Theatricality in "Pendennis"

EDGAR F. HARDEN

THE employment of theatrical behavior in English fiction is considerable, especially in the nineteenth century, but criticism has long ignored the notable use made of it in Thackeray's *Pendennis*. Recent studies have begun to examine this subject;[1] it has not yet received the attention it deserves, however, particularly in view of his novel's elaborate, richly comic, and yet moving rendering of theatricality, which emerges as an epitome of human isolation and reveals itself as an analogue of *Vanity Fair's* puppet metaphor. Surrounding the histrionic title-figure are various characters who illuminate for us and sometimes for him the abysses and possibilities of such behavior. In Thackeray's novels all the world is not a stage and all the men and women merely players, for one's "true" being can at times communicate itself directly. One other mode exists, however: though other individuals tend to see only one's role, and though one's "true" being tends to dissipate and delude itself as well as others through a surrender to role-playing, it can also communicate itself through an appropriately chosen role. Theatrical behavior thereby becomes a quintessential means by which one's "true" being not only disguises but also expresses itself. The distinctive quality of this particular novel lies in the importance given to theatricality and in the exploration of the manner in which theatricality can become communion.

The various manifestations of theatricality in *Pendennis*[2] range from the literal to the metaphoric or, putting it in another way, from actual scenic representation to offstage simulation of various kinds. In showing us a series of responses to theatrical behavior, extending from a con-

siderable number of actual playhouse visits to a variety of social gatherings and private conversations, the narrator focuses our attention chiefly on the degree of a character's ability to distinguish between the human actor and the role. We see Pen's growth, for example, not only by the gradual change in his attitude towards the Fotheringay but also by the decline of his interest in Mrs. Leary and by the fact that in this latter instance he does not, as he did with the Fotheringay, make the mistake of confusing the performer with the role—unlike the still naive Mr. Huxter.[3] From the very beginning of Pen's infatuation during the performance of *The Stranger*—a play about a man imprisoned by a role that isolates him from himself as well as from others—the narrator emphasizes both the enormity of Pen's confusion and the degree to which it separates him from the audience of which he is a part. The narrator gives us an elaborate sense of the play's sham, from its extraordinary dialogue, costumes, properties, and style of acting, to the considerably disengaged behavior of the actors, and he frequently reminds us of the reactions of spectators other than Pen. To the initiated Foker, "The Stranger" is Bingley in tights and Hessians, and the woman opposite him is "the Fotheringay" (I, 35), but in Pen's eyes she is "Mrs. Haller" (I, 36), even when he sees her privately (I, 48). To us she begins "her business," but to the awestruck Pen, "She's speaking." A further contrast is provided by her coach, Bows, who, even while about to be overcome by the pathos of a moment, is able to cry out "Bravo" in approval of his pupil's successful handling of her part. Whatever the limitations of Bows himself, this ability to respond sympathetically even while he knows he is observing a rehearsed mimetic act points to a larger ability possessed by the narrator, who can respond to what is genuine within the sham—to the "reality of love, children, and forgiveness of wrong" that is to be found "in the midst of the balderdash" (I, 37).

The theatricality into which Pen's infatuation leads him is especially evident when he arranges to see *Hamlet* with Helen; by deciding that "the play should be the thing" (I, 56) to test Helen, he implicitly acknowledges that his own life is a play, within which *Hamlet* will be staged.[4] Like Hamlet, he is both actor and stage-manager, but because Helen has no knowledge of his secret life, she responds to the play-within-the-play as a stage-piece without a dramatic context and she sees only a beautiful Ophelia (I, 59). The next spectators who witness a performance of *Hamlet*—Dr. Portman and Major Pendennis—have that additional knowledge and therefore see more than a character in a play. The clergyman finds her not only "a very clever actress" but also a woman "endowed with very considerable attractions," while the Major ignores her ability as a Shakespearean performer and comments on her physical attractiveness as an object of sexual desire: "Gad, . . . the young rascal has not made a bad choice." The Major's attention focuses on the larger human drama within which *Hamlet* is being played; more aware than Dr. Portman of the audience in the theatre and perfectly cognizant of an actress's ability to be alertly self-conscious, the Major sees her appeal for male admiration in the look she gives Sir Derby Oaks and he cynically thinks: "that's their way" (I, 90). It is Dolphin who gives professional testimony to the Fotheringay's mastery of attitudinizing and her ability to learn the occasional "dodge" (I, 124).

Although Pen attends the Chatteris theatre night after night, he fails to see the mechanical quality of the dull girl's performance, and even when personal contact between them has ended and he has become a mere spectator he does not become aware that he has always seen her as though across footlights. The memory of his passion and a persistent sense of his humiliation bring him to watch her in London, but by the next year "she was not the same, somehow" (I, 189). At last he seems to recognize "coarse and false" accents, "the same emphasis on the same

words," and her "mechanical sobs and sighs" (I, 190). His continuing association of her with misery, repudiation, and failure, however, makes understandable his following visit, after he has been plucked at Oxbridge. When next he sees Miss Fotheringay—in a theatre audience, appropriately—she has changed her name and position; having become Lady Mirabel, she has permanently joined the audience and henceforth spends her energies perfecting her new, and now metaphorical role. By a striking complication, then, fantasy—the belief that an ignorant actress is socially acceptable as a wife—having been exposed as illusion, suddenly beomes fact and yet retains its illusoriness; the fantasy creates a reality that yet remains fantastic. London society has its private reservations (I, 282, 284), but publicly it allows the role to define the person and thereby encourages her to simulate the part she has chosen by marrying Sir Charles Mirabel, that most "theatrical man" (II, 53).[5] Her success in finding acceptance, moreover, not only implicates London society but also helps make her come to seem like a lady in her own right. The range of her accomplishments gradually increases, from patronizing new authors (II, 60) to penning neat little notes (II, 100). Major Pendennis comes to term her "a most respectable woman, received everywhere —everywhere, mind" (II, 53). She gives receptions and seems to Pen "as grave and collected as if she had been born a Duchess, and had never seen a trap-door in her life" (II, 60). The main implications are clear: not only do people almost inevitably play roles, often deluding even themselves, but with money and a certain amount of study they find their great arena in society, where human beings are isolated from each other by the very roles that fit the overall performance.

The precocious Harry Foker serves as a perfect introduction to these two arenas, both in Chatteris and London. He also makes an appearance at the moment of Pen's reemergence into London life and again that evening at the theatre (I, 281). In Chatteris he knows all the

actors and in his own way unconsciously emulates them as well. Difficult at first to identify beneath his elaborate costume (I, 29), Foker, like "one of our great light comedians," offers us "great pleasure and an abiding matter for thought" (I 34). Whether calling for "his mixture," ordering turtle, venison, and carefully chilled wine, dancing the hornpipe while "looking round for the sympathy of his groom, and the stable men" (I, 30), or twirling "like Harlequin in the Pantomime" (I, 117), Foker is playing his role as man of the world with all the enthusiasm of youthful naivety. For all his simplicity, of course, he does have a certain shrewd acuteness of insight, especially into devious behavior; hence the irony of his partly duplicating Pen's early infatuation and of his failing to perceive the degree to which Miss Amory, an even more accomplished performer than the Fotheringay, is providing herself with "two strings to her bow" (I, 93). In terms of the general theatrical metaphor, Foker's illusion is epitomized for us when, after being smitten with Blanche, he feels he needs a new appearance and in response to the command, *"Cherchy alors une paire de tongs, —et—curly moi un pew,"* the valet wonders "whether his master was in love or was going masquerading" (II, 8).[6] As the woodcut initial of the third last chapter reminds us, in seeking Blanche he plays Clown to Pen's harlequin; yet, to his credit, Foker finally draws a just conclusion from the evidence presented to him about her.

Like Foker and especially Pen, Alcides Mirobolant shows how vanity and infatuation motivate theatrical behavior. A superlatively unconscious role-player, Mirobolant receives unusual attention from the novelist because of his usefulness in parodying those who are self-deluded and, in the unconsciously ironic words of Morgan, those who "has as much pride and hinsolence as if they was real gentlemen" (I, 360).[7] Like Pen in London, Mirobolant possesses an exalted sense of his own professional importance; in addition to his own library, pictures, and piano, he requires an array of assistants, his own maid, his own

apartments, and all the deference due to a hypersensitive artist—a role that he plays even in private: "It was a grand sight to behold him in his dressing-gown composing a *menu.* He always sate down and played the piano some time before that. If interrupted, he remonstrated pathetically with his little maid. Every great artist, he said, had need of solitude to perfectionate his works" (I, 128). As a deluded lover, like the youthful Pen he uses loftily inflated language for the very earthbound object of his passion and he conceives of himself in an overtly theatrical way: in replying to his confidante, who accuses him of being perfidious, he says, "with a deep bass voice, and a tragic accent worthy of the Porte St. Martin and his favourite melo-drames, 'Not perfidious, but fatal. Yes, I am a fatal man, Madame Fribsbi. To inspire hopeless passion is my destiny' " (I, 234).

But it is as a mock-gentleman that he most clearly serves to parody the attitudinizing of young Pen. At the Baymouth ball, where his vanity conflicts directly with Pen's, Mirobolant's self-esteem clothes itself in a blue ribbon and a three-pointed star, but even then Arthur fails to see the implications: the idea "that such an individual should have any feeling of honour at all, did not much enter into the mind of this lofty young aristocrat, the apothecary's son" (I, 262). As a Gascon, Mirobolant stands on the one side of Pen, while Costigan, his Celtic counterpart, stands on the other; both represent parodic versions of the strut and swagger found in Pen. Because Mirobolant has an exaggerated belief in distinctions that set him apart, he insists that he is a *chef,* not a *cuisinier,* and that being a *Chevalier de Juillet* he has a special duty to defend his honor—even like that other mock-gentleman, Costigan, by means of a duel. Here too, his attitude shows itself akin to Pen's theatrical sense of his own dignity, both in his own formal challenge to a local schoolboy and in his response to Mirobolant's tapping him on the shoulder. The conflict between the two expresses itself in such approved melodramatic forms as the grinding of teeth, the jabber-

ing of oaths, the stamping of feet, the challenge to a duel, and the high incidence of French, but like most melodramatic threats in the book it is quickly deflated.

The connectedness of all this role-playing receives further extension in the depiction of another highly theatrical figure who believes himself to be a thorough man of the world: "General or Captain Costigan—for the latter was the rank which he preferred to assume" (I 43). Costigan is a mock-gentleman and a mock-warrior—a veritable "Sir Lucius O'Trigger, which character he had performed with credit, both off and on the stage" (I, 108). He resembles the infatuated Pen as an often unconscious role-player, but where the boy is drunk on poetry and adolescent longings, the source of Costigan's illusions lies in a Celtic imagination excessively stimulated by alcohol. Ending as a fixture of the singer's table at the Back Kitchen, this performer inevitably characterizes himself in theatrical terms, speaking often and sadly "of his resemblance to King Lear in the plee—of his having a thankless choild, bedad" (II, 36). When "this aged buffoon" (II, 163) finds himself in pawn for drink, however—at "the Roscius's Head, Harlequin Yard, Drury Lane" (II, 37)—he successfully appeals to that same child, but with an invented story, of course. In fact, "the Captain was not only unaccustomed to tell the truth,—he was unable even to think it—and fact and fiction reeled together in his muzzy, whiskified brain" (I, 45). Inevitably, then, his language is highly theatrical, for he cannot distinguish himself from his role. Appropriately making his initial appearance in the company of an actor, Costigan habitually speaks with an elaborate rhetoric; he exaggerates the language and "[suits] the action to the word" (I, 102). Inordinate in his sense of honor, and extravagant also in his sense of embarrassment, which he is capable of expressing "in a voice of agony, and with eyes brimful of tears" (I, 108), he unwittingly serves to parody Pen's own excessive pride and shame from the very beginning of the novel to the moment when the series of jokes by

Warrington and others about Pen's "noble" family and his residence at Fairoaks "Castle" culminates as the imagination of the "tipsy mountebank" (I, 115) actually bodies forth the marvellous structure and the impressive life lived there: "I've known um since choildhood, Mrs. Bolton; he's the proproietor of Fairoaks Castle, and many's the cooper of Clart I've dthrunk there with the first nobilitee of his neetive countee" (II, 83). As a dueller we cannot take him even as seriously as Sir Lucius, but since Costigan has a respect for people that is based chiefly on their wealth or future prospects, we can recognize in him a comic representation of the values of the fashionable society to which he constantly alludes and which he uses to help bolster his role. He thereby reveals his similarity to Major Pendennis.

The Major, another old warrior of limited financial means and fictional ancestry, actually associates with the kind of people Costigan pretends to have known, but such association produces a false sense of personal importance not unlike Costigan's: as the narrator ironically puts it, "The Major lived in such good company that he might be excused for feeling like an Earl" (I, 70). At one point he even seems to feel like a Duke, for after greeting Wellington the Major begins "to imitate him unconsciously" (I, 363). In fact, we have a strong impression of his being an actor. Like his chest, "manfully wadded with cotton" (I, 81), he is perfect on the outside but rickety within—both physically and metaphorically. Hence the considerable emphasis on his elaborate toilettes, which becomes more lengthy and complicated as he grows more feeble and which become the basis for the narrator's elevating Major Pendennis to the mock eminence of "hero" alongside Costigan (II, 100). Like Sir Charles Mirabel, an inveterate "theatrical man" (II, 53), "Colonel" Altamont, a notorious imposter, and those two aged youths, Blondel and Colchicum (II, 72), Major Pendennis wears a wig—and that fact gets unusual emphasis in the novel, as does the elaborate and mysterious curling the wig re-

ceives. To a number of scoffers, it even defines him; he is "Wigsby" (I, 282; II, 54, 294). Indeed, on one memorable occasion, later briefly re-evoked (I, 126), it is used to epitomize not only age but sham sentiment, as he tells a story of losing a young heiress: "We returned our letters, sent back our locks of hair (the Major here passed his fingers through his wig), we suffered—but we recovered" (I, 71). Here, as often elsewhere, Major Pendennis is also an actor in the broadest sense: one whose whole-hearted commitment to Vanity Fair, to the empty values of the world, marks him as a participant in fundamental and extended illusion. We see this in the very ring he wears so prominently, "emblazoned with the famous arms of Pendennis" (I, 2). Like Bingley's it is a sham ring, and like the family motto as interpreted by the Major (II, 318), it represents a dedication to wordly aspirations alone.

Though the linking of Major Pendennis and Costigan is established from the beginning of the novel in Pen's letter to his uncle, no one would question that the Major is a far more conscious and adept poseur than Costigan; like most role-players, however, he himself is partly taken in by the illusion he tries to sustain. With "a mournful earnestness and veracity," he urges young Pen to begin his "genealogical studies" but not to concentrate on the pedigrees, for many are "very fabulous, and there are few families that can show such a clear descent as our own" (I, 85; repeated II, 185). So too, the Major believes that his conduct is "perfectly virtuous" as well as perfectly "respectable" (I, 86). One of the judgments that best epitomizes him appears in the delightful phrase, "He was perfectly affable" (I, 2). Such a desirable quality as affability, of course, can give great pleasure and amusement even when it is the perfection of pose. If the performance is carried on at great length, however, we come to see the human strain and debilitation involved, as the Major's condition after his performance at the Gaunt House ball demonstrates. Like Pen, Blanche, Lady Clav-

ering, and Lord Steyne, who introduces himself to her "at the request of the obsequious Major Pendennis" (II, 69), the Major participates in many a "little play" (II, 70) that goes to make up the entertainment of the evening. But since extended perfection is too much to ask of a human being, to be "perfectly affable" for very long is to be inhumanly artificial. Though the Major is capable of such consistency, we also see flaws from the very start of the performance, not only in his neglect of the humble rural petitioner in favor of the entreaties of more fashionable women but also in the "rage and wonder" (I, 3) that show themselves on his face and make Glowry feel for his lancet. Later in the novel, therefore, when we are told "it was curious how emotion seemed to olden him" (II, 137), the narrator is saying not simply that emotion ages the Major but also that emotion reveals his age; being a break in the pose, it discloses the aging process that has been going on underneath, much as the sudden glimpse of Becky's haggard face opposite Rawdon asleep in his chair shows us how the unremitting effort to maintain her role has debilitated her.

Finally, the passage of time[8] not only reveals weakness and leads to artifice that is both more elaborate and more apparent, but it also changes the perspective in which the artifice is viewed. The Major's practised grin comes to be termed a smirk (II, 54, 180, 202) and thereby, like Smirke himself, more of a subject for caricature. His club, Bays's, even comes in the eyes of young men to take on the name of Dolphin's theatre: "It's a regular museum" (I, 362). Likewise, as men of the Major's time begin to die and he becomes more isolated, he thereby seems more theatrical and more clearly a subject for laughter. Hence it is appropriate that he at last retires from the "Pall Mall *pavé*," where "he has walked . . . long enough" (II, 311), as a stage actor might at last retire from the boards. He never fully understands the play, however, even when he recalls so potentially illuminating an example as Sheridan's comedy—"We have him

at a dead-lock, like the fellow in the play—the Critic, hey?" (II, 319)—for in *Pendennis* as in *The Critic,* contrivance is easily overcome by counter-contrivance, and the Major's elaborate plot, like Puff's, is negated by the recalcitrance of actors who alter their parts. The Major never really understands the meaning of his part either, not even towards the end when he quotes Shakespeare's Wolsey and implicitly identifies himself with that role. Shakespeare's great worlding came at last to recognize that the cause of his defeat and misery lay in himself, that one cannot build on corruption; hence his injunction: "Be just and fear not." It is a mark of Pen's maturity that he understands this and renounces the corruption, but Major Pendennis does not. Hence his pitifully theatrical act of kneeling to Pen and his final comment: " 'and had I but served my God as I've served you— . . . I mightn't have been—Good night, sir, you needn't trouble yourself to call again.' . . . He looked very much oldened; and it seemed as if the contest and defeat had quite broken him" (II, 320). Major Pendennis believes that his desires for his nephew, which he thinks of as unselfish, have only exposed him to defeat and misery. Implying, then, that unselfishness opens one to unhappiness, he inverts the meaning of Wolsey's speech and maintains his own worldly consistency, just as he does when he accepts Pen's marriage to Laura because Lady Rockminster approves. Though we are told he "became very serious in his last days," that seriousness seems to take the form solely of telling "his stories" to Laura or listening to her "reading to him" (II, 371). His stories could hardly be very edifying and one has reason for doubting whether he understands what she reads any more than he understood the folly of Wolsey or Cymbeline (II, 137-38).

The man whom Strong finally calls "Jack Alias" (II, 370) seems for a time to represent the triumph of theatricality. Whether his real name is "John Armstrong," like the famous outlaw, or whether that is as fictitious as "Ferdinand," "Amory," and "Altamont," it is as "Colonel

Altamont, of the body-guard of his Highness the Nawaub of Lucknow" (I, 256) that he is introduced and generally known in the novel. Appearing in a "black wig" (I, 263) and in accompanying "whiskers, dyed evidently with the purple of Tyre" (I, 256), beribboned like Mirobolant, bejewelled like Bloundell-Bloundell, with whom he associates on several occasions, and generally over-dressed, Altamont is a blatant masquerader whose function is to emphasize the spuriousness of the relationships in the Clavering family and elsewhere, to serve as a standard for measuring other kinds of make-believe in the novel, and finally to demonstrate the basic folly of human plots and exploitative desires. As a thoroughgoing performer, he endures repeated exposure, so deeply does he believe in his role or roles, as we can see when, in speaking of himself, he tells Strong that "a man of honour may take any name he chooses" (II, 46) or, at an equally comic moment, in excusing some deplorable behavior of his, he calmly says to Sir Francis Clavering: "I told you I was drunk, and that ought to be sufficient between gentleman and gentleman" (II, 49). Altamont not only has difficulty in distinguishing himself from his role, moreover, but he also, with the assistance of drink, confuses matters in the actual theatre as well, to the exasperation of Captain Strong: "I took him to the play the other night; and, by Jove, sir, he abused the actor who was doing the part of villain in the play, and swore at him so, that the people in the boxes wanted to turn him out. The after-piece was the 'Brigand,' where Wallack comes in wounded, you know, and dies. When he died, Altamont began to cry like a child, and said it was a d——d shame, and cried and swore so, that there was another row, and everybody laughing" (II, 40).

Altamont, in short, is the epitome of disorder in the novel, for he is not only the chief threat but he is compulsive, even joyful in his unruliness, and his last cry is an exultant challenge to all comers: "Hurray, who's for it!" (II, 368). A true squire of Alsatia (II, 33), he cannot be permanently assimilated by society, nor does he

really wish to be. A brigand, an outlaw, an ex-convict guilty of forgery and manslaughter, he is even more fundamentally what Strong terms him at the end of the novel: "a madman" (II, 359). Full of "wild stories and adventures" (II, 56), he represents a romantically alluring irrationality to simple, novel-reading females like Miss Snell and Miss Fribsby; exploiting one after the other, like "a perfect Don Juan" (II, 369), he offers in return "to give anybody a lock of his hair" (II, 370). Only Pen deliberately renounces the attempt to trade off what Altamont seems to represent; consequently, he is free to find stability in a good marriage. Altamont, of course, renounces nothing and, being the irrational force that he is, sweeps free of all attempts to capture him. All these plots fail and it is entirely fitting that Altamont should escape the careful Morgan because of a drunken innkeeper's sudden fears and because of a most theatrical man's unexpected impulse of dashing down the gutterpipe that separates Altamont from his pursuers, being reminded of that "aisy sthratagem by remembering his dorling Emilie, when she acted the pawrt of Cora in the Plee—and by the bridge in Pezawro, bedad" (II, 370).

Though equally as much a masquerader as her father, Blanche Amory is of a rather different kind, despite certain similarities. For one thing, an important part of her alien tone comes from habits she has picked up in France. Called "the French girl" (I, 258) by one character, she uses French not only to crown herself with a false name but especially to express her affectations, notably her sentimental ones. Her flippant and arch use of the Gallic tongue, however, reveals not only affectation but moral insensitivity—lightly calling Pen a *"monstre,"* for example, as a means of teasing him about having a sexual dalliance with Fanny (II, 201). Blanche's exposure to French literature, especially the romances of George Sand, causes her to play at being in love with literary heroes and to change capriciously from one to another; she indulges the same expectations and conducts herself in the

same way when she transfers her attentions to actual human beings. It is little wonder, therefore, that she encourages Mirobolant (I, 360), flirts simultaneously with Foker and Pen, and at last, in a desperate search for legitimacy, marries an apparently bogus count with a superlatively grand name.

When she has no other audience she enjoys posing to herself, whether in a mirror or in her book of verse, the title of which serves the narrator as a metonym for her (II, 275). When she is not "the Muse," "*Mes Larmes*," or "the Lady of *Mes Larmes*," then she is often "the Sylphide," and like Taglioni in the ballet of that name (I, 377), she simulates an ethereal being whose association with earth-bound humanity proves impossible. As a "*femme incomprise*" (I, 217), she cultivates sentiment and so, "by practice" (I, 227), increases both her dissatisfaction and its expression. Irony becomes one form of utterance, especially irony directed against members of the Clavering family. At other times her annoyance takes the form of open quarrels with them, even before visitors like Laura and Major Pendennis. Though at moments she feels a certain chagrin at having let her role slip, she always has another at hand. Most capable of responding to her circumstances by speaking dramatically and making "appropriate, though rather theatrical" (II, 365) gestures, she characteristically thinks of herself as "a heroine" (II, 366). When paying a patronizing and inquisitive visit to Fanny, for example, "Blanche felt a queen stepping down from her throne to visit a subject, and enjoyed all the bland consciousness of doing a good action" (II, 274). Inevitably, Mrs. Bolton sees the play-acting and, worse, the prostitution of feeling.

Blanche wants "an establishment" (II, 59) and wide social acceptance, but she also wants to continue her immature indulgence in "dreaming pretty dramas" (II, 329). Playing at being in love with Pen and genuinely attracted by Foker's wealth, her performance for each at the piano (captured also, for emphasis, by two illustrations) helps

epitomize her artful duplicity. Though she plays various characters, she also has certain stock gestures and devices that recur in her performances: "If ever this artless young creature met a young man . . . she confided in him, so to speak—made play with her beautiful eyes—spoke in a tone of tender interest, and simple and touching appeal, and left him, to perform the same pretty little drama in behalf of his successor." If at first there are "very few audiences before whom Miss Blanche could perform" (I, 246), she does for a time secure more attention, but her repetitions become apparent to Pen, as had the Fotheringay's. When Pen asks her whether she wishes him "to come wooing in a Prince Prettyman's dress from the masquerade warehouse, and . . . feed my pretty princess with *bonbons?*" her answer is, of course, *"Mais j'adore les bonbons, moi"* (II, 266). Indeed it is Pen's ability as a play-actor that in part makes her equivocate between him and the wealthy Foker, for with the latter she has to carry much of the burden. Hence also part of the "strange feeling of exultation" that takes "possession of Blanche's mind" (II, 365) when she loses Foker at last. It takes possession of her mind, because, as several people in the novel point out, she has no heart; like Becky, she can feel no kindness, warmth, sympathy, or love. Without these capabilities, "life is nothing" (I, 227) indeed, and Blanche unwittingly emphasizes the emptiness of her life for us by variously repeating, in effect, her cry: *"Il me faut des émotions"* (II, 345). As one who from a very early age "had begun to gush" (I, 227), it is appropriate that she should tell Pen, in her deceptive letter, "To you I bring the gushing poesy of my being" (II, 331); even at this point, however, Pen fails to realize how complete a sham she is, for "he saw more than existed in reality" (II, 345). What really exists at the heart of this circle of sham emotions is precisely nothing; at the center of the role, its motive and epitome, exists complete emptiness, for the self has been dissipated through a surrender to role-playing. With the Fotheringay we are amused

by seeing the ironic discrepancy between her theatrical role and her dull, stolid, everyday self, but with Blanche Amory, the more we see into her the more we understand that behind the role is only a void.

The last form of theatricalism by which Pen is tested derives rather intimately from the actual theatre; it is represented by Fanny Bolton, whose mother was "in the profession once, and danced at the Wells" (II, 34). Fanny herself has attended a day-school run by two former actresses and she is "a theatrical pupil" of Bows's, like the Fotheringay. "She has a good voice and a pretty face and figure for the stage," and having heard "of her mother's theatrical glories, . . . longs to emulate [them]" (II, 34). Like her mother, Fanny is a "theatrical person (II, 96). Hence she responds readily to spectacle and freely participates in the illusions to which it gives rise. Vauxhall is therefore a perfect place for her romance to begin. It offers singing, horse-riding, fireworks, dancing, and a general glitter that makes it seem to "blaze before her with a hundred million of lamps, with a splendour such as the finest fairy tale, the finest pantomime she had ever witnessed at the theatre, had never realised" (II, 82). She is of course ready to make a hero of a young man who takes her through such a wealth of splendor as Vauxhall and, somewhat like Blanche and her Savoyard organ-grinder (I, 228), she romanticizes Pen by imagining hardships as well as glory: "I'm sure he's a nobleman, and of ancient famly, and kep out of his estate" (II, 124). Thinking of *The Lady of Lyons,* she asks, "And if everybody admires Pauline . . . for being so true to a poor man—why should a gentleman be ashamed of loving a poor girl?" (II, 124). The other member of "this couple of fools" (II, 108), her mother, encourages these fantasies with recollections of former actresses who married theatrical men of one kind or another: not only the Fotheringay but Emily Budd, who danced Columbine in *Harlequin Hornpipe* (II, 98, 125). Fanny, who, like young Pen (I, 78), would "do on the stage" (II, 334), eventually has to ac-

cept Huxter as her Harlequin, but the brief association with Pen helps the girl supplement her powers of fantasy with cunning, notably when she coaxes information about him out of Costigan, "tripping about the room as she had seen the dancers do at the play" (II, 107), flattering him, learning what she wants to know and then abandoning him. Though she suffers "fever and agitation, and passion and despair" (II, 166), the "drama" (II, 263) with Pen ends when she consoles herself like the heroine of Pen's poem, Ariadne; as he sees at last, the ultimate root of her theatricality lies in her "coquetry and irrepressible desire of captivating mankind" (II, 348).[9]

The object of much of this role-playing, cool or passionate, is of course also frequently theatrical in his behavior, but less so as he grows older. Pen's lack of a father, his spoiled domination of Helen and young Laura, his reading of Inchbald's *Theatre* (I, 24) and supplementary literature, his lively imagination, adolescent longings, isolation, and inexperience all help account for his youthful fantasies; he becomes a reciter of gloomy, romantic verses, a poet-playwright himself, and a person most ready to respond to the pathos and beauty of Ophelia and Mrs. Haller by seeing himself in the appropriate roles: "He was Hamlet jumping into Ophelia's grave: he was the Stranger taking Mrs. Haller to his arms, beautiful Mrs. Haller" (I, 69). He puts on "his most princely air" (I, 64) when addressing inferior mortals like Dr. Portman, while with the Major he strings up his nerves for "his tragic and heroical air," "armed *cap-à-pié* as it were, with lance couched and plumes displayed" (I, 77). It is only appropriate that the conclusion of the affair should be parodied by Hobnell, who "flung himself into a theatrical attitude near a newly-made grave, and began repeating Hamlet's verses over Ophelia, with a hideous leer at Pen" (I, 136). After the end of this first major episode of his life, however, his extravagant theatricalism is essentially at an end. Though Pen momentarily looks down at Fanny, "splendidly protecting her, like Egmont at Clara in

Goethe's play" (II, 85), and sees himself as a potential Faust to her Margaret, he terms that vision "nonsense," and vows there will be none of that "business" (II, 93) for him. Finally, when he asks Blanche, "Will you be the . . . Lady of Lyons, and love the penniless Claude Melnotte?" (II, 329), he is acting a part more to amuse her than to satisfy himself.

Along with these romantic roles, Pen has, from the very beginning of the novel, tried to simulate "a man of the world." The family legends, his father's pretentions, and his own tacit position as "head of the Pendennises" (I, 5), provide initial encouragement, as does the Fotheringay affair itself, for Pen becomes "famous" at the university by making known his former passion for the Fotheringay, now a successful London actress: "his brow would darken, his eyes roll, his chest heave with emotion as he recalled that fatal period of his life, and described the woes and agonies which he had suffered" (I, 175). Strutting, swaggering, entertaining bounteously, and indulging expensive tastes for clothing, jewelry, rare editions, prints, and gambling, while neglecting his studies, Pen boyishly overplays his role—nowhere more so that in his admiring association with Bloundell-Bloundell, who is as flamboyantly fraudulent as Macheath (I, 186), and whose stories Pen believes as implicitly as Fanny does Costigan's. During the "Ball-practising" (I, 257), Pen seems at his most typical when "performing *cavalier seul* . . . [and] drawling through that figure" (I, 260), but, as before, his triumphs soon end: though he and Blanche whirl round "as light and brisk as a couple of opera-dancers" (I, 261), they bump into recalcitrant actuality. His "waltzing career" (I, 260) having ended, he soon turns to law and then to a literary career. Here Warrington makes sure that Pen is taken down at the start, calling Pen's old poem about Ariadne "miserable weak rubbish" that is "mawkish and disgusting," and his Prize Poem both "pompous and feeble" (I, 312). Pen therefore begins with hack-writing for

bread and gradually moves up to the modest eminence of being a published novelist.

In his parallel social career, however, his mimetic instincts seem more under the influence of personal vanity: "Pen was sarcastic and dandyfied when he had been in the company of great folks; he could not help imitating some of their airs and tones, and having a most lively imagination, mistook himself for a person of importance very easily." Living in prominent society, we are reminded, makes one an actor, as we again see when Pen tells Foker of the Major's efforts to secure Blanche for him, and when, by "flinging himself into an absurd theatrical attitude," he reveals not only "high spirits" (II, 72) but perhaps also a mostly unconscious discomfort at what he sees and may sense of the Major's plotting. Pen's next bit of theatricalism shows clear discomfort, however—this time at a lurking purpose in himself—as he tries to dispel "a gloomy and rather guilty silence" at the appearance of Bows in the porter's doorway by attempting "to describe, in a jocular manner, the transactions of the night previous, and . . . to give an imitation of Costigan vainly expostulating with the check-taker at Vauxhall. It was not a good imitation" (II, 97). Deciding that his "calling is not seduction" (II, 111), Pen turns again to Blanche Amory and to his more public aspirations. Having played the part of the experienced old gentleman to Laura and Fanny, he now tries it on Warrington: "I am older than you, George, in spite of your grizzled whiskers, and have seen much more of the world than you have in your garret here, shut up with your books and your reveries and your ideas of one-and-twenty" (II, 232). Indeed, it is one of the most severe judgments made of Warrington in the novel, but he responds with a shrewd exposure of Pen's motive for proclaiming himself a worldly old Sadducee, one who takes things as they are: "This is the meaning of your scepticism . . . my poor fellow. You're going to sell yourself" (II, 238).

Pen in effect accepts a stock role imposed upon him; in the appropriately ironic words of Morgan, he is now "young Hopeful" (II, 303). Before the play is over, however, Pen clearly sees that he must not accept a ready-made role: "you must bear your own burthen, fashion your own faith, think your own thoughts, and pray your own prayer" (II, 340). When he puts on his last "tragedy air" and tells Lady Rockminster that "a villain has transplanted me" (II, 347) in the affections of Blanche Amory, his pose reflects in part his mortified vanity and consequently distorts the truth about Foker in the use of the word "villain"; hence that theatrical and inappropriate term must be rejected. Even more, however, the exaggerated pose also represents a conscious self-parody rooted in a joyous new sense of his own identity that has arisen from Laura's agreement to marry him. His last role is decidedly self-effacing: together with Laura he serves the Huxters by arranging to soften the father, "bring in the young people, extort the paternal benediction, and finish the comedy" (II, 349). Finally, as the last sentence tells us, he "does not claim to be a hero, but only a man and a brother" (II, 372).

That tempered claim is the ultimate mark of his maturity, for it implies his awareness that when theatricalism is mere strutting and gesticulation—without humility and the recognition of kinship, which includes charity—it is an epitome of human isolation. In effect, he understands at last the meaning of that short and quietly resonant scene with Bows on Chatteris bridge, when two isolations meet in brief sympathy. Warrington, of course, has long had a similar understanding, and therefore it is entirely fitting that at the end of the novel he not only affirms his kinship to Pen and Laura, his "brother and sister," but that also, by "practising in the nursery here, in order to prepare for the part of Uncle George" (II, 370), he exemplifies the positive value of theatricality: to dramatize genuine feelings of sympathy and love, and thereby to bring a temporary end to human isolation.

NOTES

[1]The first of these was Martin Fido's *"The History of Pendennis*: A Reconsideration," *Essays in Criticism,* 14 (1964), 363-79. Fido, however, limits his discussion to a three page survey of a rather narrower subject: "The thematic use of the theatre as a symbol of society" (p. 363). James H. Wheatley's *Patterns in Thackeray's Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1969) discusses Pen's role-playing and Juliet McMaster's *Thackeray: the Major Novels* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) examines artifice in Pen and other characters; both also show Pen's transforming powers as artist, especially Mrs. McMaster. The most recent work, Barbara Hardy's *The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), discusses aspects of art and performance in *Pendennis.*

[2]*The History of Pendennis,* 2 vols. (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1849-1850). I use this text because it is the fullest version of the novel.

[3]One cannot agree, however, with Fido, who argues that after Pen's initial introduction to the theatre, "Visits to the theatre are . . . a sign of moral danger" (p. 363). On the contrary, they are occasions for observation and growth.

[4]Juliet McMaster points out the Oedipal overtones of Pen's Hamlet-like relation to his mother (pp. 197-98).

[5]A number of other actresses, circus riders, and the like, including retired performers, appear also in off-stage capacities, from Miss Blenkinsop and her father (I, 281-83), Miss Rougemont, Mrs. Calverley, Mademoiselle Coralie, and Madame Brack (II, 13-15), Mademoiselle Caracoline (II, 84), and Fanny Bolton's teachers (II, 84), to Princess Obstropski (II, 177-78), who, like Lady Mirabel, has married into society.

[6]Here, as elsewhere in *Pendennis,* when French is employed it generally serves as the language of artifice, especially when used by Blanche. Foker and his "polyglot valet, . . . who was of no particular country, and spoke all languages indifferently ill" (II, 7), otherwise converse in English. Only at this moment does Foker shift to French.

[7]Juliet McMaster makes a similar observation (pp. 72, 84).

[8]For a perceptive recent discussion of time in *Pendennis,* see Jean Sudrann, " 'The Philosopher's Property': Thackeray and the Use of Time," *Victorian Studies,* 10 (1967), 359-88, especially 363-78.

[9]Laura and Helen, though generally free from a tendency to theatrical behavior, do succumb when agitated by wounded pride and jealousy, especially during the Fanny Bolton episode. Warrington is the character least prone to theatricalism—mainly because he is the least vulnerable to pride.

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