

‘The vehicle he has chosen’: Pointing out the theatricality of *Caleb Williams*

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Available online 8 August 2006

Abstract

This article challenges the critical view that Godwin’s association with the theatre is limited to the ill-fated *Antonio* (1800), and argues that the theatrical world was extremely important to Godwin the writer and political reformer. It considers *Caleb Williams* (1794) in this theatrical context and suggests a reading of it as a ‘theatrical novel’ in the light of *St. Dunstan* (1790), Godwin’s historical tragedy. It argues that the novel is structured in such a manner that it reflects contemporary dramatic technique, especially in its incorporation of the practice peculiar to the Georgian stage known as ‘pointing’. I will suggest that this deliberate attempt to ‘narrativize’ this performative technique in fictional prose has profound implications in terms of explaining how Godwin saw his novel interact with its reader and is consistent with the philosophy of *Political Justice*.

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Keywords: Godwin; Theatre; Romantic drama; Treason trials

Magnus ab integro seclorum nascitur ordo.

I have been a metaphysician, a political theorist—I have been a writer of fictitious histories & adventures—Enough; let these be dismissed—be now another man—turn your whole thoughts to the buskin & the scene—be that the labour of your being—hoc cura, hoc roga, & omnis in hoc sis!¹

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¹Bodleian Library, Oxford. [Abinger] Dep. b. 229/6. I am grateful to the Bodleian Library for permission to consult and quote from the collection. This fragment is undated but was probably written in 1797, the year *Antonio*, his first produced play, was commenced. The opening Latin quotation is from Virgil’s Eclogue IV (the ‘Messianic’ Eclogue) and can be translated as ‘the great line of centuries begins anew’. Virgil. *Eclogues Georgics Aeneid I–VI*. Trans. H.R. Fairclough. (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 48–49. The second Latin sentence is derived from Horace’s Epistle 1 and literally translates as ‘care for this, demand for this, and be everything in this’. The citation is derived from lines 10–11: ‘Nunc itaque et versus et cetera ludicra pono; /

To the cursory student of Godwin, his association with the theatre is likely to be thought a vicarious one, with the association between him and the stage probably limited to his intimate friendships with contemporary playwrights Thomas Holcroft and Elizabeth Inchbald, or the dramatisation of *Caleb Williams* by George Colman the Younger.² Or perhaps, more ignominiously, they have read Charles Lamb's cringe-inducing account of the dismal failure of his play *Antonio* on its ill-fated first and final performance on the stage of Drury Lane in December 1800.³ However, examining the sale catalogue of Godwin's library on his death in 1836, the number of texts concerned with the drama is eye-catching. There are dozens of works related to the theatre: plays, histories of the drama, biographies of playwrights and actors, anecdotal works, and a number of critical works on the theatre, including some by French and German critics.⁴ His journal too reveals a lifelong interest in the theatre, particularly during his most productive period of the 1790s.⁵ Godwin also wrote at least four plays, was a great admirer of the prominent actors of his day, and theatrical references and quotations sprinkle his entire oeuvre.⁶ He had a wide circle of theatrical acquaintances outside of Holcroft and Inchbald, with many of whom he corresponded: Richard Sheridan, John Kemble, Sarah Siddons, Charles Kemble, Thomas Harris, Robert Merry, Richard Wroughton, and George Colman the Younger amongst others. Thomas Campbell, biographer of Siddons, believed that Godwin was one of the 'most trustworthy lovers of the drama' and continued, 'I shall never forget the pleasure I received from the vivid remarks of this patriarch of our living literature. The freshness of his recollections, and his hearty interest in the history of the stage, are worthy of his gifted genius'.⁷ Theatre permeated Godwin's entire literary life and this essay will try to show how it was of particular concern in the early 1790s when he was at the peak of his fame and powers.

I shall consider *Caleb Williams* in the light of this dramatic background and suggests a reading of it as a theatrical novel. I define a theatrical novel as one that incorporates theatrical conventions to a significant degree and argue that *Caleb Williams* can be considered theatrical for two main reasons: it contains a noticeable amount of dramatic language, allusion, and even plot borrowing (mainly from Shakespeare) and it is structured in such a way that it reflects contemporary dramatic technique, especially in its

(footnote continued)

quid verum atque decens curo et rogo et omnis in hoc sum' which is translated as 'So now I lay aside my verses and all other toys. What is right and seemly is my study and pursuit, and to that I am wholly given'. Horace. *Satires Epistles Ars Poetica*. Trans. H.R. Fairclough. (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926) 250–251. The use of these quotations to cushion his self-exhortation indicates the extent of Godwin's dramatic aspirations. I would like to thank Dr. Bruce Barker-Benfield for his assistance in tracing the Horace quotation.

²*The Iron Chest*. (Drury Lane, 1796).

³Charles Lamb. 'The Old Actors.' *The Works of Charles Lamb*. Ed. E.V. Lucas. 6 vols. (London: Methuen & Co., 1912), II, 322–331.

⁴*Politicians*. Ed. Seamus Deane. *Sale Catalogues of Eminent Persons*. 12 vols. (London: Scolar Press, 1973) 8, 281–318.

⁵At his most intense period of play-going in the late 1790s, Godwin attended the theatre almost seventy times a season. [Abinger] e. 196–205.

⁶The four plays are: *St. Dunstan* (1790); *Antonio* (1800); *Abbas, King of Persia* (1801); *Faulkener* (1807). Of the four only *Antonio* and *Faulkener* were produced. There are only three surviving acts of the five-act *Abbas* which, along with *St. Dunstan*, exists only in manuscript in the Abinger Collection.

⁷Thomas Campbell. *Life of Mrs Siddons*. 2 vols. (London: Effingham Wilson, 1834) I, 189–190.

incorporation of the practice peculiar to the Georgian stage known as 'pointing'. As Burns argues:

Behaviour is not therefore theatrical because it of a certain kind but because the observer recognises certain patterns and sequences which are analogous to those with which he is familiar in the theatre.⁸

I will suggest that this deliberate attempt to 'narrativize', in fictional prose, this performative technique has profound implications in terms of explaining how Godwin saw his novel interact with its reader.

I

Godwin's arrival in London in 1782, where politics and theatre mixed so freely, only increased his youthful interest in drama. His minor novel *Damon and Delia* (1784) demonstrates his aspirations for theatrical success. It contains a thinly disguised autobiographical character named Godfrey, who is not only the intellectual hero of the novel, but also becomes the stage hero of the action by accosting the villain and rescuing the damsel in distress.⁹ Tellingly, the triumphant Godfrey, after having no success in selling his writing previously, succeeds on the stage at the climax of the story:

Think not of me, said Godfrey, I am happy in a way that nature intended, beyond even the power of Damon to make me. Since I saw you, a favourable change has taken place in my circumstances. In spite of various obstacles, I have brought a tragedy upon the stage, and it has met with distinguished success. My former crosses and mortifications are all forgotten. Philosophers may tell us, that reputation, and the immortality of a name, are all but an airy shadow. Enough for me, that nature, from my earliest infancy, led me to place my first delight in these.¹⁰

A witness of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's rise to wealth and fame built on the back of his theatrical background, and of Holcroft's growing reputation, Godwin craved this same success, and in January 1790 began to write a play entitled *St. Dunstan*. Considering Godwin's strong interest in history, it is no surprise that this play was a historical tragedy.

In Godwin's major early work on education, *An Account of the Seminary* (1783), he puts forward his ideas of what should comprise the education of young students. Godwin believed that history should be a major factor in a modern education and that it is intimately related to literature. History 'leads directly to the most important of all attainments, the knowledge of the heart'; it shows us the way forward in science and gives us 'an inextinguishable thirst for literature'.¹¹ It is not surprising that he should hold these views as history was a key subject at Hoxton Academy, and Godwin left there feeling that

⁸Elizabeth Burns. *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*. (New York and London: Harper Torchbooks, 1972) 12.

⁹Peter H. Marshall. *William Godwin*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984) 62; William St. Clair. *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family*. (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1989) 25–26.

¹⁰*Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*. Vol. 2. *Damon and Delia, Italian Letters, Imogen*. Ed. Pamela Clemit. (London: William Pickering, 1992) 75.

¹¹*Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*. Vol. 5. *An Account of the Seminary*. Ed. Pamela Clemit. (London: William Pickering, 1993) 18.

he had a true vocation for its study.¹² For Godwin, history was the *sine qua non* of a complete education, and he also associated the theatre with this educative process.

The association of drama and education in Godwin's thought had its foundation in his close friendship with Thomas Holcroft. Godwin met Holcroft in 1786, becoming close to him in 1788. Holcroft was a major influence on Godwin as he himself acknowledged, particularly in the 1780s before Godwin had made his own name.¹³ Godwin's diary entries during the late 1780s show that the two men almost inseparable, meeting practically every other day at least and dining together very frequently ([Abinger] e. 196–197). The impact of Holcroft's oral instruction on the younger Godwin cannot be overestimated, particularly in the field of drama.

Holcroft claimed that the primary objective for a theatrical piece was as a tool of moral instruction. In his preface to *Duplicity* (Covent Garden, 1781) he argued that he 'would rather have the merit of driving one man from the gaming-table, than of making a whole theatre merry'.¹⁴ He was even more explicit in the preface to *Seduction* (Drury Lane, 1787), writing that it has 'a most powerful and good influence on morals, which encreases [sic] with industry, and as the means of gaining admission among the lower class increase'.¹⁵ Godwin, conscious of the power of theatrical oratory on audiences as he saw it exercised by exponents such as Siddons, Garrick, and Sheridan, would have heartily agreed with these sentiments.¹⁶ Moreover, Godwin understood the persuasive effect that theatre could have in a private as well as a public capacity, as the records of his education of Thomas Abthorpe Cooper, a young relation he took under his wing in 1788 for some years, demonstrate. Godwin's diary shows that he, with the assistance of Holcroft, combined theoretical analysis of dramatic character with the performative aspect of drama to bring alive the lessons he believed Shakespeare could teach the young man and aspiring actor. These lessons illustrate the importance of the drama for Godwin as both a means to and a component of a rounded education.¹⁷

History, drama, and education were all linked in Godwin's philosophy. History, in particular, formed the backbone of a good education. Drama, properly written and disseminated, could be educational and morally improving. Therefore, an ideologically sound historical tragedy must be beneficial to society at large. There were also practical reasons for writing an historical tragedy at this time. On a basic level, Godwin's desire for both fame and wealth meant that writing a history play was pragmatic: they were becoming more popular in London. In Drury Lane's 1788–1789 season, Shakespeare's

¹²Marshall. *William Godwin*, 38.

¹³Godwin nominated Holcroft as one of his four principal oral instructors along with Geoge Dyson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Joseph Fawcett. [Abinger] c. 605.

¹⁴Thomas Holcroft. *Duplicity*. (London: G. Robinson, 1781) Preface, vi.

¹⁵Thomas Holcroft. *Seduction*. (Dublin: Chamberlaine and others, 1787), Preface, iii–iv.

¹⁶For Godwin's judicious assessment of Siddons see [Abinger] b. 229/6. Mary Shelley wrote that Garrick put Godwin 'in a sort of extacy brooding with jealous delight over the feelings excited by the Actor'. *Life of William Godwin. Mary Shelley's Literary Lives and Other Writing*. Ed. Pamela Clemit. 4 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), 4, 10. In his capacity as a writer for the *New Annual Register* Godwin attended the trial of Warren Hastings and saw the remarkable oratorical performances of Sheridan. See Fintan O'Toole. *A Traitor's Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*. (Granta Books: London, 1987), 212–219 for a full account of Sheridan's theatricality.

¹⁷See [Abinger] e. 199. Cooper went on to become one of the great actors of the American stage during the 19th century. Somewhat fittingly, when *The Iron Chest* was first produced in New York in 1807, Cooper distinguished himself in the role of Mortimer. B. Sprague Allen. 'Godwin and the Stage.' *PMLA* 35:3 (1920) 358–374: 367.

Henry VIII was the second most performed play (12 times) with John St. John's *Mary Queen of Scots* (1789) close behind (9 times). George Taylor notes that Kemble chose *Richard III* and *Henry V* to open Drury Lane's 1789–1790 season.¹⁸ In Covent Garden, *Richard III* was the third most performed play that same season. John Burgoyne's *Richard Coeur de Lion* (1786) was one of the ten most performed plays in the last quarter of the century, produced 123 times in 14 years.¹⁹ Familiarity with history was an essential part of the playwright's arsenal; it was said of Godwin's friend Elizabeth Inchbald that 'few women have ever known the history of her country so well' and that she read a 'daily lesson in the History of England'.²⁰

It can be argued, then, that Godwin associated education and public improvement with both drama and history, factors which, combined with his desire for public acclaim and financial security, explain his decision to write the historical tragedy *St. Dunstan*. It does not, however, explain why he subsequently turned to the novel form as a means to popularize the ideas of *Political Justice*. We need to look at the fate of *St. Dunstan* in order to understand why Godwin wrote a novel, rather than a play, and why he might have had 'reason to congratulate himself upon the vehicle he has chosen'.²¹

There will be no claims here that *St. Dunstan* is an unjustly neglected masterpiece of the 1790s. His close friend Holcroft, one of three contemporaries that we know read the play, was not overly impressed.²² He wrote, for example, that some scenes were 'too tame'; speeches were 'loosely written'; events were 'much too sudden for probability'. Yet, one does not get an impression that he considers the play an absolute failure. Indeed, some of the comments are quite encouraging and the overall impression is that Holcroft is keen to see a rewrite ([Abinger] c. 511). After December 1790 there are only a couple of references to the play in Godwin's diary for the rest of the decade and certainly there was no attempt at a major revision, surprising given Godwin's habitual rewriting of published works. It was never produced nor is there any evidence that Godwin submitted it to a theatre. Godwin's diary is frustratingly taciturn on most subjects and the fate of *St. Dunstan* is no different, but we can extrapolate the probable cause for Godwin's desertion of the play from the political sensitivity of the theatrical environment of the period.

The likelihood is that Godwin received advice that the play would not gain the approval of John Larpent, Examiner of Plays. A rigorous enforcer for the Lord Chamberlain, responsible under the Stage Licensing Act of 1737 for ensuring that nothing untoward appeared on the London stage, Larpent would not have allowed Godwin's explicitly anti-Test play to be performed.²³ The Act meant that in order to have a play produced a copy had to be sent to the Examiner of Plays, who would read it and make any appropriate

¹⁸George Taylor. *The French Revolution and the London Stage: 1789–1805*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 54.

¹⁹Paula Backscheider. *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England*. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993) 153.

²⁰James Boaden. *Memoirs of Mrs Inchbald*. (London: Richard Bentley, 1833) 131, 159.

²¹*Caleb Williams, or, Things as They are*. Ed. David McCracken. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) 1. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *CW*, with page reference.

²²The others were Major Henry Barry (referred to as 'col Barry' by Godwin) and William Nicholson; unfortunately, there is no record of their opinion on the play.

²³For theatrical censorship in the 18th century see L.W. Conolly. *The Censorship of English Drama, 1737–1824*. (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1976). Godwin's play is an explicit condemnation of the intermingling of Church and State and as such a deliberate intervention in the debate on the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.

excisions, sometimes even refusing it a licence altogether.²⁴ Reasons for censorship were varied but one can deduce, with a reasonable amount of confidence, from the play manuscripts that it was politics, rather than sexual suggestiveness, that caught the censor's eye in this period.²⁵ Holcroft, who was eventually forced to leave England after the Treason Trials and the subsequent mauling his plays received from the public, suffered from Larpent's pen from early on, and Godwin would have been aware of the limitations of this space for radical thinking.²⁶ Indeed, a theatre itself could be censored: when Covent Garden (the ministerial playhouse) announced it was closing for renovations in 1791, there was an immediate outcry by the ministerial press which forced the condemnation and renovation of Drury Lane—the opposition playhouse. Teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, the £140,000 cost of renovation almost forced the closure of Drury Lane altogether.²⁷ When Godwin first met Elizabeth Inchbald on 29 October 1792, it is likely that *St. Dunstan* was at the back of his mind when he advised her to withdraw *The Massacre*—her historical tragedy—from publication. Later she was to despair that 'The Novelist lives in a land of liberty, whilst the Dramatic Writer exists but under a despotic government'.²⁸ Theatre was the only form of literary production that suffered from pre-publication censorship (although this must be qualified by the fact that the actual publication of play scripts did not appear to have worried the Pitt government, and was freely allowed). It seems then that the problem was not the literature itself, but the means and location of dissemination.

II

The London playhouse of the 1790s was quite an unruly place; at best a raucous hubbub permeated the theatres, and at worst, riots could break out.²⁹ London theatres were highly volatile and politicised, and audiences could be swayed and incited to action reasonably easily. This ensured that a close eye was kept on what was produced, and that such a space was not available for a playwright of Godwin's explicit political views: he had to look elsewhere for a means to propagate his ideas to a wider audience. *Caleb Williams* represents Godwin's attempt to appropriate theatricality into just such another form—the novel. Godwin, as an avid theatregoer was aware of the power of the stage; as a political journalist he was aware of the importance of theatricality to political discourse, and as a radical thinker to whom the stage was not available, he turned to the novel in order to

²⁴Refusal of a licence was a rare event as playwrights and managers were quite conscious of the censorship and would generally just offer plays that were within acceptable parameters. In the period 1776–1800, Larpent only refused a license to seven plays and three of these were subsequently passed after revisions. See Charles Beecher Hogan. *The London Stage 1776–1800: A Critical Introduction*. (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois Press, 1968) 171.

²⁵See for example, those at the Huntington Library, San Marino. [Larpent] LA 854, 870, 903, 963, 1037, 1093.

²⁶*The School for Arrogance* (1791), *The Road to Ruin* (1792), and *The Rival Queens* (1794) all show evidence of Larpent's hand. [Larpent] LA 891, 935, and 1039.

²⁷Lucyle Werkmeister. *A Newspaper History of England 1792–1793*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967) 43.

²⁸Elizabeth Inchbald. *The Artist* 14 (13th June 1807). Cited in Conolly. *Censorship*, 11.

²⁹As well as Beecher Hogan. *The London Stage*, see Marc Baer. *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Judith Pascoe. *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997); Gillian Russell. *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society, 1793–1815*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

disseminate his ideas but tried to incorporate specific theatrical conventions in order to add force to his argument. Put simply, a novel allowed him to write theatrically without the limitations of state censorship.

The theatricality of *Caleb Williams* has been often noted, particularly with regard to its uses of Shakespeare. Maurice Hindle and Robert Kaufman have both discussed the presence of *Hamlet* in the text: Hindle, giving a comprehensive tally of the many allusions to the play in the novel, argues that 'the subjective and political dilemmas facing [Hamlet] [...] in many ways prefigure those of Caleb' and concludes that *Caleb Williams* is a text for the 'closed' space of the 'theatre of the mind'.³⁰ Kaufman, more expansively, goes so far as to say that '*Caleb Williams*, via *Hamlet*, gathers to itself and formally refashions the strands of the Sublime, the Theatrical, and the Revolution, and implies that it—*Caleb Williams*, the novel—is product and harbinger of the inexpressibly new: the modern'.³¹ While *Hamlet* does play an important allusive role in the novel, there are other equally significant resonances, including allusions to *Macbeth*: after Falkland unburdens himself, Caleb fears he will 'sleep no more' (*CW*, 138). When we are introduced to the character of the 'old witch', we are told that 'not the milk of human kindness, but the feverous blood of savage ferocity seemed to flow from her heart' (*CW*, 214). Toward the close of the novel, when Caleb is to be tried after being sold to Gines by Spurrel, he resolves 'to contend to the last' (*CW*, 274) and Banquo cannot be far from our thoughts when Caleb writes that the expired Falkland's 'figure is ever in imagination before me' (*CW*, 325). It is also difficult not to recollect *King Lear* in the following soliloquy by Caleb when he is in the 'midst of a heath', being pounded by a 'storm of hail', with a 'mind bursting with depression and anguish', 'full of loathing and abhorrence of life':

Accursed world! that hates without a cause, that overwhelms innocence with calamities which ought to be spared even to guilt! Accursed world! dead to every manly sympathy; with eyes of horn, and hearts of steel! Why do I consent to live any longer? Why do I seek to drag on an existence which, if protracted, must be protracted amidst the lairs of these human tigers? (*CW*, 251–252)

No less an authority than Hazlitt completes the tragic quartet when he wrote of Caleb and Falkland that 'The reaction and play of these two characters into each other's hands (like Othello and Iago) is inimitably well managed, and on a par with any thing in the dramatic art'.³² It is not so much a question of Godwin appropriating a specific play, but rather a question of harnessing the authority of 'Shakespeare', the body of canonical tragedy and its associated cultural weight, to his novel. The presence of Shakespeare also deliberately situates the novel in contemporary political discourse, since parliamentarians incorporated Shakespeare into their speeches as regularly as Burke and Paine did in their political tracts. This is not to argue that the use of Shakespeare is sufficient to mark the novel as specifically theatrical—as the presence of Shakespearean allusion and quotation is, to say the least, not uncommon in the literature of the period—but it does help mark it as

³⁰Maurice Hindle. 'Introduction.' *Caleb Williams*. (London: Penguin, 2005) xxxvi–vii.

³¹Robert Kaufman. 'The Sublime as Super-Genre of the Modern, or *Hamlet* in Revolution: Caleb Williams and His Problems.' *Studies in Romanticism* 36:4 (1997) 541–574: 543.

³²William Hazlitt. *The Examiner*. (1818). Cited in Kenneth W. Graham. *William Godwin Reviewed*. (New York: AMS Press, 2001) 90.

political and literary.³³ It contributes to denoting the novel as a conscious intervention in the political discourse on reform in Britain, enabling Godwin to find an audience he had tried to reach with *St. Dunstan* but failed. Moreover, the continual motif of trials in the novel also marks the novel as a conscious political intervention as well as further enhancing its theatricality. In the 1790s the trope of the trial had an intrinsic theatricality and was also recognisable to the reader as politically topical.

There was, of course, a series of high-profile political trials in the British courts during the 1790s. There has been some discussion of the intense theatricality of the Treason Trials of 1794; while these occurred after the publication of *Caleb Williams*, there were other important trials, particularly those of the 'Scottish martyrs' which occurred during the composition of the novel.³⁴ Godwin's diary shows that he followed the cases of Thomas Muir, Thomas Palmer, and Joseph Gerrald closely. A draft of a letter to the *Morning Chronicle* (which does not appear to have been published), condemns the treatment of Muir and Palmer ([Abinger] b. 227/2) He records visits to all three in December 1793 and January 1794. Godwin also wrote to Gerrald in January 1794 and saw him again in April 1794 ([Abinger] e. 201) Notably, Godwin read the published transcripts of all major trials assiduously, particularly around the time of the composition of *Caleb Williams*. His diary records his reading of the trials of Horne Tooke (trial, April 1792; reading, December 1793); Thomas Muir (trial, August 1793; reading, December 1793); and Daniel Eaton (trial, November 1793; reading, April 1794). Just after the publication of *Caleb Williams* he also read Joseph Gerrald's defence, published as a pamphlet ([Abinger] e. 201).

Gerrald is usually the name that one associates with Godwin and *Caleb Williams*, particularly because of the letter Godwin famously wrote to him on 23 January 1794. This letter is an insightful document as to how he understood the trials as being intrinsically theatrical and the affective and communicative possibilities of the dock. He speaks of being envious of Gerrald's opportunity and reminds him that it 'may be the means to convert thousands, and, progressively, millions to the cause of reason and public justice'. 'Never forget', he urges, 'that juries are men, and that men are made of penetrable stuff: probe all the recesses of their souls'. Godwin even goes so far as to give him specific lines to deliver in the course of his defence before reminding Gerrald that 'you represent us all'.³⁵

An open letter to Erskine on his 'performance' when defending Paine (which may not have been sent), a trial Godwin attended in person, criticises him as one would an actor. Erskine had previously earned just 'applause' for his defence of others: 'In those pleadings your mind was ardent, your generous anxiety was visible, the sentiment you uttered carried with them the stamp of your own approbation'. He had now, due to a lack of conviction

³³For the political impact and literariness of Shakespeare in the late eighteenth century, see Jonathan Bate. *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730–1830*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

³⁴See Pascoe. *Romantic Theatricality*, 33–67 for the theatricality of the Treason trials. A number of critics have written on the resonances of these trials in *Caleb Williams*, particularly the revised ending. See Ian Ousby. "'My Servant Caleb": Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and the Political Trials of the 1790s.' *University of Toronto Quarterly* 44:1 (1974) 47–55; Gary Kelly. *The English Jacobin Novel 1780–1805*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 196–198; Pamela Clemit. *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 37–38. I will focus on the trials of Thomas Muir, Thomas Palmer, and Joseph Gerrald as Godwin appears to have been most interested in them. The other two defendants in the trials were William Skirving and Maurice Margarot. Like the others, they were found guilty of sedition in 1793–1794 and sentenced to transportation.

³⁵'Godwin's Letter to Joseph Gerrald.' *Caleb Williams*. Ed. Hindle, 355–358.

on his part, 'dwindled into the declamation of a school boy'.³⁶ Godwin was an avid follower of political trials and was very conscious, not only of their theatricality, but of the importance of such theatricality to their outcome.³⁷ The trials were theatrical events and Godwin drew on these cases for the composition of *Caleb Williams*.

Echoes of the trials are to be found throughout the novel. The report on Palmer's trial on 26 September 1793 in the *Morning Chronicle* gives extracts from his post-sentence speech, which find resonances both in Caleb's own melancholic examinations of his fate and in Godwin's original *Preface* to the novel: 'My life has for many years been employed in the dissemination of what I thought religious and moral truths, of truths which I conceived of the greatest importance to my fellow-creatures [...] It is not the first time, my Lords, that I have suffered in endeavouring to benefit others. For this I have born [sic] shame, odium, reproach, and diminution of fortune'. On 4 October 1793, Muir's objection to new charges being brought under the general charge of sedition anticipates Caleb's protestations to the magistrate who holds him after he has clearly been identified as someone other than the Irishman wanted by the law. For Muir: 'Neither in justice nor in law has the public prosecutor a right to bring against me a general charge. Every criminal charge, upon the facts, must be special, in order that the panel may know the crime that is alleged [sic] against him, and accordingly prepare the special matter of his defence'.³⁸

Muir's objection to members of the Association of Goldsmith's Hall making up the jury (as they would have already condemned him, it being a loyalist organization), and the abrupt dismissal of this objection shows the complicity between prosecution and bench in the trial. This reflects Forrester's inability to act impartially in Caleb's case and, later on, the London magistrate's indignant dismissal of his accusations on the basis of an ideological stance.³⁹ In Caleb's initial hearing for the alleged theft of Falkland's valuables, Falkland, when asked to answer Caleb's accusations, exclaims: 'Surely it is no sufficient refutation of a criminal charge, that the criminal repels what is alleged against him with volubility of speech and intrepidity of manner?' (*CW*, 170). Considered in the light of his own defence on the charges of Tyrrel's murder, which consists of nothing but 'volubility of speech and intrepidity of manner', Godwin's ironic comment on the 'old boys' legal

³⁶[Abinger] b. 227/2 (b). Godwin also discussed Erskine's performance with Inchbald on 18 December 1792. Earlier on in the year he had also dined with him on 15 June. [Abinger] e. 199–200. Erskine credited Sarah Siddons for much of his oratorical skill: he described her performances as 'a school for orators,—that he had studied her cadences and intonation, and that to the harmony of her periods and pronunciations he was indebted for "his best displays"'. *The Life of Mrs Siddons*. 2 vols. (London: Effingham Wilson, 1834) II, 381.

³⁷Holcroft also shared this view. Despite his acquittal without trial he remained determined to address the court, believing that he had something to say 'of utmost importance of his country and mankind in general'. Chief Justice Eyre was inclined to let him speak until Holcroft informed him that he would take '[no] more than half an hour', to which an indignant Eyre replied 'Half and hour!—Mr. Holcroft you must withdraw'. *A Complete Collection of State Trials*. Ed. T.B. Howell. 33 vols. (London: Longman, 1816–1826) XXV, 746–748.

³⁸This should be compared with *Caleb Williams*: 'I strenuously urged the injustice of this proceeding. I observed to the magistrate that it was impossible I should be the person at whom the description pointed [...] There was not the slightest reason for detaining me in custody' (244).

³⁹For Muir's objection, see the *Morning Chronicle* 27 September 1793, and James Robertson. *An Account of the Trial of Thomas Muir ... for Sedition*. (Edinburgh: J. Robertson, 1793) 25–30. In *Caleb Williams* the London magistrate exclaims, 'A fine time of it indeed it would be, if, when gentlemen of six thousand a year take up their servants for robbing them, those servants would trump up such accusations as these, and could get any magistrate or court of justice to listen to them!' (276). This echoes Tyrrel's ire against Hawkins's temerity: 'A pretty pass things are come to, if a lease can protect such fellows as you against the lord of a manor!' (71), and invests the depiction of the law in the novel with Tyrrel's brute thuggishness.

system and the analogy with the Muir case is clear. One more significant parallel between the trials and the novel is Caleb's series of flights from justice. His initial escape and then return to face Forrester recollects Gerrald's brave decision to face trial against the advice of friends and with the certainty of transportation. Caleb's subsequent decision to escape from prison and the fickle justice on offer echoes the sentiments of Muir's speech in his defence:

[The Public Prosecutor] maintains, that a consciousness of guilt obliged me to leave this country after an information had been filed against me, and after I had been examined by a magistrate. I will admit the fact of my departure.—In these days—in these circumstances—is that to be ascribed to conscious guilt alone? If the whole strength of arbitrary power is extended against an individual, is there merit in exposing himself as a sacrifice which cannot be useful to the country, and which may only present posterity with a new addition to the immense catalogue of the victims of despotism.⁴⁰

Undoubtedly Godwin's personal interest and involvement in these trials which occurred during the composition of *Caleb Williams* is reflected in the novel, as is his sense of recording history as it unfolds before him. The theatricality of the Scottish trials would also have been evident to both him and the novel's readers. Yet while the use of trial scenes lends the novel an associative theatrical value there is more substantive evidence of a deliberate attempt to write a theatrical novel, and this is found in Godwin's deployment of 'pointing' in these trial scenes.

Pointing was a phenomenon critical to the success of both actors and plays in the Georgian theatre. Points were the focus of critical reviews and audience attention during a play. They isolated particular moments, usually well known, such as Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost or Macbeth's dagger scene. Given the hubbub of noise that was common to the playhouse of this period, points represented isolated moments of concentrated audience engagement and the exercise of critical faculties.

The dramatic technique of 'pointing' refers to the practice of bracketing off a set speech from the course of the action and directing that speech, along with a set of gestures, at the audience. Once plays were established in the repertory, particular roles and speeches or 'points' achieved privileged status in the course of performance and were associated with the technique of a particular actor or actress who either originated the role or attempted innovations in that role.⁴¹

Such affective 'peaks' sustained the momentum of the play and the audience's interest and therefore essential to the success. Their importance did not escape theatre-going intellectuals like Godwin. He wrote to William Betty, the 'Young Roscius', in November 1812:

In the principal character of every well-written play, the good actor may find at least half-a-dozen places with which to electrify an audience. It is his business to bring out

⁴⁰Robertson. *An Account of the Trial of Thomas Muir*. 74.

⁴¹Lisa Freeman. *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century Stage*. (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia, 2002) 31. See also Backscheider. *Spectacular Politics*, 178 and Hogan. *The London Stage*, cxiii-cxv.

and impress every strong sentiment, every nervous line, every passage that can by any means shake the soul of the by-stander. ([Abinger] b. 227/3).

These were precisely the elements he deliberately inserted into *Caleb Williams*. A letter of advice to an unidentified writer shows how Godwin drew on this tradition for fictional purposes:

The two great ingredients of fictitious composition are, incident & feeling. A novel of mere incident without any development of feeling, may be very amusing, but must be a work of an inferior order. But, if incident makes but an indifferent figure without feeling, feeling is a still poorer thing, in a pretended narrative or fiction, without incident. It is a feeling about nothing, a building without a foundation. It is incident, strongly marked & clearly explained, that can alone put the reader in a tone of mind to sympathise with, & relish, a detail of feelings. Incident gives variety to what is otherwise monotonous, & clearness to what is otherwise clouded & indistinguishable. ([Abinger] b. 229/1.)

In other words, 'strongly marked' incidents are essential to generating a reader's interest and sustaining his interest in following the intricacies of feeling in a novel. They lend moments of clarity to a novel and moments such as these are prevalent in *Caleb Williams*, and they are strongly theatrical in language as well as generic origin.

Consider the following early scene, just after Hawkins's son has been condemned to death and the two bitterly opposed squires, Falkland and Tyrrel, meet by chance on a road. It begins mildly, with the speeches short to keep our attention fixed:

Mr. Tyrrel, said he, somewhat abruptly, I am sorry for a piece of news which I have just heard.

And pray, sir, what is your sorrow to me?

The dialogue gradually gains in intensity as the struggle between Falkland's eloquence and Tyrrel's obstinance causes the speeches to lengthen and become more rhetorical, with Godwinian flavour:

We must not use the advantage that accident has given us, with unmerciful hand. Poor wretches! They are pressed almost beyond bearing as it is; and, if we unfeelingly give another turn to the machine, they will be crushed into atoms.

Finally, Falkland defeats Tyrrel with a speech loaded with passion and powerfully biblical language:

Almighty God! To hear you talk gives one a loathing for the institutions and regulations of society, and would induce one to fly the very face of man! But, no! society casts you out; man abominates you. No wealth, no rank can buy out your stain. You will live deserted in the midst of your species; you will go into crowded societies, and no one will deign so much as to salute you. They will fly from your glance, as they would from the gaze of a basilisk. Where do you expect to find the hearts of flint, that shall sympathize with yours? You have the stamp of misery, incessant, undivided, unpitied misery!⁴²

⁴²*Caleb Williams*, 76–78. This final speech was added in the second edition (1796), and alters Falkland's condemnation in the original (which is more muted and less dramatically demonstrative). The fact that Godwin deliberately continued to heighten the drama of the scene in the second edition is demonstrative of his desire to highlight such scenes of personal conflict and their dramatic possibilities.

Tyrrel, we are told, was 'motionless and petrified' after this damning condemnation. This scene can be considered a 'pointing' scene as it is where we first see the full range of Falkland's emotions. He moves from rational conversationalist to passionate demagogue over the course of a carefully constructed verbal exchange. It would take an accomplished actor to carry this off. In a 'pointing' scene, the reader is jolted into critical awareness.

While the above is one example of a narrative 'point' in *Caleb Williams*, there are numerous examples in the novel, particularly the trial scenes. Caleb undergoes two major trials: when he is judged by Forrester, and the final scene in the novel where he establishes his innocence.⁴³ A close reading of these two shows not only their theatrical nature but the development of Caleb's character between the two points in the novel.

In the first trial scene Caleb finds his audience waiting for him when he arrives: 'Mr. Forester and three or four of the servants already assembled in expectation of me and my accuser'. With staged symmetry 'Mr. Falkland entered at one door, almost as soon as I entered at the other' (*CW*, 163). The remainder of the scene consists of an exchange between Caleb and Falkland with occasional interjections by Forester, and Godwin's careful construction of the scene satisfies all the requirements of a point by drawing careful attention to the dominance of the two characters followed by his depiction of the reaction of the audience. Caleb conveys the helplessness and injustice of his situation by describing himself as an onlooker in a scene where he is supposed to be playing a starring role: 'I was of all the spectators that individual who was most at a loss to conceive through every stage of the scene what would come next, and who listened to every word that was uttered with the most uncontrolable [sic] amazement' (*CW*, 168–169). Most significantly, Caleb's rational arguments make no headway with either Forester or the servants. The closest he comes to gaining sympathy is when his rhetoric becomes more impassioned: 'I appeal to my heart; I appeal to my looks; I appeal to every sentiment my tongue ever uttered. I could perceive that the fervour with which I spoke made some impression upon every one that heard me'. His inability to sustain this vein costs him dear: 'But in a moment their eyes were turned upon the property that lay before them, and their countenances changed' (*CW*, 169). Ironically, Caleb's record of his poorly received performance—'They looked at me with furious glances, as if they could have torn me to pieces'—is echoed some years later by Charles Lamb's account of *Antonio's* reception from the Drury Lane pit: 'I believe at that instant, if they could have got him, they would have torn the unfortunate author to pieces'.⁴⁴

Caleb is much more convincing in his next trial where he is again careful to mark the intimacy between him, Falkland, and the audience to denote it as a pointing scene just before he speaks: 'I looked first at Mr. Falkland, and then at the magistrate and attendants, and then at Mr. Falkland again' (*CW*, 320). Furthermore, Godwin made a conscious decision to provide a dramatic denouement to the novel when he rewrote the ending. In the original finale to the novel, Caleb speaks with passion but restraint: 'with energy, fervour and conscious truth' (*CW*, 328), while in the published ending he is more expansive and dramatic, his voice was 'suffocated with agony' (*CW*, 320). In the final trial

⁴³There are several other minor trial scenes in addition to these: Falkland's defence to the magistrates read by Caleb in pamphlet form; Falkland acting as magistrate in a case of murder; the mock tribunals of the prisoners in Caleb's first internment; the judgement of Caleb by Raymond's gang; and, Caleb's attempt to bring charges against Falkland when captured by Gines from Spurrel. In addition to these, Caleb is judged by Collins, by Thomas, by the old man guarding him after his capture from the ship, and by Laura.

⁴⁴'The Old Actors.' *The Works of Charles Lamb*. II, 330.

scene of the original ending the evidence of Caleb and Falkland is reported indirectly by Caleb, while in the published ending both men speak in the first person with passion, gusto, and a much higher proportion of exclamation marks. Caleb's capacity to deliver a speech has increased significantly from his first essay on the public stage: 'Every one that heard me was petrified with astonishment. Every one that heard me was melted into tears. They could not resist the ardour with which I praised the great qualities of Falkland; they manifested their sympathy in the tokens of my penitence' (*CW*, 323–324).

Significantly, there is one more major distinction between the two scenes. Caleb tells us that 'The audience I met at the house of the magistrate consisted of several *gentlemen* and others selected for the purpose, the plan being, in some respects as in the former instance, to find a medium between the suspicious air of a private examination, and the indelicacy as it was style of an examination exposed to the remark of every casual spectator' (*CW*, 318; my italics). While Caleb's success is largely due to his passionate performance, Godwin's substitution of gentlemen for the servants of the initial trial suggests that a capacity for reciprocal sympathy is necessary and lies with men of cultivation—these were the men of 'penetrable stuff' that he referred to in his letter to Gerrald. Burke and Fox prided themselves on Sarah Siddons's extricate tears from them at the playhouse: Godwin marks Caleb's capacity for affect and his audience's capacity for sympathy as a sign of their mutual gentility and civility.⁴⁵

Godwin's use of Adam Smith's term 'impartial spectator' (*CW*, 319) is hardly coincidental: Caleb, Falkland, and their observers are all drawn together by the various performances and Caleb's guilt, which manifests itself before he begins to speak, is sparked by his imagining himself in Falkland's position: 'Shall I trample upon a man thus dreadfully reduced? Shall I point my animosity against one whom the system of nature has brought down to the grave?' (*CW*, 319–320). Caleb's capacity for sympathy has expanded in tandem with his capacity for affect and this provides evidence of his growth as an intellectual and emotional being.⁴⁶

III

Caleb Williams is a novel which expresses its theatricality on a number of levels. It is a cathartic piece of writing after the failure of *St. Dunstan*, and it also deliberately draws on contemporary theatrical practice and skilfully employs trial scenes, instantly recognisable to contemporaries as theatrical events as well as political and historical proceedings. Godwin further makes these trial scenes intrinsically dramatic set pieces to capture the reader's imagination and spark his sympathy. Thus, a reading of *Caleb Williams* as a theatrical novel seems satisfying as far as fiction and contemporary political discourse are concerned. Yet between *St. Dunstan* and *Caleb Williams* Godwin wrote his magisterial *Political Justice*, and the question that must be therefore addressed is how literary and political theatricality is measured according to the tenets of his major work of political philosophy. I want to now suggest that beyond making his novel appealing to its readership and marking it as a conscious political commentary on contemporaneous

⁴⁵Cited in Julia Carlson. *The Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 134.

⁴⁶For a full discussion of Smith's conception of sympathy in *Caleb Williams*, see Monkia Fludernik. 'Spectacle, Theatre, and Sympathy in *Caleb Williams*.' *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 14:1 (2001) 1–30.

events, a theatrical novel is also consistent with broader Godwinian philosophical principles.

As the preface to *Political Justice* states that the author wished it to be 'an advantageous vehicle of moral improvement', it seems reasonable to begin with examining Godwin's view of literature's potential for improving society's moral position.⁴⁷ Godwin believes that literature is one of two existing methods of diffusing political justice, education being the other. Literature has the merit of being powerful in the diffusion of truth, it 'has reconciled the whole thinking world respecting the great principles of the system of the universe'. In the interaction of reader and text Godwin sees the 'collision of mind with mind' that will cause truth to be 'struck out'. On the other hand, literature has a limited influence as it 'exists only as the portion of the few'. In short, while it has an intrinsic power, it has too limited a range to bring about wholesale social reform as it is 'unaided by the regularity of institution and discipline' (PJ, 14–16).

Education, on the other hand, has the opposite problem. Despite having the institutional framework to propagate truth to the masses, Godwin does not trust its strength of purpose and he is probably reflecting on his relationship with Cooper when he doubts that one can find sufficient men of quality to teach small groups of pupils 'when [they] should be instructing the world' (PJ, 18). Furthermore, education is too broad a term, encompassing many ideas which are not coherent to the young mind. The sort of education required is dedicated tuition of small groups by exemplary teachers, which is simply impractical (PJ, 16–18). The problem, as Godwin sees it, is that government monopolises control of the largest institutional framework—that of political institutions—in order to propagate its own interests rather than the pursuit of political justice. It can credit itself with the spread of 'superstition, an immoderate fear of shame, a false calculation of interest' (PJ, 18–20). The implication is that a sort of counter-institutional force is required to challenge government hegemony: a theme central to both *St. Dunstan* and *Caleb Williams*.

This does not contradict Godwin's championing of private judgement, which is central to his philosophy. There is a gap in Godwin's manifesto between needing philosophers to educate the people (the present) and the utopia of individual private judgement (the future) and it was a gap that he thought deeply about how to fill. In short, Godwin believed that people had to be taught to think for themselves.

The studious and reflecting only can be expected to see deeply into future events. To conceive an order of society totally different from that which is not before our eyes, and to judge of the advantages that would accrue from its institution, are the prerogatives only of a few favoured minds. When these advantages have been unfolded by superior penetration, they cannot yet for some time be expected to be understood by the multitude. Time, reading, and conversation are necessary to render them familiar. They must descend in regular gradation from the most thoughtful to the most unobservant. (PJ, 118)

It is an epistemic change, to borrow Foucault's term, that is required to unfold 'an order of society totally different' on a top-down basis from the intelligentsia to the public. One that has the requisite power and scale to influence large numbers of people while respecting the doctrine of private judgement. One that gradually diffuses knowledge and its

⁴⁷*Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*. Vol. 3. *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. Ed. Mark Philp. (London: William Pickering, 1993) iii. Hereafter cited parenthetically as PJ, with page number.

accompanying power, and one that operates across the broad spectrum of society. I suggest that Godwin saw this epistemic change come about through theatrical culture as diffused through literary vehicles such as *Caleb Williams*.

At first glance the unruly nature of the Georgian playhouse does not appear to be a Godwinian environment.⁴⁸ Yet there were many aspects of it that must have resonated with him, a regular attendee, as a model instrument of the type of epistemic change he imagined. It satisfied the problem of scale he identified with literature, given that there were approximately 10 000–15 000 visits made a week to the patent theatres in London.⁴⁹ The constant coverage of the theatres in the newspapers increased its penetration into the public consciousness. Moreover, in the age of sensibility, one could not doubt its effectiveness and power of affect. Men and women cried alike at death scenes and applauded vigorously at a hero's triumph. John Haggitt, in his preface to the loyalist play *The Count de Villeroy*, noted:

Now the Stage, as it is one of the most effectual means of gaining the public ear, so it is most powerfully calculated to influence the public mind; and though it may not at present greatly avail itself of this honourable and useful part of its office, the original institution is however no means answerable for the neglect.⁵⁰

Haggitt identifies the stage as a key battleground for the hearts and mind of the British public in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Although the material that he saw performed there dismayed him, this, he argues, does not mean it cannot be rectified for the public good. James Fennell, an actor who was later to compete with Cooper in New York, agreed, seeing the theatre as a fallen institution but for moral rather than political reasons. He wrote and published *The Theatrical Guardian*, a short-lived magazine, in 1793, and in its inaugural issue, hoped that, as 'The Augean Stable was once free from that foulness which required afterwards the labour of Hercules to cleanse it; so may that rubbish, now gathering about the theatre, be lightly swept away, which, if suffered to increase, may soon defy the most spirited endeavours to restore the Drama to its desired purity'.⁵¹ The problem for Haggitt, Fennell, and Godwin, albeit for different reasons, was one of content, not infrastructure.

The theatre satisfied the top-down model of diffusion of knowledge in that there was a play being performed and thus an author-function in operation that was relatively authoritative.⁵² Furthermore, drama also allowed for that 'clash of mind with mind' that was crucial to the Godwinian notion of education and political justice. Just as Godwin could learn from Cooper, Holcroft, Inchbald, and others, the playwright could learn from the audience as they actively criticised and engaged with the text in real time. At the end of a play's performance, particularly a new play's first night, the manager would 'give it out' (propose it) for another night and this would be greeted with either 'approbation' or 'disapprobation' by the audience, which would largely determine the length of the play's run. Indeed, it was a commonplace for an author to cut the play according to the reaction

⁴⁸See Judith Pascoe. 'Romantic drama.' *An Oxford Guide to Romanticism*. Ed. Nicholas Roe. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 409–423, 415.

⁴⁹Beecher Hogan. *The London Stage*, ccix.

⁵⁰John Haggitt. *The Count de Villeroy; or, The Fate of Patriotism*. (London: T. Cadell, 1794) vi.

⁵¹*The Theatrical Guardian* 1 (5 March 1791) 5.

⁵²With the input of censor, manager, audience, and actors in the production of a dramatic performance-text, I find author-function a more useful term than author.

of the crowd—Holcroft and Sheridan, amongst many others, did this. When Godwin wrote of how intellectual activity produces truth over time, an analogy with the repertory system can be found: ‘The restless activity of intellect will for a time be fertile in paradox and error; but these will only be diurnals, while the truths that occasionally spring up, like sturdy plants, will defy the rigour of season and climate’ (PJ, 15). In the playhouse there was an exchange of views between author-function and audience that allowed a text to develop and change over time; and over time this synthesised critique of the stock of plays would preserve the canon and eliminate the chaff.

Finally, the theatre encompassed the broad cross-section of society that Godwin wanted to address. While the very poor could not be said to be a regular presence at Drury Lane or Covent Garden, most classes of society were represented there:

In the class-conscious eighteenth century a fairly sharp distinction was almost always observed as to those theatregoers who prescriptively should sit where. In the pit were the intelligentsia, professional men, writers, critics and the like. In the boxes, as in the boxes at the opera, sat persons of the upper class, of rank and of fashion. To the first gallery resorted the middle class: merchants and tradesmen. The lower class, the famous “gallery gods,” consisting of servants, sailors, prostitutes, betook themselves to the upper gallery.⁵³

As a bridge to social utopia, playwriting and its accompanying regulated institutional framework seems almost ideal for Godwin. The theatrical audience offered much to a social reformer that the readership of large philosophical tracts could not. There remains a tension though between the theory and the practical, for in practice, as a closely contested site of political struggle, the theatre was an atmosphere both where groupthink was likely to proliferate and where heated debate, rather than cool conversation, held sway.⁵⁴ Both of these were anathema to Godwin, who championed conversation as the avenue of progress and ‘the universal exercise of private judgement’ as the founding principle of human perfection. On the other hand, books ‘have by their very nature but a limited operation’ and ‘a sort of constitutional coldness’. Readers ‘review the arguments of an ‘insolent innovator’ with sullenness, and are unwilling to stretch our minds to take in all their force’ (PJ, 121). This tension was to lead Godwin to conceive the idea, the ‘vehicle’, of the cross-genre theatrical novel: *Caleb Williams*.

This novel is best read as a theatrical novel, one that draws heavily on the dramatic culture pervading contemporary London life for reasons of affect, effect, and political ideology. Like Foucault, one of Godwin’s central interests was the relationship between knowledge and power and in the theatrical novel Godwin saw the opportunity to replicate the theatrical experience in the novel’s style and structure. The reader engages with the text all the while conscious of his status as ‘spectator’ as much as ‘reader’. In doing so Godwin encourages contemporary readers to find the confidence that they experienced while part of a theatrical audience; as Pascoe writes, ‘Outside the theatre, these audience members may have submitted to their lowly status in society; stationed in theatre galleries, they spoke in a collective and raucous voice’.⁵⁵ Thus, Godwin infuses the reader of *Caleb Williams* with the self-assurance to engage with the text, to pick up on the trope of judgment that is

⁵³Hogan. *The London Stage*, 30.

⁵⁴See Russell. *The Theatres of War*.

⁵⁵Pascoe. ‘Romantic Drama.’ 415.

manifested in the trial scenes, to engage in the 'clash of mind with mind', all the while absenting him from the actual crowd of the theatre.⁵⁶ Readers of the following passage could not have failed the explicit signs of theatrical activity in Caleb's narrative:

The case seemed entirely altered, when the subject of those passions was continually before my eyes, and the events had happened but the other day as it were, in the very neighbourhood where I live. There was a connection and progress in this narration, which made it altogether unlike the little village incidents I had hitherto known. My feelings were successively interested for the different persons that were brought upon the scene. My veneration was excited for Mr. Clare, and my applause for the intrepidity of Mrs. Hammond. I was astonished that any human creature should be so shockingly perverted as Mr. Tyrrel. I paid the tribute of my tears to the memory of the artless Miss Melville. I found a thousand fresh reasons to admire and love Mr. Falkland (*CW*, 106).

This summary of Caleb's reaction to the first volume of the novel (Collins's narrative), serves to invite the reader to take Caleb's place. As he will now provide the narrative for the remainder of the novel, moving from audience to actor, this passage advertises the absence of spectator that will now emerge; a space the reader is invited to fill. The astute and well-versed reader will notice the allusion to the imagined impartial spectator in the novel's climactic scene and find his own capacity for sympathy challenged and his critical faculties heightened as a result, and then further strengthened by the recognition of a pointing scene.

Of course, more mundane reasons of censorship, lack of dramatic talent, little public demand for stage tragedy, and poor physical venues (due to the enlargement of Drury Lane and Covent Garden in the early 1790s) also contributed to the genesis of *Caleb Williams*, and prevented a direct dramatic reworking of *St. Dunstan*. But Godwin was never a man short of self-confidence, and his return to writing plays in mid-1797 suggests that the decision to write a novel in 1793 was at least partially driven by the reasons I have outlined rather than an outright feeling of failure in drama.

Godwin's intellectual framework connects fiction, history, theatre, and education as overlapping discursive practices that depend on each other for effectiveness and utility. The 'pointing' trial scenes that permeate the novel invite the reader to judge, not only Caleb, but himself as a spectator, as a member of society and as both an observer of and participant in history in the making. Godwin read Muir's *Defence* in December 1793 just before he began intensely revising *Caleb Williams* in January 1794. A passage where Muir, a man who suffered the 'whole strength of arbitrary power', directly addresses the jury is likely to have struck him forcefully, and it is the responsibility that he felt as reader of this that he tried to inculcate into the reader of *Caleb Williams*:

The eyes of this country are fixed upon us both. The records of this trial will pass down to posterity. When our ashes shall be scattered by the winds of heaven, the impartial voice of future times will rejudge your verdict. Let faction rage;—let the spirit of party, in the present hour, proudly domineer.—The illusion will soon vanish

⁵⁶For an excellent discussion of how the reader can be seen as a 'structural element' in the novel and which argues convincingly that Godwin 'use[s] fiction self-consciously to interrupt itself, to make us aware of reality as a "text" or system of misrepresentation', see Tilottama Rajan. 'Wollstonecraft and Godwin: Reading the Secrets of the Political Novel.' *Studies in Romanticism* 27:2 (1988) 221–252, 223.

away. In solitude the power of recollection will assume its influence; and then, it will be material to you, whether or not you have acted uprightly, or sinned against your own eternal conscience, in my acquittal, or in my condemnation.⁵⁷

Godwin asked towards the end of *Political Justice* ‘Shall we have theatrical exhibitions? This seems to include an absurd and vicious cooperation. It may be doubted whether men will hereafter come forward in any mode to repeat words and ideas not their own?’ (PJ, 452). Yet he was not rejecting theatre, but rather looking forward to a future where the author-function of government had dissipated and was relocated in an enlightened public, thanks in no small part to the counter-institutional framework of theatrical literature and culture.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jon Mee and Pamela Clemit for comments on an earlier version of this article.

⁵⁷Robertson. *An Account of the Trial of Thomas Muir*, 73.