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Sad Realities: The Romantic Tragedies of Charles Harpur

Sydney, May 1834. A rapidly-growing metropolis on the edge of the British world, and the site of a largely forgotten episode in the history of Romantic drama. Edward Smith Hall, editor of the radical *Sydney Monitor*, is sitting in his office, when the 20-year-old Charles Harpur enters brandishing a manuscript. A few days later, Hall describes the incident with some bemusement: ‘...[Harpur] held in his hand *a play of his own composing*; and not a play only, but a tragedy; and not a tragedy only, but a tragedy *composed in blank verse!*’ It was indeed ‘the first tragedy in blank verse composed on this side the equator, which we ever heard of.’¹ The play was *The Tragedy of Donohoe*, one of the earlier, and certainly one of the best plays written in Australia during the nineteenth century. Hall was impressed by the young author’s first attempt, commending it publicly to Barnet Levey and Joseph Simmons, proprietors of the city’s only licensed theatre. This play was ‘superior to half the stuff that “His Majesty’s loyal servants of the Theatre Royal Sydney,” have performed there, and will continue to perform there.’² Messrs. Levey and Simmons seem to have been unmoved by this snide recommendation. Neither they, nor indeed anyone else, has ever professionally produced this early Australian drama. Hall did give Harpur some more practical help, publishing substantial excerpts of the play in his paper over five issues in 1835.

Undeterred, Harpur set to work on another, altogether more ambitious play. *King Saul* was to be a biblical tragedy of the highest order. It would depict Saul’s rise to the throne, the corruption and madness of power, his final destruction at the battle of Gilboa. For whatever reason Harpur appears to have abandoned the project in 1838. He wrote out a fair copy of some of the completed scenes, and excerpted a song or two for separate publication, but the play remained incomplete and apparently unrevised among his papers at his death. There it

¹ Edward Smith Hall, ‘Australian Literature’, *The Sydney Monitor*, 10 May 1834, p. 2. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article32146242>> [accessed 25 Jul 2018]

² *ibid.*

has lain, unperformed and essentially unstudied, until now. Some years later, however, Harpur did revisit *The Tragedy of Donohoe*. He revised substantially it for the press, publishing it in 1853 as *The Bushrangers*.³

These two plays, *The Bushrangers* and *King Saul*, are remarkable texts that challenge our ideas about Romantic tragedy. In Australia, Harpur is often seen as the founder-poet of a distinctive Australian Romanticism,⁴ though he was also one of the first writers to question whether an original Australian literature was even possible.⁵ Outside Australia he is unrecognised as a Romantic poet. Full study of Harpur has been hampered in the past by a lack of quality texts, but this problem has been eliminated this year with the publication of the *Charles Harpur Critical Archive*, the first full critical edition of his poetry.⁶ In what follows, I make the case for these plays as original, thought-provoking examples of the tragic genre in the Romantic period. In the first section (§1), I describe the literary and theatrical scene in Harpur's New South Wales. In the second (§2), I offer a description of Romantic tragedy and briefly explain its place in the genre-system of Romantic theatre. In the final three sections, I consider three aspects of these plays that set them apart. In an age when plays were increasingly allegorical and exotic, Harpur's were topical and direct (§3). Apparently fearless of censorship, Harpur satirised his contemporaries in *The Bushrangers*, and in *King Saul*, he boldly reworked a controversial story from the most ideologically sensitive book of his time. Secondly, these plays were radical (§4). Both advocated an

³ Charles Harpur, *The Bushrangers; a Play in Five Acts, and Other Poems* (Sydney: Piddington, 1853) <<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=WNFZAAAACAAJ&dq=harpur+the+bushrangers>> [accessed 31 July 2018].

⁴ See for example Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788-1972*, new ed (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2014), p. 31.

⁵ Paul Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 48; Philip Mead, 'Charles Harpur's Disfiguring Origins: Allegory in Colonial Poetry', *Australian Literary Studies* 14, no. 3 (1990): 279-81.

⁶ Paul Eggert, ed., "Charles Harpur Critical Archive," (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018), <<http://charles-harpur.org>> [accessed 31 July 2018] Each version of each poem has a unique h-number, which I will use to refer to them.

egalitarian society, where the right to rule could come only from inborn talent and self-cultivation. Finally, these plays were mystical (§5). Harpur was deeply invested in mystical ideas, and with their supernatural elements, *The Bushrangers* and *King Saul* pose deep questions about the possibility of mystical experience for the modern mind.

§1. Writing Life in Harpur's Australia

Harpur was born in 1813 in the small town of Windsor, northwest of Sydney. His parents were convicts. His Irish father, Joseph, had been transported for highway robbery in 1800, his mother Sarah for larceny in 1805. In Australia they flourished. When Harpur was born his father was the local schoolmaster and parish clerk.⁷ Windsor itself is a pretty Georgian township on a hill overlooking Deerubbin, the winding estuarine river that curls around Sydney's north and west, and which the settlers renamed the Hawkesbury. The rich alluvial soils on either bank fed the colony in its early years, but they were dangerously flood-prone, and we will see how the water, with its terror and its beauty, flows through Harpur's plays. By 1834 at the latest, Harpur had moved to Sydney. He began to publish in newspapers, and appears to have had a short and ignominious acting career at Sydney's new Theatre Royal.

Theatre had come to the colony with the First Fleet in 1788. In 1789 the first known theatrical performance took place, when a group of convicts performed *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) for the King's birthday.⁸ It was only in 1833, however, that the colony received its first permanent licensed theatre, in the form of Barnett Levey's Theatre Royal. The colony of New South Wales was still a tiny society, though it was growing fast. The First Fleet had brought 1480 men, women and children ashore. By the time Harpur published the first extracts of *The Tragedy of Donohoe* in 1835, there were nearly 72,000 settlers in New

⁷ See J. Normington-Rawling, *Charles Harpur: An Australian* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), pp. 2, 4, 39-41. See also the biographical section of the *Charles Harpur Critical Archive*.

⁸ Watkin Tench, *A Complete Account of the Settlement of Port Jackson, in New South Wales* (London: G. Nicol, 1793), p. 25.

South Wales, and Sydney had become an energetic port town.⁹ More and more free settlers were arriving, and respectability was becoming a key virtue in the increasingly urban Sydney. Theatre in the early years had been largely a convict affair. Temporary playhouses popped up all over the colony, normally supported by wealthy landowners but usually with a cast and crew entirely drawn from the convicts. This changed abruptly in 1833, when the governor ceased to permit such rowdy entertainments and the Theatre Royal was licensed with the explicit proviso that no convict was to tread the boards.¹⁰ Censorship was strict. The Colonial Secretary—the chief minister in the colony—personally licensed every play for performance until the 1850s.¹¹ The preference was for sound British drama, imported from the metropolis.

Harpur was thoroughly exposed to current trends in the theatre and to the poetry of the preceding generation. As a child he could well have seen plays at the convict theatre in nearby Emu Plains, where the latest Romantic melodramas were performed (Jordan, pp. 170-1). A ‘Mr. Harpur’ is listed as an actor in three plays at the Sydney Theatre Royal in October 1833, including two melodramas: Douglas Jerrold’s *The Mutiny at the Nore* (1830) and Isaac Pocock’s Gothic classic, *The Miller and his Men* (1813).¹² We cannot be sure this ‘Mr. Harpur’ was Charles Harpur, but it is likely. He was of course a great reader, and in the 1830s already had a deep knowledge of the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton and Byron. The local newspapers, including the *Monitor*, *The Australian*, *The Sydney Times* and *The Currency Lad*, fostered local literature by publishing poets and prose writers. Harpur may have been

⁹ Noel Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy, Australia 1810-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 34.

¹⁰ Robert Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788-1840* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002), p. 137.

¹¹ Richard Fotheringham, ‘Theatre from 1788 to the 1960s’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, edited by Elizabeth Webby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 138.

¹² These advertisements can be found in *The Sydney Gazette* for the 3rd, 8th and 10th of October 1833, which are freely available on the National Library of Australia’s Trove database: <<http://trove.nla.gov.au>>

writing on the far edge of the European world, but he was immersed in the literature and the theatre of home and abroad, as both his plays demonstrate.

The Bushrangers was a Gothic tragedy in the tradition of Schiller's *Die Räuber* (1781), about a rebellious band of outlaws in the woods. His hero was originally based on the real-life bushranger Jack Donohoe, whom Harpur transformed into a Byronic hero rebelling against a snobbish colonial order. In the 1853 book version, he changed not only the title but aspects of the plot and many of the characters' names, including that of the protagonist. In this and all later versions of the play, the real 'Donohoe' became the fictional 'Stalwart'. Harpur tinkered with the play to the end of his life, leaving at least two further complete versions in manuscript. Neither of these were published until 1987, when a critical edition of the final 1867 version appeared, with the 1835 newspaper extracts included.¹³ In what follows I focus on the 1853 edition, the earliest complete version of the text.

King Saul is a Biblical drama apparently inspired by Byron's *Cain: A Mystery* (1821) (see below §3). In the manuscript, preserved in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, Harpur claims to have finished work on the play in 1838, but there is no corroborating evidence, and it is not clear when Harpur wrote out the fair copy in which this date is given.¹⁴ At any rate, we can be sure the play was a product of his youth, when he was a bachelor, a jobbing writer and a member of Sydney's radical circles. In Harpur's version of Saul's story, the prophet Samuel is a radical republican, who believes monarchy is an unnatural form of government, and Saul is a man destroyed by his own wealth and power. In the event, Harpur only

¹³ Charles Harpur, *Stalwart the Bushranger, with the Tragedy of Donohoe*, ed. Elizabeth Perkins (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987). I will refer throughout to the play's various versions by year and page number.

¹⁴ Mitchell Library, Sydney, Charles Harpur Manuscript Volumes (c. 1837-1868), A87-2, 559. All the fragments of *King Saul* appear in manuscript volume A87-2, so hereafter I simply give the page number. Harpur's manuscripts can be viewed for free at the "Charles Harpur Critical Archive," see above, n. 6.

completed about a third of the play, though the fragments do add up to about 1,200 lines of verse, and he left behind two ‘Plans’ of his overarching design.

With these plays Harpur hoped to conquer the stage and prove himself a poet. In some ways he was a provincial British author with his eyes on London. In other ways he was a Romantic nationalist. Like his contemporaries Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, Adam Mickiewicz and Alexander Pushkin, he aimed to create a new national theatre. Like them, he drew heavily on Shakespeare. Like them, he felt tragedy was the crucial genre for the reform of the stage. Like them, he created passionate, Byronic characters. Unlike them, however, he was a colonial subject of uncertain nationality, and had a profoundly ambivalent attitude towards Britain and its traditions. He was a nationalist who spoke a foreign tongue. These ambivalences give his early plays a raw and searching quality not normally associated with the highly conventionalised world of Romantic tragedy.

§2. Characteristics of Romantic Tragedy

Popular theatre and literary drama diverged in the Romantic period. For literary playwrights, tragedy ‘present[ed] the highest phases of creative art’, as Harpur’s friend Dan Deniehy put it.¹⁵ While Romantic poets strove to write austere tragedies, however, a different kind of play, the melodrama, was sweeping the theatre. Like other literary playwrights of the day, Harpur responded to the rise of melodrama by adopting and transforming many of its elements.

It was the age Jane Moody describes as ‘the theatrical revolution.’¹⁶ Theatres began to transform and proliferate. The old patent theatres of London were rebuilt on a larger scale.

There were ever more new ‘illegitimate’ theatres, which operated without a licence and could

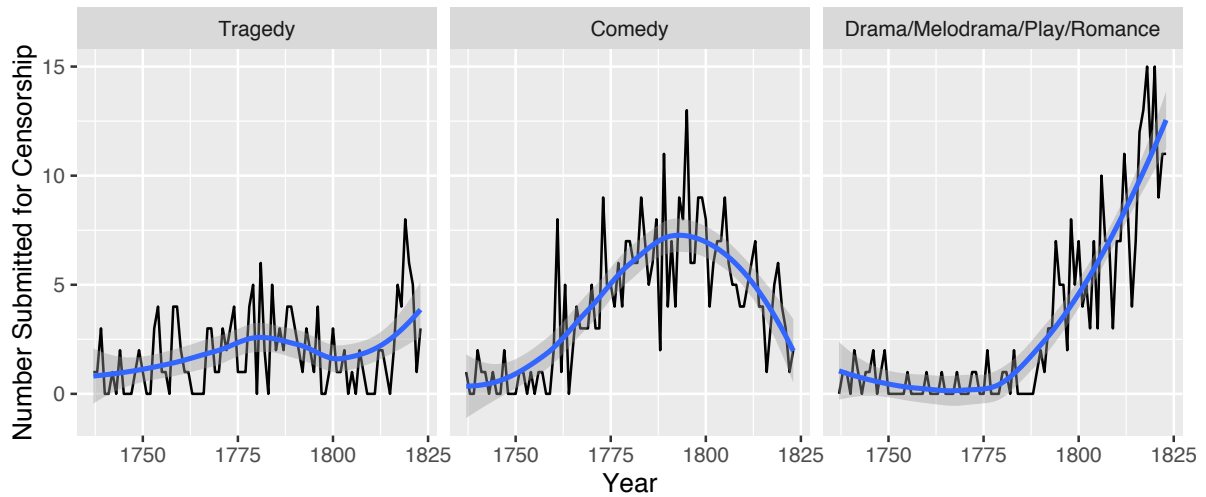
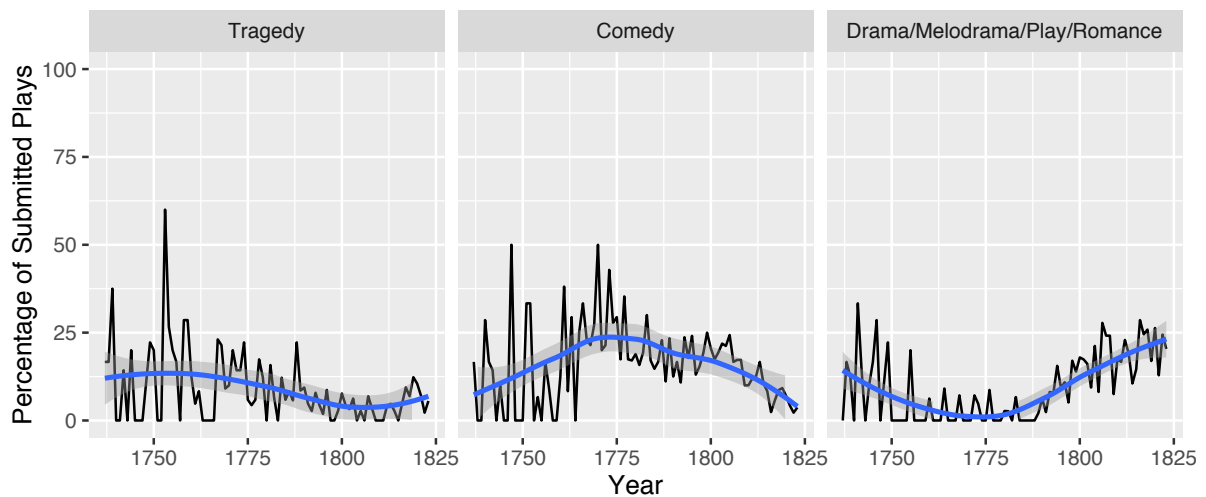
¹⁵ Dan Deniehy, “Review of *The Bushrangers, and Other Poems*,” in David Headon and Elizabeth Perkins, eds., *Our First Republicans: John Dunmore Lang, Charles Harpur, Daniel Henry Deniehy, Selected Writings 1840-1860* (Sydney: The Federation Press, 1998), p. 120.

¹⁶ Jane Moody, “The Theatrical Revolution, 1776–1843,” in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, ed. Joseph Donohue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

not stage spoken drama.¹⁷ All these new theatres demanded new kinds of drama: ‘tragedy and comedy’ gave way to “‘illegitimate” forms such as burletta, extravaganza, pantomime and melodrama’ (Moody, p. 209). It was a rapid and dramatic shift, as Figure 1 shows. It uses data from the *Eighteenth Century Theatre* database to display the shifting genre-system of Romantic theatre.¹⁸ It shows the number of tragedies, comedies and melodramas submitted to the English Inspector of Plays, for licensing between 1737 and 1823. Since all plays performed in London’s patent theatres had to be submitted for censorship, this collection gives us a rich, though incomplete, view of what kinds of plays were being written or produced in Britain across the period. The plays have been categorised according to their subtitles. Plays with ‘tragedy’ or ‘tragic’ in the subtitle have been classed as ‘tragedies’. Plays with ‘comedy’ or ‘comic’ are ‘comedies’, and plays with any combination of ‘play’, ‘drama’, ‘romance’ or ‘melodrama’ in the subtitle have been placed in the third category. Of course a subtitle alone does not reveal the actual content of a play. A playwright or promotor could rename a ‘sentimental comedy’ a ‘grand romance’ if it would draw the crowd. But the changing subtitles do reveal how theatre professionals’ attitudes towards the different genres changed over the period.

¹⁷ These developments are summarised in Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), chap. 2; Jeffrey N. Cox, “Introduction,” in Jeffrey N. Cox, ed. *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789-1825* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), pp. 8-12; and Frederick Burwick, *Romantic Drama: Acting and Reacting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 2-15.

¹⁸ “Eighteenth Century Drama Contents,” in *Eighteenth Century Drama* (London: Adam Mathew Digital, 2018) <<https://www.amdigital.co.uk/images/product-downloads/content/EIGHTEENTH%20CENTURY%20DRAMA.xlsx>> [Accessed 31 July 2018]

Figure 1**Number of Plays Submitted for Inspection, 1737-1823****Percentage of Submitted Plays in Each Category, 1737-1823**

Source: Adam Mathew Digital

The data brings into question Moody's claim that tragedy and comedy were displaced by the new melodramas. The truth is subtler. When Harpur turned to write his two tragedies in the 1830s, tragedy was as popular (or unpopular) as ever, but melodrama had replaced comedy as the main alternative to it. By 1823, less than 5% of submitted plays were subtitled 'comedy', while nearly a quarter were labelled as melodramas. If melodrama was the theatre of freedom and escape, Romantic tragedy was the theatre of entrapment, of what Jeffrey Cox

calls ‘frustrated development’.¹⁹ To portray such frustrated development, writers of tragedy drew on many major tropes of contemporary melodrama: the mixture of genres and styles (Moody, p. 213; Burwick, chap. 3), the distant and exotic settings (Booth, chap. 3), and the recourse to the supernatural (Burwick, pp. 67-69). Beyond these more superficial similarities, however, there were two deep affinities between tragedies and melodramas, which can help us to see Harpur’s achievement in perspective.

Firstly, as Burwick has argued, Romantic melodramas in Britain had a pervasive ‘duality’ (pp. 2, 91). They took place in foreign lands, but clearly represented Britain. They featured marvellous or impossible events, but their sets and special effects were convincingly realistic. Critics demanded a more natural style of acting, but actors were celebrities who won the crowd with grand, stylised gestures (Burwick, chap. 4). Burwick never theorises ‘duality’, but it emerges from his examples that ‘duality’ is an opposition between nature and artificiality, between a theatrical, imagined world, and the real one hidden behind the scenery. This is a compelling idea. The early nineteenth century was a febrile period of war, class politics, strict censorship, and intense competition in the theatre industry. To appeal to a divided audience and escape the censor, playwrights and theatre managers erected a gorgeous screen of spectacle between their plays and the world. Many writers of tragedy adopted the same tactic. Though Friedrich Schiller and Joanna Baillie, for example, raised controversial issues of individual liberty, national liberation, and the constitution of crown and church in their plays, they nearly always set them in a distant, theatrical location: 8th-century England, 14th-century France, ancient Rome, pagan Sicily. As we will see, Harpur took a different approach. Despite the censorship of the Colonial Secretary and the wide divisions of his convict society, he chose to represent his controversial content directly on stage.

¹⁹ Jeffrey N. Cox, *In the Shadows of Romance: Romantic Tragic Drama in Germany, England, and France* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), p. 61.

Secondly, subjectivity was a key theme of both popular melodrama and literary tragedy in the period. This may seem a striking claim. It is commonly argued that melodramas paid little heed to subjectivity or ‘character development’ at all (Booth, pp. 14-15). But even Booth admits that the mental ‘agony’ of the Gothic villain was a key theme of melodrama in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (p. 80), and Paul Ranger has demonstrated how melodramas used music to heighten emotion.²⁰ Writers of melodrama were fascinated by the dark passions of the human mind, a fascination that carried over to the tragic playwrights of the period. No critic has ever denied the subjectivity of Romantic tragedy. Indeed, since Hegel the ‘principle of subjectivity’ has been considered central to the genre.²¹ Earlier tragedies had depicted a religious world of objective meaning, but in the Romantic worldview, meaning could only come from the mind: the Romantics ‘close[d] the doors of hell’ (Steiner, p. 127); they portrayed a universe ‘without the gods’ (Cox, *Shadows of Romance*, p. 12); they wrote for a ‘mental theater’;²² they invented the tragedy of ‘self-awareness’ or of ‘pure consciousness’;²³ they advocated a ‘closet drama’ of intimacy, privacy and sympathy.²⁴ It is undeniable that Gothic passion and complex subjectivity were key themes of Romantic drama, but this great tide of criticism does tend to overlook the public and religious quality of many Romantic plays, including Harpur’s. *He* certainly did not close the doors of hell. Both Saul and Stalwart end up there. In what follows, we will see how Harpur brings into question both the duality and the subjectivity of Romantic drama.

²⁰ Paul Ranger, *‘Terror and Pity Reign in Every Breast’: Gothic Drama in the London Patent Theatres, 1750-1820* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1991), p. 89.

²¹ Georg Friedrich Hegel, *On Tragedy*, ed. Anne and Henry Paolucci (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), p. 79.

²² Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theatre: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

²³ Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (New York: Random House, 1968), 45; Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. Eric Butler (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 304ff.

²⁴ Catherine Burroughs, *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women Writers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), esp. pp. 86-91.

§3. Directness

Harpur's plays rent the screen of duality in different ways. *The Bushrangers* was a satirical play about a controversial news item and satirised living people. *King Saul* worked out the moral and political implications of a difficult Bible story. These plays were direct. Instead of erecting a screen of theatricality to separate their fictional worlds from reality, they were to confront Harpur's Australian audience with their most pressing anxieties. To prove the 'direct' nature of these plays, I compare them to two contemporary examples, Jerrold's *The Mutiny at the Nore* and Byron's *Cain*.

Harpur later claimed that it was *The Bushrangers'* controversial subject-matter that made it impossible to stage.²⁵ He was probably right, though there is no evidence that the play ever made it to the Colonial Secretary's desk. In 1844, the Secretary would disallow *Jackey Jackey the N.S.W. Bushranger* (Fotheringham, p. 138), and few other bushranger plays made it to the stage before the end of the century.²⁶ Moreover, two of Harpur's villains, Roger Tunbelly and Wealthiman Woolsack, were thinly-veiled caricatures of Windsor worthies (Harpur, 'Postscript', p. 84), and the Secretary was known to ban plays that satirised important members of society, as when he disallowed *Life in Sydney* (1843) (Fotheringham, *ibid*). It is unlikely that Harpur's satire would have passed unnoticed.

In Britain it was actually quite common to stage 'docu-dramas' about real-life criminals (Burwick, pp. 69-79). But such melodramas took a very different approach to Harpur's, carefully shielding the audience from unpleasant ramifications. We can see this by comparing *The Bushrangers* to *The Mutiny at the Nore*, a docu-drama Harpur appears himself to have acted in. There are striking parallels. Both Stalwart and Richard Parker (the

²⁵ Harpur, "Postscript," in Harpur, *Stalwart the Bushranger*, p. 84.

²⁶ See Elizabeth Webby, "*The Bushrangers,—or Norwood Vale*," and T.G. Parsons, "Censorship" in *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons and Victoria Chance (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), pp. 118, 131.

lead mutineer) are innocent victims of tyranny who are driven to murder: ‘...we have risen against the tyrant, what heed we then of the bully?’, cries Parker to his erstwhile captain.²⁷

Stalwart the bushranger explains himself in more detail:

A villain’s dupe at first, I found myself
 An exile, and a tyrant’s bondman;—one,
 Who for some reason I could never learn,
 Both feared and hated me;—and who, with all
 The petty fretfulness of power so placed,
 Was wont to solace the meanness of his hate,
 And mask its utter cowardice, the while,
 With hourly hurling the opprobrious term
 Of *convict* in my teeth! (1853, p. 20)

Both Parker and Stalwart become killers, but the tyrannies they suffer are different. Parker decries the abstract tyranny of ‘the tyrant’ and ‘the bully’. Stalwart decries the everyday tyranny of the particular society he occupies, in which a whole class of people are ‘exiles’, under the legal control of ‘bondmen’, who are ‘so placed’ that power embitters them. It is a society where a great mass of the population are convicts or their descendants, and yet the very word ‘*convict*’ is an ‘opprobrious’ taboo. Through the 1830s and 40s Sydney was indeed becoming increasingly snobbish, as more free settlers arrived who found the colony’s convict heritage shameful.²⁸ Harpur’s play documented what they would rather forget.

While Harpur made clear that the world of his play was the real world, Jerrold strove to remove his play from reality. *Nore* premiered in 1830, 33 years after the actual mutinies at Spithead and on the Thames. By contrast, bushranging and convict transportation were raging topics in Harpur’s Sydney.²⁹ *Nore*’s main authority-figure, Arlington, is a shadowy character

²⁷ Douglas William Jerrold, *The Mutiny at the Nore. A Nautical Drama, in Two Acts*. (London: Thomas Hailes Lacey, [n.d.]), p. 32.

²⁸ Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2009), p. 533.

²⁹ Bushranging was endemic in the Sydney region till at least the 1840s: *ibid*, p. 306.

with only few lines, and defends himself stoutly: ‘... I acted but according to my duty. Even when I punished, I did not wrong you.’ (p. 33) Tunbely, the main authority-figure in *The Bushrangers*, is verbose, fat, lazy and self-centred, and complains endlessly about insubordination in woozy pentameters: ‘But seriously, these underlings are all | A-wanting in respect.’ (p. 34) In *Nore*, Parker repents of his crimes as he patriotically climbs the scaffold: ‘I have been a mutineer, my name will be stained with rebellion—murder! I leave to my king and country my child, my only child. From this moment he is England’s.’ (p. 44) Stalwart never repents, and dies in hellish remorse after a stormy gunfight with the police: ‘Guilty! Guilty! | I do not plead Not Guilty! Mercy!’ (1853, p. 59). He is the violent, lurid, morally ambiguous consequence of the colony’s unequal society.

King Saul is direct and provocative in a different way. Biblical themes were common in the theatre of the preceding century—but the story of King Saul was not. Not one play in the Larpent collection has ‘Saul’ in the title. Saul is a bad king, possessed by an ‘evil spirit’, yet is also God’s anointed.³⁰ His legitimate succession is usurped by a rebellious shepherd, David, who is also God’s anointed. Harpur’s play lays bare the contradictory implications of this story. In this way *King Saul* resembles *Cain*, one of Byron’s most controversial works. Both plays are literal retellings of Old Testament narratives embellished with philosophical speeches that make their meaning plain.

Cain’s reception can give us an indication of how *King Saul* might have been received had Harpur finished and published it. Byron’s play broke like a thunder-clap in the polite drawing rooms of England: ‘a more *direct*, more dangerous, or more frightful production, than this miscalled Mystery, it has never been our lot to encounter’, wrote one reviewer.³¹ ‘This is unquestionably one of the most pernicious productions that ever

³⁰ I Samuel 16:14, 15, 23; 18:10; 19:9.

³¹ “Cain, a Mystery,” *The Literary Gazette*, no. 257 (Dec 1821), p. 808. My emphasis.

proceeded from the pen of a man of genius’, wrote another.³² John Galt thought ‘boldness’ the play’s key characteristic.³³ Tom Moore was enthusiastic: ‘... Cain is wonderful—terrible—never to be forgotten. ... while many will shudder at its blasphemy, all must fall prostrate before its grandeur.’³⁴ It was still controversial thirty years later, when Charlotte Brontë cautioned that though the play was ‘magnificent’, it was also unreadably wicked.³⁵ What these readers found ‘direct’, ‘bold’ or ‘blasphemous’ about Byron’s play was the character of Cain, who questions God’s order and pays heed to Lucifer. Byron embellished the story, of course. Lucifer does not appear in Genesis. But Cain’s transgression is the Bible’s literal truth.

Harpur too laid a literal Bible truth before his readers. God is a cruel punisher of wealth, power and monarchy. Like Byron, he took this straight from the text:

And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but *they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.* (1 Samuel 8:7, my emphasis)

SPIRIT OF THE LORD. ... But, having rejected God
As their sole Sovereign, what merit they
Of good in this their King? (Harpur, *King Saul*, p. 586)

God loathes monarchy, so when Israel request a king, he curses the man he raises to the office. Druma describes the young Saul as a man who would ‘sit in some green shade | And wind his fingers in [Zillah’s] golden hair’ (p. 594). After becoming King, however, loathly passions consume him, and he is alienated from the God that crowned him: ‘I cannot lift my thoughts as thou wouldst have me | To God above’ (p. 575). To a respectable audience, who

³² “111. Cain, a Mystery,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (Dec 1821), p. 613.

³³ John Galt, *The Life of Lord Byron* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), 240.

³⁴ Moore to Byron, September 30th, 1821, quoted in Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: With Notices of His Life*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1830-31), II, 583.

³⁵ Charlotte Brontë to ‘E’, quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Elizabeth Jay (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 99.

were virtuous Christians and loyal subjects of the Crown, Saul's cruel fate would have made for disturbing viewing.

Harpur's two plays, in their different ways, direct and provocative. *The Bushrangers* represented contemporary society directly, and showed its seamy underside. *King Saul* was a highly literal portrayal of the Bible that made no attempt to hide or smooth its contradictions. They are plays of what Veronica Kelly calls 'radical instability'.³⁶ Harpur did not resolve this instability by displacing his dramas into a theatrical, morally consistent world, as Jerrold did. Instead, in Byron's manner, he portrayed the colony and its most important book directly and without compromise. These plays could never have passed the censor, which is perhaps why Harpur abandoned playwriting in the 1830s. When *The Bushrangers* was finally published as part of Harpur's 1853 collection, the reaction was almost universally negative: 'Mr. Charles Harpur's great Play, (upon words!) "The Bushranger" has had an effect upon the younger portion of the community similar to that caused by Schiller's "Robbers." Several juveniles have "taken to the road"—to get out of the way of it.'³⁷ Even Harpur's friend Deniehy thought it his weakest work (p. 119). 20 years after its original composition, it seems that Harpur's first play could still make for unpleasant reading.

§4. Radicalism

Harpur's plays were not only designed to provoke. They also put forward positive ideas about what would make for a just society. Harpur was an elder statesman of the New South Wales republican movement, which achieved full male suffrage in the colony in 1858 (at least in

³⁶ Veronica Kelly, "The Melodrama of Defeat: Political Patterns in Some Colonial and Contemporary Australian Plays", *Southerly* 50, no. 2 (1990): 132-33.

³⁷ "For All Parts of the World," *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 14 May 1853, p. 2. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/59757146>> [Accessed 31 July 2018]

theory).³⁸ Both *The Bushrangers* and *King Saul* espouse Harpur's egalitarian beliefs by portraying different kinds of authority-figures. True authority derives from subjectivity, from talent and imagination. His plays vigorously satirise authority-figures whose power derives from wealth and status, and suggest that true mental authority is available to anyone, regardless of background.

We have already encountered the main malign authority-figure in *The Bushrangers*, Roger Tunbelly. His keyword is 'respect'. Tunbelly advocates a society of simpering condescension, in which the lower orders fawningly 'respect' their betters. Harpur quite luridly satirises this notion. Tunbelly's favourite constable is brave Ned Bomebard, 'for Ned is not wanting in proper respect' (1853, p. 4), but when we meet Bomebard, we discover that he is nothing more than a boasting, brownnosing snob:

Well then, to show yous that I ain't too proud o' my dig-nitty, I don't care if I takes a dram with the pair o' yous—purwiding one o' yous stands flat. I've been on the spree all night myself, my dymons o' goold, though I am a hofficer. But what then? A hofficer is a mortal man, and must git drunk now and then, like a man o' mortality—mustn't he? (1853, p. 16)

Tunbelly and Bomebard are both bureaucratic authoritarians, whose power derives from the 'dig-nitty' of their office. Bomebard's energetic language shows how unreal their worldview is. He cannot complete a sentence without contradicting himself. He is not 'too proud' of his dignity, but demands that the carpenter and shoemaker buy his drinks. He is a respectable 'hofficer', but perfectly entitled to be drunk in the street. This false worldview debases the English language. Bomebard stitches together colloquial expressions and legalistic jargon in an attempt to impress, but winds up actually saying very little at all. Most critics in the last 150 years have dismissed Harpur's satirical characters. Deniehy argued that Tunbelly and

³⁸ See Michael Roe, *Quest for Authority in Eastern Australia, 1835-1851* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1965), chap. 4; and John Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008), esp. pp. 210-15.

Bomebard were ‘incongruities’ who demonstrated the play’s lack of ‘fusion’, while Leslie Rees finds them poor imitations of Shakespeare’s comic relief characters.³⁹ But they serve an important purpose. Harpur had a keen sense of the social aspects of language, and the clichéd, jargonistic speech of Tunbelly, Bomebard and their ilk contrasts strongly with the terse, philosophical verse in which the true authority-figures speak.

Stalwart’s authority over his men derives from his mental power, as one of his men admits: ‘He has that hold of me I cannot but follow’ (1853, p. 55). He is intelligent, able and self-reflective. He cultivates himself, carefully sifting through the contents of his mind: ‘Now, methinks, | Could I but see my villain face, it were | Enough to shame me hence.’ (1853, p. 23) And most importantly, he rules democratically. When the band think Stalwart is dead, they decide to ‘vote freely’ for his successor (1853, p. 36). The only other figure who wields this kind of authority in the play is Dreadnought, the visiting constable from Parramatta. He is a brave and effective warrior, and sees straightaway that Bomebard is ‘a mere braggadocia’ (1853, p. 14). He and Stalwart respect one another, and it is Dreadnought that finally tracks and kills the bushranger.

Mental power is also the source of Samuel’s authority in *King Saul*. What makes Samuel powerful is his ability to see God’s purposes: ‘... for even now, within my soul | The shadow of his purpose lengthens out ...’ (p. 585). Samuel feels prophecy ‘within his soul’, through the power of his own imagination. When the Spirit of the Lord comes with a message, he does not deliver it. Instead, he requests Samuel to ‘Look forth now in the vision of thy soul, | And tell me what thou seest. (*after a pause*) What seest thou, Samuel?’ (p. 586). All the meaning of the prophecy is encapsulated in Samuel’s vision, and the Spirit simply helps him to interpret it. Like Stalwart, Samuel is introspective and perceptive. He speaks clearly:

³⁹Deniehy, above n. 15, pp. 119-20; Leslie Rees, *The Making of Australian Drama* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973), p. 89.

Man was not made for Kingship; let him dream,
Dream only that he is a King, and lo
That dream denatures him: he is no more
A man; no longer human in his thoughts,
Nor will, nor virtue. (p. 593)

Samuel speaks the language of the cultivated intellect. The aphoristic opening phrase, the repetitions of ‘no’ and ‘nor’, even the placement colons and semicolons, all give the impression that he is a calm and careful thinker. By contrast, Saul’s language becomes increasingly irrational and contorted when he is crowned:

A hateful dream, yet happily a dream,
Hath play’d the ramping lion in my brain,
And all my senses scatter’d, like a flock
Of weanling kids, that on the borders graze
Of the drear wilderness:—’twas strange! and yet
I’m proud to find it but a dream—yet fear
This dream portendeth much!—even too much. (p. 560)

Like Bomebard, Saul toggles between contradictory views of things, marked in this case by the conjunction ‘yet’. The humble Samuel’s visions are clear and meaningful. Saul’s imagination, diseased by grandeur and ambition, tortures him with meaningless noise.

Many Romantic poets extolled the power of the imagination. What makes Harpur radical is the way he extolled the imaginative power of ordinary people. Stalwart is a convict. Samuel lives in a humble house in the desert. We can see how significant this is if we consider the most famous Gothic bandit of French literature, the eponymous hero of Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* (1829):

Je suis Jean d’Aragon, grand-maître d’Avis, né
Dans l’exil, fils proscrit d’un père assassiné
Par sentence du tien, roi Carlos de Castille!
Le meurtre est entre nous affaire de famille.

Vous avez l'échafaud, nous avons le poignard.
Donc le ciel m'a fait duc et l'exil montagnard.⁴⁰

Hernani and Stalwart are extremely similar, exiles who blame law and authority for their loss of honour. But while Hernani defines himself by his birth and parentage and heaven-given rank, Stalwart has no heritage to defend: 'at first' he was not a duke but 'a villain's dupe' (1853, p. 20). Hernani wants his wealth and titles back. Stalwart only wants to be 'free' (ibid.). In Harpur's radical vision, self-conscious, imaginative power is available even to the most humble and downtrodden. Stalwart and Samuel are not wise idiots like Wordsworth's peasants, but the wielders of righteous authority.

Stalwart and Samuel wield mental authority. Tunbelly and Saul wield monarchical or aristocratic authority. There is a third kind of authority in Harpur's plays, which we might call 'feminine' authority. Stalwart's sweetheart, Mary Fence, wields it:

MARY. I ask not what you are: to me you seem
Only unhappy, like myself; and very—
Yes, very gentle—at least to me; and this
Aye makes me weep to think on when you are gone.

STALWART. This kindness kills me! (1853, p. 8)

Deniehy argues that her power derives from her 'gentleness' and 'pathetic helplessness' (p. 120). It would be more accurate to say that her power derives from empathy. Rather than wielding mental power like a prophet, she draws people in by seeing herself in them. In both his plays, Harpur suggests that such feminine authority is weak. Mary cannot persuade Stalwart to 'reform' (1853, p. 9). Nor, later on, can Ada. In *King Saul*, Saul's childhood sweetheart, Zillah, is unable to warm his heart once he is crowned, and he sends a soldier to

⁴⁰ 'I am Juan of Aragon, Grandmaster of Aviz, born | In exile, outlawed son of a father assassinated | Under your sentence, King Carlos de Castile! | Murder, between us, is a family matter. | You have the scaffold, we have the sword. | So heaven made me a duke, and exile a mountain-dweller.' My translation. Victor Hugo, *Hernani*, ed. Yves Gohin (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 160.

turn her away. At first the gentle David can dispel the ‘haughty gloom’ (p. 595) of the King with his song, but later Saul turns on him in envious rage. In both these plays, feminine authority is crushed: Mary Fence, Ada and Zillah die, and David is transformed from songster to warlord. Indeed, it seems that women are more powerful dead than alive. Stalwart is tortured in his final moments by the memory of his female victims, and we can be sure that if Harpur had finished *King Saul*, Saul would have died with the spurned Zillah on his mind.

Despite his democratic faith, it may appear that Harpur was no feminist. As Michael Ackland observes, in Harpur’s poetry women are usually ‘a regenerative ideal’, rather than ‘genuinely autonomous’ people.⁴¹ One character stands out as an exception. Mrs. Fence owns the house in *The Bushrangers* where Stalwart and his gang carouse, and is Mary’s mother. Both Stalwart and Mary call her a vicious parent, but she is a robust character with an attractively realistic worldview:

MRS. FENCE.—Well; ’twas his fate, as the saying is, and has been the fate o’ many a good man afore him. Ods! gal—(to Mary) you do nothing but mope, an’ hang your head, an’ stare when you’re spoke to! What the dickens! was he the only man i’ the world? Have a good hearty cry, and ha’ done with it. (1853, p. 22)

She lacks the empathy of other female characters, telling Mary to stop ‘moping’ when her lover seems to have died. Instead she has something of the clear vision and masterful persona of a Stalwart or Samuel. Though she speaks in rough-and-ready prose, she is no Bomebard, and steps logically from her notion of ‘fate’ to her advice for Mary. Her husband admires her potency: ‘You can do it, old ’oman; you’re the one that can do it, and no mistake’ (1853, p. 10). She enforces the bushrangers’ honour code, deciding when it is ‘proper’ to perform certain rituals (1853, p. 22). Grace Karskens has written about the role convict women had in the early rural settlements, not only managing their households, but sheltering runaways,

⁴¹ Michael Ackland, *That Shining Band: A Study of the Australian Colonial Verse Tradition* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994), p. 51.

running brothels and distilling illegal liquor (pp. 312-13). Harpur recognised, even if he did not fully condone, this kind of female working-class freedom, just as he recognised the male working-class freedom of bushranging.

The other limit to Harpur's radicalism is race. Elsewhere Harpur wrote movingly about the plight of Aboriginal men and women coping with the invasion. But in *The Bushrangers*, the only Aboriginal people are the 'dusky savages' whom the white characters mention from time to time. It is also significant that Harpur includes only Israelites in *King Saul*, and never characters from among their conquered foes. In these early plays, Harpur's dream of democracy had a national, perhaps an ethnic boundary. Nonetheless, the dream of democracy is there. Harpur's criticism of the class system is powerful, and his concept of mental authority, embodied by Stalwart and Samuel, is potentially universal, even if his early plays do not achieve the universality of later masterworks like 'Aboriginal Death Song' (1858) or *The Witch of Hebron* (1867).

§5. Mysticism

The final remarkable element of Harpur's Romantic tragedies is their mysticism. Magic, prophecies, and supernatural beings are common in Romantic drama. What is striking about Harpur's plays is how deliberately he works through the problems of mystical experience in a secular age. What are the sources of such experience? How should we relate our dreams to our lives? These problems are especially urgent in Harpur's plays, because as we have seen, he suggests that mental or mystical power is the only source of legitimate authority in a free society.

The debate about the possibility of mystic experience is more obvious in *King Saul*, because the characters have the debate out loud. When Saul dreams of David taking his crown, Ziba argues that dreams merely express our anxieties:

... [dreams are] but
 The vap'ish steam of an o'er-heated brain,
 In which the toil-drows'd, yet half-conscious mind's
 Refracted glances paint its apprehensions,
 In dim-drawn scenes, incongruous, and yet mask'd:—
 Nay, oftentimes, with an undertouch of such
 Significance, in that each wild effect
 Seems faithful to its own prefigur'd cause
 So rationally sequent, as might well
 Engage belief in sob'rest minds. (p. 560)

Ziba argues that dreams have a purely psychological meaning. They are 'mask'd' allegories of the mind's 'apprehensions'. If a dream seems to be prophetic, it is not because it is a divine message of truth, but because it has a compelling internal logic. Ziba's theory seems at first to be borne out. David is not plotting against the paranoid Saul. The dream is a self-fulfilling prophecy, driving Saul to commit the foul deeds that will cause David to rebel and his monarchy to crumble. We could likewise interpret Samuel's vision from the beginning of the play as a self-fulfilling prophecy: he dreams a young man will come to him and be crowned, so he makes Saul king. Nonetheless, according to his 'Plan', Harpur intended to show Saul being possessed by an 'Evil Spirit' before his dream, as in the Biblical text (p. 587), and we have seen how a Spirit of the Lord visits Samuel in the opening scene. In any case, if dreams can be so 'rationally sequent' that they do predict the future, then what is truly the difference between dream and prophecy? The play is deeply ambivalent.

Harpur significantly revised the mystical aspects of *The Bushrangers*. In the published extracts of *The Tragedy of Donohoe*, he had included two supernatural scenes. In one, 'Mary O'Brien' (Ada in the 1853 version) dreams that Donohoe has killed 'William' (Abel) on the very night he does so: 'Pray heaven my fears | Prove phantasms, and not presentiments!' (1835, p. 100). In the other supernatural scene, the Furies descend during a

storm to announce that Donohoe/Stalwart will be punished for murdering William/Abel.

Unlike *Macbeth*'s witches, however, these Furies never communicate with humans:

FURIES. Thus we carry darkness with us,
Hiding us from mortal ken;
Thus in hellish dance we writhe us,
When we'd touch affairs of men. (1835, p. 106)

What makes Mary's dream and the Furies so striking is their ambiguity. Is Mary's prophetic dream a mere coincidence? What place do these 'hiding' and 'hellish' Furies have in the order of things? We are never told the provenance of Mary's dream, and Harpur suggests that these Furies are simultaneously good and evil, simultaneously the source of truth and yet utterly invisible and unknowable.

The problem in *The Bushrangers* and *King Saul* is the classic Romantic problem of subjectivity. If there is another, spiritual, meaningful world, then our senses are likely too gross and material to perceive it. Harpur came to feel that the Furies and Mary's dream were crude symbols of this problem. He deleted the supernatural scenes from *The Bushrangers*, and the dark energy of the Furies returned in the form of metaphor:

STALWART. But I ever was,
And ever shall be, the accursed slave
Of lawless passion!—She has given me health
And liberty, but with those gifts evoked
Desires iniquitous, that from their dark
Impulsive depths, like monstrous sea-swells, keep
Blindly upworking ... (1853, p. 28)

Now the 'hellish' and 'hiding' Furies have buried themselves in the human mind, in the 'lawless', 'impulsive', 'dark' and 'blind' depths of our own natures. Perhaps these 'monstrous sea-swells' harken back to the terrible floods of Harpur's early childhood, when the tidal Hawkesbury repeatedly broke its banks and engulfed the district's farmland.

Certainly Stalwart's water-imagery contrasts with Abel's description of this same 'shining river' in another scene:

... Then, my fairest,
 We'll mark the spangled fishes throng about
 In happy revel, and compare them well
 To swarms of brilliant love-lights flashing through
 The silver vision of some glorious Bard,
 When, flowing forth in everlasting verse,
 It greens the course of time. (1853, p. 24)

The Bushrangers presents humanity as a 'battleground of contradictory impulses', argues Ackland.⁴² On the one hand are the 'monstrous sea-swells' that sweep up from the deaths and drive men like Stalwart and Saul to madness. On the other hand is the 'silver vision' of Abel when he gazes on the water. These impulses remained mysterious. Harpur was sure that we could reach a 'cloudier region of [the] soul' (*The Bushrangers*, p. 49), but could never settle on a theory of how such mystical experience was possible. Even in the late 1850s, when revising 'The Tower of the Dream', he was still asking whether dreams are just 'the thin disjoining shades' of memory, or whether they are 'glimpses oft, though vague, of some wide sea | Of mystic being' (h642c, ll. 2, 10, 22-3).

What is remarkable is how explicitly Harpur worked through these problems in his plays. The plays repudiate the 'duality' of Romantic theatre in all their aspects. Reality was their subject. They would portray the literal truth of colonial New South Wales or of Biblical history, regardless of censorship or the demands of respectable opinion. Their ghosts and dreams and strange coincidences were not allegorical or theatrical, but were careful attempts to work out whether mystical experience was possible in the real world. With their melodramatic elements, *King Saul* and *The Bushrangers* may not seem so realistic today, but

⁴² Michael Ackland, "Plot and Counter-Plot in Charles Harpur's *The Bushrangers*," *Australasian Drama Studies* 0, no. 8 (1986), 49.

it may be remembered that in Harpur's world, the Bible was still factual and Gothic bandits actually did range the bush. Like other Romantic tragedies, these two were highly subjective. The language was tuned to reveal different styles of thought, from the ideological ramblings of Tunbelly and Bomebard, to the passionate raving of Saul and the powerful reflections of Stalwart and Samuel. Harpur believed that all persons had equal subjective capabilities, and his plays look forward to a just society where wealth and privilege no longer shackle the human mind. But they were not 'subjective' plays in the way theorists of Romantic tragedy often use the word. There is an underlying vision of the 'mystic sea' of human impulse that gives meaning to the characters' words and deeds. Harpur spent his life trying to chart this sea, and was never sure he had finally succeeded.

Harpur hoped all his life to be published in London, and to be recognised internationally as the founder of his nation's literature. He was extremely conscious of his place in the literary tradition, and it is perhaps for this reason that in his first major works he took such a bold and inquiring approach to tragedy, the most prestigious literary genre of his time.