‘A CONJUGAL LESSON’: ROBERT BROUGH’S MEDEA AND THE DISCOURSES OF MID-VICTORIAN BRITAIN

Edmund Richardson

The Athenian Captive (1838) was to constitute the last significant use of Greek tragedy on the professional stage in Britain for a radical political purpose until Gilbert Murray’s stagings of Euripides in the Edwardian era.

Edith Hall1

I believe in the Revolution.

Robert Brough, 18552

Introduction: Cultural crisis? What cultural crisis?

The fiercest political debates in 1850s Britain were inextricably bound up with the Classical past. Traditionalists and eulogists, priests and pamphleteers, doctors and revolutionaries all set their arguments and their ideals within a Classical framework. Amongst those who sought to use the ancient for decidedly contemporary purposes, Robert Brough was one of the most passionate. He was a revolutionary, a playwright, and a Classicist—though up until the performance of his burlesque Medea (on July 14th 1856), he had never been all three at once. This article will explore how, at the time, the myth of Medea was the perfect vehicle for radical politics—and how Brough exploited its potential to the full. It will frame his play within some of the most controversial debates of the period. It will explore Brough’s (on the face of it, startling) claim that his burlesque would give the audience more to think about than any play they had seen before, that it would be ‘a conjugal lesson, surpassing in intensity anything ever before presented’.3 Brough wrote his Medea believing in ‘the Revolution’. And, as I hope to show, he wanted his audiences to leave the theatre believing in it too.

Gender: The Unmanageable Woman

Man for the Field, Woman for the Hearth,
Man for the Sword and the Needle She,
Man with the Head, and Woman with the Heart,
Man to Command, Woman to Obey,
All else Confusion.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, The Princess (1847)

Mid-Victorian Britain was fascinated by ‘confusion’—especially in women. Lurid transcripts of adultery trials were rushed through the presses, and became
EDMUND RICHARDSON

bestsellers. Exhibitions of ‘portraits of insane persons’ drew the crowds and grabbed the column inches. Sensationalist accounts of female madness described a woman’s ‘sudden and violent efforts to destroy things or persons; her vehement rushings to fire and window; her very tread and stamp in her dark and disordered and remote chamber’. Designers of lunatic asylums advised that ‘a larger proportion of the building should be allotted to females, as their numbers almost always predominate’. London’s prostitutes were obsessively counted and re-counted, and the results (which ranged from 8,000 to 80,000) debated in Parliament.

Yet if this was a society fascinated by disorder, it was also one obsessed with order. Many—such as Tennyson—sought to maintain a model of ‘respectable’ femininity; a paradigm of womanhood that worked to marginalise and exclude all who did not fit into it—the mad women, the adulterous women, the intellectual woman, the prostitutes, the ‘confusion’. A strongly positive paradigm of femininity—the Angel in the House—came to be juxtaposed with a strongly negative paradigm—the disorderly, unmanageable woman. Many saw the maintenance of this positive paradigm, this ideal of womanhood, as crucial to the welfare of the country: ‘Marriage ought to be in high estimation among men, not only as the state most safe to virtue...but as best calculated to promote the welfare of our country.’

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Sexual and moral behaviour were perceived as the touchstones of social order; private morality was a matter for public debate.

There certainly was a debate in 1850s Britain over the place of women in society—and received opinion was being called into question more and more insistently. Reformist measures such as the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act (passed in 1857), and the Married Women’s Property Act (which, in the end, did not become law until 1870), were working their way through Parliament, in the face of vitriolic opposition. For one traditionalist, Viscount Dungannon, the (rather mild) Divorce Act was ‘a bill which, to say the least of it, was fraught with danger to the morality, the wellbeing, the order of society, and the happiness of the country at large’.

Those opposed to reform, and to increased rights and freedoms for women, responded to the calls for change by arguing that their conception of women’s role in society was the ‘natural’ one, as history and the Gospels showed. They created a tradition of perfect Victorian housewives, stretching from Ancient Greece to contemporary Britain. The Angel In The House, an idealised romance written during the 1850s, is one of the most famous articulations of that curious, archetypal Victorian femininity. While it is set in the contemporary world, the author, Coventry Patmore, has saturated the narrative with Classical allusions. The lovers have Latin names—‘he Felix, and Honoria she’—and measure up to Classical ideals—‘[she was] in shape no more a Grace/But Venus.’ In an atmosphere of ‘temple-like repose’, Patmore and ‘his noble Muse’ tell a story peppered with references to ‘stout Jason’, ‘translated Psyche’, and ‘authentic Juno’. Patmore’s idealised lovers, it is clear, are meant to represent the way men and women always have behaved—and always should behave.
Anyone who went against that tradition, or sought to challenge it, was an 'unnatural' aberration.

What characteristics, in particular, were these traditionalists seeking to write out of the history of femininity, and so declare 'un-womanly'? James Hanway, Christian pamphleteer and self-appointed moral-reformer, is perhaps typical of such individuals. His advice to women is nothing if not comprehensive—he even warns them about 'the undistinguished use of Tea'. But it is feminine emotions—and, in particular, the more destructive emotions—which he seeks above all to control, declaring them against women's nature: 'any wish for “revenge” on an unfaithful husband is a symptom of a sick and crazied mind.'

Of course, Euripides' Medea was the antithesis of this mid-Victorian paradigm. She represented the emotional, vengeful woman, who would not be controlled by rationality, and the intellectual woman, more than capable of occupying a central role in the public space. When she is introduced into the discourse, it becomes much more difficult to claim that women in the ancient world were indistinguishable from a contemporary 'Angel in the House'. It also becomes much more difficult to create a sanitised history of femininity, and to dismiss certain characteristics as 'un-natural' or 'un-womanly'. Indeed, the figure of Medea can be used to construct an alternative paradigm of femininity, in which women have 'traditionally' had strong emotions to spare, and public lives to lead, and in which the 'Angel in the House' becomes the 'unnatural' woman. A vision of women, in fact, which was very close to the one which many contemporary reformers were arguing for.

Perhaps, then, it should be unsurprising that many mid-Victorian writers went out of their way to argue against linking the contemporary 'unmanageable' woman with Medea. Here, a medical writer, John Bucknill, aims to disconnect Medea from contemporary discourses on madness, and to reclaim the myth as a piece of normative rhetoric—with a 'moral', no less:

The revengeful anger which urged Medea...to destroy her own sons, is usually regarded as the result of insanity; but it scarcely bears this interpretation... The whole moral of the tragedy is weakened by such a supposition; and, indeed, there are few of the true characters of madness in the actions of Medea.


The French playwright Ernest Legouve also saw Medea as a near-insoluble threat to his paradigm of a civilising, graceful contemporary femininity. He admits that, unless the figure of Medea can be neutralised, contemporary women cannot be expected to play the roles he has imagined for them:

If the French people formerly possessed the graces of Athens, they have latterly exchanged them for a considerable degree of Spartan bluntness. What can most effectually oppose the progress of this growing evil?
Doubtless the society of amiable women.

[...]

Still you retort, 'Women are ever frail,
Where love, ambition, interest assail.
Witness the horrors by Medea wrought,
In Colchis. Can these deeds be e'er forgot?'

Ernest Legouve, *The Merits of Woman*

Euripides’ Medea can hardly be made into a positive paradigm of mid-Victorian femininity but—as we have seen with Dr Bucknill—she can be re-constructed in such a way that she no longer poses a threat to that paradigm, or provides a precedent for contemporary reformers to draw upon. This was Legouve’s strategy when he came to write his own adaptation of *Medea*, which received its London premiere on June 6th, 1856; he drains his Medea of her Classical power. Euripides’ Medea was at home in the public space, and more than capable of out-arguing every one of her male opponents. But in the society that the traditionalists argued for (and did their best to maintain), it was ‘Man for the Field, Woman for the Hearth’; men and women had their own ‘spheres’, and the woman’s was the domestic, ‘protected from all danger and temptation’. Legouve’s Medea, in consequence, must lurking in the sidelines, unable to control the theatrical space or the public space. She is singularly unable to function effectively in the male ‘sphere’ of the outside world; she must, for example, ask male characters to speak on her behalf in public—‘Speak thou for me. I have no words to plead for woes like mine.’

This Medea’s maternal instinct, too, is decidedly mid-Victorian. The so-called ‘cult of domesticity’ prevalent at the time had its origins in eighteenth-century France—in the writings of Rousseau (who argued for the importance of intimacy between the mother and child, and the naturalness of the maternal instinct), and the so-called ‘happy mother’ school of art (which explicitly set out to idealise motherhood, and to depict it as a blissful state). A near-fanatical maternal instinct, and dedication to the home, became a key part of the traditionalists’ picture of acceptable femininity—here is Hanway the pamphleteer again: ‘Cherish in thy bosom a tenderness for children: The woman devoid of this affection hardly deserves the name of a woman.’ Those words could have been spoken by Legouve’s Medea herself: she emphasises that ‘they [the children] are even dearer to me than my hate’, and only kills her children after she has been explicitly rejected by them, and so rendered unable to play the role of a mother—‘I am no more a mother, no more myself.’

Euripides’ tragedy has been recast as a domestic drama, of a type with which London audiences were, if anything, over-familiar. ‘He [Legouve]...reduced it from its classical grandeur to romantic, or even melodramatic proportions.’ Legouve’s Medea is no longer a threat to the male ‘sphere’; she is a figure of pathos and innocence, rather than menace—intrinsically ‘pure and unsullied’, with a ‘fond, confiding heart’. Her transgression has been controlled.
Why was it so important to these writers—to Legouve and Bucknill, Padmore and Hanway—to profess such a circumscribed view of femininity? Why did they feel impelled to eliminate the threat posed by Medea to their vision? Precisely because, during the 1850s, that vision of femininity was under determined, sustained, and outraged attack. The debate over the Divorce Act, already touched upon, represents but one part of the picture. The rigid paradigm of acceptable femininity forced many women outside the boundaries of ‘respectability’—often through no fault of their own. Caroline Norton, pamphleteer, protestor and society beauty, was perhaps the most famous of them all. When abandoned by her husband, she found herself (as far as the law was concerned) beyond the pale—and her long-running campaign to improve the legal status of women had a significant impact on public debate. Just as Bucknill and Legouve were well aware of the benefits of eliminating any alternative paradigm of femininity, Norton was well aware of the benefits of creating one, and she set her appeal for sympathy within a tradition of unjustly marginalised women:

*My history is real. I know there is no poetry in it to attract you... Let that thought haunt you, through the music of your Sonnambulas and Desdemonas, and be with you in your readings of histories and romances... I really have gone through much that, if it were invented, would move you—but being of your every-day world, you are willing it should sweep past.*

Caroline Norton, *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century*

The Classical world, naturally enough, provided a fruitful store of such figures. The title of Florence Nightingale’s *Cassandra* reminds the reader of another woman systematically and unjustly rejected by society—the prophetess who always spoke the truth, but whom no-one ever believed. Nightingale uses the figure of Cassandra to construct the very kind of alternative paradigm of femininity that it seems Bucknill and Legouve were trying to guard against. She argues that the way in which contemporary society treats women is not only unjust—it is unnatural, in defiance of women’s true nature:

> Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity—these three—and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?... In the conventional society, which men have made for women, and women have accepted, they must have none [passions], they must act the farce of hypocrisy.

Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra*

It is within this framework, and this debate, that Robert Brough constructs his own Medea. His play was a burlesque of Legouve’s, but his protagonist could hardly have been more different. Legouve aimed to neutralise his Medea’s relevance to contemporary political debates; Brough worked to engage his
Medea in them. Thanks to women such as Caroline Norton, the figure of the abandoned wife, unjustly marginalised by society, was at the forefront of the public imagination in this period. Brough constructed a detailed set of correspondences between his Medea and this very contemporary, decidedly controversial, figure—and, by so doing, worked to destabilise the ‘traditional’ paradigm of femininity.

When Brough’s Medea first hit the London stage, almost every review took note of her low social status. The Times called her ‘the moody virago of low life’, and the Illustrated London News said that ‘Mr. Robson was the Medea of vulgar life’. No wonder. Brough played up his Medea’s poverty for all he was worth: her first entrance is as a beggar, and her first words are an appeal for money. Even her furniture has been repossessed: ‘A landlord, as inclement as the weather,/Has seiz’d our flock bed.’ Brough’s Medea is a woman rendered destitute by her husband’s desertion of her. This was the situation Caroline Norton found herself in when separated from her husband. In 1853, she had been reduced to near-penury when her estranged husband abruptly terminated her allowance. Because married women had no independent property of their own, she found that she had no legal redress. Lord Lyndhurst, when proposing the introduction of a Married Women’s Property Bill (he tried in 1856, and 1857, but it was voted down on both occasions), saw things in a similar light: he argued that, as soon as she was separated from her husband, a wife was ‘homeless, helpless, and almost wholly destitute of civil rights’.

Not only were estranged wives deprived of their property, they were also deprived of their public identity: ‘under the common law a married woman had no legal identity apart from her husband.’ Norton, giving evidence in court against her husband, came under no illusions: ‘I do not ask for my rights,’ she said. ‘I have no rights; I have only wrongs.’ Brough’s Medea found herself in the same situation—separated from her husband, but still legally married, she has lost even the most basic marker of her identity, her name:

JASON [to Creusa]: Thank—Mrs.—what’s her name!
MEDEA [sharply]: Got none!

Robert Brough, Medea

There is an equally strong consensus between Brough, Norton, and the reformers when it comes to apportioning blame for the plight of the abandoned wife: it’s all the husband’s fault. The widespread public support given to Norton—one on one occasion, again in court, ‘the entire court burst into cheers and applause’ when she appeared—shows that many saw her as the injured party in the dispute with her husband; there appears to be a general consensus amongst later commentators that she was a ‘victim of a husband’s adultery’. Brough is even more explicit: his Jason merrily sings that ‘I was to blame and that’s the truth,/I’m not ashamed to own it.’ Blaming the husband for the breakup of a home becomes the rule, not the exception:
Despite their lack of culpability, women who were abandoned by their husbands found themselves relegated to the fringes of society, shunned by the ‘respectable’ world, and often near-criminalised. Norton claims to have suffered ‘every species of degradation’ since her separation from her husband; she casts her appeal for help as ‘a cry coming over the waves from a shipwreck to where you stand on shore’. Brough’s Medea is even more dramatically (but perhaps not quite so melodramatically) shunned:

**MEDEA:** To overseers, if I make application  
To join the Union, there’s a conflagration:  
To model lodgings I’m not endurable—  
Hospitals kick me out as past incurable!  
Soup kitchens don’t consider me the ticket—  
I’m even bowl’d out at the gaoler’s wicket.

In 1850s Britain, the version of Medea which you subscribed to said a great deal about your views on the place of women in society. Brough’s Medea, certainly, is anything but apolitical. Her search for self-definition and survival outside of marriage would have been instantly recognisable to an audience of the 1850s; of the women marginalised by mid-Victorian society, the woman abandoned by her husband was perhaps one of the most controversially so. Brough was allowing on to the stage some of the most insistent—and most insistently reviled—voices of the period, and was mounting his own challenge to established notions of femininity.

**The Establishment: A Classical Revolution**

There’s an amnesty given—deny it who can?  
For all the sins of “a gentleman!”  
You may leave your wife, with her children six,  
In a ditch to starve and pine  
And another man’s take, in a palace rich  
With jewels and gold to shine.

Robert Brough, *Songs of the ‘Governing Classes’*
Brough’s radicalism, however—and his use of the Classical past in support of it—goes far further. When Brough mobilises our sympathies for his Medea, he does it (as can be glimpsed in my particularly execrable epigraph) as part of a much wider critique of mid-Victorian society, and of that peculiar figure, the ‘gentleman’.

In mid-Victorian Britain, the union of Classics and radical politics made both a natural pairing, and a rather odd couple. Natural, because such a union had its antecedents in the Romantic Hellenism of Shelley and Byron, and their search for a ‘new politics’; the French Revolution of 1848 (like its 1798 ancestor) was also heavily influenced by Classical ideals (Marx commented that ‘the French Revolution was enacted in Roman dress’). Robert Brough was well aware of these links—he had recently produced a translation of Béranger’s French revolutionary songs. On another level, however, Classics and revolutionary politics sat uneasily with each other. Classics in mid-Victorian Britain, after all, more frequently served to bolster exactly the opposite end of the political spectrum. Knowledge of Latin and (especially) Greek came to be seen as a marker, and a guarantor, of elite status. Public schools (waves of these institutions were being founded in this period) segregated their pupils according to wealth: those who could pay were taught Latin and Greek, those who could not were only taught English. The emerging bourgeoisie sought to use knowledge of Classics as a marker of status, and to bolster their sense of superiority over the working classes; it became ‘the symbol of both mobility and exclusivity’.

Public school education, however, was not only geared towards the maintenance of social exclusivity; it aimed at the creation of it. These schools were seen by many as institutions for the production of gentlemen: ‘an expensive education,’ for Sir Charles Trevelyan, enabled even the most nouveau-riche to acquire ‘the feelings and habits of gentlemen.’ In this way, knowledge of Classics came to serve as a stock test of a person’s worth—even in areas which a Classical education had no bearing on. Disraeli’s autobiographical novel Tancred recounts the curious history of the ‘Greek Play Bishops’, clergymen promoted to the bishopric by the Earl of Liverpool, whose ‘test of priestly celebrity was the decent editorship of a Greek Play’.

In mid-Victorian Britain, Classical knowledge was a very powerful thing to have on one’s side. Those seeking a guarantee of respectability, or the legitimating of their opinions, often looked to a Classical precedent—whether it was real or invented, sublime or ridiculous. At the latter end of the spectrum can be found Mathias Roth, pamphleteer. Hoping to convince the Earl of Granville of the merits of his system of ‘rational gymnastics’, he makes the inevitable connection, selecting a passage that could have been lifted from a contemporary public school’s charter:

The Greeks knew the value of Rational Gymnastic training. Lucian tells us that Solon said to the Scythian Anacharsis, ‘To us Greeks it is not enough to have man as nature created him, but we train him by gymnas-
tics, that we may make that much better which nature has done well, and improve what is inferior.'

Mathias Roth, A Letter to the Rt Hon. the Earl of Granville

In the political rhetoric of the period, too, Classical references abound. Politicians, in fact, found them particularly useful for getting out of tight corners. When Lord Palmerston was censured by the House of Lords in the summer of 1850, after a classic piece of gunboat diplomacy, not only did he embark on a speech of truly epic proportions (it finished at 2.30 a.m.), he also set at the heart of his defence an appeal to Classical precedent: 'as the Roman, in days of old, held himself free from indignity when he could say Civis Romanus sum; so also a British subject, in whatever land he may be, shall feel confident that the watchful eye and the strong arm of England, will protect him against injustice and wrong.' Classical precedent served as a fundamental buttress both to the status and the ideology of the elite.

So when the received version of the Classical past is undermined, it is easy to see why some people became extremely agitated. Earlier in the century, a wave of Classical scholars (mostly ancient historians) began to threaten the stability of the establishment’s vision of the ancient world; perhaps the most famous of them was a German, Barthold Georg Niebuhr. While he still believed in Classics as a marker of elite status, his critical attitude, and revisionist approach, blew holes in vast tracts of ancient history. When dealing with Herodotus, for example, he attacks the ‘childlike credulity’ of his history. Throughout his commentary, Niebuhr makes much of the ‘rational’ standards which he employs, and which Herodotus decidedly does not: ‘The expedition of Darius against the Scythians is a remarkable instance of the phenomenon, that at an age so near to the historical times, so many things which are impossible and inconceivable are related as facts by a man of the greatest intelligence and judgment [Herodotus].’ This attack on academic orthodoxy was seen by many as an attack on orthodoxy of all forms; reviewers blasted Niebuhr’s ‘libertarian’ re-reading of ancient history as ‘incendiary’ and ‘pregnant with crude and dangerous speculations’. Niebuhr, however, is rarely explicit in his connections between past and present, though the ones which he does make tend to be rather more dystopic than the rose-tinted norm. Nevertheless, it is clear that many saw his relatively mild re-readings of the past as nothing less than a call to revolution. In a period where Classics and politics were so inextricably entwined, any attack on the sanctity of the past paradigm was seen (by many) as an attack on the present one.

And so we return to that curious cohabitation, between Classics and radical politics. While Niebuhr’s revisionism may have only been mildly political (in intention, at least), many other attacks on received Classicism in this period were very strongly linked with the parallel propagation of egalitarian ideals. Here, an introduction is necessary, to the curious and colourful prose of another pamphleteer, the Rev. Foster Barham Zincke. His works combine attacks on
upper-class privilege with calls for educational reform, and the removal of Classics from the curriculum. He advocated ‘the establishment of an extended and improved system of education for the poor’, 70 which should include as little as possible of the history of that ‘caste of military slaveholders’, 71 the Greeks and Romans. In fact, he advocates its complete removal from the curriculum, even in the public schools: ‘the idea must be abandoned that the attempt to teach Latin and Greek is the best education for the upper orders.’ 72 Zincke seeks to redefine knowledge of the Classical past, from being a marker of elite status, to being a mark of someone’s complete inability to play a useful part in the world: ‘the system...which is pursued at Oxford, does not make the slightest preparation for any thing.’ 73

What is most striking, however, about Zincke’s use of the Classical world is his readiness to re-appropriate it for his own, egalitarian, purposes. While he roundly condemns Classical knowledge as useless, he also makes much of the point that his ideas for universal education have Classical precedents. His Greeks held that ‘the mind of each individual may be, and ought to be, an independent power for thought and action.’ 74 Not only has he undermined the use of Classical knowledge to demarcate membership of the elite, he has also constructed an alternative form of Classicism, rooted at the very opposite pole of society.

The Rev. Zinke has captured much of the tone of the time. In the 1850s, it is possible to trace a struggle between two competing versions of the ancient world, both highly politicised. One, the establishment’s, emphasised the static, grandiose, ‘high cultural’ aspects of the tradition. The other, the one created by Zincke and his ilk, sought both to question the factual basis of received Classicism, and to construct an ancient world where the heroes were the common people. Thus Edward Whitty, in The Governing Classes of Great Britain (a series of satiric portraits of prominent public figures, first published in 1854), made a direct link between unacceptable rhetorical style and unacceptable rhetorical content—any style which included Classical references, in the ‘grand manner’, was ipso facto suspect:

History applauds all the conquests accomplished by civilised men over barbarians. Rome benefited the world by organising the world. England is admired by Englishmen when she exterminates...New Zealanders, whose crime is, that they do not appreciate commercial settlements in their neighbourhoods.

Edward Whitty, The Governing Classes of Great Britain75

So when Robert Brough wished to turn his hand to anti-establishment polemic, he gravitated naturally towards using the Classical world to frame it. Brough professed himself to be a great admirer of Whitty’s work, and adapted it in ballad form ‘in a seasonable spirit of vulgar declamation’, 76 in 1855. This is a book that leaves the reader in no doubt of its politics. Brough states his ‘deeply-
rooted belief that to the institution of aristocracy in this country...is mainly attributable all the political injustice...we have come to deplore'.77 'I believe in the Revolution,'78 he says, simply. Brough may write in jesting tone, but he prefaces the volume with an Aristophanic plea to be taken seriously: 'I have certainly made jokes for a livelihood...but I do not see that I am thereby disqualified from giving serious utterance to my feelings on vital questions.'79

The volume, as one might expect, is peppered with Classical references. There is, for example, Sir Menenius Agrippa, a blend of Shakespeare’s Roman patrician (from Coriolanus), and a present day ‘popular’ politician: ‘He sits for a borough remote from his home/(Where he reigns like a slave-girt Patrician of Rome).’80 There is Nero, trying (and failing) to prove that ‘some good in all the great must be’.81 And there are many more. Brough specifically ridicules the establishment’s attempts to appropriate the Classical past, and to draw their heavily self-interested ‘morals’ from it:

We’ve lectures long
By the Peers, on ‘Art and Song,’
Pointing all the moral strong—
‘Class array’d
’Gainst its ruling class, is wrong’—
Who’s afraid?

Robert Brough, Songs of the ‘Governing Classes’82

Like Zincke, Brough is well aware of the cultural authority of Classicism, and appropriates that authority for his own purposes. There is much common ground between the ideologies of the two men. Both are committed critics of the aristocracy,83 both believe in equality for all (though Zincke is simply concerned with education, Brough with a general revolution), and both make the working classes the heroes of their narratives.84 Brough, it seems, is well aware of the revisionist tradition in Classics, and its political implications. He explicitly aligns his (highly politicised, highly polemical) version of the Classical past with that of the much-vilified historian Niebuhr (translations of his works were being republished in the early 1850s, and Brough was familiar with them):

Roman history is edifying,
And though by Niebuhr, in the German tongue,
Proved to consist of nine-tenths lying,
Morals, here and there, may from it be wrung.

Robert Brough, Songs of the ‘Governing Classes’85

Brough, like the establishment, delights in ‘wringing’ morals out of the Classical past. His morals, however, could hardly be more different from theirs. While one version of Classicism was constructed specifically to exclude the working classes, the other made them its heroes. While one validated the rule of
the aristocracy, the other called for their removal. While one sought to maintain
the purity, and sanctity, of ancient narratives, the other continually called them
into question. Brough’s Medea, viewed in the light of his earlier politicisations
of Classics, can easily be seen to be of a piece with them, with its ‘low life’ hero­ine, its distinctly unsympathetic portrayal of the establishment, and its re­
visionist narrative. In the political climate of 1850s Britain, how you reacted to
that particular brand of Classicism said a great deal about who you were, and
what you believed in.

The Crimean War: Do Classicists make good soldiers?

You pass by men who have led their troops to glory, who have seen
great campaigns, and you sent out men of seventy years of age, who
have never seen war...but who happen to possess Parliamentary in­
fluence or family connections... This country is coming to the opin­
ion that you have sacrificed its dearest interests because you will not
allow men of talent to come between you and your nobility.

A.H. Layard, M.P., to Lord Palmerston

In the summer of 1856, Robert Brough was not alone in nurturing a cordial
hatred of the British aristocracy. Britain had just emerged from a bloody, costly,
and often disastrous war in the Crimea. It was, perhaps, the most appallingly
mismanaged campaign ever conducted by the British Army. Soldiers were left
‘houseless and tentless...with no bed but the reeking puddle under the saturated
blankets’, at the mercy of the cholera, ‘the fever, the ague, dysentery and
pestilence’; those who made it to the infamous hospitals, run on principles of
‘antiquated imbecility’, often wished that they hadn’t. The only thing, it
seemed, that the army could do well was care for its officers’ facial hair:
amongst the pre-war orders issued to the Horse Guards was the stern stricture
that ‘a clear space of two inches must be left between the corner of the mouth
and the whisker, where whiskers are grown.’ Not content with their uniforms,
officers insisted on bringing a ‘wideawake and shooting jacket, and a dressing­
gown and evening-dress...and a variety of gay shirting’.

The British army was run like a gentleman’s club. Even those apt to eulo­
gise it admitted that ‘in the army, beyond all other professions, merit, unaided
by aristocratic patronage, counts for nothing.’ Its upper ranks were populated
by a collection of singularly over-privileged and singularly under-qualified gen­
erals—people like the Earl of Lucan, an ‘invincibly stupid’ man, one of
whose less fortunate decisions was to order the Charge of the Light Brigade.
Lucan’s career in the army was a typically aristocratic one—marked by ex­tremely rapid, almost automatic promotion, which had little or nothing to do
with merit:
He, as Lord Bingham, was on the 29th of August 1816, gazetted a Cornet in the 17th Lancers. On the 24th of December, 1818, he became Lieutenant. Captain on the 16th of May 1822; Major the 23rd of June, 1825, Lieutenant-Colonel the 9th of November 1826.

George Ryan, *Our Heroes of the Crimea*  

The campaign in the Crimea (and the presence, for the first time, of an ‘on-the-scene’ war correspondent, in the person of W.H. Russell) exposed the shocking ineptitude of such people. Yet their apologists were many and vocal. A determined effort was made by many to present even Lucan’s Charge of the Light Brigade as the work of a military genius: for George Ryan, author of *Our Heroes of the Crimea* (needless to say, all are officers, all are aristocratic), Lucan had ‘covered himself with a glory which to rob him of would be to commit a sacrilege against the nation’.

Not everyone was of his opinion. Opposition to the war was widespread and bitter. In the midst of the carefully-orchestrated celebrations held (on May 29th 1856) to mark the Guards’ return from the Crimea, many Londoners made their true feelings felt. In Oxford Street, ‘a board above a shop read “Peace to the Remains of the Heroes who fell in the Crimea and the Victims of Mismanagement”... Another shop was decorated with crêpe...pictures of a mourning widow and a weeping mother were also shown.’ Anti-war polemic was often (naturally enough, as we have seen) mixed with an attack on the institution of the aristocracy. Many pamphleteers were also concerned with the effects of war on the working classes, something they felt that the government had ignored: ‘this large majority of the nation [the working classes] have never been much considered by our elected or hereditary legislators’; ‘war brings... the breaking up of peaceful homes, and the danger of ruin and debasement to which so many women of the humbler classes... are exposed.’ Robert Brough was as vocal, and as shrill, as any of the pamphleteers; his opposition to the war was rooted in a deep distaste for the aristocrats who waged it, and an equally powerful sympathy for the poor who suffered because of it. These three strands are neatly united in the epigraph to his *Songs of the ‘Governing Classes’*, formed by a quote from *Coriolanus*—‘If the wars do not eat us [the poor] up, they [the aristocracy] will.’ Elsewhere in the same volume, we find a decidedly uncomplimentary sketch of Lord Raglan, the commander of British forces in the Crimea:

*Our Crimean Chief*
Last winter, out at Balaklava
Regal’d—within his quarter’s crush-rooms,
Gay crowds, with music, jellies, soups,
While starv’d, and frozen, round him, troops
Unburied lay, as thick as mushrooms.

Robert Brough, *Songs of the ‘Governing Classes’*
The preening, aristocratic army officer becomes, in fact, one of Brough’s chief targets in the *Governing Classes*. We might, perhaps, recognise some of the characteristics of the Earl of Lucan’s career in Brough’s portrait of ‘my Lord Tomnoddy’, and his rapid rise through the ranks. For all the venom in Brough’s caricature, however, it can’t quite live up to reality. The Earl of Lucan, after all, was a ‘full-blown Colonel’ at twenty-six, while:

A full-blown Colonel at thirty-one
Is the Earl of Fitzdotterel’s eldest son.

[...]

And what are his qualifications? ONE!
He’s the Earl of Fitzdotterel’s eldest son!

Robert Brough, *Songs of the ‘Governing Classes’*

Brough’s aristocrats—as he constantly makes clear—are not just over-privileged, but, morally, very dubious indeed. ‘My Lord Tomnoddy’ has ‘some children, by nobody’s wife’, and another (nameless) officer, returning from the Crimea with tales of his own heroism, is shown up as a fraud, and implicitly blamed for the deaths of his men. He bases his heroism on the fact that, out of some hundreds involved in an attack, he ‘alone unscath’d return’d’, but he is rather abruptly reminded that this is because ‘Those men-at-arms wore tatter’d vests, with naked heel and limb;/The Leader who return’d unscath’d was clad, from head to heel/In spear and dart-proof armour, of the hardest Milan steel.’ While the likes of George Ryan were busy constructing the myth of the aristocratic military hero, Robert Brough was debunking it with equal determination, and a curiously moralistic glee.

This sense of anathema against the military aristocracy can be clearly seen in the character of Jason in Brough’s *Medea*, who appears as another entrant in his gallery of sleazy ex-Crimean officers. Even Jason’s costume is as close as the (rather elastic) conventions of Classical burlesque can make it to that of a British redcoat: he is to wear a ‘white merino tunic, trimmed with red, red toga, fleshings, red boots’. He sings, to the tune of *The British Grenadiers*, a little ditty about life in the Crimea; Russell’s reports in the *Times* made details like these instantly recognisable to audiences:

They talk of queer provisions
Of trench work in the cold,
Of tents in bad conditions,
Of huts that water hold.

Robert Brough, *Medea*

One might think that this is simply Brough being an opportunistic satirist, and using every chance he has to put his points across to the public—including putting ‘my Lord Tomnoddy’ in a toga. This is far from being the case; his use
of the Classics to further an anti-war polemic has other, better reasons behind it. It was, in fact, the British establishment, not Robert Brough, which first appropriated the ancient world in debates about the Crimean War. The British people were encouraged to cast themselves in a tradition of imperialism that had its roots in the Roman empire. In his *Ode to the British Army* (a poem as nauseating as its title suggests), Edmund Peel compares the experiences of the soldiers in the Crimea with those of the Roman legions, capping the juxtaposition with the hope that Britain’s power will surpass Rome’s:

So Roman legions stared, in dumb surprise,
At warriors stranger than their skies.

Glad olive crown’d of old, the daring
Of the mighty, sceptre-bearing:
May it crown a mightier, swaying
Oceans, continents and isles.

*Edmund Peel, Ode to The British Army* ¹⁰⁶

This is far from an isolated phenomenon. The French Emperor, Louis Napoleon, when addressing the returning French army in Paris, cast himself in an equally Classical role: ‘Soldiers,—I come to meet you, as the Roman Senate of old came to the gates of Rome to meet their victorious legions.’ ¹⁰⁷ George Ryan, busy creating some of *Our Heroes of the Crimea*, also equates ancient campaigns with modern ones. This is he (in one of his less florid moments) when writing of the death of the death of a Captain Newman at the Battle of Inkermann: ‘With other heroic spirits yielded up in the Inkermann Thermopylae, his memory will be preserved in the records of English valour.’ ¹⁰⁸

Many writers go further. Knowledge of Classics, and the ability to place one’s actions in a Classical tradition, are often seen as fundamental to being a successful soldier. One anonymous pamphleteer comments: ‘What reason could the Turkish soldier commonly have for fighting?... The proverbial expression “Pro rege ac lege” contains an idea beyond his powers of... translation.’ ¹⁰⁹ The British soldier, by implicit contrast, with his knowledge of Latin (again, ‘soldier’ must be read as ‘officer’), will always be eager for battle—and successful in it. For an example, one might turn to Captain Newman, whose re-enactment of Thermopylae we encountered above; he prepared himself for life in the military by pursuing a carefully selected program of Classical study: ‘Having had an ardent desire to enter the army, his course of reading, both at Harrow and at Cambridge, was directed to fitting himself for the profession of his choice.’ ¹¹⁰ The wars of the ancient world were cast as the ideal paradigm of military life and military conduct; the greatest compliment that could be paid to a soldier was to place him within that paradigm. Thus the French general St Arnaud, waxing lyrical about the Battle of the Alma, commented that ‘Lord Raglan is like a hero of antiquity.’ ¹¹¹ In a discourse where the ancient hero and
the modern hero were one and the same, Robert Brough’s deeply disreputable Jason would have been doubly damning, and doubly unwelcome.

Naturally, the version of the Classical past invoked by the likes of Ryan and St Arnaud is more than a little curious. Kin to them is Duncan McPherson, the army’s inspector-general of hospitals in the Crimea, who spent more time digging up Classical sites than he did inspecting hospitals. On his return to Britain, he published a vast, lavishly-illustrated book on the antiquities of the region. Perhaps predictably, Greek involvement in the Black Sea region is cast as a very contemporary form of colonialism: his first chapter aims to set out ‘all we know of Grecian colonisation in the Crimea and the coasts of the Sea of Azoff and the Euxine’.112 The heroes of the Iliad, in this narrative, rather come to resemble a mid-Victorian British Chamber of Commerce: ‘We are told that on the fall of Troy the restless Grecian chiefs dispersed in quest of new exploits… The discovery of the rich countries on the shores of the Black Sea opened up a new and vast field for commerce and colonisation to this bold and enterprising people.’113 Excavations such as McPherson’s were, it seems, quite the fashion—early in 1856, the Illustrated London News published an extensive account of another set, also carried out by officers in the Crimea.114

In these narratives, the ancient Greeks and the contemporary British appear as parallel ‘civilising’ powers, imposing order and commerce on the uncivilised world. Success for the Greeks spelled success for the British (as well as legitimating a rather dubious piece of imperial adventuring). McPherson is at pains to recount how, on the coming of the Greeks to the region, ‘the country, lately the scene of my explorations, was first raised from a state of savage barbarity, to wealth, elegance, and grandeur.’115 It became almost a commonplace to cast the war as a struggle between civilisation (represented by Britain) and barbarism (represented by Russia), parallel to ancient conflicts between Greeks and Persians (thus, George Ryan’s ‘Inckermann Thermopylae’), Romans and barbarians. This was something fiercely resisted by those opposed to the conflict:

The timid and ignorant, that immense mass of every population, were assured that they were called on to engage in the struggle of civilisation against barbarism; and that if the hordes of brutal Cossacks and Tartars were not promptly and vigorously repelled, the fair fields of Southern Europe would be devastated by modern Russians, as in the ancient invasions of…the Roman Empire.

Anon (pseud. ‘Ex-MP’), The War Unmasked116

Robert Brough, too, has little patience with such parallels. While advocates of the war used the Classical past to enact the success of colonialism (ancient and modern), and the triumph of civilisation over barbarism, Brough’s Medea stages failure (again, both ancient and modern) on both counts. Jason, the tamer of ‘savages’, becomes almost an embodiment of the establishment’s rhetoric: ‘No gentleman we know/Of savage tribes...so defiant.’117 Medea casts herself as a
barbarian with some glee: ‘The fact is, I’m the daughter of a nation/A little backward in civilisation.’ Of course, Jason’s attempts to ‘civilise’ Medea are (to say the least) unsuccessful; early on in the play, he admits defeat—‘I couldn’t tame her.’

The Jason-Medea myth was a deliciously appropriate vehicle for an attack on the rhetoric of the Crimean War. Colchis, Medea’s mythical homeland, was sited on the coast of the Black Sea, only a short distance away from the action of the war. In consequence, when writers sought to achieve a synthesis of ancient and modern, it was that myth which they often turned to. McPherson, for example, places Colchis and Balaklava a scant few inches apart on his maps, and makes recurring mention of the Golden Fleece. The conception of Britain’s expedition to the Crimea as a second Argonautica was reinforced by the names chosen for some of the troop-ships: a few weeks before Brough’s Medea was first performed, the Times reported that ‘No. 1 Detachments of the Royal Artillery, to be detailed by Lieutenant-Colonel Maclean, will embark at Balaklava in the Jason, Golden Fleece’.

The Crimean War sparked off some of the bitterest political debates seen in 1850s Britain. Brough sought to make his mark on those debates—and did so, at least in part, through his Medea. He was, of course, not alone in using the Classical past to construct an alternative, competitive reading of Britain’s exploits in the Crimea. Those opposed to the conflict paraded their Classical precedents with no small glee: one commented that the Crimea was ‘a war that seems to be (which Heaven forbid!) a fulfillment of that fearful sentence, “Quem Deus vult perdere, prius dementat”.’ Robert Brough has again captured much of the tone of his time.

**Burlesque: A funny kind of Classics**

_OEDIPUS_: Oughtn’t the Sphinx, by right, to be a she?
_MERCURY_: Yes, but our authors, by poetic license, have made a he of it.
_OEDIPUS_: Well, come, they’re nice uns. But Lor’! the ancients—this to smash will send ’em.
_MERCURY_: The ancients, hang ’em!—or, at least, suspend ’em.

R.B. Brough & W. Brough, _Sphinx: a touch of the ancients_.

Classical burlesque was alive and well in mid-Victorian Britain. Indeed, Robert Brough’s Medea shared the London stage (and its opening night) with Mark Lemon’s equally facetious (but much less successful) _Medea, A Tragedy In One Act_. A list of the subjects burlesqued by Brough and his contemporaries reads like a catalogue of Greek mythology: Alcestis, Virginius, Electra, Atalanta, Romulus and Remus, Pluto and Proserpine—and many (very many) more. In the midst of such a cornucopia, where should Brough’s Medea, with its high level of political engagement, and its particular brand of radical poli-
EDMUND RICHARDSON

tics, be sited? He may have captured the tone of his time, but has he captured
the tone of his genre? For Edith Hall, assuredly not. In her survey of mid-Victo­
rian Classical burlesques, she argues that burlesque is fundamentally concerned
with metatheatre, with cutting high culture down to size. 124 This is a some­
what monolithic picture: it is true that ‘Greek tragedy furnished fertile material
for burlesque’ 125 throughout the mid-Victorian period. However, the nature of
the ‘fertile material’ raided from the ancient sources, and the agendas of those
who raided it, changed dramatically during the 1850s—for reasons that can be
traced back to Brough’s Medea.

‘Classical burlesque’ can be a misleading term: the target is invariably Victo­
rian Classicism, not the Graeco-Roman Classical. Staking a claim (however
unfounded, however bemusing) on the Classical past was common practice in
mid-Victorian Britain, from the Crimean warmongers to the curious Mr Roth
and his ‘rational gymnastics’. Burlesque capitalises on the inherent ludicrous­
ness of many such claims: it takes them at face-value, and stages the transposi­
tion of contemporary Britain on to the Classical world. Thus, in Brough’s
Siege of Troy, Chryses may not see his daughter because he should have waited
‘till the young person’s usual Sunday out’, 126 and he certainly may not take her
away with him, because ‘she hasn’t even given warning’. 127 By constantly fore­
grounding its own ‘suspension’ of ‘the ancients’, burlesque encouraged its audi­
ence to think critically about the many contemporary attempts to appropriate
the ‘Classical’.

Which of these appropriations did burlesque characteristically engage with?
Brough’s Medea is concerned with political ones: the ‘women’s question’, the
Crimean War, the established structure of society. In 1856, this was far from
typical: burlesque-writers, Brough included, had, up until then, confined them­
selves to rather safer, less ambitious targets. Classical burlesque had been a fun­
damentally apolitical genre, concerned with debunking the Classical pretensions
not of those who claimed high office—but of those who claimed high culture.

Mark Lemon’s Medea—Brough’s competitor—is close to a paradigm of this
type of ‘fairground theatre’: 128 rather than setting the action in ancient Corinth,
he sets it in the midst of a circus troupe (for a contemporary audience, perhaps
the ultimate shift from ‘high culture’ to ‘low culture’). The first scene is laid in
‘Creon’s Booth’, 129 and Jason becomes ‘an acrobat’. 130 A play set amongst per­
formers is, of course, an ideal environment for sustained metatheatre—and
Lemon exploits this opportunity to the full. Creon, for example, is a stock bur­
lesque theatre-manager, paranoid about being closed-down by the powers that
be:

ORPHEUS (to Creon): Governor, I heard today—I think it’s true—
The Beak 131 Lysippus wants a word with you
Something about your Licence. 132

Mark Lemon, Medea, A Tragedy In One Act 133
This was a more-than-familiar figure on the contemporary stage—another example from 1856 is the curious character of ‘O’Mugway: Manager of the Theatre Royal Wherever-it-pays', from Leicester Buckingham’s burlesque *Belphegor*. Nor did actors escape un-burlesqued—particularly those in tragedies. Planché’s Eurydice, aiming at pathos, exclaims: ‘I kneel—like Miss O’Neill—in Desdemona.’ Robert Brough, too, in his earlier works, makes much satiric capital out of the conventions of Victorian theatre. In *Sphinx*: a ‘touch of the ancients’ (written in collaboration with his brother William in 1849), it is taken as read that ‘As a monarch in a play,/Of course you’ve got a young and lovely daughter.’

Brough’s *Medea* debunks the claims of ‘high culture’ (in the person of Ernest Legouvé) on the Classical past—but does so in order to legitimate and bolster its own appropriation of it. Classical burlesque had, up until that point, taken a decidedly more liminal perspective: it did not seek to stake a claim of its own on the ancient world. Indeed, it made much satiric capital out of presenting such a claim as inherently ridiculous—however hard its characters try to be ‘Classical’, they will never convince, because they are products of the ‘low’ culture of burlesque, and they cannot measure up to the ‘high’ (and high-budget) theatrical culture to which the ancient world (by implication) rightfully belonged. Thus Apollo, in Francis Talfourd’s *Alcestis (Travestie.)* must begin with an apology: ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, I am Apollo—but although I frankly own it doesn’t follow/From my costume.’ Leicester Buckingham’s *Belphegor* engages in a similar ironically inept imitation of ‘proper’ theatrical Classicism: ‘Scene III: Grand Banqueting Hall In the Mansion of Belphegor. Decorated after the first models of Attic Elegance, and On A Scale of Meanness never before attempted in this or any other Theatre.’ Not only is this attempt to recreate the Classical world self-consciously threadbare, it is also self-consciously incompetent; Planché’s Orpheus is ‘son of Oeäger—or great Apollo/I’m not quite certain which.’ Mark Lemon’s Glauce—though trying very hard—has an equally uncertain Classical heritage:

**GLAUCE:** The Corinth railway, straight across our isthmus
Shortens a journey that will last ‘till Christmas.
Christmas, what’s that? What foolish things to speak.
I’m an anachronism. Come, that’s Greek!

Mark Lemon, *Medea, A Tragedy In One Act*  

What is being enacted here? The impossibility of ‘low’ culture, and burlesque (traditionally the champion of ordinary people), making a valid claim on the Classical past. This form of Classicism is a self-consciously bad imitation of its ‘high culture’ counterpart; its starting-point is an implicit recognition of the validity of the established model, rather than (as is the case with Brough’s *Medea*) a wish to challenge it. Thus, however much earlier burlesque-writers may mock their model, they do not seek to overthrow it: ‘Remember, we are
trading classic ground. And from the drama’s strict laws do not mean To wander off.’ 141 For those ‘who can pay a guinea for your seat’, 142 Mark Lemon recommends Legouve’s Medea over his own burlesque of it: ‘Go and applaud an artist truly grand.’ 143 Only, he says, if ‘the wife wants the guinea for her shawl’ 144 should you be at the burlesque. 145 Artistic self-deprecation aside, it is clearly implied that Lemon’s Medea has nothing which makes it valuable for its own sake, rather than as an imitation of a ‘high culture’ model—unlike Brough’s Medea, it has no distinctive voice of its own.

Unsurprisingly, the political engagement of these ‘earlier’ (pre-Brough’s Medea, at any rate) burlesques is minimal—at best. Inasmuch as they do touch on the discourses of the establishment, they tend to be implicitly supportive: in Blanchard’s Antigone Travestie, the heroine offers up a curtsey to the young Queen Victoria—‘Vivat regina now—not vivat rex.’ 146 In Planché’s Paphian Bower, ‘Adonis is killed by an A-boar-iginal inhabitant’ 147—not exactly the most shimmering of puns, but noteworthy because it places the Classical Adonis and the contemporary British in the same frame, engaged in the same struggle against the ‘aboriginal’. As the case-study of the Crimean War has amply shown, contemporary colonial discourses were attempting to do just that—to locate British imperialism in a Classical tradition.

Robert Brough’s Medea could hardly be more different. Different, in its radical sentiments, and its highly-engaged political position. Different, in its preoccupation with the appropriation of Classics in the wider world—not just the theatre. Different, in its full-throated challenge to the appropriation of the ancient world by ‘high culture’ and by the establishment. Nor is this Medea simply an anomaly—the one burlesque with a different agenda. It redefined the conventions of the genre: contemporary writers took it, in its totality (from sweeping political positions to minute details), as a model around which to build Classical burlesques of their own.

To illustrate this almost slavish level of imitation, let me start in a self-consciously curious place—with the one element of Brough’s Medea that it would seem strangest for another writer to wish to replicate. Legouve’s Medea was a French adaptation of a Greek play; it was performed in London in an Italian translation, to an audience who mostly spoke only English. Brough could not resist a couple of metatheatrical jokes on this linguistic confusion. Even his Medea gets mixed up in it all:

MEDEA [sola]: “Sangue! sangue! Straziar spezzar suo cuore,” Which means, translated, something red and gory. “Unche di sparento’s atroce strano” —Murder in Irish! No—Italiano! […] “Briser torturer son coeur—oui!” That’s wrong! I’ve got confused with all these versions jinglish—Thunder and turf!—And even that’s not English.

Robert Brough, Medea 148
The humour in this confusion, of course—if humour there is to be found—lies in the audience’s knowledge of the convoluted provenance of Legouvé’s play. Out of context, when used in a burlesque of another part of the Classical world, it makes precious little sense. This, however, did not stop Leicester Buckingham imitating it wholesale in his 1859 burlesque *Virginius*. His Virginia cannot decide which language to use: ‘French? Dutch? Italian? Hebrew? Irish? Greek?’[^149^] and his Lucius is struck by a suspiciously Medea-like confusion (down to Buckingham’s use of the ‘jinglish’/‘English’ rhyme, lifted straight from the passage of Brough above):

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LUCIUS: Di quella pira;
No, that’s Italian
On te punira;
That’s French, I know.
Foreign tongues jinglish
Can’t give my meaning;
I’ll say in English,
Here’s a rum go.
```

Leicester Buckingham, *Virginius; or, the Trials of a fond papa*[^150^]

Brough’s more serious targets also reappear. Francis Talfourd’s 1857 *Atalanta* contains a figure after Brough’s own heart: Major Thraso, the ‘fat’[^151^] commander ‘of the gallant Scyros Militia, the type of an article set up, by himself, as a slashing leader of the *Times*, but whose military achievements will not qualify him to be considered as an army raiser, further than that he has been found cutting away after a lathering.’[^152^] This, in other words, is a military commander whose only qualification is that he can (just about) shave himself. References to the Crimean War, the incompetence of the officers, and the misery of the soldiers, proliferate in Classical burlesque, clearly drawing on Brough’s precedent. Buckingham’s aforementioned *Virginius* jolts its audience’s minds to the Crimea with a pun on ‘Choler-a’,[^153^] laments the plight of soldiers with ‘holes in each stocking’[^154^] and follows that up with an attack on the military establishment, in a now-familiar tone:

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STRANGER: And who might you be, friend, most pertinacious?
DENTA: A General.
STRANGER: Noble?
DENTA: No.
STRANGER: Rich?
DENTA: No.
STRANGER: Good gracious!
DENTA: In many ways for valour I’ve been noted.
STRANGER: That makes it odd, that you should have been promoted.
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Leicester Buckingham, *Virginius; or, the Trials of a fond papa*[^155^]
Classical burlesque re-invents itself as an anti-establishment genre. A few years after the premiere of Brough's Medea, in the late 1850s, a properly hiss-able 'tyrant of the old school' (like Brough's Creon) becomes almost obligatory. The first line of Croker's 1859 Romulus and Remus is: 'What a terrible king Amulius was'; Talfourd's Atalanta has 'Schoeneus, King of Scyros, over which he exercises a rule to which there is no exception, thereby proving the rule'; his Electra has Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, whom the 'vulgar rabble' 'rather hate'. Indeed, where no tyrant exists in the source-narratives, authors bend their material to create one—Buckingham is at it in Virginus, where the tyrant-slot is filled by 'Appius Claudius (Lord Mayor of Rome, who would be a Decemvir, but for the absence of his nine colleagues, who being idle and proud of it, are probably travelling among the Happy-nines)'.

What happens to all these new-found tyrants? There's a simple, and universal answer: they get toppled. Revolutionary politics, of the sort advocated by Brough, becomes fundamental to Classical burlesque. The message is nothing if not direct:

VIRGINIUS: Each Roman lad I've chanced to meet
Has whispered this to me
Oh! hit vile Appius in the eye,
And make the tyrant say,
To save his life he'd gladly try
To swim to Dublin Bay.

Leicester Buckingham, Virginius; or, the Trials of a fond papa!

The message—and the threat to the establishment—is nothing if not contemporary. Buckingham's Virginius was written in the wake of the Indian Mutiny—and in it, a character comments that 'In the camp there'll be mutineers, I fear.' The means by which these tyrants are disposed of are also often pointedly modern—Talfourd's Aegisthus comments that 'The seeds of revolution, taking root, Promise to both of us an early shoot.'

Brough's Medea represents—and instigates—a turning-point in the history of Classical burlesque. He described his Medea as 'a conjugal lesson'—and that, perhaps, tells us a great deal. For the first time, a burlesque-writer was claiming to have a 'lesson' to teach his audience, and an independent claim to stake on the Classical past—rather than engaging in the habitual mix of mimicry and mockery of an established (and establishment) model.

Conclusion: Brough's 'Conjugal Lesson'(s)

In the Britain of 1856, how Medea was presented mattered profoundly. Prior to Brough's production, the Classical theatre of the 1850s had been characterised by an uneasy, obsessive serenity, epitomised by Legouvé's Medea. This was,
however, an institution well aware of the radicalism latent in its subject-matter—and Legouve’s forensic editing of Medea shows the care that was taken to remove all traces of it. Even here, Edith Hall’s picture of an institution quite disconnected from radical politics seems inadequate. The peace was an uneasy one, and was comprehensively shattered by Robert Brough’s Medea.

This article’s collage of perspectives (albeit an incomplete one) shows the breadth of engagement between Classics and radical politics, both in Brough’s Medea, and, more widely, in mid-Victorian Britain. At the height of the debate over the Divorce Act, Brough used Medea to attack the saccharine ideal of The Angel in the House, and to create space for an alternative paradigm of femininity. When growing discontent with the established order of society was beginning to bubble to the surface, he exploited the cultural authority of the Classical to make a wide-ranging critique of the British aristocracy and political system. When London was full of recriminations and celebrations over the Crimean War, his singularly gormless Jason exploded much of the rhetoric that had sent Britain into the disastrous conflict. When Classical burlesque was derided as a ‘long worn-out’ genre, insignificant, timorous and apolitical, Brough politicised, radicalised, and reinvigorated it, as well as spawning a host of imitators. In mid-Victorian Britain, performing Medea was a very good way to make a lot of people nervous. Robert Brough knew that, rejoiced in it, and exploited it to the full.

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NOTES

3. Robert B. Brough, Medea; or The Best of Mothers with a Brute of a Husband (London 1856), 2.
13. The Bishop of Oxford opposed the Divorce Act on the grounds that there was not ‘a shadow of a foundation in the gospel for such an extension of the right of divorce’—The Times, July 4th 1856, p.6.
14. Patmore (n.9 above), 7.
15. Patmore (n.9 above), 20.
16. Patmore (n.9 above), 22.
17. Patmore (n.9 above), 188.
18. Patmore (n.9 above), 60.
19. Patmore (n.9 above), 60.
20. Patmore (n.9 above), 77.
21. Hanway (n.10 above), 66.
22. Hanway (n.10 above), 156.
23. Cf. Euripides, Medea, 1078-80: καὶ μανθάνω μὲν οία δράν μέλλω κακά·/θυμός δὲ κρείσσοι τού ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων/δόσσερ μεγίστον ἀτίς κακῶν βροτοίς ('and I understand the evil which I am about to do, but my rage is stronger than my reason, rage which is the root of mankind's greatest evils').
29. Legouve (n.28 above), 24.
30. For an example of this genre, cf. A.F. Sergent-Marceau (after Augustin de Saint-Aubin), The Happy Mother (L’Heureuse Mère). For a British equivalent, cf. Charles Cope’s Life Well Spent (1862), where a euphoric-looking mother is surrounded by her children.
31. Hanway (n.10 above), 160.
32. Legouve (n.28 above), 23.
33. Legouve (n.28 above), 25.
37. Lord Brougham, for one, credited her with significantly altering the final form of the Divorce Act—cf. Alice Acland (pseudonym for Anne Marreco), Caroline Norton (London 1948), 203.
40. The Times, July 15th 1856, p.12.
42. Brough (n.3 above), 11.
44. Hansard, May 20th 1856, 3rd ser. 142.410.
46. Acland (n.37 above), 198.
47. Brough (n.3 above), 31.
48. Acland (n.37 above), 198.
49. Nead (n.11 above), 129.
50. Brough (n.3 above), 9.
51. This, of course, was quite the opposite of the received view—cf. Augustus Egg’s Past and Present series, exhibited in 1858, for one of many contemporary narratives of how a wife’s behaviour (adultery, in this case) leads to the breakup of a home.
52. Brough (n.3 above), 8.
53. Norton (n.38 above), 173.
54. Norton (n.38 above), 175.
55. Brough (n.3 above), 12.
56. Brough (n.2 above), 34.
57. Robert B. Brough, Béranger's Songs of the Empire, the Peace, and the Restoration (London 1856).
59. Quoted in Stray (n.58 above), 39.
60. Benjamin Disraeli, Tancred (London 1847), Book 1, Chapter 4.
61. Roth, like the forthcoming Rev. Zincke, and many of the characters in this narrative, is someone whose works I have come across in the archive. It has been difficult to discern much about these individuals that is independent from their own self-presentation.
63. Hansard, June 25th 1850, 3rd ser. 112.444.
64. 'It is the duty of every one who aims at high mental culture to make himself acquainted with it [Greek history].'-Barthold Georg Niebuhr, Lectures on Ancient History: From the Earliest Times to the Taking of Alexandria by Octavianus, tr. Leonhard Schmitz (London 1852), i.1f.
65. Niebuhr (n.64 above), i.146.
66. Niebuhr (n.64 above), i.157.
68. Quarterly Review 39 (Jan. 1829), 8f.
69. A typical example: 'The city [Thebes] was taken by storm, and destroyed with the same fury as Magdeburg'. Niebuhr (n.64 above), ii.362.
70. Rev. Foster Barham Zincke, Why must we educate the whole people? and what prevents our doing it? (London 1850), 52.
71. Rev. Foster Barham Zincke, How much longer are we to continue teaching nothing more than what was taught two or three centuries ago? (London 1850), 24.
72. Zincke (n.71 above), 41.
73. Zincke (n.70 above), 32.
74. Zincke (n.70 above), 7.
76. Brough (n.2 above), 1.
77. Brough (n.2 above), 6f.
78. Brough (n.2 above), 9.
80. Brough (n.2 above), 32.
81. Brough (n.2 above), 64.
82. Brough (n.2 above), 99.
83. Throughout the volume, Brough is vitriolic. A typical passage: 'So, torn by the roots from each bed and tree./And into the bonfire cast/The strawberry's [symbol of the "peerage" fate at last.'—Brough (n.2 above), 107.
84. Cf. Brough (n.57 above), 98: 'Tis wondrous how the smallest folks/Whom you have wrong'd, can tease ye!'; Zincke (n.71 above), 27f.: 'Will any one deny that these same [English] labourers and artizans do amongst ourselves submit with more resolution and with more cheerfulness, to hardships and self-denial, than any class amongst the ancients?'
85. Brough (n.2 above), 34.
86. The Times, July 15th 1856, p.12
87. From a speech delivered in the House of Commons on 19th February 1855, quoted in J.B. Conacher, Britain and the Crimea, 1855-56: Problems of War and Peace (London 1987), 18.
89. W.H. Russell, quoted in Grey (n.88 above), 61.
90. W.H. Russell, quoted in Grey (n.88 above), 37.
92. W.H. Russell, quoted in Grey (n.88 above), 42.
94. Vulliamy (n.91 above), 126.
95. Ryan (n.93 above), 36.
96. Ryan (n.93 above), 90.
97. Vulliamy (n.91 above), 352.
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98. Arthur Hallam Elton (1855), *An inquiry into the alleged justice and necessity of the war with Russia* (London 1855), 10 and 112f.
99. Brough (n.2 above), 64.
100. Brough (n.2 above), 21.
101. Brough (n.2 above), 22.
102. Brough (n.2 above), 21.
103. Brough (n.2 above), 46.
104. Brough (n.3 above), 4.
105. Brough (n.3 above), 21.
108. Ryan (n.93 above), 53.
110. Ryan (n.93 above), 52.
111. Quoted in Vulliamy (n.91 above), 160.
115. McPherson (n.112 above), 1.
117. Brough (n.3 above), 6. Brough’s opinion of the ‘gentleman’ has already been touched on.
118. Brough (n.3 above), 18.
119. Brough (n.3 above), 12.
120. Cf. McPherson (n.112 above), 5 and 7.
124. Edith Hall, ‘1845 And All That: Singing Greek Tragedy on the London Stage’, in Maria Wyke and Michael Biddiss (eds.), *The Uses and Abuses of Antiquity* (Bern 1999). Hall argues that Classical burlesque worked to ‘equate ancient Greek theatre with the contemporary London stage’ (44), and served to cut ‘a previously elite art form down to popular size’ (48).
125. Hall (n.124 above), 44.
128. Hall (n.124 above), 42.
130. Lemon (n.129 above), 3.
131. A slang word for ‘Magistrate’.
132. All theatres had to be licensed, and those licences were apt to be withdrawn by petulant officials.
133. Lemon (n.129 above), 6.
139. Planché (n.135 above), 12.
140. Lemon (n.129 above), 12.
141. Talfourd (n.137 above), 3.
142. Lemon (n.129 above), 1.
143. Lemon (n.129 above), 1. The ‘artist’ in question is the Medea, Adelaide Ristori.
144. Lemon (n.129 above), 1.
145. All this seems to call into question Hall’s argument that Classical burlesque, *as a genre*, consistently cut ‘a previously elite art form down to popular size’ (Hall [n.124 above], 48). Many
of these earlier burlesques seem to offer a cut-rate, rather than a cut-down-to-size version of the Classical world. Here, it is not the Classical that has been humbled, merely its 'unworthy' imitators.

146. Quoted by Hall (n.124 above), 43.
148. Brough (n.3 above), 25.
149. Leicester Silk Buckingham, Virginius; or, the Trials of a fond papa! (London 1859[?]), 32.
150. Buckingham (n.149 above), 22.
151. Francis Talfourd, Atalanta, or, The Three Golden Apples (London 1857), 22.
152. Talfourd (n.151 above), 3.
153. Buckingham (n.149 above), 19.
154. Buckingham (n.149 above), 16.
155. Buckingham (n.149 above), 25.
156. Brough (n.3 above), 2.
157. T.F. Dillon Croker, Romulus and Remus: or, Rome was not built in a day (privately printed 1859), 9.
158. Francis Talfourd (n.151 above), 3.
160. Buckingham (n.149 above), 2.
161. Buckingham (n.149 above), 23.
162. Buckingham (n.149 above), 16.
163. Talfourd (n.159 above), 7. The problems of blood-guilt are overtly edited out: there is nothing wrong, it seems, with unseating a tyrant.
165. Cf. Whitty (n.75 above), Zincke (n.70 above), Zincke (n.71 above), et al.