

# The Plays of William Godwin

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*Edited by David O'Shaughnessy*



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THE PLAYS OF WILLIAM GODWIN

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EDITED BY  
David O'Shaughnessy

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2010 by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited

Published 2016 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

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BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Godwin, William, 1756–1836.  
The plays of William Godwin. – (The Pickering masters)  
I. Title II. Series III. O'Shaughnessy, David, 1976–  
822.6-dc22

ISBN-13: 978-1-85196-631-8 (hbk)

Typeset by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited

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*For Mum and Dad, with much love*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have contributed to this book in a number of different ways. I would like to thank all at Pickering & Chatto who helped usher the book through the publishing process, particularly Mark Pollard, Simon Egan, and Paul Lee. They were helpful and prompt at all times with my requests for advice. I would also like to thank the Principal and Fellows of Linacre College who elected me to a Junior Research Fellowship which gave me the time to complete this edition. The college has at all times been a convivial and stimulating place to be and I'm very grateful to all there.

I would also like to thank the staff at the English Faculty Library, the Huntington Library, and the Bodleian Library, in particular Bruce Barker-Benfield who went out of his way to help this project towards completion. His assistance is gratefully acknowledged, particularly the provision of a number of images at critical junctures. I am very grateful to the Bodleian and Huntington libraries for permission to reproduce material in this edition. There are a number of people who contributed pieces of information that were extremely useful at various points; thanks are due to Felicity James, Pamela Clemit, James Grande, and Stephen Burley. I am particularly thankful for the input and editorial expertise of John Barnard which improved this edition significantly. Kate Barush contributed the chronology with typical enthusiasm which saved me some time and labour. I am especially grateful to Mark Philp, who not only gave me tremendous support and advice throughout the time spent on this project in his mantle as expert Godwin editor, but also proved himself a very able research assistant when the deadline loomed and the panic was beginning to set in.

It seems appropriate at this point in my academic life to acknowledge a number of people who have supported me along the way. The conversation, advice, and friendships of Darryl Jones, Nicky Grene, Graham Allen, Pat Collins, Lionel Pilkington, Séan Kennedy, Rosemary March, Peter McDonald, and Liam Chambers have at all times pointed me in the right direction. I am also very grateful for the hearty encouragement of John Barrell and Fiona Stafford who examined the thesis from which this edition emerged.



Jon Mee and David Fallon have been very important figures, both professionally and personally, in recent years and I'm very grateful for their friendship. Jon Mee has been a wonderful mentor, not only intellectually stimulating but a good friend to boot (and a suitably middling opponent on the squash court). David Fallon has been unfailingly reliable when some rejuvenating downtime in the local hostelry was needed. He also played Holcroft to my Godwin and read most of this manuscript with his customary insight and intelligence. It has been much improved by his comments but I, unfortunately, can't pin any errors on him. They must remain my own.

It is customary on these occasions to thank family, spouses, and children. It would betray Godwin, who has been a large presence in my life over the past few years, to do this uncritically. In the spirit of candour then, I honestly cannot think of one occasion when Rory made a constructive contribution to the book's genesis despite me outlining the edition's rationale to him on a number of occasions while giving him his bottle. Still, it would be churlish not to admit that it was truly wonderful to come home to him after a hard day's transcription. On the other hand, I can make no such comments about his mother who 'kept the show on the road' in so many ways. Gobnait has been a simply brilliant companion and for her patience, love, and belief in me I'll always be grateful. Of all people, this edition could not have happened without her. Thanks also to my parents-in-law, Mary and Denis, for their love and support through the years I've known them.

My family has been stalwart over many years in their support and love. John, Ruth, Rebecca, and Daniel have always monitored me with panopticon-like assiduity and have ensured that any notions of getting above my station were firmly shot down. To Mum and Dad I owe a tremendous amount which is difficult either to quantify or articulate. I hope this edition goes some way towards expressing my appreciation. It is dedicated, with much love, to them.

## INTRODUCTION

When William Godwin was ten years of age he went on a three-week trip to Norwich, King's Lynn and Wisbech. This expedition was to include his first trip to the playhouse. Thomas Otway's play *Venice Preserv'd* (1682) – which was to cause such consternation in the 1790s – provided the entertainment.<sup>1</sup> In an autobiographical passage written many years later, Godwin tried to convey the wonder with which the 'principal event of the excursion' had filled him:

The appearance of Priuli and Jaffier in the first scene, engrossed my mind, and made me almost breathless with attention. I thought the man who played Jaffier the most extraordinary creature I had ever beheld. Belvidera had, I believe, a very insufficient representation; and, from a mixed and undefined emotion of disgust at the actress, and sympathy for the distress in which the author has involved the character, I felt considerable pain every time that I saw her enter upon the stage.<sup>2</sup>

The shift from rapt attention to impatient criticism exemplifies Godwinian candour but attending the play was also a prescient moment – should we take his response at face value – when we consider Godwin's lifelong investment in the theatre. One of the Romantic period's most frequent theatre-goers, Godwin was also a tireless reader of dramatic works and an author whose own commitment to writing tragic drama was substantial. Godwin's interest in the theatre spanned his whole life and this edition seeks to make his plays widely available and place them into a personal and historical context.

William Godwin was born in Cambridgeshire in 1756 into a Dissenting Protestant background.<sup>3</sup> Determined at an early age to become a minister he became a student at Hoxton Dissenting academy. He was taught here by Dr Andrew Kippis (1725–95) who was to take a special interest in Godwin. The young man took his education seriously: 'for one whole summer', he wrote, 'I rose at five and went to rest at midnight, that I might have sufficient time for theology and metaphysics.'<sup>4</sup> The curriculum at Hoxton was demanding and Godwin thrived in the environment, although it appears to have stunted his theatrical writings. Earlier in 1773, before he went to Hoxton, he had planned two tragedies which were never completed.<sup>5</sup>

There has been substantial work done on the importance of the culture of Dissent to the formulation of Godwin's political thought.<sup>6</sup> But his Dissenting background and education are also of great importance to understanding his theatrical aspirations. There are two main reasons for this: the parallels between performance and preaching and the centrality of history to a Dissenting education.

Godwin's education at Hoxton Academy alerted him to contemporary debates regarding the appropriate degree of performativity for a preacher. Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), whom Godwin greatly admired, wrote a tract entitled *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* in 1777, while Godwin was at Hoxton. Priestley outlined his understanding of the performative nature of preaching and argued that both acting and preaching were exercises in persuasion. He admitted that 'the theatre, and the subjects of plays, contain a thousand things more engaging to the bulk of spectators than the furniture of a church, or the subjects of the generality of sermons' and he went on to discuss what the preacher could learn from the player.<sup>7</sup> Robert Robinson, another leading Dissenter, published *An Essay on the Composition of a Sermon* in 1779, a translation from the French ecclesiastic Jean Claude. Robinson added a copious commentary in the form of lengthy footnotes and in the following extract he also drew a parallel between sermons and the theatre:

Mons. Le Clerc somewhere observes – "That a good sermon preserves an unity of subject, and does not consist of an heterogeneous collection of articles – and that there are in beautiful sermons unities of time, place, and action, as in theatrical pieces." There is no doubt, a great deal of truth in these remarks [...]<sup>8</sup>

In the second volume of his book, Robinson wrote an introductory essay 'A Brief Dissertation on the Ministration of the Divine Word by Publick Preaching', which, while regretting the correlation of theatre with sermons, admits to their close association.<sup>9</sup> Godwin made a comparable and revealing observation:

[Drama] does that, which sermons were intended to do: it forms the link between the literary class of mankind & the uninstructed, the bridge by which the latter may pass over into the domains of the former.<sup>10</sup>

Dissenters understood the appeal of performativity to the public and thus the successful communication of a message, but they were equally aware of the dangers of such performativity rousing an inappropriate enthusiasm in an audience.<sup>11</sup> Performance was deemed to be independent of the intrinsic moral value of a sermon and there was a perceived danger that performativity could both overshadow the substance of the message and also corrupt the audience: there was a tense negotiation to be carried out by the preacher in incorporating theatrical elements into his oratorical armoury.<sup>12</sup> As both an admirer of Priestley and a protégé of Andrew Kippis, Godwin was familiar with these concerns and

the careful consideration of how best to disseminate the ideas of *Political Justice* in the treatise shows how important he considered the means of communicating knowledge and truth.<sup>13</sup> For Godwin, truth was a teleological certainty given man's innate rationality as long as the right conditions of production were allowed. These conditions of production were concerned with the appropriate transmission of knowledge. Kippis's assertion that the aim of oratory was to cultivate the 'happiest Method of delivering Truth' underlines this separation of message and medium and is echoed in the preface to *Caleb Williams*.<sup>14</sup> Theatricality, properly regulated, was a considerable enabler of the communicability of ideas and, for Godwin, the spread of political justice.

Indeed, Godwin's own autobiographical fragments record his personal experience of oratorical performance. In one of these fragments, Godwin relates that he had a precocious love of performing as a child: 'I preached sermons in the kitchen, every Sunday afternoon, and at other times, mounted in a child's high chair, indifferent as to the number of persons present at my exhibitions, and undisturbed at their coming and going'.<sup>15</sup> These flourishes were not limited to the privacy of the family home. Godwin was fond of reciting at school and with Rousseau-esque candour – and egotism – admitted the pride he felt when his schoolmates encouraged him: 'Here then was a new scene, tending to foster in my mind an overweening vanity and conceit; and it is difficult to conceive the transports with which I witnessed the admiration that attended me'.<sup>16</sup> The young intellectual had his first taste of public applause as a performative orator. His earliest literary memory linked poetry and preaching; he wrote, allegedly at the age of five, some lines 'in imitation of Pomfret [...] the first line of which was, "I will be a minister"'.<sup>17</sup> Recalling his association at age ten with an unfortunate friend, Godwin describes an incident where he: 'talked to him of sin and damnation, and drew tears from his eyes'.<sup>18</sup> Godwin understood at an early age the power compelling delivery could lend the substance of an argument; both his plays and his novels would draw attention to the ambivalent nature of this rhetorical power.

Godwin identified even closer parallels between religion and drama. A fragment of an essay in the Abinger Collection shows that Godwin read the Bible as a dramatically rich text. 'The Book of Job', he argued, 'is the oldest drama in existence. The incidents are almost entirely contained in the proem & the epilogue. The rest is in dialogue.' He goes on to suggest that 'The [Book of Job] is wound up by the Lord out of the whirlwind (Deus ex machina)', that the tragedies of Euripides and Aeschylus on the subject of Hercules were 'a kind of sacred drama', and so were plays written by Racine, Corneille, Voltaire, and Dryden.<sup>19</sup> Religious writing was profoundly dramatic and this is demonstrated particularly in Dunstan's evocation of prophetic biblical books.

All four of Godwin's tragedies are history plays. *St Dunstan* and *Abbas* are history plays in the fullest sense in that they are dramatic representations

of events that actually occurred. *Antonio* and *Faulkener* depict fictional events but situate them in precise historical periods which refer to historical incidents. Godwin wrote history books for children, history books for adults, historical novels and biographies of historical figures. Although a genuinely polymathic figure, to describe him as a historian is arguably the cap that fits him best.

History was a key subject for students attending Hoxton and Godwin left the academy feeling that he had a vocation for its study.<sup>20</sup> He believed that history was to be understood through the lives of eminent individuals as evidenced by his essay 'Of History and Romance' (1797) and by numerous examples in his fictional writing: for example, Falkland's eulogy on Alexander the Great in *Caleb Williams*.<sup>21</sup> This conception of history was inspired by Kippis, his mentor, at Hoxton. In the introduction to his *Biographia Britannica*, Kippis declared in his preface that the text:

will be of use also to succeeding times: for this Body of Lives being once in the hands of the Public, improvements will be continually made, and every man of genius, every person endowed with a generous and liberal spirit, will become more steady and more assiduous, as well as more eager in pursuit of knowledge and virtue, when he is sensible that his labours will not be buried in oblivion, but that whatever he gloriously achieves will be faithfully recorded.<sup>22</sup>

This is an idea picked up by Godwin in his *Account of the Seminary*, a manifesto for a proposed school he published in 1783: 'I would keep far aloof from the niceties of chronology, and the dispute of facts. I would not enter upon the study of history through the medium of epitome. I would even postpone the general history of nations, to the character and actions of particular men.'<sup>23</sup> Godwin went on to argue that one must then proceed to a further level of detail:

The mere external actions of men are not worth the studying: Who would have even thought of going through a course of history, if the science were comprised in a set of chronological tables? No: it is the hearts of men we should study. It is to their actions, as expressive of disposition and character, we should attend.<sup>24</sup>

We can see in Godwin's historiographical ideas the roots of his focus on the introspective side of his dramatic characters. Godwin always had difficulty reconciling this position with the demands of contemporary stage-craft. Critics, both private and public, consistently seized on his long speeches, convoluted arguments and lack of action.

History should lie at the heart of a modern education, argued Godwin. The *Account of the Seminary* laid out his ideas of what should comprise the education of a small group of young students. History 'leads directly to the most important of all attainments, the knowledge of the heart'. History shows us the way forward in science and gives us 'an inextinguishable thirst for literature'.<sup>25</sup> History

and literature were comparable discursive threads for Godwin as can be seen in his much commented-upon essay 'Of History and Romance'. This essay opens with the line 'The study of history may well be ranked among those pursuits which are most worthy to be chosen by a rational being'.<sup>26</sup> History writing was a matter of great interest to British society more broadly at the end of the eighteenth century. As Stephen Bann has pointed out, and as is neatly encapsulated by Godwin's writing as a whole, the 'rise of history' is an integral part of Romanticism. Bann notes that the Romantic period was a 'remarkable enhancement of consciousness of history'. History became the 'paradigmatic form of knowledge to which all others aspired' and Godwin shaped his literary output according to this paradigm.<sup>27</sup> Given this Dissenting background and its concerns with performativity and history, Godwin's writing of four history plays should be perhaps seen as inevitable, a primary concern of his philosophical and literary drive rather than a crass exercise in money-making as it has been described.<sup>28</sup> Godwin's assertion that drama forms the link between the 'literary class' and the 'uninstructed' should be considered alongside the potential of conversation which he highlighted in *Political Justice*:

The studious and reflecting only can be expected to see deeply into future events. To conceive an order of society totally different from that which is now before our eyes, and to judge of the advantages that would accrue from its institution, are the prerogatives only of a few favoured minds. When these advantages have been unfolded by superior penetration, they cannot yet for some time be expected to be understood by the multitude. Time, reading, and conversation are necessary to render them familiar. They must descend in regular gradation from the most thoughtful to the most unobservant.<sup>29</sup>

The Georgian playhouse was home to people from all sections of society from the 'studious' to the 'most unobservant', from the vulgar to the polite. It offered an ideal platform for a thinker determined to bring about societal change. Going to the theatre could be a mode of intellectual and moral bootstrapping for the public should they be exposed to the right dramatic stimulus. Godwin's Dissenting background then had sown the seeds of his dramatic project and it was when he arrived in London in the early 1780s that he found an environment conducive to their cultivation.

Godwin left Hoxton in 1778 and was employed by congregations in Hertfordshire, Suffolk and Buckinghamshire but was not particularly successful and his interest in ministering waned. He finally moved to London in 1783 and started a career as a writer. He published three novellas in 1784: *Damon and Delia*, *Italian Letters* and *Imogen*, the first of which contains a remarkable self-portrait in the character Godfrey who declares his determination to succeed on the stage which Godwin was to crave in the 1790s:

In spite of various obstacles, I have brought a tragedy upon the stage, and it has met with distinguished success. My former crosses and mortifications are all forgotten. Philosophers may tell us, that reputation, and the immortality of a name, are all but an airy shadow. Enough for me, that nature, from my earliest infancy, led me to place my first delight in these. I envy not kings their sceptres. I envy not statesmen their power. I envy not Damon his love, and his Delia. Next to the pursuits of honour and truth, my soul is conscious to but one wish, that of having my name enrolled, in however inferior a rank, with a Homer, and a Horace, a Livy, and a Cicero.<sup>30</sup>

Godwin's talent and intellectual precocity soon got the attention of London's literary and political worlds and he began to mix in these circles regularly. During the 1780s he met key London theatrical figures such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816), drama critic William Woodfall (c.1745–1803), playwright Dennis O'Brien (1755–1832), playwright and satirist Richard Tickell (1751–93), actor John Bannister (1760–1836), and Thomas Holcroft (1745–1809).

A successful dramatist, Holcroft, whom he met in 1786, became Godwin's closest friend and literary confidant during his most successful years as a writer. Godwin's diary entries during the late 1780s show that the two men were almost inseparable, meeting practically every other day and dining together very frequently. Recalling their early friendship and its importance to his intellectual and literary development, Godwin wrote that in 1790, the year he composed *St Dunstan*, 'my mind became more and more impregnated with the principles afterwards developed in my *Political Justice* – they were the almost constant topic of conversations between me and Holcroft.'<sup>31</sup>

The 1790s saw the publication of Godwin's works that we most remember today. During the decade he produced three editions of his *Political Justice* (1793, 1795, 1797), his influential novel *Caleb Williams* (1794), his notable pamphlets *Cursory Strictures* (1794) and *Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills* (1795), and his collection of essays *The Enquirer* (1797). Godwin was at the centre of the reform movement and the literary world. While he was not a participant in radical societies such as the London Corresponding Society (LCS) or even its more polite companion the Society for Constitutional Information, he knew many of the key figures such as John Thelwall (1764–1834) and John Horne Tooke (1736–1812) well. Godwin found the emotive and highly charged atmosphere of the LCS debating halls 'sufficiently alarming' and not conducive to the spread of truth and reason.<sup>32</sup> But he would debate with Thelwall and other radicals at the meetings of the Philomaths, a select group which gathered every fortnight to discuss a topic. Here Godwin found 'a number of individuals who, having stored their minds with reading and reflection, are accustomed, in candid and unreserved conversation, to compare their ideas, suggest their doubts, examine their mutual difficulties and cultivate a perspicuous and animated manner of delivering their sentiments'.<sup>33</sup>

Godwin's anxieties about the nature of the radical societies are interesting in the light of his intense play-going during the 1790s. Georgian theatre was a raucous affair far removed from our modern genteel incarnation. Holcroft, who saw theatre as a tool of moral instruction, lamented the boisterous environment in an unpublished afterpiece he wrote in 1794. Here Tim Halfprice (referring to the practice of entering a theatre at the interval to avail of cheaper prices) boasts of his vulgar exploits:

To be sure you have! I make the tour of the Lobbies – curse the Boxkeeper, bang the doors, talk loud to the Doxies – bawl to Ned, Tom & Dick – pinch the Orange women till they squeak again and take care that the whole house shall hear as little of the play as I do.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless Godwin's theatre attendance, which he documented with great care in his diary from 1791 onwards, is striking. The theatrical winter season ran from September to June and Godwin attended Drury Lane and Covent Garden with great frequency, particularly to see new plays such as those by Holcroft and another close friend Elizabeth Inchbald (1753–1821). These were the patent theatres, those licensed by the king to perform spoken drama; during the summer months he went to the Haymarket managed by George Colman the Younger, who was to base his 1796 play *The Iron Chest* on *Caleb Williams*. Godwin went to the theatre up to eighty times a season, going both by himself and with others such as Inchbald, Holcroft, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), John Thelwall, his student Thomas Cooper (1776–1849), and artist Thomas Lawrence (1769–1830). He also kept careful record of people he encountered at the theatre: for example, he went with Inchbald on 20 October 1795 and also bumped into Holcroft, drama critic John Taylor (1757–1832) and radical and moneylender John King (1753–1824). Many entries of this kind demonstrate the playhouse's importance as a site of sociability.<sup>35</sup> This rate of theatre attendance he kept up with an impressive regularity, averaging approximately fifty trips a year right up to his death – occasionally even visiting both Drury Lane and Covent Garden on the same night. His final trip to the theatre – to see the opera *The Corsair* at Drury Lane – took place on 24 March 1836, just two weeks before his death on 7 April.<sup>36</sup>

Godwin not only attended new plays with great regularity; in many cases he had been involved in their writing. Thomas Holcroft and Elizabeth Inchbald were the principal beneficiaries of his criticism. Although Godwin, as the major figure in Jacobin fiction, is probably better known for his involvement with their novels, he was also closely involved with their dramatic efforts.<sup>37</sup> Inchbald wrote to him on 3 November 1792 to thank him for his comments on her short piece *The Massacre* (1792) because there was 'so much tenderness mixed with the justice of your criticism'.<sup>38</sup> Holcroft also had recourse to Godwin for a revision of *The School for Arrogance* (1791).<sup>39</sup> Amelia Opie (1769–1853) wrote to him on



6 April 1796 to thank him for comments on a tragedy which she had written.<sup>40</sup> Godwin's love of theatre was well known and respected even outside his immediate close circle. James Broughton asked Godwin to read his annotations to his *Ancient British Drama* before publication in 1818.<sup>41</sup> Thomas Campbell (1777–1844), poet and biographer of actress Sarah Siddons (1755–1831), believed that Godwin was one of the 'most trustworthy lovers of the drama' and continued, 'I shall never forget the pleasure I received from the vivid remarks of this patriarch of our living literature. The freshness of his recollections, and his hearty interest in the history of the stage, are worthy of his gifted genius.'<sup>42</sup> Godwin's association with London theatre was well known and applauded even if it has been somewhat forgotten today.

Coupled with his theatre attendance, Godwin also read drama prodigiously. Shakespeare was a particular favourite, and he returned to him again and again. But his admiration was not uncritical. While Godwin praised Shakespeare the artist throughout his works, he lamented the fact that 'the political sentiments of [Shakespeare's] plays are almost all monarchical & aristocratical'. Specifically, Godwin was disappointed at Shakespeare's 'retreat into the country, the appellation of New Place, & the heirship of his property left to his eldest child, savours of the same propensities [towards primogeniture]'. Worst of all, for a writer who affirmed the redemptive and educational powers of the drama, Shakespeare had prostituted his talents and ignored the true value of his oeuvre: 'It is still more extraordinary that during this period of leisure he took no steps towards a correct publication of his works. By this conduct he showed, not only that he was indifferent to fame, but that the principles of his literary exertions had been for the most part emolument, & not the consideration of how much the species might be benefited by intellectual improvement'. These observations were made by him in his notes on a planned biography of Shakespeare which he later abandoned.<sup>43</sup> Godwin began the biography in August 1792 and by way of preparation, he read an impressive thirteen Shakespeare plays as well as Nicholas Rowe's biography of Shakespeare the preceding month.<sup>44</sup> We can see in these comments on Shakespeare that the political tendency – to use a word with much resonance for Godwin – could supplant aesthetic considerations. Like Holcroft, Godwin also believed strongly in theatre's capacity to effect change on an individual as well as on a societal level.

Godwin's reading was as broad as it was deep: other favourite playwrights included Rowe, Sophocles, Terence, Voltaire, Moliere, Beaumont and Fletcher.<sup>45</sup> On discovering Beaumont and Fletcher he wrote that 'it was as if a mighty river had changed its course to water the garden of my mind'.<sup>46</sup> For Godwin, drama had a cultural authority and weight which was unsurpassed by any other species of writing. 'Tragedy', he summed up, 'is perhaps the most difficult of all the classes of human composition. It is comparatively easy to write a novel or a tale'.<sup>47</sup>

In many ways then, Godwin's dramatic project was driven by a desire to reconcile this cultural weight with the contemporary, somewhat degraded, as he perceived it, condition of the London playhouse.

Could theatre be redeemed, its audience reformed, and its instructive capacity rejuvenated? 'Theatres' was twice a topic of conversation at the Philomaths meetings in May 1794, the month of the arrest of John Thelwall, prominent member of both the Philomaths and the London Corresponding Society, demonstrating the centrality of the Georgian playhouse to the political barometer of the period. Doubtless Godwin and Holcroft were eager contributors to the discussion. The previous year, in a supplement to his diary dated 24 March 1793, Godwin recorded a conversation that he had with his close friend George Dyson on their way to Wimbledon to visit Horne Tooke where they debated this very question. Godwin had published *Political Justice* six weeks previously and had just begun writing *Caleb Williams*, a novel rife with theatrical allusion.<sup>48</sup> The topic of the conversation was Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert* (1758), a response to D'Alembert's entry on the Swiss city of Geneva for the *Encyclopédie* in which he had called for the introduction of a theatre to the city.<sup>49</sup> Rousseau, despite being a playwright himself, was disgusted by his co-contributor's endorsement of such a decadent and corrosive institution. Rousseau argued that the theatre isolated communities (by distracting people from their neighbours), that it could not improve public morality, only replicate it, and that it created sympathy for unnatural actions, such as murder, and their perpetrators. Worse, the theatre was a place where men spent too much time with women and where both sexes spent too much time with immoral actors. Theatre was a distraction from productivity, an added, unnecessary expense to daily life, and it promoted general moral dissipation. The best that could be said for theatre, as far as Rousseau was concerned, was that it was permissible in a city already decadent (such as Paris) as the inhabitants were already deeply immoral and time spent at the theatre was a lesser evil than what people would get up to outside its walls.<sup>50</sup>

What did the theatre offer the modern world? Although his enthusiasm for the theatre clearly distinguishes him from Rousseau's stance, Godwin was also very concerned with theatre's potential for beneficial or harmful effects to a society. This uncertain potential was the subject of the conversation between Godwin and his artist friend George Dyson in March 1793, as the note recording their exchange reveals:

Rousseau sur les Spectacles – Do theatrical productions, such as we find them do most good or harm? – Which is most powerful, the moral inference fairly deducible from an interesting story, or its tendency to rouse? instance in *Othello* – A question similar to that of Rousseau may be put relative to Petronius, Horace, Voltaire, Hume,

Sterne – How far is mind generated, not only in the vulgar persons suitably prepared, but even in the vulgar, by energy of intellectual exhibitions?<sup>51</sup>

Godwin's anxiety about theatre's capacity to reduce a collection of individuals to an uncritical, 'vulgar' mob and the possibility of this mob being inflamed to inappropriate and irrational action by the 'energy' of the performance will be recognizable to most historians of the 1790s. On the other hand, he was well aware that there was no greater public platform for the dissemination of literary, political, and philosophical ideas in contemporary Britain. And it was for that reason that he would dedicate so much of his time when he was at the peak of his powers and influence to the writing of drama.

The plays are discussed individually below. More extensive commentary will be found in my forthcoming monograph, *William Godwin and the Theatre* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010).

### *St Dunstan*

#### *Composition History*

*St Dunstan* is a play about a tenth-century conflict between state and church. Given Godwin's background, education, and his social networks at the time of writing *St Dunstan*, it is entirely unsurprising that his first full dramatic effort should be focused on the question of enfranchising non-conformists.

In March 1787 a motion to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts came before Parliament.<sup>52</sup> These pieces of legislation dating from the late seventeenth century limited full civil rights to members of the Anglican church. Indeed the development of Dissenting academies such as the one at Hoxton that Godwin attended was driven largely by the exclusion of non-Anglicans from taking their degrees at Oxford and Cambridge. The motion was defeated by 176 votes to 98 but this was not the end of the matter.

The Dissenters were led by Henry Beaufoy MP (1750–95) and Andrew Kippis, the latter leading a petition to William Pitt (1759–1806) on the subject in early 1787. Another effort to repeal the act was brought in May 1789, also led by Beaufoy. Godwin's diary shows the extent to which he was part of these Dissenting circles. On 6 May 1789 he recorded 'Dine at the Hackney dinner London tavern: speak with Hoghton, Barbault : see Beaufoy'. New College, Hackney was founded in 1786 and every year on 6 May they marked the anniversary with a sermon which was subsequently published by Joseph Johnson (1738–1809) and a subsequent dinner at the New London Tavern in Cheapside.<sup>53</sup> Godwin's attendance and his acquaintance with Sir Henry Hoghton MP (1728–95), Rochemont Barbault (1749–1808), and Henry Beaufoy is signifi-

cant. Hoghton was a moderate Dissenter who seconded the motions of 1787 and 1789. Barbauld was a Dissenting minister and was married to Anna Letitia Barbauld who wrote *An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts* (1790) and with whom Godwin had tea in July 1789. In November Godwin noted a dinner he had with the London Revolution Society, an organization founded in 1788 which celebrated the Glorious Revolution and whose membership was stacked with non-conformist ministers. Among the diners were Richard Price (1723–1791), Abraham Rees (1743–1825), Joseph Towers (1737–99), Theophilus Lindsey (1723–1808), John Disney (1746–1816), all eminent Dissenters and, indeed, all governors of New College, Hackney. Godwin was covering the repeal debates in his capacity as a reporter for the *New Annual Register*, a Whig journal, and there can be no doubt that it was the most important political issue of the day for him and his friends.

The opposers of the repeal movement were nervous about the separation of church and state, believing that only by maintaining those close ties could loyalty and stability be maintained. As a non-Anglican and one who was teetering on the brink of atheism, Godwin was unsurprisingly provoked into action. Getting involved in the most contentious political issue of the day would both satisfy his principles and his desire to make his mark on London's cultural and political scene.

Godwin conceived the idea for the play on 31 January 1790. Work proceeded quickly, perhaps inspired by the energetic political environment in which he found himself, and he completed the first act on 8 February. He dined with the 'Anti-tests' on the 13 February which may well have been a strategy meeting for the final attempt of the century to repeal the act in March 1790. Charles James Fox (1749–1806) was to lead this – again unsuccessful – motion and he, along with fellow MPs Beaufoy and Hoghton, was present with many other leading figures of the movement. The second act of Godwin's play followed quickly on 26 February but enthusiasm was to be dampened by political events. On 2 March the motion for repeal was crushingly defeated, helped by Edmund Burke's (1729/30–1797) intervention. Burke had abstained on the two previous votes but now he argued that 'The turn of affairs in France proved the danger of any sort of innovation or alteration in the laws of the land.'<sup>54</sup> This must have been a moment of great despair for Godwin; Burke was a man whose talents and intellect he greatly admired.<sup>55</sup> Work on the play stalled as the demoralized Godwin took stock. On top of melancholy he had to get back to his 'real' job – reporter for the *New Annual Register*, which Kippis had secured for him in 1786. Three days after the debate Godwin recorded in his diary 'Read for A. R.' and he was to work on this until the end of July when he sent off sixty pages to the publisher, George Robinson. The section on the repeal debate gives some indication of Godwin's rancour (a brief aside in an article which is generally objective and

dispassionate) and identifies a key theme of *St Dunstan*, the will to power of the church. He complained that 'the clergy of England, alarmed perhaps at the rapid downfall of the pecuniary and territorial eminence of the Gallican church, strenuously exerted themselves to keep alive and diffuse a spirit of opposition against the incroachment that was intended on their exclusive privileges'.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the disappointment of the repeal defeat, the reformers remained defiant. Godwin attended a dinner to mark the anniversary of the French Revolution on 14 July along with many of the eminent reformers such as Stanhope, Sheridan, Horne Tooke and Brand Hollis. When he recorded the dinner he also noted with some pride, one imagines, a comment someone had made to him at the meal: 'We are particularly fortunate in having you among us; it is having the best cause countenanced by the man, by whom we most wished to see it supported'.<sup>57</sup> This encouragement must have galvanized his resolve. The fourth act was completed on 6 September and the play was finished precisely a fortnight later.<sup>58</sup> In November he gave the play to Colonel Henry Barry (1749/50–1822) who was a friend of Hester Piozzi, to the chemist William Nicholson (1753–1815), and Holcroft to read before making further revisions in December 1790.

### *Plot*

*St Dunstan* is a historical tragedy detailing the tale of a tenth-century English monk. The play opens with Queen Eltruda anxious on her wedding day at the threat that the banished Dunstan poses to England. Athelstan, her husband's faithful courtier, tries to reassure her but to no avail as she recalls Dunstan's resentment over his conviction for, we discover later, defrauding the public purse. King Edward's entrance confirms her fears as he relates Dunstan's return and the subsequent rapture of the people. A messenger tells an incredulous Edward that his brother Edgar is leading Dunstan to court. Edgar, whom Dunstan educated, enters and insists that Dunstan is repentant and has a message for the king; Edward reluctantly agrees to meet him and exits. The first act closes with Edgar confirming his love for his brother but also his secret passion for his sister-in-law, Eltruda.

The second act shows an imperious Dunstan encountering Edward, the former insisting on his pre-eminence as a messenger from God and the latter dismissing this as arrogance. Dunstan announces his divine message that Edward and Eltruda must be divorced as they were too closely related for the church. Edward is indignant with rage and determines that Dunstan will stand trial proper for his initial crimes, having refused to answer for them before his banishment, to which he agrees. Eltruda and Dunstan then speak and he warns her of the church's judgment of Edward. She appears shaken by his stern counsel and exits leaving Dunstan and his subordinate Anselm. Dunstan reveals to Anselm that Edgar will be the means by which he regains political power as he is conscious of the degree of power he has over him.

Edward assuages Eltruda's fears at the outset of the third act which is followed by Dunstan's trial where his sentence is confirmed. Livid, Dunstan gets Edgar alone and convinces him that his godly mission is to assassinate his brother and take the crown. A reluctant Edgar is finally won over by the promise of Eltruda's hand.

His resolve is tested, however, by a tender exchange with his brother at the opening of the fourth act. Their conversation is interrupted by news that Dunstan has manipulated the citizens to support him and threaten rebellion. Edward refuses to let the army disperse them and goes to meet his people. On his return, Edgar has gathered his resolve and kills him before immediately repenting, suggesting that he was under a dark spell.

The final act shows Eltruda being saved from a mob by Edgar who refuses to believe that it was Dunstan who instigated her attempted execution. Eltruda is horrified to hear that she has been promised to Edgar, murderer of her husband, and this completes his misery. Dunstan and his entourage arrive and he orders the seizure of the queen which Edward countermands. Eltruda, in order to prevent further death and wishing to join her husband, surrenders to the monks but when Dunstan attempts to impose a new king due to Edgar's crime of fratricide, she springs back into action delivering a speech loaded with sincerity which confounds Dunstan's conscience and he exits in confusion. The play ends with Eltruda leaving for Ireland and a remorseful Edgar holding the crown.

### *Sources and Influences*

We can consider the major sources for the play under two categories: historical and literary. In the case of the historical sources we can infer with a high degree of certainty the historians Godwin may have read from his Hoxton education, the sale catalogue of his library, his citation of historians in other works, and the parallels between the version of events in a particular history and the action of the play.<sup>59</sup>

The major source appears to have been Tobias Smollett, *A Complete History of England deduced from the Descent of Julius Caesar to the Treaty of Aix la Chapelle, 1748 Containing the Transactions of One Thousand Eight Hundred and Three Years*, 4 vols (London: James Rivington & James Fletcher, 1757–8). Smollett's account of the conflict between Dunstan and Edward tallies very well with the action of the play. Furthermore, Godwin was a great admirer of Smollett – despite his Toryism – and gave an enthusiastic assessment in his essay 'Of English Style' in the *Enquirer*: 'Respect for the great name of Smollett, will not suffer me to pass over in silence his History of England, the most important of his compilations.'<sup>60</sup> A copy of this history was listed in the sale catalogue of his library.

Godwin may also have consulted Paul de Rapin (1661–1725) *Histoire de l'Angleterre* (1723–5) which was translated almost immediately for the English market by Nicholas Tindal and David Hume (1711–76) as *History of England*

(1754–61). Both texts are also found in the sale catalogue and feature on Dissenting curriculums. He cites Hume on numerous occasions in his other writings.

The play owes a general literary debt to Shakespeare, who Godwin admired so much, and it may be that Godwin was trying to marry Shakespearean style with more progressive political values than the ones he identified in the man from Stratford. *St Dunstan* is a standard five-act tragedy written in blank verse and a lofty style. Unlike Shakespeare it pays attention – like all of Godwin’s plays – to the dramatic unities. He alludes to plays such as *Macbeth* and *3 Henry VI* and the discerning reader is sure to discover more. Unsurprisingly, in a play concerned with institutional religion allusions to the Bible and *Paradise Lost* also feature prominently.

### *Reception*

The play was never published or performed. There is convincing evidence that it was submitted to Covent Garden in early 1796 as a letter from Joseph Ritson to Nicholas Harris suggests. Ritson wrote that he had heard that Godwin had written ‘a tragedy, on I know not what subject, which the managers will not play’.<sup>61</sup> This seems plausible as Godwin had read and revised *St Dunstan* in December 1795, just after the passing of the Two Acts and the publication of his *Considerations on Lord Grenville’s and Mr Pitt’s Bills*. He had also just finished reading Paine’s assault on institutional religion in *The Age of Reason* (1793–5) and, just as in 1790, Godwin turned to his play as an appropriate statement of resistance. January 1796 saw Godwin engaging in a lot of discussion on theatre: it was the topic of conversation at the Philomaths on 5 and 19 January, and he also spoke to Nicholson on ‘passions’, Marshall and others on ‘anatomy & theatre’, George Dyson and Thomas Kearsley on ‘Shakespear’, and Northcote on ‘expression & players’. Evidently, matters of the stage were very much to the fore of his mind. There is no explicit evidence of his submission to a theatre manager but this is not particularly unusual for Godwin – other sources indicate that he forgets or omits meetings or letters written and received more often than a biographer would like. There is one further suggestive diary entry on 20 January: ‘meet Lewis cg’ which is likely to refer to some bad news being delivered to Godwin by William Thomas Lewis (c.1746–1812), deputy acting manager of Covent Garden theatre since 1782.

Irrespective of its non-performance, the play did have its readers. There is no record of what Barry or Nicholson made of the play, only that Godwin made some revisions after their readings. However, the comments of the third reader, Thomas Holcroft, have been preserved. There is some slight emendation on the fair copy which has been documented in the endnotes to the present edition. He also made extensive comments on the play which have been preserved in the Abinger Collection including, in the spirit of Godwinian candour, a line-by-line

analysis of what he perceived to be the play's weaknesses. Two extracts should indicate the general tenor of his comments which suggest that he felt that Godwin had not fully exploited the dramatic potential of the story's events, that the speeches were too expository and longwinded at times but that these were shortcomings easily amended. In III.i.198–236 Athelstan gives an extended account of Dunstan's performance at the trial which Holcroft found problematic:

The whole speech of Athelstan in the mouth of Dunstan might be rendered sublimely terrific. Here it gives pain (excellent tho' it is) by obliging us to recollect it is the paltry artifice of a feeble French poet who narrates what he had not powers to exhibit. Dunstan must be shewn in this great situation it would be madness to lose the opportunity.<sup>62</sup>

Holcroft also saw problems with the last act which he felt stretched credulity:

I have before expostulated on the denouement & the catastrophe I can only add my feelings are but confirmed by a second reading Eltruda could not ought not to act thus What seat the murderer of her husband on the throne! Why not marry him too?<sup>63</sup>

Godwin did not automatically defer to Holcroft, despite his friend's undoubted success on the stage and he reminded himself in a note: 'Be not misled by Holcroft: attend impartially to his criticisms, but adopt nothing except on full conviction.'<sup>64</sup> Further he did not always appreciate the candour; their correspondence on his plays would always be a source of tension in their relationship. The tone of Holcroft's letter to him on 24 December 1790 is hurt at Godwin's reaction, particularly in the context of Godwin's acerbic comments on his work:

I am sorry to have excited those feelings toward me at which you hint. There was at one time an intercourse of so much confidence between us that I believe such feelings could not have been excited. The large and liberal intentions of the writer would have been too powerfully present either to your mind or to mine for them to have found a place ... I am sure I do not speak in a spirit of recrimination when I request you to remember the tone and phraseology of numbers of your notes on MS pieces of mine.<sup>65</sup>

In her unfinished biography of her father, Mary Shelley was less generous in her opinion. Shelley felt that 'his genius was not dramatic'. Specifically, she argued that there was a 'want of proper concatenation of event[s] & several leading circumstances not accounted for' in *St Dunstan*. Like Holcroft, she found the conclusion 'an unsatisfactory catastrophe'.<sup>66</sup> However, although she thought it unsuitable for representation on the stage she contended that 'there are many scenes & situations which render it interesting for the closet'. Shelley, evidently, saw in *St Dunstan* the philosophical musings that were to be developed fully in *Political Justice*. The manuscript of *St Dunstan* was only discovered in 1982 and,



being unpublished until now, has received no modern critical attention. But *St Dunstan* is an important indication of Godwin's political development and the play offers early considerations of many ideas that would be more fully developed in *Political Justice* and warrants close attention.

### *Antonio*

#### *Composition History*

Godwin was at the height of his theatre-going in the second half of the 1790s. Between the 1795–6 and 1797–8 seasons his theatrical attendance had increased significantly, thanks in part to the admission of his name to the free list on all three patent theatres. The increase in his theatre-going meant that Godwin was witness to the changing tastes of the London theatre audience. One of the most notable changes that took place over the period was the growing popularity of grand spectacle.

Godwin's disregard for the convention of spectacle in his writing of a traditional five-act tragedy was driven by an immense sense of confidence. From a very early age Godwin had always had a tremendous sense of his own stature that could be read as arrogance but was more a sincere assessment of his own abilities that could be empirically demonstrated through his scholastic achievement then and the success of *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams* now. False modesty was not for a man forged in the intellectual exchange of Dissenting candour. This aspect of his character can be seen in various notes scattered through the Abinger Collection that he wrote to himself commenting on his character, his future plans, and his current literary activities. One such note relates directly to the writing of *Antonio*.

Magnus ab integro seclorum nascitur ordo.

I have been a metaphysician, a political theorist – I have been a writer of fictitious histories & adventures – Enough; let these be dismissed – be now another man - turn your whole thoughts to the buskin & the scene – be that the labour of your being – hoc cura, hoc roga, & omnis in hoc sis!<sup>67</sup>

This self-exhortation is undated but the reference to fictitious histories in the past suggests that it was written after *Caleb Williams* but before any subsequent dramatic effort to *St Dunstan*.<sup>68</sup> It is a note intended to galvanize himself into a serious dramatic endeavour. Godwin's opening Latin quotation is from Virgil's Eclogue IV, a poem about the dawning of a new Golden Age, free from corruption and decadence, symbolized by the birth of a child. That Godwin chose a quotation from a poem which speaks, it has been argued, of Virgil's newly-born literary hopes prior to writing his *Aeneid*, indicates the extent of his dramatic

aspirations.<sup>69</sup> The second Latin citation is derived from Horace's first Epistle and literally translates as 'care for this, demand for this, and be everything in this.'<sup>70</sup> Godwin was more than determined to succeed; *Antonio* was to be a whole new departure for him and the writing of tragedy was to be a period of creativity that, he told his financial benefactor Wedgwood, he 'hope[d] to devote several years of my life.'<sup>71</sup>

*Antonio* was indeed to be a serious literary commitment. Godwin began it on 26 June 1797 and worked on it until he was devastated by the death of Mary Wollstonecraft on 10 September. While her death immediately caused him to break off the work more or less entirely in order to concentrate on writing her memoirs, it also seemed to have knocked his spirit more profoundly. When he began writing proper again in January 1798 he returned to novel-writing, not able for the exuberance that the drama required.<sup>72</sup> He had conceived *St Leon* (first entitled 'Magnum Opus') on 31 December, seemingly a deliberate act of new-year catharsis to get over the trauma of losing Wollstonecraft. Holcroft wrote to Godwin on 9 September 1800 after reading the novel and sighed 'Your Marguerite is inimitable. Knowing the model after which you drew, as often as I recollected it, my heart ached while I read.'<sup>73</sup>

On 30 September 1798 he returned to the play almost a year after he had laid it aside. Whatever was the exact cause of this change in focus (*St Leon* was not completed and he now abandoned that until April 1799) I suggest that 26 September was a momentous day. Firstly, he met John Kemble, manager of Drury Lane and pre-eminent tragedian of the decade, in Hampstead. He did not know Kemble well and had not seen him since 1796 but he and Kemble, as we shall see, were to have a lot to do with each other over *Antonio*. Perhaps Godwin first mentioned the play to Kemble during this encounter. Later that day he also wrote 'Hints of Character', a frank Rousseauvian assessment of his personality and also what he had achieved in his life to date. He concluded the brief essay:

On the other hand, my mind has a firmness and vigour, calculated to prevent its vicissitudes of opinion from being ludicrously rapid. It has also that degree of, what I might call, richness of soil, as not to leave the sentiments it embraces idle or unexpanded into the remoter ramifications.<sup>74</sup>

Godwin reminded himself that he was no quitter, that his principles were founded on profound reflection and intellectual rigour. The day ended with a trip to Covent Garden where he saw George Colman's *Inkle and Yarico* (1787).<sup>75</sup> Colman, who had ripped off *Caleb Williams* for his *The Iron Chest* – much to Godwin's dismay – probably did the same to Thelwall's *Incle and Yarico*.<sup>76</sup> Being reminded of his own shabby treatment as well as his friend's at the hands of Colman may also have contributed to him rethinking his efforts to make a bid for theatrical acclaim. In any case he returned to *Antonio* four days later and worked

steadily on it until he completed a first draft in December 1798. He spent the first three months of 1799 revising it before sending it to Sheridan. Godwin seems to have been keen to get an answer out of Sheridan and a guarantee that he would bring it forward the coming season (in a letter to Thomas Wedgwood dated 10 April 1799 Godwin says that the spring months are 'unfavourable' to theatrical success).<sup>77</sup> Although Sheridan liked the piece he was not prepared to humour Godwin who called or wrote to him a number of times over the summer. Sheridan had more important things to do, such as oppose the Act of Union with Ireland, and many of Godwin's calls on Sheridan were unsuccessful, as indicated by his diary. Finally, however, Godwin was invited to dinner at John Kemble's house with Sheridan and theatrical stars Charles Kemble and Elizabeth Inchbald on 27 October 1799. Sheridan offered to bring forward the drama for representation that autumn but Godwin declined, insisting that he could improve it.<sup>78</sup> He returned to the play in December after completing *St Leon* and worked on it throughout 1800.

Although John Kemble had Godwin round to his house it is fair to say that he was less than enthusiastic about the tragedy. Kemble acknowledged receipt of the play on 14 October 1800 and sent it to the copyist two weeks later. Godwin was understandably anxious about what Kemble thought of the play as he was hoping that he would play the lead – his star power would help the play's chances of success. He wrote to him on 1 November to ask for an opinion; two days later Kemble replied: 'All I can say in answer to your Letter of yesterday is, that you asked me my sincere opinion of your Tragedy, and I sincerely told you that I thought it would not succeed. I am of that opinion still.'<sup>79</sup> But Godwin would not be dissuaded with proceeding with his formal tragedy which did not deign to resort to the tawdry level of spectacle. However, Kemble clearly did not think that playing the lead in Godwin's tragedy would help his career one jot. He evidently tried to get out of the role as one of the most entertaining of Godwin's letters, one he wrote to tell on Kemble to his boss, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, shows.<sup>80</sup> Sheridan promptly told Kemble to do his job and he accepted the role in a letter – a short one – to Godwin on 15 November.

With his cast organized and a promise from Kemble that he would make no changes without Godwin's permission, Godwin had one more concern. The question of authorship was a vexed one. The author of Wollstonecraft's *Memoirs* had been ribbed, and worse, persistently in the conservative press and in a number of anti-Jacobin novels. Already a target as the leader of the 'New Philosophy', outrage at his liberal attitudes to Wollstonecraft's dalliance with Gilbert Imlay had made him a renewed target. If it became known that he was the author of a new play, conservative critics – who shared his belief in the capacity of the stage for moral instruction – were sure to savage him. Godwin asked contemporary playwright John Tobin (1770–1804) – after William Hazlitt's brother-in-law,

John Stoddart (1773–1856) refused him – to attend rehearsals in order to put people off the scent.<sup>81</sup> He also drew on his literary contacts to supply him with a prologue and an epilogue. Charlotte Smith (1749–1806) supplied the former, after Coleridge protested he was unable to do so, and Charles Lamb contributed the latter.<sup>82</sup> The Abinger Collection has a prologue and a preface in Godwin's hand which he decided not to use (they are reproduced in the appendices of the present edition). After a three-and-a-half-year gestation, the play was finally produced on 13 December 1800 at Drury Lane theatre.

### *Plot*

Don Gusman, a Spanish nobleman, discovers his wife Helena in tears. Helena is worried about how her brother Antonio will react to the news that she is recently married. She tells Gusman that her father promised her to Rodrigo, Antonio's friend, on his deathbed and Antonio is likely to greet news of her marriage with dismay. Gusman reassures her as Pedro, the King of Arragon, blessed the union. Antonio then returns from war where he has been fighting for three years alongside Rodrigo. He tells Helena that Rodrigo is being held hostage and that his only solace is thinking about Helena. The act closes with Antonio suspecting that something is bothering Helena who has remained silent on her marriage.

Antonio is met by Henry who, after some attempts at evasion, confesses that Helena is married. Antonio is furious – despite acknowledging their debt to Gusman who previously rescued Helena from some unspecified threat – at what he considers adultery; Helena's and Rodrigo's vow in front of his dying father constitutes a sacred vow 'that angels heard'. Helena enters and Antonio lambasts her at length and tells her she is no longer his sister despite her tearful attempts to appeal to their childhood affection.

The third act opens with Don Pedro granting Antonio an audience. Long-time friends, Pedro is delighted to see Antonio again. He salutes his courage and immediately promises to pay Rodrigo's ransom. Antonio's peremptory insistence on Pedro using his monarchical authority to dissolve the union between Gusman and Helena appears to gain some favour, the king reacting to the imputation on his honour. Pedro exits to consider his words and Gusman enters in a futile attempt to make the peace. When Gusman leaves, Henry arrives and tells Antonio that the king has reaffirmed his earlier decision and tells him that Helena will remain Gusman's bride. Henry agrees to help Antonio kidnap Helena for the sake of family honour.

Helena has been kidnapped but Henry is beginning to have some qualms about what they have done. Antonio and Helena have a key scene where he explains to her in a world-weary tone the necessity of his actions; he pleads with her to see the justice of his deeds. Helena oscillates between dignified terseness, pleas for mercy and passionate condemnation which manages to raise the slight-

est hint of doubt in Antonio, quickly brushed aside. Gusman then challenges Antonio to a duel in which Antonio dismisses him with a hauteur that impresses his opponent.

At the start of the final act we are told that Henry has betrayed Antonio and effected the rescue of Helena. Pedro and Henry discuss her escape until Gusman and Helena arrive. Helena pleads with Gusman to let her return to the convent for a period to allow Antonio to become reconciled to their marriage, in order to save her brother from madness and grief. Gusman is incredulous at what he perceives to be capitulation to Antonio's whim and dismisses the idea. Antonio enters the court and asks Pedro one final time to release Helena to him. Helena then steps forward and offers to go with him of her own free will but Pedro is now incensed at Antonio's challenge to his authority and refuses in no uncertain terms. Antonio then strikes down Helena to preserve the family honour. Helena's last act is to prevent Gusman from avenging her death. The play ends with Antonio repenting his actions and falling by his dead sister's body.

### *Sources and Influences*

As St Clair has observed, Godwin worked hard on the technical side of his craft while writing *Antonio*.<sup>83</sup> He read an enormous amount of plays, particularly English Restoration and Augustan tragedians, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French playwrights, and Shakespeare. He cites a number of them in his notes to the play demonstrating the extent to which he was crafting characters and passions drawn from these playwrights, acting as a dramatic bricoleur.<sup>84</sup> For example, he suggests that Gusman 'may be allowed to bear a resemblance to Jaffier' and whether Antonio 'may repent like Zanga'.<sup>85</sup> Other literary characters or situations cited in his notes drawing comparisons between them and those of his play include characters from: James Thomson's *Tancred and Sigismunda* (1745); Abbé Prevost's *Mémoires d'un homme de Qualité* (1728); Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (1702); John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667); and, Sophocles's *Philoctetes* (409 BC).<sup>86</sup>

On one page of his notes he lists the following playwrights, suggesting their influence on the play. In addition to Thomas Otway and Edward Young, he lists playwrights Nathaniel Lee (c.1650–92) and Thomas Southerne (1660–1746).

The notes also suggest the degree of care Godwin took with his tragedy. He reminds himself that 'No incident or scene can be beautiful, that does not either forward or retard the catastrophe'. Recalling perhaps Holcroft's criticism of *St Dunstan* he further writes '[Gusman's rescue of Helena] need not be described in the scene of Antonio & Manuel, for Antonio is acquainted with it already'. In *St Dunstan* Eltruda recounts at length Edward's rescue of her which motivates her love for him and Godwin wants to avoid this degree of superfluous exposition in his second dramatic effort.

Although the play is set in a specific historical period in Spain's history when it was involved in the Italian Wars, Godwin does not do any significant reading in Spanish or European history over the course of the play's composition. One of the themes of the play – and indeed Godwin's fictional and dramatic work more broadly – that of the corrupting influence of a martial-driven sense of honour seems more important than any real sense of historical place. Godwin's play could have been situated anywhere that had close proximity to major conflict.

### *Reception*

The most famous account of *Antonio* remains the essay 'The Old Actors' by Charles Lamb.<sup>87</sup> Lamb pokes fun good-naturedly at Godwin and generally points to the absence of any entertainment value in an overly serious and philosophical piece.<sup>88</sup> Coleridge had warned Godwin prior to the staging of *Antonio* in a letter dated 6 December that: 'The success of a Tragedy in the present size of the Theatres (Pizarro is a Pantomime) the success of a TRAGEDY is in my humble opinion rather improbable than probable –. What Tragedy has succeeded for the last 15 years?'<sup>89</sup>

Significantly, however, Lamb also notes that Kemble believed all the good tragedies had been written and he had no time for modern attempts. He then recalls how Kemble coughed his way through the third act which ended any hope of its success. Ironically, George Colman, in the preface to the second edition of the play, had also blamed Kemble for assassinating *The Iron Chest* on its opening night in March 1796.<sup>90</sup> Lamb alludes to this event in his essay also, writing that Kemble 'did not care to adventure bottomry with a Sir Edward Mortimer'. In addition, the history of Godwin's correspondence with Kemble, discussed above, before the production of *Antonio* suggests that Kemble's hatchet-job on the play was done with perhaps some malicious intent. Overall, it is easy to see why the play had only one performance.

The play was not well received by the public or the critics. Holcroft wrote to Godwin from Germany on 26 December 1800 and sympathized:

You have a grief upon your mind which requires all your fortitude to keep at bay. Do not imagine it is unfelt by me. Before your account reached me, I read the malignant and despicable triumph of *The Times*. It was not Alonzo but William Godwin who was brought to the bar: and not to be tried, but to be condemned. I was in vain to croak, having seriously warned you, as I did: you were of a different opinion; and to have been more urgent would only have produced disagreeable feelings, not conviction, but with me it was a moral certainty that if your name were only whispered the condemnation of your Tragedy was ensured. JP Kemble well knew this; and hence his refusals, and forebodings. Yet it pleased me to see that malignity itself was obliged to own the play had beauties.<sup>91</sup>

Godwin's attempt to have his authorship suppressed had failed; the review in *The Times* had identified the play as being of the 'Godwinian school'. This raises the

question of whether there was a political slant to Kemble's possible sabotage: one coughing fit in a Godwin-associated play may be unfortunate, two is suspicious.

The rest of the conservative press were delighted to attack the play. George Canning's *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* declared that the plot was 'beneath the rudest epoch of the stage. Its language wants energy, variety, and metre, except a few new-coined words can be called variety. It is totally destitute of incident, unless we call an unprovoked murder incident; nor is there any thing in the whole composition to excite a momentary interest'. 'A crude and undigested mess' summed up the *British Critic*. Slightly more sympathetically, the *Critical Review* stated that the play 'drew no tears, excepting those of the author and his friends' and that it 'affords a melancholy addition to those already on record, of men of unquestioned abilities miscalculating the extent of their mental powers'. The *London Chronicle* thought it not without merit and concluded that it 'would form an interesting tale for the closet, but, as a drama, it is in many parts defective, and by no means likely to obtain a permanency upon the stage'.<sup>92</sup>

Modern critics have been lukewarm. His latest biographer, William St Clair, stated of *Antonio* that Godwin 'might love poetry, he might have read a great deal of it, he might understand its power and talk about it regularly with some of the best poets of the day, but he could not write it'.<sup>93</sup> Biographical apathy and the brilliant comedy of the Lamb essay have ensured that literary critics have steered clear of *Antonio*. Pamela Clemit, a notable exception, seeks to defend the play to some extent by highlighting its Godwinian themes but concludes that it 'remains fundamentally unsuited for the stage'.<sup>94</sup> Despite all of this, Charles Kegan Paul wrote that 'to the latest day of his life Godwin considered it his best work'.<sup>95</sup>

### *Abbas, King of Persia*

#### *Composition History*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote to Godwin on hearing of *Antonio*'s failure with an encouraging message: 'But cheerily, Friend! it is worth something to have learnt what will not please'. He then suggested to his friend:

If your Interest in the Theatre is not ruined by the fate of this, your first piece, take heart, set instantly about a new one, and if you want a glowing Subject, take the death of Myrza, [...] There is Crowd, Character, Passion, Incident, & Pageantry in it –<sup>96</sup>

Coleridge's hints echo those of Lamb, who had also pointed out the absence of visual relief.<sup>97</sup> Despite Godwin's determination to avoid what he perceived to be the vacuous spectacle of the period, some compromise – not capitulation – would have to be made. Choosing an oriental play was a sensible option at least from a commercial perspective. Orientalist dramas were established crowd-

pleasers in contemporary London. Plays such as *Bluebeard* (1798), *Ramah Droog* (1798), and *Pizarro* (1799) were both highly successful and had all been seen by Godwin.<sup>98</sup>

Godwin, who had enormous respect for Coleridge's intellect, did not waste any time. With remarkable resilience he put *Antonio* behind him and recorded 'Invent Mirza' in his diary entry of 24 December 1800. After three weeks of intense reading of historical sources on Persia he began to write the play. As was his habit he wrote steadily, managing on average about two pages a day, and he continued to read primary source material as he went along. The diary records a large number of contacts with Charles Lamb over the period he wrote the play, an indication of his respect for Lamb's theatrical nous. Lamb may have then gotten over at least some of his exasperation at Godwin's persistence. He had exclaimed to Thomas Manning in a letter of 27 December 1800: 'Are poets so few in *this age*, that He must write poetry? Is *morals* a subject so exhausted, that he must quit that line? Is the metaphysic well (without a bottom) drained dry?'<sup>99</sup> Whether he communicated a milder version of this to Godwin is unknown but, if he did, it had little effect.

Godwin completed the play on 23 February and wrote to Kemble the very next day asking him to read his play and offer suggestions to improve it. Kemble declined the offer, stating that he did not read anything unless it had been accepted by the readers at Drury Lane.<sup>100</sup>

Godwin was determined not to submit his play to the readers until he had received some expert opinion. In Holcroft's absence (still in Germany) he wrote to Coleridge on 17 March to ask him to cast a critical eye over it. It was less than perfect timing. Coleridge's health had 'altogether collapsed' and his opium-induced response to Godwin must have perturbed his friend but he nonetheless agreed.<sup>101</sup> It would be a long wait: delays in the postal service – according to Coleridge – and his ill-health meant that the tragedy was not returned to Godwin until mid-July. Godwin acknowledged receipt on 12 July before setting out to do some minor revisions. But Coleridge's criticisms were strong so he turned to Lamb to get a second opinion. Lamb went through the manuscript with a pencil commenting on Coleridge's notes. Both sets of annotations are fully documented in this edition.<sup>102</sup>

Lamb had been heavily involved in the play's initial composition as is suggested by a letter to Robert Lloyd in February 1801 and the intense contact he had with Godwin in February.<sup>103</sup> This intense contact was repeated in mid-July 1801 as the pair worked on the play together. Godwin must not have felt very confident in Kemble. Given his experience with him, he was probably right to feel Kemble had little sympathy for him. He decided to try his luck with Thomas Harris (d. 1820), manager of Covent Garden, instead and sent him the tragedy after some last minute tweaking on 29 August. Despite Harris's reputation



for generosity to dramatists, Godwin had no luck and he had to write to Kemble on 15 September with his tragedy (after, strategically, also sending a copy to Sheridan directly on 10 September).<sup>104</sup> The cover letters he attached to both copies show what Godwin had learned and, indeed, not learned since *Antonio*. He declared that the play should 'not be found defective in incident, action, exhibition & theatrical situations', assuring Kemble that this play was an entirely different proposition to *Antonio*.<sup>105</sup> In the letter to Sheridan, Godwin asked that he ensure that Kemble gave his play the proper attention that an author of his stature deserved: 'I think myself entitled to the casual advantage which may arise from my being the author of one or two well known novels and other pieces; not that I desire by this means in the least to influence their judgment, but to rouse their perspicacity and excite their attention'.<sup>106</sup> This was a letter that was unlikely to endear Godwin to Kemble, should he have learned of it.

Godwin tried to insure his play against rejection. He pointed out to Kemble the tragedy's weak spots in advance and put the onus on Kemble to help get the play right. It was a strategy that he had also used with *Antonio* when he asked Kemble to edit the text appropriately for the stage. However, with *Abbas* Godwin was much more explicit. 'It is too long', he admitted in the letter, 'there are parts which must be omitted, & parts which might be improved'.<sup>107</sup> Kemble tried to disengage himself from Godwin's persistent correspondence; after acknowledging receipt of the manuscript he passed over the more unpleasant task of refusing the play to William Powell, the prompter at Drury Lane.<sup>108</sup> Godwin was not to be deterred however and wrote to Kemble again. The two men exchanged a number of letters at the end of September and early October where they both held to their positions: Kemble told Godwin to revise it and Godwin retorted that he could not do it until he knew what precisely was wrong with it.<sup>109</sup> A flavour of Kemble's growing frustration at Godwin's persistence can be seen in this extract from one letter:

You love Frankness; – now give me Leave to ask you, whether or not it is quite fair to seem to draw me into a Difference with you, by telling me that "I hint at Alterations?" – If I do, which is more than I own, you will be so good as to recollect that I only take a Hint of your own offering. In the Letter, which I had the Honour of receiving with your manuscript, you say, "The Play is too long, there are Parts which might be omitted, and Parts which might be improved" [...] – Shorten it, – expunge what you think objectionable, – amend what seems to you imperfect, – if there are any "men whose Sense and Experience" you can rely on, take their opinions. – <sup>110</sup>

Godwin finally gave up on the play after Kemble's steadfast refusal to engage in a collaborative dialogue to improve it.<sup>111</sup> There is no doubt that he was as frustrated at Kemble's unwillingness to act as his editor as he remained convinced of his own talent despite all his negative experience. 'Tragic writers', he had once declared with remarkable confidence to Kemble, 'are not the growth of every

summer. It depends, upon you, sir, more than upon any man in this country, to decide whether, if talents for that species of writing arise among us, they shall be permitted to be exercised'.<sup>112</sup> Kemble, whether for reasons that were literary, commercial, personal, or political, was not to be swayed. However, the extent of Godwin's efforts to get the play accepted are demonstrative of his continuing determination to have a tragedy successfully staged.

### *Plot*

The play opens with an announcement of a great victory of the Persian Shia army, led by Abbas, over the Ottoman Sunnis at Medina. An excited mob exchange gossip about the battle and the focus of the discussion is the exploits of Sefi, the heir to the throne. Abdallah and Mustapha, two courtiers, enter and give a more specific account of the battle's events. Abbas and a jubilant Sefi follow but Abbas lowers Sefi's youthful enthusiasm by expostulating on the strain of maintaining imperial order under constant threat of insurgency. In fact the Persian march into enemy territory has to halt due to rebellion at home. The scene shifts to the capital, Ispahan, where Irene, Abbas's wife, is in her seraglio. She laments both the threat to her son and husband and her virtual incarceration in the harem before hearing word that Cartzuga, her husband's finest general has returned to Ispahan to deal with the rebels. On the road to Ispahan, Abbas and Sefi hear of Cartzuga's success with great joy. And in the following scene Abbas and Irene are reunited at home with much joy which is disturbed by a melancholy Sefi. He shows his parents a letter which he received anonymously inviting him to lead a rebellion against his father. Abbas suggests that he might be tempted to such an opportunity to Sefi's tearful consternation. The act closes with Irene eulogizing their familial bliss.

The second act continues with the aftershocks of the rebellion. Michael, Irene's father, has been accused of taking part in the treason. Irene is distraught but she is kept from going to Abbas by her situation in the harem. Sefi volunteers to plead his grandfather's case. Elsewhere in the palace Abbas is fretting over his suspicions of Sefi before being interrupted by Cartzuga. The general brings a list of conspirators and mentions that Michael is on the list. Abbas is not swayed and demands death for all, regardless of who they are, and Cartzuga exits. Sefi appears before Abbas and requests clemency for Michael. Abbas is at first non-committal but Sefi's persistence forces him – reluctantly – to commute the sentence to banishment but his son's doggedness raises his suspicions once more. Turkish ambassadors arrive and they go to receive them. The diplomatic encounter does not go well: Abbas peremptorily dismisses their demands and they pay special attention to Sefi, again causing Abbas's suspicions to increase. Observing Abbas's mood is Bulac, an Iago figure, who sees possibilities for his own advancement in the discord. The act ends with Sefi leading the army against the Turks.

Bulac begins his campaign against Sefi with a series of seemingly innocent comments about the prince which Abbas, his paranoia heightened, is not slow to pick up on. He has decided on Sefi's guilt when news of Sefi in danger reaches him. His misgivings vanish immediately, vanquished by a deep fatherly love. His rage turns against Bulac who escapes death by another series of artful hints of Sefi's duplicity and claims that he has letters to prove his guilt. Abbas again decides on Sefi's death and recruits Cartzuga to the cause. The general refuses and, on learning who is behind the scheming, reveals Bulac to have been one of the recent traitors. Abbas relents once more. The next scene sees Abbas meeting Irene. He is still morose and lets slip his suspicions of Sefi to Irene's horror. Her outrage causes his distrust to return as he does not believe she would have been so bold had his position been secure. The act ends with Irene scrabbling to reclaim her words to protect her son.

### *Sources and Influences*

Godwin did a significant amount of primary research for this play, primarily seventeenth-century travel literature. Coleridge had suggested John Harris's *Navigantium atque Itinerantium Bibliotheca* (1705) in his initial letter suggesting the topic which Godwin consulted immediately on receiving the letter in December 1800. He also looked at Sir Thomas Herbert's *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile, begunne Anno 1626. Into Afrique and the Greater Asia, Especially the Territories of the Persian Monarchie* (London, 1634). Despite Coleridge's recommendation of the former, he does not appear to have found these sources fruitful, looking at them only for one day 'çala'.

Other sources included Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *The Six Voyages of John Baptista Tavernier, A Noble Man of France now living, through Turkey into Persia and the East Indies* (London: R. L. and M. P., 1678); Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* ([Paris], 1697); and, *Persian Tales, or the Thousand and One Days*, 2 vols (London: William Lane, 1800). The final text was one in which 'The manners, customs, habits, religion, and politics of the Asiatics, are well portrayed, so that the Reader, besides a fund of entertainment, is fully instructed in the customs of the Eastern Nations'.<sup>113</sup> Godwin was determined to ensure that his tragedy smacked of authenticity and local colour.

The diary suggests that Godwin even went to the trouble of translating Adam Olearius's *Relation du voyage d'Adam Olearius en Moscouie, Tartarie et Perse* (Paris, 1659) or a later edition of this text despite there being an English translation: *The voyages and travells of the ambassadors sent by Frederick, Duke of Holstein, to the Great Duke of Muscovy and the King of Persia*, trans. John Davies (London, 1662).

However, his chief historical source, based on the number of days he spent consulting it, was John Chardin's *Travels of Sir John Chardin into Persia and Ye*