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JAMES THOMAS

Wilson Barrett's *Hamlet*

On 16 October 1884 a surprising and unconventional production of *Hamlet* opened at London's Princess's Theatre on Oxford Street. The play's producer and star was Wilson Barrett, a romantic actor who had achieved his fame chiefly in various forms of literary melodrama.

The Princess's had fallen on hard times since the departure of Charles Kean in 1859. There were a few bright years under Augustus Harris in the early sixties and several more under F. B. Chatterton in the early seventies, but the sad fact was that this historic playhouse had by 1880 degenerated into a more or less working-class operation with a reputation for cheap spectacle. Barrett's tenancy reversed this trend and by 1884 audiences representative of the better classes of society were once again attending the Princess's. Wealth was present at *Hamlet*; even William Gladstone, John Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold were there, and with them came other well-known personalities from the worlds of politics, art, and literature.

Today there is not much interest in Barrett, for general historical opinion holds that he was not much of an artist. A typical view is that of the American dramatic critic John Rankin Towse, who thought Barrett's acting was no more than "workmanlike and agreeable" and that his attempts at Victorian classics were "not in any degree beyond the reach of any ordinarily experienced actor."¹ At best Barrett is thought to have been a popular melodramatic actor, "congenial to the multitude,"² whose personal vanity unfortunately "raised an obstacle against his acceptance as a serious artist."³ A close examination of Barrett's life and works, especially his innovative production of *Hamlet*, indicates, however, that there was more to this complex man than contemporary critics reported. Actually, while Barrett did begin as a melodramatic actor, he suffered from the jealousy and condescension of his fellow artists when he sought to broaden his repertoire—that is, to infringe upon Henry Irving's repertoire.⁴

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¹ John Rankin Towse, *Sixty Years of the Theatre* (New York, 1916), p. 427.

² William Winter, *The Wallet of Time* (New York, 1918), p. 420.

³ *The Athenaeum* (30 July 1904), p. 156.

⁴ J.B. Booth, *"Master" and Men* (London, 1927), p. 244.

Except for a mediocre performance at the Princess's by the aging Edwin Booth in 1880, Barrett's was the only new *Hamlet* to be seen in London since Henry Irving's famous interpretation was first presented at the Lyceum ten years before. Irving was considered "The Hamlet of the Age," but his characterization was not the model for Barrett, who returned instead to the first folio and quarto, introducing an entirely new version of the play that included many provocative innovations. He discarded the traditional act divisions in favor of intelligent new ones that clarified the action. He also allowed the neglected roles of Laertes and Claudius to blossom into full grown acting parts by restoring many edited lines of their dialogue. Equally important, Barrett courageously extracted the play from the Renaissance neverland of its popular scenic tradition. Charles Fechter had achieved the first tentative steps in this direction early in the 1860s by setting his *Hamlet* in a poeticized historical Denmark, but Barrett went further than Fechter by setting his production in a tenth-century Denmark that was fully robust, crude, and semi-barbaric. Significant as all these changes were, they were eclipsed in importance by Barrett's startlingly original conception of the Prince. He introduced to London playgoers a very young Hamlet, an energetic hero capable of addressing challenges forcefully and free from ambiguous Romantic yearnings. The revenge motif, so long subservient in theatrical tradition to poetry, was restored to a prominent place in the play.

Victorian theatre history has been preoccupied for the most part with observing the emergence of social drama and with the acting of Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, and a few other notables.⁵ Popular theatre, the lifeblood of the Victorian stage, has often been neglected in favor of this historical predisposition with the result that an irregular picture of the Victorian theatre has emerged which tends to overlook a wealth of artistry. In an important way popular theatre artists, admittedly inferior geniuses, had the liberty to proceed with only mild regard for the predominant artistic tastes of the times. Hence, popular theatre tended to be imaginative and inventive, often with strikingly original results.

Wilson Barrett was the leader of popular theatre in England for over thirty years. Moreover, he was the most successful actor-manager and the most well-known one besides Henry Irving. He was a popular choice for knighthood after Irving and was considered by many to be the heir to Irving's throne. A balanced conception of the Victorian theatre, therefore, must rank Barrett along with Irving in importance for the historian. Unfortunately, however, Barrett was like most melodramatic actors in that the primary ingredient of his art—his charismatic stage personality—simply could not sustain interest in him beyond his career. Such vehicles of his as *The Silver King*, *The Manxman*, and *The Sign of the Cross* make thin reading today, while in Barrett's hands they were all stage triumphs. But *Hamlet* remains a touchstone by which actors from all ages can be judged. Consequently, it is fortunate for the historian that Barrett undertook this play, and that he did so at the peak of his powers.

⁵ See, among others, Martha Vicinus, "The Study of Victorian Popular Culture," *Victorian Studies*, 18, 1975), 473-83 and Joseph W. Donohue, *The Theatrical Manager in England and America* (Princeton, 1971), "Introduction."

The production can be reconstructed in considerable detail because it created enough of a stir to beget many reports and reviews. It also became a standard repertory piece during Barrett's later international touring, so it generated still more column inches for years after its premiere. Most reviews concentrated upon Barrett's interpretation; but the production was so innovative that a few reports were exceptionally detailed in their accounts of the costumes, staging, and settings. This journalistic commentary can be tested against Barrett's own promptbook (a leather-bound expansion of his own published version of the text) which contains his original stage directions and groundplans along with additions and changes made for subsequent productions.⁶ The color plates for the costume designs are also extant.⁷ As a result, a reasonably complete description of the play can be compiled, from which key scenes, together with the general principles that governed the production, can be extracted.

Barrett had worked ambitiously to achieve the fame he needed before daring to produce *Hamlet* in Irving's London. The son of a poor Sussex gentleman farmer, he started in London working amateur theatricals, and early on was a fervent admirer of Charles Kean's Shakespearean revivals at the Princess's. His first professional engagement occurred in 1864 when he was hired as "juvenile utility" at the Theatre Royal, Halifax. Four years later Barrett married Caroline Heath, an established star who had acted with Kean's company and who was a favorite of Dion Boucicault. She was a specialist in the newer, more natural forms of domestic melodrama then coming into vogue. Barrett and Miss Heath thereafter toured the provinces and London as a team, and during this time Barrett made his metropolitan debut at the Surrey late in 1868, playing Tom Robinson in Charles Reade's prison yarn, *It's Never Too Late to Mend*. The success of the Barrett and Heath artistic partnership led in 1870 to the formation of a provincial touring company established to support Miss Heath under Barrett's management. This was one of the first successful "combination" companies in England.⁸

At first going was hard for the new company, but prosperity finally arrived when they were at Leeds in 1875. There Barrett staged a production of the melodrama *Jane Shore*, newly adapted by the poet and playmaker William Gorman Wills, which developed into a financial goldmine. Barrett's managerial talents flashed still brighter when he assumed control of the Leeds Amphitheatre that same year. The twenty-nine-year-old manager showed definite signs of future accomplishments by challenging the theatrical monopoly held in Leeds by his close friend, the redoubtable provincial lessee John Coleman. Unfortunately, the Amphitheatre burned to the ground later in the year, but the impact of Barrett's management upon the townsmen soon led to the construction of a new playhouse built at their request under Barrett's supervision. The new Grand Theatre (today the northern home of the English National Opera) proved to be such a model of efficiency and splendor for the provinces

⁶ Property of F. Wilson Barrett, grandson of the subject.

⁷ Property of Edward Craig, grandson of E.W. Godwin.

⁸ Account Books of the Wilson Barrett Company, 1871-1888 (Austin, Texas: Humanities Research Center [HRC]). See also *The Era* (28 August 1886), p. 11.

that it effectively put Coleman out of business. Another playhouse, the Theatre Royal in Hull, was added to Barrett's control in 1878.

The profits from these leases, and from three subsidiary provincial companies Barrett formed between 1875 and 1878, supplied enough capital for him to finance his first London playhouse, the Royal Court Theatre on Sloane Square, in 1879. This adventure did not begin well, however, for Miss Heath was forced to retire from the stage early in the season due to a lingering illness contracted during her years of arduous provincial touring. Bad fortune changed to good when Barrett succeeded in booking in place of Miss Heath the international star Helena Modjeska for a season-long London debut engagement that resulted in a great deal of good press, both for her and for the new manager.

More luck followed. Modjeska's popular engagement happened to coincide with Edwin Booth's series of unlucky appearances at the Princess's under the low-grade commercial management of Walter Gooch. Booth's failure there was the latest in a train of disasters that finally convinced Gooch in 1880 to give up management and to lease his playhouse to Barrett. This led to a meteoric rise in fame for the new manager, beginning with four triumphantly successful dramas calculated to introduce to London Barrett's interesting policy of "lofty" (literary) melodrama based upon English themes. His maiden productions, *Lights o' London* and *The Romany Rye*, were the first of journalist George R. Sims's famous "gospel of rags" melodramas and ran for a total of thirteen months. Some critics disliked the graphic depiction of city low life, but audiences loved it; they especially loved Barrett's heroic treatment of working class characters. These plays were followed in November 1882 by Henry Arthur Jones's first major play *The Silver King*, now regarded as a major English literary melodrama. Barrett's talents exceeded themselves in his next play, *Claudian*, a "high prose" historical drama by William Gorman Wills, produced just prior to *Hamlet*. *Claudian*, lavishly designed by the noted antiquarian E. W. Godwin, boasted the most terrifying earthquake scene ever seen on the English stage.

Despite his success, many among London's artistic elite looked down their noses at Barrett's accomplishments; he was, after all, a relative newcomer and, what was more, a popular actor who catered to the masses. On the other hand, the high quality of his work encouraged others to treat him as a serious artistic force. In fact, the fame of Barrett's first four plays, together with the continued good fortune of his provincial companies and playhouses and his achievements at the Royal Court, assured for him among the general public the reputation of a first-class actor-manager. His staging talents were compared to those of the renowned Meiningen troupe from Germany which had recently visited London.⁹ Moreover, in sharp contrast to the lacklustre supporting actors associated with Henry Irving at the Lyceum, Barrett's plays demonstrated that an English company could act as a theatrical ensemble.¹⁰

⁹ Philip Beck, "Realism," *The Theatre* (September 1883), pp. 127-31.

¹⁰ Matthew Arnold, "At the Play," *Pall Mall Gazette* (December 1884), p. 4 and George Bernard Shaw, *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* (New York, 1917), II, 281.



Wilson Barrett as Hamlet. Reproduced courtesy of the Hoblitzelle Theatre Arts Library, University of Texas.

It was to his greater credit that Barrett's managerial talents combined with his impressive scenic productions to make him an artistic as well as a theatrical force. He made it a practice throughout his career to avoid cheap staging and to hire the best scene painters available, sparing no expense in mounting splendid productions. His record of sophisticated scenery and sound staging brought theatre managers from as far away as Germany to see Barrett's plays, while influential men such as Ruskin, Arnold, and William Gladstone threw their support behind Barrett's artistic policies. John Ruskin even decreed that his productions were educational examples for the elevation of English taste.¹¹

All the same, Barrett's fame did not rely exclusively upon his talents as a director and producer, for the central interest was always Barrett's acting. In the first place, Barrett himself presented a better picture on the stage than Irving because, unlike Irving, he possessed every physical attribute accounted necessary for an actor. His figure was robust and well-proportioned and, though he was short (and, therefore, wore high heeled boots), his movement was graceful, in classical roles even beautiful. A square, thin-lipped, and determined mouth under a prominent nose gave him a Roman countenance that portrayed in repose a kind of melancholy. Barrett's matinee idol image stemmed from his full and curly dark brown hair, which he often wore in a wavy roll over his forehead, and from his keen, dark grey eyes. Barrett's voice presented another advantage over Irving. He was a tenor of fine clarity, resonance, and projection—"a silver bell," Clement Scott called him.¹² And Barrett differed from Irving in acting style as well. Irving demonstrated a poetic, but macabre imagination and specialized in parts such as Richelieu, Mephistopheles, Mathias (in *The Bells*), and Hamlet—all roles in which his eccentric looks, unusual turn of mind, uncommon voice, and unheroic manner would show to their best advantage. Outraged honor was not in his range, and he was a failure at being a stage lover. Barrett, on the other hand, was handsome, spirited, and manly. His imagination was straightforward rather than poetic and lent humanity to classical roles, dignity to humble ones. He excelled at heroism and was an effective stage lover. Barrett's physical and artistic assets prompted several influential observers to hail him as Irving's equal in talent. Austin Brereton, Irving's biographer and also a dramatic critic, claimed, for example, that Barrett was "one of the few really great actors of the century."¹³

As if this weren't enough competition for Irving, Barrett was also an exceptional manager and financial wizard. Not least important in this regard was the Princess's itself, a playhouse whose stage had played such an important part in the history of *Hamlets* though one that had recently fallen upon hard times. Thanks to Gooch's renovation in the early fall of 1880, prior to the Booth engagement there, the Princess's became one of the most sumptuous and well-equipped playhouses in London. Newly enlarged to seat 1750 comfortably, it was nevertheless an intimate theatre

¹¹ Henry Herman, "The Stage as a School of Art," *Magazine of Art* (1888), pp. 332-37.

¹² *The Theatre* (January 1884), pp. 47-48.

¹³ Austin Brereton, "Wilson Barrett," *The Theatre* (January 1883), pp. 33-41.

with a proscenium only thirty-one feet wide. Backstage was a marvel of efficiency precisely suited to the elaborate scenic spectacles Victorian audiences loved to see with their Shakespeare. Furthermore, building on a solid financial base, Barrett, in the short span of four years, had rescued the famous playhouse from the depths to which it had fallen. By October 1884, there were eight companies playing Princess's dramas throughout Great Britain and the United States, and profits by this time amounting to nearly £20,000.¹⁴

Barrett had truly become a theatrical power. Clement Scott and other London critics pleaded that Barrett's work and that of his company demanded the strongest possible attention.¹⁵ There was probably no personal battle between Irving and Barrett at this time, but to each actor's admirers the possibility of such a clash was real, especially since the styles of the actors were utterly different. There may have been some substance to Shaw's remark that Henry Irving was "afraid" of Wilson Barrett.¹⁶

As Barrett's directing skill had been obvious in the past, it was to be expected that his new *Hamlet* would be staged with particular inspiration. Nevertheless, in two dimensions of his staging at least, he broke no new ground: he followed the customary nineteenth-century practice of alternating "front scenes" (shallow stage scenes) with "set scenes" (full stage scenes), and his blocking exploited common patterns developed earlier in the century by Charles Kean and others. Barrett's contribution can be found in the tone of certain scenes; that is, in the combination of tempos, movements, colors, scenery, sounds, and acting that comprised the artistic whole. An early example occurred in the second scene of the first act, when the eye of the playgoer was immediately struck by the impressiveness of the setting, the great hall of the castle of Kronberg. The groundplan in the promptbook indicates that the full depth of the stage was used, with painted wings and backdrop defining a large space within Gothic arches and columns. Tapestries painted colorfully with figures and groups from Danish military history were hung about the walls, and two gilded thrones placed at an angle were located left on a stepped dais. The brilliantly colored tapestries and chairs of state were said to effectively contrast with the rustic browns and grays of the architecture (*Daily News*).¹⁷ This difference was rendered still more vivid with the sudden arrival of the court—over fifty in all—costumed in bright colors. The quick tempo of the movements and the vibrancy of the visual spectacle gen-

¹⁴ Accounts, HRC.

¹⁵ *The Theatre* (January 1884), pp. 47–48.

¹⁶ Hesketh Pearson, *GBS—A Full Length Portrait* (New York, 1942), 138.

¹⁷ Reviews hereafter cited in the text include: (all 1884 except where noted) *The Athenaeum*, 25 October; *Daily News*, 17 October; *Daily Telegraph*, 17 October; *The Entr'Acte*, 25 October; *The Era*, 17 October; *The Illustrated London News*, 25 October; *Life* [London], 16 October; *Morning Post*, 17 October; *The Nation*, 6 November; *The New York Times*, 5 April 1887; *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 9 March 1894; *Punch*, 25 October; *The Stage*, 24 October; *The Theatre*, 1 November; *The Times*, 17 October; *To-Day*, 1 November; *The World*, 22 October. Other published accounts of the production include: William Winter, *Shadows of the Stage* (New York, 1893), II, 339–58; Clement Scott, *Some Notable Hamlets* (1900; rpt., New York, 1969), pp. 104 ff; Charlotte Porter, "Wilson Barrett's *Hamlet*," *Shakespeareana*, 4 (1887), 29–40. Reviewers or publications are cited in the text, but not dates.



"Alas! Poor Yorick." Engraving from *The Illustrated London News*, 1 November 1884, p. 428.

erated a deliberately gaudy effect, dramatically counterpointing the solemn opening moments of the play. The occasion of the scene was conceived by Barrett to be the announcement of the betrothal of the King and Queen and as such the dominant mood was brisk and human, not funereal. This mood, a new one for the play at this moment, was to mark the rest of the drama's action.

The play scene (III.ii) was another interesting point in the production for several reasons, including Barrett's decision to set it in an outdoor courtyard at night, illuminated by several dozen torches. This was an elaborate "set scene" needing extra time for arrangement by the stagehands, so Barrett hit upon the novel idea of breaking up the scene into two parts (III.i and III.ii) and playing the first part ("A View Near the Castle") as a "front scene" with characters depicted on their way to the play. This decision preserved the element of surprise as the drop in the first grooves was raised at the end of the scene, revealing the second scene already in place with

actors. It was a striking picture: an inner open courtyard of the castle with a backdrop showing moonlit sea, surrounded by dark fir trees which created a dramatic transition from the backdrop to the Gothic architecture of the castle walls. The variety of light created by the flickering torches, the phantasmagoria of color and sound created by more than fifty actors, and the sheer size of the scene made an exciting contrast to the traditional indoor staging (*Daily Telegram*). The whole stage was used. A temporary platform was erected upstage left between two fir trees with a curtain drawn across. The King and Queen sat upon a stone bench placed at an angle center right, while Hamlet and Ophelia were on a similar bench upstage center between the King and the stage. This arrangement allowed Hamlet to observe the actions of the King and the players without sprawling unceremoniously on the ground. The setting also sharpened the significance of the mimed drama, which now was acted in the very garden where the actual murder took place.

Another striking effect was achieved at the climax of the scene, when the King jumped to his feet distressed at what he saw before him. At this moment there was pandemonium on stage and a confused withdrawal of the entire court while trumpets sounded offstage warnings. The sudden emptying of the Princess's stage, the silence, and the darkness caused by the departure of the torchbearers made this an exciting moment (*Shakespeareiana*). Then Barrett extended the excitement into the second, more private, part of the scene. He avoided Irving's example of rushing for the King's throne, choosing instead to leap upon the players' stage with hysterical exclamations of triumph. Hamlet's whole being had been intent upon the performance, so it was logical and theatrically telling for Barrett to focus his attention on the acting platform before him.

Barrett's production was marked consistently by careful attention to detail, so it is understandable that he would take equal care to develop a working text appropriate to his conception and mounting of the play. *Hamlet* was among the least doctored of Shakespeare's plays, yet the standard acting edition was still different from the version he eventually used and considerably different from the 1864 Globe edition, the first printed full edition. Barrett admitted that tradition was important, claiming to have seen every major *Hamlet* produced during his lifetime, but he also said that blind adherence was as invaluable as "the grain of wheat in a bushel of chaff, hardly worth the finding" (*Times Picayune*). The result was a new arrangement of the play based upon what Barrett believed was a view unhindered by useless custom. He did this by casting aside his own preconceptions of the role as it had been handed down to him—and, incidentally, as he had acted it himself in the provinces during his apprenticeship—and then taking up the play fresh, as if it were a recent composition by an unknown author.¹⁸ It was unheard of for any actor-manager to treat a classic in this manner.

Barrett's contributions to the script began with rearranging certain acts and scenes, striving for a clean, smooth, and swiftly moving story line in a play not com-

¹⁸ Wilson Barrett, "Hamlet," *Lippincott's*, 45 (April 1890), 580-88. Barrett probably used a combination of the 1864 Globe edition, edited by W.G. Clark and W.A. Wright (later revised as the Cambridge edition), together with the F.J. Furnivall edition of Shakespeare's plays in quartos, published beginning in 1880.

monly noted for its structural clarity. Act I adhered to the accepted pattern of action, leaving out Reynaldo, Cornelius, and Voltimand and thereby stripping the play of its public implications. The traditional action was also kept for most of act II, but at the end of Globe II Barrett started to show some individuality of thought. George Furnivall had founded The New Shakespeare Society in 1877, and Barrett apparently found the published transactions of the Society valuable sources of information about the play. Edward Rose argued that the traditional act divisions of the play were too arbitrary and structurally weakened the play.¹⁹ He suggested also that Shakespeare's acts were intended to be entities, not parcels of piecemeal action, and that his plays demonstrated an inherent five-part structure that always followed the same outline. The pattern, Rose said, was this: first, everything laid out; second, the beginning of the working out; third, the biggest event; fourth, more working out; and fifth, the conclusions. *Hamlet*, Rose stated, demonstrated an identical pattern of action: first, everything to do with the ghost; second, Hamlet's "madness" and the King's adjustment to it; third, "one tremendous night"; fourth, miscellaneous intermediate incidents; and fifth, the ends of all things. Furnivall was not comfortable with some of Rose's ideas, but did agree that the concept was sound. Barrett seemed to take this to heart, for he followed Rose's plan throughout his production.

The first effect of following Rose appears at the junction of Globe II and III, the moment of the "rogue and peasant slave" speech after the exit of the players. Barrett did not end his act there, but continued uninterrupted into the next actions. Irving and his predecessors had capitalized without exception on the emotional intensity of the "rogue and peasant slave" speech, choosing to end the act with the dramatic line, "The play's the thing. . . ." Barrett avoided the curtain on this speech and allowed the act to end more appropriately after the Hamlet-Ophelia scene on the King's telling line. "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go." In this way the entire second act was taken up with Hamlet's "madness" and the King's reaction to it, as Rose suggested.

Barrett continued his innovations through Globe III and IV as well, abandoning the customary end of III (at the close of the Queen's closet scene) and continuing the action through the traditional IV.i, ii, and iii. Barrett's act IV began at Globe IV.v. Again, this arrangement shifted emphasis from Hamlet himself to the plot, as Barrett avoided the traditional "point" of ending act III with Hamlet dragging Polonius's body out of the Queen's chamber. Instead, the act again ended with the emotions of the King, "Do it, England," thus rounding out the events of the evening in which Claudius discovers Hamlet's purpose. Barrett then opened his act IV with a new situation, the madness of Ophelia, centering the act around the effects of Polonius's death upon his children. (Fortinbras was omitted from the play entirely.)

Barrett's act V was virtually the traditional one, save for the fact that Barrett staged Osric's invitation to the duel as a "front scene" because of the need to set the full stage for the finale.

¹⁹ Edward Rose, "The Division into Acts of *Hamlet*," *Transactions of the New Shakespeare Society*, 5 (1877-1879), 1-10.



"Pray can I not . . ." Mr. Willard as Claudius, engraving from *The Illustrated London News*, 1 November 1884, p. 428.

Audiences at the Princess's included the aristocracy, members of the middle class, and working people whose loyalty to Barrett and faith in his work had elevated him to a high position. The diversity of the audience made for a democratic blend of tastes. It was logical, therefore, that Barrett would try to work out a version of the play free from ambiguity and appealing to a wide spectrum of sensibilities. Clearly, his innovative restructuring of the act divisions was one of the most effective means he employed. The chronology of the story was improved while respect for the script was maintained, even at the expense of showy curtain speeches for the star. Moreover, the restructuring had the added effect of making the entire action more natural and understandable. Barrett exploited Rose's ideas and proved they could work in production. Critics were unanimous in their approval.

But not all the clarity Barrett achieved was the result of new act divisions. He also restored to the text lines left out by generations of actor-managers, perhaps his most noteworthy contribution. The Lacy (later Samuel French) edition was the common acting version for most professional productions of Shakespeare in 1880. With additional cuts, it was essentially the same as the versions used by Irving, Charles Kean, and their contemporaries. Barrett abandoned Lacy and returned to the first quarto and folio. It was no secret that in the hands of previous actor-managers *Hamlet* had been so bowdlerized and concentrated over the years that it had become virtually a one-character play. Barrett reversed this trend by returning a great deal of dialogue to the King and to Laertes, and by doing so he restored much of the dramatic density we admire today.

The character of the King benefited from dialogue restored in the first court scene; in his plotting with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in II.ii (Globe II.ii and III.i) and III.i, ii, and iii (Globe III.iii and iv); and in his plotting with Laertes in IV (Globe IV.v, vi, and vii). Barrett restored 208 lines to the Lacy version of these scenes; an astonishing 446 lines to Irving's version.²⁰ Laertes was treated as generously, for his important scenes grew proportionately to those of Claudius. Barrett's version of Laertes's farewell scene, for example, was an improvement of thirty-four lines over Lacy, seventy-six over Irving. Laertes also shared with the King in the restoration of lines in Ophelia's mad scene and announced death in IV (Globe IV.v and vii).

The following table compares Barrett's text with the Lacy and Globe editions as well as with those versions used by Irving and Booth.

<i>Globe</i> <i>Act/Scene</i>		<i>Lacy</i>	<i>Globe</i>	<i>Irving</i>	<i>Booth</i>	<i>Barrett</i>	
I	i	105	175	104	122	105	
	ii	202	258	198	227	233	
	iii	94	136	77	128	112	
	iv	51	91	68	67	67	
	v	170	190	94	167	180	
	total	622	850	541	711	697	
II	i	32	120	54	33	36	
	ii	556	634	450	463	556	
	total	588	754	504	496	(592)	Barrett's Act II 777 ll.
III	i	175	196	174	185	185	
	ii	329	417	327	371	92	
	iii	46	98	61	77	231	
	iv	137	217	145	144	82	
	total	687	928	707	777	165	Barrett's Act III 663 ll.
IV	i	22	45	0	0	93	
	ii	0	33	0	0		
	iii	48	70	0	49		
	iv	0	66	0	0	0	
	v	151	218	125	125	182	
	vi	32	33	0	0	30	
	vii	97	195	75	75	148	
	total	350	660	200	249	453	
V	i	291	322	312	286	284	
	ii	198	236	111	167	101	
	total	489	558	95	98	133	scene 2 divided into two sections
	play total	2736	3750	2470	2784	3015	

²⁰ Information about Irving's production from Agnes J.L. Enggass, "A Reconstruction of the *Hamlet* Productions of Sir Henry Irving" (diss., U. of Mich., 1977).

In all, Barrett's version was an improvement of 279 lines over Lacy, 230 lines over Booth's, and 540 lines over Irving's.

There were some who were disdainful of Barrett's efforts to restore the text to an approximation of its original status. With typical Victorian prejudice, William Winter, for instance, thought that all the emphasis should have remained on Hamlet and not on supporting roles, whose story, Winter declared, "lacked absorbing interest." On the whole, however, public response to the new acting version was favorable. Barrett did not sacrifice Shakespeare's meaning in order to make the play into a solo performance; he saw that Hamlet was simply one character out of many in the story. A considerable amount of importance was now placed on the other chief characters in the play, but the public was most surprised by the new King they saw. For the first time in two hundred years Claudius was returned to the position in which Shakespeare placed him, the "chief antagonist, villain, and thwarter of the hero."²¹ Never before in remembered stage history had Claudius been allowed to show how dramatically effective he could become. There was a deeper meaning to Barrett's version as well: artistic self-sacrifice. More than one of his restorations had the effect of reducing the stage opportunities for the actor playing Hamlet. This had been done by no other actor of his time. Fair minded observers were grateful to Barrett for working so conscientiously on the play and for restoring to it the vigor and spirit that Shakespeare intended. In a letter to Barrett, Sir Theodore Martin, husband of actress Helene Faucit, agreed: "We were greatly struck by the admirable fairness—so rare these days—with which every character in the piece was allowed full sway."²²

The character of Hamlet has provoked more discussion than any other in the whole range of drama, but with only a bowdlerized text to consult in 1884, discussion of any "new" interpretation could only have been one actor's variations on one character. Barrett's study of the full texts prompted his belief that the play turned on the incestuous intercourse of the Queen with Claudius, and that old Hamlet's murder was undertaken to protect this relationship.²³ Such an interpretation could have come about only from seeing the play whole. In this way, Barrett's was a new interpretation. Moreover, now that much more of the script was there to work with, a complex texture of motives could be determined that would give the production an artistic unity seldom achieved before. A review of the motives explains Barrett's dramatic scheme for the production.

Barrett blamed those who debated Hamlet's "madness" for constantly resorting to their own theories instead of the text, thinking it unlikely that Shakespeare would have made both his hero and heroine insane. Obviously, he argued, dramatic interest would be negated if this were so. Barrett pointed out that Hamlet is never mad in

²¹ George C. Odell, *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving* (New York, 1920), II, 398.

²² Sir Theodore Martin to Wilson Barrett (21 February 1885), HRC.

²³ Barrett's ideas about *Hamlet* are summarized in the *New Orleans Times Picayune* and Barrett "Hamlet" as well as in "Mr. Wilson Barrett on the Character of Hamlet," *The Scotsman*, 9 December 1887, and "On Hamlet's Age," *Shakespeareana*, 3 (1886), 584–86.

soliloquy or with Horatio and, further, that there is no reference to madness at all until Hamlet announces his intentions in I.v to put on an "antic disposition." Barrett reasoned that Hamlet, after seeing the ghost, quickly determines to revenge the murder. He knows that Claudius is guilty; he has just been told so. And he knows further that his life would be in danger if the King should learn of his knowledge. Therefore Hamlet pretends madness to lull the suspicions of the King and swears Horatio and Marcellus to silence since they are the only ones who know of the ruse. Barrett believed that Shakespeare considered this action so important that he brought the ghost back twice to reaffirm the pledge. Barrett also pointed out that Hamlet pledges his mother to the same cause during the closet scene. Even the King, after watching Hamlet in II.ii (Globe III.i), declares that Hamlet is not mad.

Barrett carried out this idea in production by stressing in I.v, for example, not so much Hamlet's emotional wildness (though he did execute this effectively), but Hamlet's quick intelligence and his princely control of the situation. Such action is not commonly associated with the character at this point in the play, but various observers testified that Barrett successfully communicated his intentions here (*The Era*).

Barrett's extensive restructuring of the traditional acting version also led him to believe that far too much emphasis had been placed by his predecessors on Hamlet's indecision and inaction, only two sides of what he believed was a many-sided character. Barrett saw in Hamlet a remarkable quickness and decision. He pointed out, for example, that as soon as Horatio tells Hamlet of the appearance of the ghost, Hamlet begins cross-examining his friend with the alertness of a courtroom lawyer. The facts of the incident are rapidly brought out and Hamlet immediately decides to watch that very night. Moreover, quick decisiveness is also part of Hamlet's staging of the play, his killing of Polonius, and his dismissal of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in England. Hamlet, Barrett continued, is also first to board the pirate ship. And finally, since all the actions in Barrett's production were declared to take place over a brief period of six weeks, Hamlet's execution of the revenge under the circumstances is exceptionally swift.

Goethe was probably the person responsible for the notion of a pale, wavering Hamlet, first by influencing the German theatre, then later the European theatre, and finally the English. According to Ellen Terry, Irving himself wore pale makeup in the role. All the same, a tradition of heroic Hamlets had persisted in spite of the romantic attraction of melancholy. Charles Fechter presented the picture of a bustling, cheery man of the world in the early 1860s, and even Edwin Booth, Charles Shattuck points out, avoided making the role mysterious because he wanted to have it "crystal clear to every hearer."²⁴ Barrett later supported this dimension of his interpretation with evidence from Betterton's performance. In fact, Restoration interpretations of virile, active Hamlets may have been closer to the tradition of the original productions because the heroic actions, not the profound thought, of Shakespeare was what the first players hoped to present.²⁵ For Barrett, the result was that

²⁴ Charles H. Shattuck, *The Hamlet of Edwin Booth* (Urbana, Ill., 1969), p. xxiii.

²⁵ Harold Child, "The Stage History of Hamlet," in *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, J. Dover Wilson, ed. (Cambridge, 1954), pp. lxix-xcvii.

he did not weigh down the production with Hamlet's private troubles, and the unknown quantity in the character was reduced to a minimum. There was no evidence of John Philip Kemble's funereal plumes, of Irving's wan sadness, or of the old picture of melancholy Hamlet by Sir Thomas Lawrence so cherished by English actors. Here instead, said Charlotte Porter in *Shakespeariana*, was a quick, passionate, and impetuous hero, earnest and determined, full of tender and lovable qualities, quick to forgive and forget, and, most important, ruthless toward the murderer of his father. Some important critics, notably those of the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Era*, were not persuaded, however, because they felt this interpretation left insufficient room for Hamlet's traditional and popular depression. They argued that Barrett simply forgot to be reflective and that consequently the character's poetic side was lost.

Following a line in the gravedigger's scene, most commentators fix Hamlet's age at thirty, but Barrett, with characteristic independence of thought, believed this conception to be detrimental to Shakespeare's intentions. Barrett stated that the gravedigger's reference to having been sexton, man and boy, for thirty years was introduced for the convenience of Richard Burbage, who originated the role and who was unlikely to have been able to act the youthful prince. Barrett used the same argument to explain away the Queen's line in V.iii (Globe V.ii), "Our son is fat and scant of breath." Further, Barrett contended that according to the ghost the incestuous relationship between Claudius and Gertrude had been going on during old Hamlet's life. If this were the case, then Gertrude must have been an attractive, sensuous woman of forty or so. Barrett therefore concluded that Hamlet was young (and, incidentally, that Gertrude and Claudius were in the full glow of middle age) and that Shakespeare meant him to be so. The word "young" is used in reference to Hamlet numerous times throughout the play, just as it is with the characters of Orlando and Romeo, both of whom are almost always played young. Horatio refers to "young" Hamlet; it is a young Hamlet who wishes to return to school in Wittenberg; and it is a young Hamlet who has not yet attained his majority and is therefore not on the throne. In I.iii, Laertes, with typical condescension, speaks to Ophelia of a Hamlet who is a "youth" with his soul still growing, while Polonius warns her of the same thing later in the scene. Barrett cited other examples from the text to support his claim, but perhaps the most telling evidence was found in a *Tattler* review which contained some of the first detailed criticism of any English actor in the part.²⁶ The *Tattler* critic observed that though Thomas Betterton was about seventy-six at the time, in his farewell performance as Hamlet he played youth and that "by the prevalent power of proper manner, gesture, and voice [he] appeared through the whole drama a youth of great expectations, vivacity, and enterprise." Had Barrett needed other evidence outside the script, he might have cited also Richard Burbage's funeral elegy, which mentions among his roles "young Hamlet," and the Saxo-Grammaticus legend, which maintains that Hamlet was about twenty.

But despite such careful logic, Barrett's portrayal of youthfulness fell short of critics' expectations. *The Era* pointed out that Barrett made every effort to stress youth, that he acted briskly, and that every character in the play who had to call Hamlet

²⁶ *The Tattler* (20 September 1709).

"young" seemed to accent the designation. Barrett was thirty-eight in 1884, however, so it seems doubtful that this particular dimension of his interpretation was effectively achieved in performance. *The New York Times* critic commented that Barrett's ideas about Hamlet's youth were "made much more prominent in the newspaper interviews than in his performance." Winter agreed, writing that Barrett looked like "a full grown athletic man, trying to make himself boyish by acting in an alert manner."

In I, iv and v Barrett showed best how he worked out his interpretation in performance. Scene iv, Hamlet's first introduction to the ghost, revealed the same setting as that of scene i: a "set scene" featuring a high stone rampart with an open portcullis leading offstage left. Green shades over the gas jets lent a spectral mood to the picture. In direct opposition to Irving's quiet and still observation in the opening moments of this scene, Barrett revealed something of Hamlet's urgent sense of anticipation by pacing anxiously and apprehensively prior to the appearance of the ghost on the ramparts above.

The moment of Hamlet's first encounter with the ghost has been a time-honored point in the play throughout the ages, as it illustrates the specific quality of the relationship that existed between Hamlet and his father. At the words "Angels and ministers of grace defend us," which Irving spoke bravely and with confidence, Barrett collapsed and fell to his knees. The quality of this extreme reaction was shown in more detail during Hamlet's first long speech to the ghost (ll. 39-57). Here Barrett strongly emphasized Hamlet's heroic devotion, thus stressing the idea of revenge. He was by no means the first to choose this interpretation of the scene. Charles Kean was the most recent of his predecessors who had, but the custom of drawing attention to the devotion inherent in the father-son affiliation can be traced back through Edwin Booth at least as far as Edmund Kean, who showed deep pathos when his Hamlet learned the ghost was his father. Barrett, however, was far more radical than previous actors: his Hamlet, kneeling, cried, "I'll call thee—Hamlet, King . . . FATHER . . . Royal Dane," and *The Era* critic observed that the agony of Barrett's broken voice on the word "father" caused considerable stir in the audience. Barrett's conception of the role was recognized at that moment: revenge prompted by conspicuous, ardent, and determined filial love. Irving's emphasis here was on "Royal Dane," a further indication of the disparity between the two interpretations.

Barrett's interpretation was reinforced in scene v, whose setting revealed a different rampart located at a remoter part of the castle bordering upon the sea. The ghost appeared within a transparency inside the rampart walls, while Hamlet appeared atop and stepped down to the stage as he spoke his first lines. The father-son theme was accented again as Barrett sighed and fell to his knees when the filial relationship was mentioned. A second theme was introduced when Barrett sighed deeply at his discovery of the adulterous and incestuous relationship between Claudius and Gertrude; Barrett then fell completely prone as the ghost bemoaned the superficial virtue of his former queen. Ongoing adultery was not stressed in other productions, so the implications of Gertrude and Claudius fondling each other affectionately in later scenes were not lost on Victorian audiences.

More of Barrett's intentions were brought out in the soliloquy immediately following the departure of the ghost (ll. 92-112). The first was Hamlet's extreme physical weakness as a result of the news of the adultery: he remained prone for several lines and rose only with great difficulty. Then, supporting himself as best he could by the rampart walls, he launched into such a terrible tirade of anger that he was barely able to stand up under the strain. It was obvious that his sense of vengeance had been pricked. There were a few complaints by critics about Barrett's ineffectiveness at this point, but most observers thought he was impressive and fresh (*The Stage*). After all, this action was intended by Barrett to carefully call attention to the inciting action of his production. Virtually no modern actor laid as much stress on this dimension of the play, and few actors could have illustrated it as successfully as Barrett, with his broad training in the strenuous melodramatic style. Odell points out that the roots of realistic English acting tradition lay with the "gentlemanly melodramas," especially those performed by Charles Kean. These plays were relatively new to the English stage, so no formal acting tradition existed as for Shakespeare and the classics, and they therefore could be approached less explosively, more prosaically than the traditional style. Barrett's wife was a specialist in this manner of acting, probably learned while acting in Kean's company at the Princess's. Barrett himself excelled at this kind of melodramatic acting, and, if critics' comments can be properly deciphered, it seems likely that he was attempting to carry on the traditions of Kean and Fechter by adapting the style of his acting in *Hamlet* to that of middle class melodrama.

Barrett's approach was exemplified by his vocal manner, especially in the soliloquies. Those critics unable to perceive the style called it spiritless and unpoetic, that is, untraditional. They complained that Barrett's delivery "jarred the ears of Shakespeare lovers" (*The Stage*). On the other hand, a few reviewers recognized that Barrett was doing something new, and they treated the production more disinterestedly, although reluctantly. The critic of *The Illustrated London News*, for example, observed that "the magnificent speeches [he] delivers easily, gracefully, and, as it were, incidentally." Barrett's speaking style was actually an extension of his approach to the acting of the entire play, which was easy, natural, and untraditional throughout. Representative illustrations of this occurred during "To be or not to be . . .," which Barrett delivered leaning against a table, and during Hamlet's philosophical discourse with the gravedigger, which Barrett spoke reclining on the stone steps of a large cross. The critic for *The Nation* commented that Barrett "ventured far more freely than his predecessors upon the use of the familiar style; he is more of a man like ourselves than an incarnate psychological problem." Playwright Bronson Howard perceived the same thing and wrote in a letter to Barrett; "For the first time in my life I felt last night that Hamlet was one of us—a real, breathing and feeling human being—and not a poetic-philosophical myth."²⁷

Observations about the actors with whom Barrett shared the stage affirm the

²⁷ Bronson Howard to Wilson Barrett (25 October 1884), HRC.

general style of the production. The ghost, played by John Dewhurst, was a very "ordinary looking" individual who moved and spoke colloquially, "more friendly than formidable" (*Punch*). Horatio, acted by John R. Crauford, was "insubstantial" (*The Entr'acte*) and "lacking in poetry" (*The Stage*). Critics for *To-Day* and *The Stage* felt that Frank Cooper's Laertes was "colorless" and "unimpressive." Furthermore, the same pattern of naturalness was exhibited with Gertrude, whom Winter declared was untraditionally "soft, sensuous, and vain," and with Claudius, whose portrayal, *The Era* observed, was "altogether opposed to tradition." According to Winter, "There was nothing of the heavy tragedian business in [Claudius's] embodiment." Cautious criticism might take these comments at face value, yet their common factor—natural and unaffected ease of manner—seems to indicate that a valuable example of style-making was taking place. Barrett was extending his artistic intentions into the acting of every member of his company.

Apart from staging, text, and interpretation, a few of Barrett's readings also proved interesting. In the very first line that Hamlet speaks, for instance, a reading new to the Victorian stage was given. After the King finishes addressing Laertes in I.ii, he turns to Hamlet and says, "but now my cousin Hamlet, and my son," to which Hamlet answers, "A little more than kin and less than kind." Barrett pronounced the "i" in "kind" short, as in the word "him" and as in the German word for child. This pronunciation still had currency in certain rural districts of Great Britain and for this reason several critics liked it, but when Barrett used the same reading in the "rogue and peasant slave" speech, referring to Claudius as the "kindless villain," critics were less enthusiastic. Another unusual first act reading occurred on the ramparts in scene iv, where instead of saying "The air bites shrewdly. It is very cold," Barrett adopted the first folio question mark: "Is it very cold?" Later, in the "To be or not to be" speech, he adopted "seige" for "sea of troubles," and in the play scene he answered the king's question about the title of the play by quipping, "The mouse trap. Marry, how? Trapically." These readings and others like them throughout the play seem to indicate that, in some instances, Barrett was more showman than artist, striving after novelty for its own sake. He was correct in guessing that various first quarto and first folio readings like these would stir attention in tradition-minded London audiences, but the decision backfired when some critics were put off by Barrett's verbal quirks.

Barrett added several pieces of stage business more to the point of his conception than his eccentric readings. The first of any importance occurred in II. ii (Globe III. i) during Hamlet's first scene with Ophelia, when two separate and distinct appearances behind the arras betrayed the presence of both Claudius and Polonius. Acted as it had been in the past, with only a suspicion of their presence, the scene made Hamlet seem unnecessarily cruel to Ophelia, but by allowing the audience to actually see the villains' faces, Hamlet's bitter tone gained significance.²⁸ Two equally effective pieces of business took place after the play scene, when Barrett leaped

²⁸ It is hard to believe that Barrett invented this business, yet among others William Winter and critics for *The Athenaeum*, *The Stage*, *To-Day*, *Shakespeariana*, *The Era*, and *The Illustrated London News* considered this to be the case.

upon the players' stage in a fit of victory and when Barrett used the restored "wild words" to break down, dropping his head on Horatio's shoulder for comfort. Barrett's business with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the recorder followed, and deserves attention not only because of its quiet restraint but because of its singular difference from Irving's business. In one tradition, the star actor broke the recorder over his knee and threw it in order to emphasize Hamlet's sarcasm. Irving resisted breaking it, but did fling the recorder mightily across the stage. Barrett, with perhaps more natural insight, simply handed the instrument to Horatio with the courtesy of a well-bred gentleman (*Some Notable Hamlets*). This moment was spoiled for the *To-Day* reviewer, however, because of its obvious "antagonism" to Irving's business.

More new business was introduced after Hamlet dismisses his two friends and is left alone in the garden. At this moment Barrett looked around cautiously, whipped out his sword, and ran it several times before him into the shadows of the archway where he was about to depart. Then, with sword drawn he went off to meet his mother. *The Stage* and *Shakespeariana* described this business as exciting and innovative, but they could have pointed out as well that it served to foretell the development of Hamlet's character. William Winter once again balked, this time because he felt that the business "lowered the tone of the situation." Hamlet's inner life was shown with even more force during the "picture" sequence within the queen's chambers. Here Barrett avoided the traditional practices of either imagining the portraits or utilizing picture lockets. He did wear his father's picture, but at this moment of intense anger he seized a framed portrait of Claudius from a table, threw it to the ground, then stamped on it violently. He repeated the action a few minutes later when (in Barrett's staging) Hamlet was brought back into the same room to face the wrath of the king. In this scene Barrett also held his picture locket up to the king's face contemptuously, forcing the king to recoil in horror.

Even though many of Barrett's readings may have been motivated by novelty, the new business was not, for it gave more evidence of a clear working out of his planned conception. Barrett's Hamlet was an intense, energetic, and vengeful prince and the new business was carefully plotted to visually declare this.

E. W. Godwin, *Hamlet's* designer and a close friend of William Gorman Wills, first met Barrett in 1878 on the occasion of Wills's second play for Barrett, *Juana*, produced at the Royal Court in 1879 and designed by Godwin. Half-means were not enough for Godwin: he sought to create in his scenery and costume designs for *Hamlet* "an image of the time in all its bearings" (*Life*). Irving had not fussed over historical accuracy; he seemed pleased enough to obtain a visual effect consonant with Shakespeare's poetry, and sought designs which were harmonious, simple, and not overly expensive. Barrett's intentions, were they known, were likely to have been similar, but in carrying them out he yielded a good deal more freedom to his designer than Irving did. Barrett even accepted advice from Godwin as to groupings and certain points of acting.

Despite appearances Godwin was not, of course, a designer in the modern sense. He did create water color renderings from which the costumes were made, but he did

not actually "design" the settings. Most likely, he drew informal sketches to which were added notes about color and architectural detail. The execution of the designs was firmly in the hands of Barrett's staff of scene painters, far better versed than Godwin in the exigencies of the stage.

Appropriately enough, critics' comments about the settings and costumes were divided between the imaginative visual ideas (not well received by all) and the execution of the ideas (almost unanimously praised). The opinions of the critic for *The Stage* were typical of the antagonistic responses. He regretted that "picturesque effect [had] been sacrificed in order to obtain absolute [archeological] correctness." He agreed with others who wished that the idealized scenic tradition had remained intact. *The Era* reviewer declared that Barrett's adventure into antiquity was "ugly" and "grotesque," and that the costumes and scenery destroyed the play's intimate poetry. Victorian moralism was demonstrated by the critic of *The Athenaeum* who was genuinely shocked at Barrett's décolleté, an effect, said the observer, "wholly unsuited to artistic effect as well as to the Northern latitudes." On the other hand, there was little adverse criticism of the scene painting or costume pageantry. *The Daily News*, for example, reported that *Hamlet* was an "infinitely pleasurable" visual experience. "In all spectacular aspects," argued the critic for *The Morning Post*, "the representation was the finest ever given." A modern eye sees substantial Victorian prejudice in remarks about ugliness in Godwin's work. The truth is that in a few fastidious observers the shock of a new locale and costumes clouded artistic sensibility. For the remainder of the playgoers, the majority of the audience, the scenery and costumes were fresh, impressive, and artistically executed. This would be more consistent with what is known of Godwin's and Barrett's work in earlier days at the Princess's and elsewhere.

Hamlet played at the Princess's from 16 October 1884 through 21 February 1885, a total of 18 weeks or 110 performances. Unfortunately, the extraordinarily high production costs, coupled with Barrett's very understandable desire to extend the run as long as possible beyond the magic 100 nights, resulted in losses of nearly £5000. Weekly expenses of £1204 were several hundred pounds more than *Lights o' London* or *The Silver King*, and average weekly receipts were significantly below Princess's standards. Barrett would have lost considerably less if he had stopped the run at the end of 60 nights, after which time attendance dropped drastically.

Barrett fared only somewhat better regarding the impact of his interpretation on future productions. Something of his heroism was retained by Beerbohm Tree in his 1892 Haymarket production, while Barrett's example of a sensuous, middle-aged king and queen continued both in Tree's and Johnston Forbes-Robertson's 1897 Lyceum version, though with less effect in each case. (Several of the actors in Barrett's original company performed roles in these later productions.) As for public response, critics for *The Morning Post* and *To-Day* contended that Barrett's *Hamlet* would eventually occupy a conspicuous place in the history of the play, and reviewers in *The Academy*, *The Era*, *Shakespeariana*, *The Entr'acte*, and *The Nation*, among others, found enough that was striking in the production to promise what they hoped would be its success. But on the whole, Barrett's *Hamlet* had currency

only among the class of playgoers unschooled in the finer points of traditional theatrical performance. Rightly or wrongly, critics with more influence among the theatrical leadership were offended by what they perceived as an excess of bluntness and "barbarism" in Barrett's interpretation. "Too modern," *The Athenaeum* critic concluded, meaning 'too unconventional.'

It is regrettable that this interpretation was not supported by a greater actor than Wilson Barrett, whose technique simply was not up to his conception. Clement Scott in *The Daily Telegraph* commented that Barrett's was more a production for the ear than for the heart, for the eye more than the intellect. But even Scott had to agree that the production was "vastly in advance of the mouthing and attitudinizing *Hamlets* of other days." There is more to be gained, therefore, from an understanding of the production's implications than from analyzing the specifics of the performance, imaginative as they may have been.

Perhaps the main characteristic of the interpretation was that Barrett took up the play new, examined hundreds of perplexing questions, and settled them for himself with intelligence and insight. Almost all his ideas were excellent, and what straining after effect there was may be said to have come from his desire not to be the slave of tradition. His *Hamlet* was truly what Charlotte Porter declared in *Shakespeariana*: "the boldest and the most triumphantly successful" that had been seen for many years in London. Henry Irving's did not differ much from tradition. Dutton Cook called Irving's "substantially . . . the ordinary *Hamlet*, of the stage . . . [with the addition of the actor's] peculiarities of manner"²⁹ Barrett's, however, was not the poet's or the philosopher's *Hamlet*, but neither was it the intellectual's, the prompter's, or the star actor's. Many believed it was Shakespeare's. *The Times* observed that Barrett had taken a tragedy which to many had become stilted, artificial, and even dowdy on stage, and transformed it into "an interesting panorama, full of colour, movement, and human nature." One of the stage's most poetic plays received an imaginative new illustration and new vitality, but equally important, the audience was stirred to the perception of new beauties in the play. The result was that, unlike other *Hamlets* rooted in tradition and, in effect, isolated from the world, Barrett's production had about it some of the atmosphere of change then taking place in the theatre. According to *The Theatre*, Barrett's interpretation was the kind "for which the taste of the day was pining." This melodramatic actor's physical sensuousness was probably a popular and effective antidote to the climate of empty aesthetic tradition and excessive intellectuality attached to the classics. "For a season," exclaimed Odell, "it seemed as if a new tragic actor had arisen and a new face had been brought into the dying places of the drama."³⁰

All the same, Barrett's fortunes following *Hamlet* were not as bright as the quality of that production might have warranted. A disastrous series of plays followed on the stage of the Princess's and these, combined with a large stock investment loss

²⁹ Dutton Cook, "Irving in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," in *Specimens of English Dramatic Criticism*, Alfred Charles Ward, ed. (London, 1945), p. 163.

³⁰ Odell, p. 381.

and the bad opinion of influential pro-Irving critics,³¹ forced Barrett out of London management and into the life of an itinerant international touring star. He tried several times in later years to reestablish his place in London theatre, even repeating *Hamlet* (less successfully, with a different cast) in 1891, but he failed to garner the necessary support until his astonishing success in 1896 with *The Sign of the Cross*—a play he wrote, directed, and starred in. Unfortunately for him, by this time imaginatively staged spectacular melodrama was dying as a genre (later to move into films), while highbrow cabals persistently dissuaded him from attempting the better classics. Barrett finished his career in 1904, wealthy and still trying to hold onto his position, but never regained the measure of artistic success he had with *Hamlet*.

³¹ For an interesting and informative overview of the late Victorian stage and its theatre cabals see Philip Amory, "Mr. and Mrs. John Bull Pretend," *The Comet* (May 1897), 30–43.

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