David O'Shaughnessy

reads

The Theatre of Shelley

(Open Book, 2010)

by Jacqueline Mulhallen

THE RATIONALE for Jacqueline Mulhallen's fine book is sound: 'There has never been a full-length, in-depth study of Shelley's dramatic work as a whole, nor one which places it fully in the context of the theatre of the late Georgian, or Romantic, period, 1780-1830' (1). Moreover, she continues, earlier discussions of Shelley's dramatic work are flawed, hindered by assumptions about both Shelley and Georgian theatre that are incorrect. Primarily, among these, is the view that Shelley did not attend the theatre with any degree of frequency and, in fact, did not even like it very much. Mulhallen's monograph, rich with original archive research, sets out to distance Shelley from the reductive notion of 'closet drama' (defined here as 'a play unsuitable for performance on stage which might have literary merit') (7). The problem with the 'closet drama' label, as Mulhallen sees it, is that critical discussion on a work such as *The Cenci* has been overly concerned with 'psychology, morality or imagery' rather than dramatic technique (8). In this book Mulhallen demonstrates convincingly that 'Shelley not only had a knowledge of practical theatrical techniques and dramatic criticism current in his lifetime but evolved a theory of drama consistent with this knowledge and used them as a framework for writing his own dramatic works' (1).

The first chapter provides an overview of the theatrical context of the period by describing some of Shelley's own theatrical appearances before he left England in 1818. Thus, we are offered brief discussions of how the theatre in Richmond would have looked in 1802 (Richmond is where Shelley first saw a play—Dora Jordan acting in Garrick's *The Country Girl* in 1802); contemporary changes to Drury Lane and Covent Garden over the period; playwrights and censorship; minor theatres; private theatricals; the audience; actors; and opera and ballet. It is a very well written introduction to the period's theatre, if regrettably short.

A discussion of Shelley's theatregoing, play-reading, and criticism follows. In this second chapter we learn about Shelley's theatre attendance in England and Italy and the degree of influence of Schlegel's *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* on Shelley's dramatic aesthetic. The two shared many views such as a preference for Aeschylus and Sophocles over Euripdes and a sense of how the 'greatness of the drama at Athens corresponded to the greatness of the society it reflected' (72). Mulhallen argues that 'this study makes the fullest extent of the debt to Schlegel's work in Shelley's theory of drama as set out in *A Defence Of Poetry*' (14). A survey of Shelley's reading of the Greek dramatists (in the original), Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Calderón and Goethe concludes the chapter.

After these two introductory survey chapters, Mulhallen turns to the texts

themselves and there are successive chapters on *The Cenci*, *Charles the First*, *Prometheus Unbound*, *Hellas* and *Fragments of an Unfinished Drama*, and *Swellfoot the Tyrant*. The discussion of *The Cenci* is shaped by Mulhallen's discovery of the manuscript of *The Italian Wife*, a version of Henry Hart Milman's *Fazio* (a previously noted influence on Shelley's tragedy). *Fazio* had been declined by Drury Lane but Thomas Dibdin, manager of Drury Lane and the Surrey, decided there was sufficient merit to warrant his rewriting it as *The Italian Wife* for the smaller theatre. However, the connection between Dibdin's play and *The Cenci* is somewhat tendentious: Mulhallen argues that '[Shelley] uses spectacular effects reminiscent of *The Italian Wife*' (98) in *The Cenci* but this does not seem terribly convincing, particularly when there is no evidence that Shelley even saw the play. Given that the author provides such a compelling case for Shelley's familiarity with theatrical practice, he certainly would have known how important spectacle was for the success of a play in the early nineteenth century irrespective of whether he had seen *The Italian Wife* or not. The examination of *Charles the First* emphasises the play's stage-worthiness and works through the four scenes of Act I that Shelley completed (an outline sketch of the second act and various notes are all that Shelley managed to add before his untimely demise). The focus here is on crowd scenes, processions, songs, and scenery—all evidence of, as Mulhallen would have it, Shelley's commitment to contemporary dramaturgical practice. Moreover, she concludes, Shelley's inclusion of two outdoor scenes, as opposed to the indoor scenes of *The Cenci*, is an indication of the growth of Shelley's dramatic confidence.

Most readers would agree that *Prometheus Unbound* would be the most difficult play to fit into Mulhallen's thesis. She discusses a previously unidentified influence: Salvatore Viganò's *La Spada di Kenneth*, a ballet set in Scotland which Shelley saw three times in La Scala, Milan in 1818. Shelley was more than impressed, describing it to Peacock as 'the most splendid spectacle I ever saw' (qtd. 153). On the one hand, Mulhallen's argument succeeds here as she does a careful job of showing how contemporary theatrical practice—particularly that related to scenery, ballet, and music—fed into the construction and thematics of *Prometheus Unbound*. On the other hand, the play contradicts one of Schlegel's guidelines on drama: the importance of conveying ideas in a very clear way and the argument elsewhere in the book rests heavily on the Schlegel connection. Secondly, as is detailed in the book's conclusion, the argument is that 'although he had written a performable play in *Prometheus Unbound*, it was not one which could have been staged at the time' (237), rather one for a 'future theatre' (17, 147, 178). She goes on to suggest how 'the multicultural nature of British theatre and its high skills of dancing and singing' could facilitate a successful production 'in a modern idiom' (242). This may very well be true but means that a thesis that a prescient Shelley was writing plays for some sort of 'future theatre' begins to emerge. This is a perfectly satisfactory argument, particularly for someone so richly steeped in performance history as is Mulhallen (she tells us that her 'background as a

professional actress, writer and co-manager of a touring theatre allows me to bring an understanding to a play-text not readily available' (13)). But, at the same time, one wonders whether such an ambitious but indeterminate teleology was necessary when the plays could be freshly interpreted in the light of Mulhallen's new research by literary critical methods.

The final two chapters on *Hellas*, *Fragments of an Unfinished Drama*, and *Swellfoot the Tyrant* continue in the same vein as the others, offering careful analysis of how Greek plays, contemporary plays, and Shelley's growing dramatic ambition can be traced through his oeuvre. The analysis of *Swellfoot*, for instance, is rooted in Shelley's experience of *commedia dell'arte* in Italy.

Mulhallen's passion for Shelley and his work comes through on every page of the book which makes it a vibrant and engaging read. Moreover, the book is notable for its extensive use of archives, particularly the number of Italian sources consulted. However, one also feels that the argument is a little strained at times, most evident in the number of 'ifs', 'buts' and 'would haves' that are found in its pages. This comes across particularly when Mulhallen is trying to demonstrate Shelley's theatre attendance, an area where the actual evidence falls a little short of her deductions. For instance, it is suggested that Shelley saw *1 Henry IV* in April 1810 because he quoted it in a letter in October of the same year (58). A few pages later, Peacock's statement 'Indeed I do not remember [Shelley] having been present at any but two [theatre performances]' (qtd 62) is read as revealing Peacock's uncertainty on the matter, rather than the fairly definitive statement it seems to constitute, at least from Peacock's perspective. Mulhallen is also keen to make much of any suggestion of Shelley's theatricality: the fact that he and his sister sent a play (written in 1810) to an actor 'suggests that Shelley had already seen Mathews perform, since reputation alone would have justified sending it to a number of other actors' (56). I cannot agree either that an anecdote about Shelley disguising himself as a gamekeeper and being subsequently hired as one reveals 'considerable acting ability' in a sense that would be germane to this book (55).

It is a pity that the book is dotted with these occasional strained moments as it did not require them. Mulhallen has written an excellent book on Shelley's theatre that will open up lots of further research, particularly in the area of the relationship between Italian and English theatre of the nineteenth century. There is also plenty of room for thinking about how figures such as Byron, Godwin, and Mary Shelley contributed to the development of Shelley's thinking on drama. But Mulhallen's book is a wonderful starting point for such future work. With a magisterial command of contemporary theatrical practice, she has certainly problematized the labelling of Shelley as a 'closet dramatist'.