifice for the sake of virtue and supporting men in moments of doubt, all emphasized by the contrast with the portrayals of the temptresses like Berenis or Iras (sometimes even enhanced by the changes to the original story and their suicidal death after rejection by men like in the case of Berenis in the 1914 *The Sign of the Cross*). The fact that the story of Iras was eliminated from the 1959 *Ben-Hur* is not very surprising, as it was the time in America, after II World War, when the story of the real American hero was born, and the films started to concentrate on the masculine body even more than the eroticized female one in order to reassure men of their social roles, however much this male self-assurance was shaken by the war. After all, toga plays also concentrated on the male character who had to overcome his doubts and flaws, redeem himself and find his own path, women being only the supportive force (Camma from *The Cup* breaks the mould

to some extent, but *Claudian* and *The Sign* are perfect examples). In toga plays the emphasis was always on the internal and moral struggles of the main character even when there was a motif of rebellion against the aristocracy like in *Clito* or the rebellion of the Jews like in *The Daughters of Babylon*. Judah Ben-Hur however, without the distraction of the romance with the evil woman, as portrayed by Charlton Heston in 1959 movie, was the epitome of the American hero fighting with the imperial oppression. This oppression in the toga movies after World War II always meant the fight with a foreign threat, where the moral strength was derived from the inner sanctum of Christian virtue.

Conclusion

The toga plays chosen by me to be the subject of analysis in this dissertation, together with their corresponding film adaptations, show different elements combined together that made the genre unique and already a popular culture phenomenon, before it even entered cinema. The drama that inspired them, Henry Irving's production of *The Cup*, with the story taken from Plutarch, written by the Poet Laureate Alfred Tennyson and staged in front of one of the most respectable Victorian audiences of the Lyceum Theatre was a foreshadowing of what level of drama the historical plays may introduce on a wider scale. Being written as a verse drama, just like the later Barrett's *Clito*, it was a higher dramatic form than melodrama, but not as serious as tragedy, hence some scholars view it as a compromise between these two – also a shadow of the 'compromise quality' of the whole genre, standing in-between high and low aspects of culture. The topics tackled in *The Cup* were to be repeated in the later toga plays, as they were topics often covered by melodrama because they were relevant to the present-day of Victorian era – the sanctity of marriage and domestic peace, the role of women, the debauchery and lustfulness of men, the choice between loyalty to the authorities and loyalty to one's own people. The later toga plays did not have to follow the verse drama form in order to be seen as performed for the educated audience, as the actor-managers, in particular Wilson Barrett, knew what made Irving's production popular, successful and prosperous, just as the Hollywood filmmakers knew it about their toga films – spectacle. *Claudian* is very close in construction to the melodramas of Dion Boucicault, with its sensation scene, the earthquake in Act III, and the resolution in Act IV, also with a morally fallible hero, but most of all it is a spectacle, with the use of painting and archaeological details provided by E.W. Godwin and its whole set design that shocked the audience with its beauty and prompted a whole series of toga plays on Victorian stage, mostly directed by Wilson Barrett, but occasionally also by Henry Irving and

Herbert Beerbohm Tree. Staged in 1895, *The Sign of the Cross*, was truly a cultural phenomenon, not only because of its almost perfect combination of the popular – it was a spectacular melodrama, and the serious – the plot involved classical antiquity which was always associated with educated circles of society and the beginnings of Christianity, but also because it found itself at the crossroads between the old and new century, the popular and new drama, the theatre and the cinema. It was a unique play, one of the most successful from the Victorian era when we take into account its affinity with popular culture – by 1904 it was seen by over 15 000 people in around 10 000 performances prepared by nine different touring companies – the record numbers to be frequently repeated in toga movies with record-breaking sizes of studios, decorations, sums of money or uses of technical novelties. The play's very morally uplifting and emotionally touching topic and its bold contrast between good and evil, the Christians versus Romans, was what people at the end of the century needed, just as they later needed in America in times of Great Depression – all in form of a stunning visual spectacle that became common and obvious as the times were shaped by the notions of visual and popular culture. *Ben-Hur* as a theatrical adaptation on the American and British stage is just a staging of another popular toga story, its American tale of an Empire, but *Ben-Hur* in film is, together with Cecil DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross*, a movie that transferred the theatrical focus on spectacle to the cinematic art and developed it on an unprecedented scale. American film industry's use of toga plays, tales set in antiquity but corresponding to modern world issues, shows that they were already one step in the direction of popular culture, even while being part of the more respectable theatrical forms on the Victorian stage.

The toga play's achievement in gathering one of the most wide and diversified audience, with the inclusion of deeply religious people and members of the clergy, is often noted and praised. It could do that because of the most unique mixture of the

popular and respectable elements, its aspiration to the level of great literature, not really fulfilled in comparison to the quality of the reformist drama of the end of the century. But this aspiration turned out to be enough to attract people from different social groups, and even to be occasionally praised by critics such as Shaw, as I mentioned for instance in the case of *The Sign of the Cross*.

Toga plays tried to achieve respectability in various ways. They were melodramas, but with an educational aspect, not only owing to their preaching virtue and the differences between right or wrong, evil and good, like the plays from the first half of the century, but also owing to the depiction of historical events and figures in a realistic form, with the attention to archaeological detail, taken care of by professional advisers. It was a lesson in classical history, art and religion, as they also contained the elements of biblical stories (characters and language). The educational aspect of toga plays mentioned and praised by John Ruskin was not only connected with the events based on the ancient history of the Roman Empire (we should remember that the middle-class people in Victorian times had obligatory courses in Latin, which meant that they had a much better knowledge of classical civilization than we have nowadays), but also with the religious tone that promoted highly virtuous life even if it required a lot of effort and personal sacrifice. Apart from those intellectual aspects, toga plays offered a combination of first class Academic style painting, which could be seen by a large number of people sitting in the audience, and the whole archeologically accurate and beautiful spectacle. All of that made them a loftier form of dramatic art, but still kept in a melodramatic form targeted at the wide audience of the popular theatre, hence the plays fulfilled their educational role aimed at a considerable part of the population. The universality of all the forms combined by toga dramas is noted by Maria Wyke who describes marketing strategies of the campaign book for the 1944 reissue of Cecil DeMille's film version of *The Sign of the Cross* which encouraged cinema managers "to

sell the film's religious element to church-goers, its historical element to schools, but its *spectacle* – 'the glitter, the excitement, the thrills which characterized Rome at the height of her power and the depth of depravity' – to the masses" (Wyke, 137).

The fact that toga plays were melodramas with the use of common characters and stories with an emphasis on the emotional rather than intellectual tone places them in the sphere of popular theatre. Characteristic to melodrama was the use of sensation scenes like the earthquake, sinking of a ship or chariot race whose primal aim was to entertain the audience, but also the scenes like torture and death in the arena to elicit a strong emotional reaction. They were aimed at a wide number of people, promoted, as exemplified by the actions of Wilson Barrett, in a way that is close to the later promotional strategies in film industry. Their use of spectacle, present and demanded in different aspects of Victorian life and culture, made them an entertaining and visually pleasing experience, one of many types of melodramatic plays presented throughout the Victorian era. Nevertheless, toga plays were yet something more.

They were a hybrid genre uniting high drama, educational quality and religious motifs with common melodramatic entertainment that was present on the Victorian popular stage. They were one of the Victorian theatrical genres that are part of the visual culture which permeated different spheres of life and leisure in the era, through their links with painting and the corresponding neo-classical revival in art. They were created as if they were theatrical adaptations of Academy paintings, produced by means of the artistic methods close to visual art such as the use of tableaux and sets painted by professional, sometimes very famous, painters combined with archaeological realism used in the rich details of architecture, costumes, and objects. They used history in the same way as it was used in neo-classical painting – as a commentary on the issues close to the Victorian spectators. In toga dramas, we observe conventional gender roles, especially as regards woman's place in society, the sanctity of marriage, the right moral

conduct, eschewing of debauchery, and the primacy of Christian virtue and morality. These results were achieved on the basis of stories set in ancient Rome, with the Empire represented as a model (in arts, architecture, and imperial politics), but mostly in the form of something I would call a 'model-warning' which shows, interestingly enough, to the spectator's aesthetic satisfaction, the life that leads to moral and even political downfall. As a result, this warning can be legitimately thought of as tinged with some hypocrisy.

The toga play's treatment of history was of course related to the times in which they were created and was a response to the imperialist thinking pervading the Victorian era. Let me emphasize that toga plays were both very critical of the ancient civilization (showing what may lead to the fall) and they held it in some awe (presenting Roman Empire with visual grandeur) - which mirrors the Victorian attitude towards the British Empire. They were a reaction to a crisis in popular religion caused to some extent by the theories of Charles Darwin and the cult of science and turned strongly towards religion and promotion of Christian morality. The fact that religious matters started to be shown in the theatre after many years of absence (religious topics disappeared from the English stage as a result of the Reformation in the 16th century) only proves how relevant and close to present day issues their topic was. It can be said that it was toga plays that paved the way for such future plays tackling the topic of religion (in a totally different style, naturally) as the 1935 verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot. In my opinion, they managed to do so, because they chose a serious topic, already known and popular among the public (members of clergy included) because of the historical novels with similar themes. The choice of telling the story of the persecution of Christians and the general opposition of Romans and Christians provided a historical context deemed educational and worthy and a Christian moral message needed at the given time in society. They were popular with the clergy because of the educational and Christian

aspect, and they were popular with the public because of the well-known, but slightly changed melodramatic form that offered excitement and pathos and, also educational, historical setting. It was hard to ignore the influence of such a popular genre, and although theatre shifted in a different direction around the time of I World War, some roads were paved, and cinema certainly did not ignore it.

It would be hard to find such an intriguing dramatic genre in British theatre, so full of dualities, much like the Victorian era itself. It is remarkable that they were historical plays, yet commenting about present social and political issues, aiming at high art, yet using the popular form of melodrama, promoting strict moral code of behaviour, yet offering a little perverse visual pleasure. Toga plays were a combination of the emotional, the educational, the spectacular, visually-pleasing, morally guiding and moving elements, a piece of art on stage, the swan song of the Victorian theatre before it was used as an inspiration for moving-pictures and then film, leaving the stage to a more pure, experimental form to be watched by elites, not the masses. It is understandable why they achieved such popularity among the audiences in the late Victorian period, as the above-mentioned mixture of elements was exactly what was needed at that time. They remained relevant to important issues of their times, hence were interesting to the viewers, but they also offered the spectacle that was not only a strong part of the Victorian culture but also of the more modern and popular forms of culture that succeeded it. Toga plays tried to keep up with the tendencies of the times towards a more respectable theatre, aimed at a chosen audience (for instance the religious circles), but stayed within the popular repertoire and thanks to their spectacular melodramatic form offered entertainment. Being so closely related to the Victorian times, it also no great wonder that the toga genre was definitely forgotten after World War I and did not enter the established canon of the Victorian theatre, as they were one of the many types of melodrama, with quite specific mixture of different elements and

quite limited number of authors in a wider perspective of Victorian drama. The fact that toga dramas were so easily forgotten can be offset by their successful and long afterlife in American cinema, even though they were not only wiped from public memory but also absent from the first scholarly analyses of the Victorian theatre. What made them popular on the Victorian stage also made them popular and both narratively and aesthetically suitable for the new medium, proving that they had both the qualities that were expected on the popular Victorian stage, but also the elements valued in the developing 20th century popular culture.

Summary

This doctoral dissertation, entitled “Literary Tradition and Popular Culture: Toga Plays in the Victorian Popular Theatre,” addresses the still incompletely researched topic of the so-called toga plays, which were present on the Victorian stage from the 1880s until the end of the century. Their popularity greatly decreased with the beginning of World War I due to new trends in the theatre and the new form of popular entertainment that emerged– cinema, which successfully adopted the themes and form of toga plays . Toga plays can be defined as a variety of melodramas, which were part of the popular theatre of late Victorian times, most often set in the times of the ancient Roman Empire and dealing with the decadence of the Roman lifestyle, especially its combination of eroticism and pagan religion. The characters in these plays are faced with a choice between anti-values imposed by the official culture and imperial power, and Christian values representing the path of morality and virtue. Toga plays were characterized by a rather specific approach to presenting historical times, which was intended to reflect contemporary sociological and economic problems. We are dealing here with a broader perspective of seeing the British Empire as the successor of the Roman Empire, where the fall of the latter was supposed to be a warning against a similar, especially moral, decline of British civilization. The plays were also distinguished by their quite accurate reproduction of archaeological detail (architecture, everyday objects and costumes), their emphasis on visual effects and their desire to attract a more sophisticated audience. The playwrights and managers wanted them to be seen as moral and educational, while also aiming to entertain and achieve commercial success.

In my doctoral dissertation, I analyse the texts of four plays - *The Cup* (1881), by Alfred Tennyson, adapted by Henry Irving, *Claudian* (1883), by W. G. Wills and Henry Herman, directed by Wilson Barrett, *The Sign of the Cross* (1895), where the author and producer was Barrett and *Ben-Hur* (1899) - a stage adaptation of Lewis Wallace's novel

written by the American playwright William Young. These plays are not only among the most famous toga plays, but also show the evolution of this genre on the Victorian stage – from Irving's production, characterized by a revolutionary and at the same time very professional approach to a historical spectacle, which made an incredible impression on the audience, through Wilson Barrett's plays, which developed themes appearing in the whole toga genre and created a cycle of plays that distinguished themselves among the popular Victorian drama. The aim of this dissertation is to look at the phenomenon of toga plays from a broader perspective related to theatre and culture studies, in order to explain its popularity in nineteenth-century Great Britain and its subsequent disappearance and oblivion.

Chapter I – "Literary tradition: The Antiquity in the Nineteenth Century" – deals with the widespread popularity of classical motifs in nineteenth-century Europe, with an emphasis on Great Britain. This popularity was manifested in some widely known historical novels, such as *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Ben-Hur*, *Quo Vadis*, neoclassical painting or the fact that such powers as Great Britain and America used the Roman Empire as a model for various political, economic and cultural aspects of their own "empires". Since an important reason for such a "return" to classical history was the coming to light of numerous archaeological discoveries, and the new methods of popularizing them, in this chapter I briefly describe the most important of these developments. I also consider William Shakespeare's Roman plays as one of the potential inspirations for later toga plays.

Chapter II entitled – "Educational Theatre and Entertainment" – offers a broader look at what characterized the theatre of the Victorian era in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, which had a major impact on the formation of toga plays, in particular, their educational aspect and the desire to expand the spectrum of potential viewers. The most popular dramas at that time were the so-called "society plays," touching on

contemporary problems of Victorian society, in particular the morally difficult choices related to the male and female, mainly marital, roles strictly imposed by society . It is surprising to discover that toga plays, so seemingly detached from Victorian reality, presented similar issues, only under a historical disguise. In this part of my thesis, I portray the key figure of the toga genre – the actor-manager Wilson Barrett and his path to creating a series of plays set in ancient Rome, which was an undertaking supported by John Ruskin himself. The fact that Barrett focused both on achieving commercial success and on creating plays of a new, higher quality comparable to that of literary classics was related to the general trend of the times towards increasing the quality of theatre, staging more serious plays, and creating the respected institution of the National Theatre. What is also unprecedented is the fact that, despite working for commercial theatre, Barrett, as one of the few authors, successfully managed to introduce religious themes, absent for a few centuries, into his plays and include people associated with the Church in his audiences.

The third chapter, simply titled "Toga Plays," briefly presents the available information on the relatively unknown plays that fall within this genre. In addition to the previously mentioned plays: *The Cup, Claudian* and *The Sign of the Cross*, which I try to analyse in depth, I also mention other toga plays, mainly works by Wilson Barrett, i.e. *Clito, Junius, The Daughters of Babylon,* and *Pharaoh*. In this chapter, I present the evolution of the motifs used in toga plays, the way the main characters and heroines are presented, staging methods, the development of the popularity of these plays, and their references to contemporary Victorian society. I try to present the elements of popular culture, mostly melodrama, and those that were intended to make toga dramas become perceived as ambitious and artistic.

The last chapter, entitled "From Victorian Popular Stage to Early American Cinema: the Rise of Popular Culture," first discusses the last toga play performed on the

British stage – *Ben-Hur*, brought from America to the Drury Lane Theatre in 1912. I try to emphasize the difference of the American author's approach to ancient themes, which I also continue by discussing the extremely popular three film versions of this play. The last part of my dissertation tries to show the reasons why toga plays, which are one of many genres of Victorian theatre, moved from the stage to the movie screen in a quite natural way, initially as the early films, the so-called "moving pictures" and then the big Hollywood productions. Discussing also the three film versions of the typically British and most famous toga play – *The Sign of the Cross*, I try to show how film directors approached the topic of toga dramas and the characteristic elements of this genre i.e. references to contemporary problems and times, a combination of spectacle, historical accuracy, religion and the Christian message as well as entertainment and visual spectacle with erotic overtones.

This dissertation aims to present the topic of toga plays, for many years forgotten and still not included in the canon of the most popular works of the Victorian period, and to demonstrate their characteristics – a combination of various elements, unique even in the context of the very diverse drama of this period. The use of the means of expression belonging to melodrama, considered a popular and unambitious form in late Victorian theatre, combined with the aura of serious drama was a very interesting mixture of low and high art. References to painting, the pictorialism of the staging and the emphasis on a visually beautiful spectacle make toga plays both part of the ubiquitous visual culture and a means of promoting academic art. Religious motifs, both biblical heroes and the language imitating the Bible, next to the richly presented life of Romans from the upper social class, gave not only a lesson in Christian values and a warning against what leads to the fall of morality and the Empire, but also a surprising juxtaposition of the spiritual with what is pleasing to the eye. The possibility of telling a story that will interest the viewer both because of its distance in time and provide tips on how

to deal with contemporary problems is what made it possible for toga plays to be successfully taken over by cinema. There, they evolved from adaptations of what had previously been an entertaining but also educational spectacle for Victorian society, to a whole series of themes and characters inspired by the history of the Roman Empire used in numerous toga films for almost seventy years of the 20th century.

Streszczenie

Niniejsza rozprawa doktorska zatytułowana „Tradycja literacka i kultura popularna: Toga Plays w wiktoriańskim teatrze popularnym" podejmuje nadal nie w pełni zbadany temat sztuk teatralnych nazwanych (około roku 1896) „toga plays", obecnych na wiktoriańskiej scenie od lat osiemdziesiątych XIX wieku aż do końca stulecia. Ich popularność bardzo zmalała wraz z początkiem I wojny światowej ze względu na nowe tendencje w teatrze i nową formę popularnej rozrywki w postaci kina, które w dużej mierze przejęło z powodzeniem tematykę i formę „toga plays" . „Toga plays" można zdefiniować jako rodzaj sztuk melodramatycznych, będących częścią popularnego teatru późnych czasów wiktoriańskich, których akcja osadzona jest najczęściej w czasach starożytnego Imperium Rzymskiego i podejmujących tematy dekadencji rzymskiego stylu życia, zwłaszcza połączenia erotyki i pogańskiej religii. Postacie tych sztuk stoją przed wyborem między anty-wartościami narzucanymi przez oficjalną kulturę i władzę imperialną, a wartościami chrześcijańskimi reprezentującymi drogę moralności i cnoty. „Toga plays" charakteryzowały się dość szczególnym podejściem do przedstawiania czasów historycznych, które miało odzwierciedlać współczesne problemy socjologiczne i ekonomiczne. Mamy tu do czynienia z szerszą perspektywą polegającą na widzeniu Imperium brytyjskiego jako następcy Cesarstwa rzymskiego, gdzie upadek tego ostatniego miał być ostrzeżeniem przed podobnym, zwłaszcza moralnym, upadkiem cywilizacji brytyjskiej. Sztuki te wyróżniały się także dość dokładnym odtwarzaniem archeologicznego detalu (architektury, przedmiotów i kostiumów), naciskiem na efekty wizualne oraz chęcią przyciągnięcia bardziej wyrafinowanej publiczności. Dramatopisarze i menadżerowie teatralni chcieli, aby były one postrzegane jako moralne i edukacyjne, a jednocześnie miały na celu rozrywkę i osiągnięcie komercyjnego sukcesu.

W rozprawie doktorskiej analizuję teksty czterech sztuk - *The Cup* (1881), autorstwa Alfreda Tennysona, zaadaptowanej przez Henrego Irvinga, *Claudian* (1883),

autorstwa W. G. Willsa i Henrego Hermana, w reżyserii Wilsona Barretta, *The Sign of the Cross* (1895), gdzie autorem i producentem był Barrett oraz *Ben-Hur* (1899) – sceniczną adaptację powieści Lewisa Wallace'a napisaną przez amerykańskiego dramaturga Williama Younga. Sztuki te nie tylko należą do najbardziej znanych „toga plays", ale również pokazują ewolucję tego gatunku na scenie wiktoriańskiej – od produkcji Irvinga cechującej się rewolucyjnym, a jednocześnie bardzo profesjonalnym podejściem do historycznego spektaklu, robiącego niesamowite wrażenie na publiczności, przez sztuki Wilsona Barretta, które rozwinęły tematy pojawiające się również w pozostałych sztukach z tego gatunku i którym zawdzięczamy wyróżnienie go spośród całego bogactwa dramatu wiktoriańskiego. Celem tej pracy jest spojrzenie na zjawisko „toga plays" z szerszej perspektywy związanej z teatrologią oraz badaniami nad kulturą epoki wiktoriańskiej, aby wyjaśnić jego popularność w dziewiętnastowiecznej Wielkiej Brytanii oraz późniejszy zanik i zapomnienie.

Rozdział I pracy – „Tradycja literacka: Starożytność w XIX wieku" – porusza tematykę powszechnej popularności motywów klasycznych w dziewiętnastowiecznej Europie, z naciskiem na Wielką Brytanię. Popularność ta przejawiała się w powszechnie znanych powieściach historycznych tj. *The Last Days of Pompeii* (*Ostatnie dni Pompei*), *Ben-Hur*, *Quo Vadis*, malarstwie neoklasycystycznym czy wzorowaniu się takich mocarstw jak Wielka Brytania i Ameryka na Imperium Rzymskim w różnych politycznych, ekonomicznych czy kulturowych aspektach. Ponieważ ważnym powodem takiego „powrotu" do historii klasycznej były liczne odkrycia archeologiczne i zmiany w podejściu do ich popularyzowania, w tym rozdziale opisuję pokrótce najważniejsze z nich. Jako jedną z potencjalnych inspiracji dla późniejszych „toga plays" biorę również pod uwagę sztuki Williama Szekspira osadzone w czasach starożytnego Rzymu.

Rozdział II mojej rozprawy – „Teatr edukacyjny i rozrywka" – oferuje szersze spojrzenie na to, czym charakteryzuje się teatr epoki wiktoriańskiej ostatnich dwóch

dekad dziewiętnastego wieku, co miało duży wpływ na ukształtowanie się „toga plays", w szczególności ich edukacyjnego aspektu oraz chęci poszerzenia spektrum potencjalnych widzów. Najpopularniejszym w tym czasie rodzajem sztuk były tzw. „society plays", poruszające współczesne problemy wiktoriańskiego społeczeństwa, w szczególności moralnie trudne wybory związane z narzuconymi przez społeczeństwo określonymi rolami kobiet i mężczyzn oraz problemy małżeńskie. Z zaskoczeniem można odkryć, że tak na pozór oderwane od dziewiętnastowiecznych realiów „toga plays" przedstawiały podobne kwestie, jedynie pod historycznym przebraniem. W tej części pracy przedstawiam kluczową dla gatunku „toga drama" postać aktora, reżysera i menadżera teatralnego Wilsona Barretta oraz jego drogę do stworzenia serii sztuk osadzonych w starożytnym Rzymie, co było przedsięwzięciem wspieranym przez samego Johna Ruskina. Fakt, że Barrett skupiał się zarówno na osiągnięciu komercyjnego sukcesu oraz stworzeniu sztuk o nowej, wyższej jakości porównywalnej do tej, jaką ma klasyka literatury był związany z ogólną tendencją owych czasów do podniesienia jakości teatru, wystawiania bardziej poważnych sztuk oraz stworzeniu szanowanej instytucji Teatru Narodowego. Bezprecedensowy jest również fakt, że mimo tworzenia komercyjnego teatru, Barrettowi, jako jednemu z nielicznych autorów, udało się wprowadzić tematykę religijną do swoich sztuk, po kilku wiekach jej nieobecności w teatrze, i poszerzyć środowisko widzów o osoby związane z Kościołem.

Trzeci rozdział zatytułowany po prostu „Toga Plays" przedstawia pokrótce dostępne informacje na temat dość mało znanych sztuk, które zaliczane są do tego gatunku. Oprócz wymienionych wcześniej sztuk *The Cup, Claudian* oraz *The Sign of the Cross*, które staram się dogłębnie przeanalizować, wspominam też inne „toga plays" – głównie dzieła Wilsona Barretta, tj. *Clito, Junius, The Daughters of Babylon* czy *Pharaoh*. W rozdziale tym przedstawiam ewolucję podejmowanych przez „toga plays" motywów, sposób przedstawienia głównych bohaterów i bohaterek, metody inscenizacji,

rozwój popularności tych sztuk i zawarte w nich nawiązania do współczesnego społeczeństwo wiktoriańskiego. Staram się wykazać występowanie elementów „popularnych", typowych dla melodramatu oraz tych, które miały sprawić, że sztuki te będą postrzegane jako ambitne i artystyczne.

Ostatni rozdział zatytułowany "Od wiktoriańskiej sceny popularnej do wczesnego kina amerykańskiego: rozwój kultury popularnej" poświęcony jest najpierw jednej z ostatnich sztuk z gatunku „toga plays" wystawionych na brytyjskiej scenie teatralnej – *Ben-Hurowi,* sprowadzonemu z Ameryki do teatru Drury Lane w 1912 roku. Staram się podkreślić specyfikę w podejściu do starożytnej tematyki w przypadku amerykańskiego autora, co kontynuuję również omawiając niezwykle popularne trzy wersje filmowe tego dzieła. Ostatnia część mojej rozprawy stara się ukazać przyczyny, dla których „toga plays" będące jednym z wielu gatunków teatru wiktoriańskiego w dość naturalny sposób przeszły ze sceny teatralnej na ekran filmowy, na początku jako pierwsze protofilmy, tzw. „moving pictures", a kończąc na wielkich hollywoodzkich produkcjach. Omawiając także trzy filmowe wersje typowo brytyjskiej, i najbardziej znanej, „toga play" – *The Sign of the Cross*, staram się wykazać jak do tematu „toga plays" podeszli reżyserzy filmowi i jak elementy charakteryzujące ten specyficzny gatunek (tj. odniesienia do współczesnych problemów i czasów, połączenie spektaklu, historycznej wierności, religii i chrześcijańskiego przekazu oraz rozrywki i wizualnej uczty, często z podtekstem erotycznym) zostały wykorzystane przez film.

Rozprawa ta ma na celu przybliżenie tematyki przez wiele lat zapomnianego, wciąż pozostającego poza kanonem najpopularniejszych dzieł okresu wiktoriańskiego gatunku teatralnego nazwanego „toga plays" i wykazanie jego szczególnej specyfiki – połączenia różnorodnych elementów, wyjątkowych nawet na tle bardzo różnorodnego dramatu tego okresu. Szczególne połączenie środków wyrazu należących do melodramatu, uważanego za popularny i mało ambitny rodzaj teatru, z aurą poważnego dramatu

stanowiło bardzo interesujące powiązanie sztuki niskiej i wysokiej. Nawiązania do malarstwa, ale i sama „malarskość" realizacji i nacisk na wizualnie piękny spektakl czyni te dzieła zarówno częścią wszechobecnej kultury wizualnej, jak i środkiem propagowania sztuki akademickiej. Religijne motywy, zarówno bohaterowie biblijni, jak i język naśladujący Biblię tuż obok bogato przedstawionego życia Rzymian z wyższej klasy społecznej dawały nie tylko lekcję chrześcijańskich wartości i ostrzeżenie przed tym, co prowadzi do upadku, ale i zaskakujące zestawienie tego, co uduchowione z tym, co przyjemne dla oka. Możliwość opowiedzenia historii, która zainteresuje widza zarówno jej odległością w czasie jak i udzieli wskazówek postępowania w przypadku współczesnych problemów, sprawiła, że „toga plays" mimo że zniknęły ze sceny na początku dwudziestego wieku, wyparte przez nowe nurty w teatrze, ukierunkowane na nowe formy i bardziej zawężone grono widzów, zostały z powodzeniem przejęte przez kino. Tam ewoluowały od adaptacji tego, co wcześniej stanowiło rozrywkę, ale i edukujący spektakl dla społeczeństwa wiktoriańskiego, do całej serii tematów inspirowanych historią Cesarstwa rzymskiego zrealizowanych w licznych „toga movies" na przestrzeni prawie siedemdziesięciu lat dwudziestego wieku.

Illustrations

Figure 1. Alma-Tadema, Lawrence. *The Roses of Heliogabalus*. 1888. Collection Juan Antonio Pérez Simón, Mexico. *Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopaedia.* 29 May 2023. Web. 2 June 2023.

Figure 2. Leighton, Frederic. *Flaming June*. 1895. Museo de Arte de Ponce. *Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopaedia.* 27 December 2022. Web. 2 June 2023.

Figure 3. Alma-Tadema, Lawrence. *Expectations*. Around 1889. Private Collection. *meisterdrucke.ie*. 27 May 2023. Web. 2 June 2023.

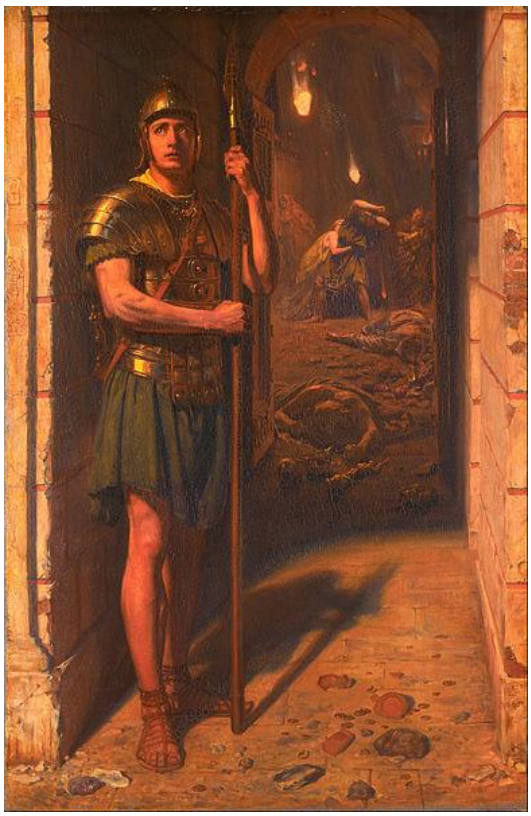

Figure 4. Poynter, Edward. *Faithful unto Death*. 1885. Walker Art Gallery. *Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopaedia*. 12 January 2023. Web. 2 June 2023.

Figure 5. Poynter, Edward. *Israel in Egypt*. 1867. Guildhall Art Gallery. *Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopaedia.* 1 April 2023. Web. 2 June 2023.

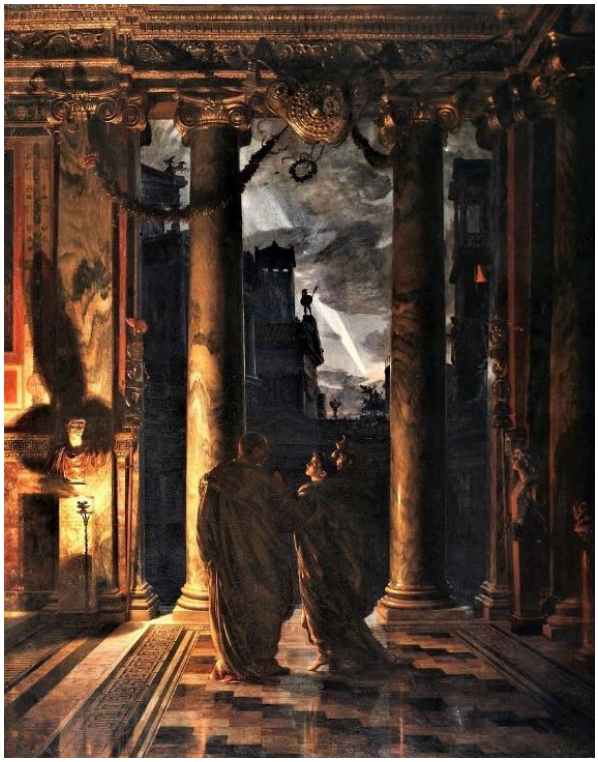

Figure 6. Poynter, Edward. *The Ides of March*. 1883. Manchester Art Gallery. *Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopaedia.* 1 January 2023. Web. 2 June 2023.

Figure 7. Alma-Tadema, Lawrence. *The Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra, 41 B.C.* 1885. Private Collection. *Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopaedia.* 3 January 2022. Web. 2 June 2023.

Figure 8. Long, Edwin. *Diana or Christ?*. 1881. Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery. *Art UK*. Web. 12 June 2022.

Figure 9. Alma-Tadema, Lawrence. *The Tepidarium.* 1881. Lady Lever Art Gallery. *Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopaedia.* 23 July 2016. Web. 19 June 2023.

Figure 10. Alexander von Wagner. *The Chariot-Race.* 1882. Manchester Art Gallery. *Art UK*. Web. 2 June 2023.

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