The Problem of the Perennial Popularity of the London Merchant
by George Lillo

Terrence James McNally
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
McNally, Terrence James, "The Problem of the Perennial Popularity of the London Merchant by George Lillo" (1968). Dissertations. 941.
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/941

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1968 Terrence James McNally
THE PROBLEM OF THE PERENNIAL POPULARITY
OF THE LONDON MERCHANT BY GEORGE LILLO

by

Terrence James McNally

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June
1968
Terrence McNally was born January 5, 1937 in Cincinnati, Ohio. He attended a parochial school and thereafter enrolled at St. Francis Seminary, Cincinnati. After his graduation he attended Duns Scotus College, Detroit, Michigan. In 1960 he was graduated *cum laude* with a B.A. degree in philosophy. After a year at St. Leonard's College, Dayton, Ohio, where he studied theology, he enrolled at Xavier University, Cincinnati, as a graduate student in English. He received the M.A. degree in English from that school in 1963. He was an instructor at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin during the following year. In 1964 he became a teaching assistant at Loyola University of Chicago, where he began studying for the doctorate. Since 1966 he has been an instructor at DePaul University in Chicago.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I. THE FORTUNES OF THE LONDON MERCHANT</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II. A DISCREPANCY</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III. PLOT AND CHARACTER IN THE LONDON MERCHANT</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV. DIDACTICISM IN THE LONDON MERCHANT</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter V. THE SENTIMENTALISM OF THE LONDON MERCHANT</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VI. THE LONDON MERCHANT AS A TRAGEDY</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace among historians of the drama that George Lillo's play The London Merchant (1731) is a landmark in the annals of the theatre. Eric Bentley reaffirms its importance while calling it "a bad play which spawned other bad plays."\(^1\) But if it had merely spawned bad plays, the matter could be dropped there.

The London Merchant is a most unlikely landmark. Lillo wrote other and better plays. His Fatal Curiosity is deservedly called by Allardyce Nicoll the only masterpiece of domestic drama in the first half of the eighteenth century.\(^2\) The judgment is not original to Nicoll, for Henry Fielding wrote of Lillo after his death: "His Fatal Curiosity, which is a Master-Piece in its Kind, and inferior only to Shakspeare's best Pieces, gives him a Title to be call'd, the best Tragic Poet of his Age. . . ."\(^3\)


It is strange that Lillo's "masterpiece" should largely be forgotten while his "bad play" should become a standard work included in almost every anthology of Restoration and eighteenth century drama.

Professor Ashley Thorndike called the play "the most important contribution to the general development of European tragedy in the eighteenth century." For The London Merchant Allardyce Nicoll has called Lillo the father of Ibsen. It will therefore be my task to discover the literary and social reasons why a play with serious dramatic weaknesses could maintain a position of importance and influence for much of the dramatic history of the past two hundred years up to the time of Ibsen, Galsworthy, Williams, and Miller.

It is not my intention to suggest that The London Merchant is, after two centuries, a much maligned play that is better than has hitherto been thought. On the contrary, I share the view that the play has many essential weaknesses from the point of view of artistic construction. But that is of secondary importance. First I wish to examine the structure, characterization, dialogue, themes, and environment of The London Merchant in order to understand those factors which enabled the play to survive and to exert its influence. In fact I shall not even
assume that the play actually did exert the influence on British and German drama that many critics would attribute to it. For there are arguments on either side of the question, and the extent of the play's influence on Lessing, for example, has never been completely settled. My starting point is the fact that there has been much argument about the alleged influence of this play rather than that of other plays. What was there about this play that won it so much critical attention in the last two centuries?

First I shall discuss the theatrical and critical fortunes of Lillo's play in order to outline the successes of this play in the past two hundred years. I shall compare The London Merchant to Lillo's Fatal Curiosity, his best play, so that the reader may see the success of the former play in its proper perspective. Likewise I shall set forth several social reasons for the ascendancy of The London Merchant over Lillo's other works. I will then discuss the internal structure and characterization of The London Merchant in an attempt to set forth the dramatic techniques Lillo used in his famous play.

I shall discuss the didacticism of the play and its influence on the reputation of the play. Thereafter I shall discuss the principal themes of the play together with the reputa-
tion The London Merchant had for supposedly improving the morals of young people.

I shall consider the question of the nature of the sentimentalism of The London Merchant. Most critics agree that the play is sentimental, but each uses the term in a different sense. Ernest Bernbaum seemed to locate the essence of Lillo's sentimentalism in a belief in the goodness of average human nature. George Bush Rodman holds that the play shows us the opposite view of human nature. R.D. Havens answers that Bernbaum is correct in his original judgment. And Paul Parnell has recently located the essence of Lillo's sentimentalism in the abasement of Barnwell after his crimes. One would think that there is a basic ambiguity in the play. I hope to present a solution to this problem based upon a careful study of structural elements within the play itself.

Finally I shall discuss the question of The London Merchant as a tragedy. The use of a middle class protagonist as the hero of a tragedy raised a question about the very nature of tragedy itself. Could a tragedy properly deal with a common man? The question was debated through much of the eighteenth century: I shall document both sides in detail. In so doing and by discussing the merits of the play as a tragedy, I hope to show
its relevance to the modern tragedy of the common man as described by Arthur Miller.

George Lillo was born probably on February 8, 1691.1 His father, Jacobus van Lillo, was a Dutch jeweller who belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church. His mother, Elizabeth Whitehorn, was an Englishwoman who also belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church. Since their son was brought up in their religion, it is not hard to understand the strong Calvinist didacticism so dominant in his plays. Although born Joris van Lillo, George later anglicized his name, perhaps when he began writing for the English stage.

George was brought up in the neighborhood of Moorgate in London, where Theophilus Cibber, his earliest biographer, tells us he was “always esteemed as a person of unblemished character.2 Almost nothing is known of Lillo’s youth except that he followed his father in the profession of a jeweller. However it is probable that he spent his early years in the parish grammar school, after which he either worked in his father’s shop or was apprenticed to another London jeweller. Eventually he became a successful businessman, one who had leisure enough to frequent the

---

1 Drew B. Pallette, "Notes For A Biography Of George Lillo," Philological Quarterly, XIX (1940), 265.
playhouses, for Cibber tells us that "his principal attachment was to the muses." 6

Lacking a university education, George Lillo, the Dissenting jeweller, was an improbable candidate for playwright. But if he was unschooled and limited in his range of conversation, he was far from being illiterate. There is a solid probability that Lillo was widely read in both ancient and modern drama. 7 The catalogue for the auction of his library included the works of Euripides, Sophocles, Seneca, Plautus and Terence, Shakespeare, Webster, Settle, Molière, Racine, and Hurtado de Mendoza. Of course to possess a work is not necessarily to have read it, but the proof of Lillo's wide reading is in his plays. These show the marked influence of Shakespeare, Dryden, Racine, Sophocles and Seneca: they also show his acquaintance with the writings of Milton, Hobbes, Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Addison, Steele, and Pope.

It was not until his fortieth year that he wrote his first play, Silvia; or The Country Burial (1730). Silvia was a ballad opera written in imitation of John Gay's popular The

6 Ibid.

Beggar's Opera (1728). Thomas Davies, who knew Lillo and edited his works, said of it: "... this Pastoral Burlesque Serio-Comic Opera was written with a view to inculcate the love of truth and virtue, and a hatred of vice and falsehood."

The plot is complex. Briefly, Sir John Freeman attempts to seduce Silvia, the daughter of his tenant farmer, Welford. Rebuffed, Sir John seduces one of the local girls, Lettice. Meanwhile, Welford and Sir John quarrel over the young noble's attempt to corrupt Silvia. Sir John experiences a change of heart: he renounces his paramour and proposes to Silvia, who refuses him lest it be thought that she rejected his earlier advances in the hope of receiving a proposal. Welford, the farmer, now reveals that Sir John is actually his son, and Silvia is the daughter of Sir John's deceased "parents." The heiress is now free to accept the proposal of the former Sir John. Lettice is bestowed on a serving man.

Written in the tradition of Cibber and Steele, Silvia combines the vivid seduction of Lettice with the virtuous behaviour of Silvia. And the story of a low born maid who resists

---

8 Thomas Davies, *The Works Of Mr. George Lillo; With Some Account Of His Life* (London: Thomas Davies, 1775), I, xii.
the advances of a nobleman and later accepts his offer of marriage would soon become famous in Richardson's Pamela. Nevertheless the play was unsuccessful on the stage, and its first performance at Lincolns Inn Fields was received with "Hissing and Cat-calls." Fielding parodied this play and others like it in The Grub Street Opera (1731). Silvia had only three performances in 1730.

Undiscouraged by failure, Lillo a year later brought out The London Merchant; Or The History Of George Barnwell, which overshadowed all other plays produced in 1731. The play was bound to be a success: it had temptation, lust, innocence betrayed, blood, and retribution. The hero of the tragedy was no Hamlet, no Almanzor, nor even a Jaffier, but an eighteen-year-old merchant's apprentice in the city of London.

George Barnwell meets Millwood, a beautiful and resourceful trollop, who entices him to spend the night with her. When he returns to the home of Thorowgood, his master, Barnwell meets his friend Trueman whom he at first shuns out of guilt. They are

---


reconciled on condition that Trueman does not question Barnwell. Thorowgood, moved by Barnwell's show of remorse, does not inquire into his absence. Barnwell resolves to forswear Millwood's love.

Millwood wins him back with a fiction about her creditor who demands the same favors she bestowed on Barnwell. To save her, Barnwell gives her Thorowgood's money. Trueman finds Barnwell's letter disclosing his theft and intention to run away, which Trueman reveals to Thorowgood's daughter, Maria. While she replaces the stolen sum, Trueman searches for Barnwell. Now Millwood's servants, Lucy and Blunt, reveal that she has persuaded the youth to rob and murder his beloved uncle. Fearing punishment for complicity, they reveal Millwood's plans to Thorowgood. In the next scene Barnwell stabs his uncle, who dies praying for his nephew and murderer.

After Maria soliloquizes of her hidden love for Barnwell, Thorowgood reveals to her and Trueman the intelligence he has received from Lucy and Blunt, and they hasten to prevent the murder. Meanwhile Barnwell hurries to Millwood's house for sanctuary. Upon discovering his failure to rob his uncle's corpse, she sends for the police. When Thorowgood and the others arrive, she holds them at gunpoint until Trueman disarms her.

Barnwell bids farewell in his prison cell: he embraces
Trueman and then Maria. As Barnwell and Millwood are led to the gallows, the original play ended. But in the fifth edition, Lillo added a gallows scene in which Millwood defies Heaven and welcomes damnation. As Barnwell exhorts her to seek divine mercy, the curtain falls.

As Theophilus Cibber attests, the play met with uncommon popularity in its first run at Drury Lane in 1731.

It met with uncommon success; for it was acted above twenty times in the summer season to great audiences; was frequently bespoke by some eminent merchants and citizens, who much approved its moral tendency: and, in the winter following, was acted often to crowded houses: and all the royal family, at several different times, honoured it with their appearance. It gained reputation, and brought money to the poet, the managers, and the performers.¹¹

The jeweller had become the playwright. It was probably at this time that he began his friendship with Henry Fielding, for it was Fielding who revised and directed Lillo's only other theatrical success, Fatal Curiosity, in the year 1736.

This play is also a tragedy. Old Wilmot and his wife, Agnes, are reduced to such poverty that he contemplates suicide. Their son, whom they believe dead, returns after seven years in India. Before going to visit his parents, he visits his betrothed, Charlot, who does not at first recognize him due to his

¹¹Cibber, V, 339.
altered appearance. On his way home, he meets Randal, a boyhood companion, whom he persuades to forge a note in Charlot's handwriting introducing him to his parents as her friend. Sure his parents will not recognize him, he plans to surprise them later. The parents do not recognize the son; before he goes to rest he entrusts his jewels to his mother, who persuades his father to murder him for them. When Charlot arrives in the evening, revealing the identity of their guest, Old Wilmot stabs Agnes and himself.

The play was put on only seven times in 1736 in contrast to the run of twenty performances enjoyed by The London Merchant. Except for a few revivals it has had a rather insignificant stage history. Ironically Fatal Curiosity is considered by the majority of critics to have been Lillo's best play.

Lillo's minor works have had even less success on the stage and in criticism. He wrote two heroic plays. The Christian Hero (1735) was based on the life of George Castriot, King of Epirus, known as Scanderbeg. Allardyce Nicoll has noted the strong influence of Dryden in this play.12 A contemporary of

---

12 Nicoll, p. 74.
Lillo's called it "that un-English thing, a religious drama." In the play Scanderbeg refuses to save the life of his beloved Althea at the expense of his country. But he defeats the Turkish army, saving both his love and his honor. Davies noted that the play achieved only "tolerable success" at Drury Lane.

Lillo's better heroic play was Elmerick; or, Justice Triumphant (1740), which was not produced in his lifetime. In this play the King of Hungary goes off on a crusade leaving Elmerick as his vice-regent. The Queen, Matilda, tries unsuccessfully to seduce Elmerick. Stung by his refusal, she contrives to have her licentious brother rape the wife of Elmerick. The latter, in his capacity as the King's vice-regent, has the Queen put to death. At the brother's behest the King returns, and having heard Elmerick's justification, commends him for his impartial administration of justice. The Queen's brother commits suicide, the King's crusade is resumed, and Elmerick continues his vice-regency.

The improbabilities in plot and character notwithstanding, Henry Fielding had high praise for Elmerick; or, Justice Triumphant.

---


14 Davies, I, xiv.
The Title is interesting and instructive, and the Incidents affecting, the Characters strongly drawn, and the Sentiments and Diction pure and noble; and in a Word, such a Regard to Nature shines through the Whole, that it is evident the Author writ less from his Head, than from an Heart capable of exquisitely Feeling and Painting human Distress, but of causing none.  

There are many sentiments expressed in the play which would have commanded Fielding's sympathies. The play advocated the ideals of Christian warriorship, public rectitude, and constitutional rule. In a modern study John Loftis has explicated the Anti-Walpole Whig undertones of both Lillo's heroic plays. These political sentiments must have appealed to Henry Fielding, whose dramatic career was effectively thwarted by Sir Robert Walpole's Stage Licensing Act of 1737. It was perhaps because of the Licensing Act that Elmerick was never produced in Lillo's lifetime. Elmerick is the incorruptible prime minister who administers justice to all without regard to their position or wealth. Walpole would have suffered by comparison.

The fact of the Licensing Act may also explain another

---

15 Fielding, I, 312.


mystery in Lillo's dramatic career. Davies reports having seen in manuscript a comedy by Lillo called The Regulators. But the play has not survived in any form, and its fate has long mystified scholars. From the title it seems to me that the play could have been an attack on Walpole and the others who were attempting to regulate the stage by the Act of 1737. Accordingly Lillo would not have published Elmerick or The Regulators for fear of the consequences.

The last of Lillo's plays to be acted in his lifetime was Marina (1739), an adaptation of Shakespeare's Pericles. It had little success when it was acted at Covent Garden on August 1, 1738. Genest thought well of it and wrote an interesting comparison of the play with Shakespeare's original, but it has received little attention since.

Lillo also left a version of Arden of Feversham, which John Hoadly, Garrick's friend and correspondent, completed and revised in 1762. Davies claims that Lillo had written the play before 1736. In the play Arden is betrayed by his wife and friend and thereafter murdered by the friend. It was Lillo's

---

19 Davies, I, xliii.
third domestic tragedy, possibly written between The London Merchant and Fatal Curiosity. Davies says the play was much applauded but acted only one night. He further adds that this play suffered from inept acting on the part of young and inexperienced actors. Lillo also left a masque called Britannia And Batavia [sic], written to celebrate the coming marriage of Princess Anne to the Prince of Orange. The masque was no happier than the marriage it was intended to celebrate. It is a puzzling mixture of allegory and chauvinism which was never acted.

Lillo was to become one of those writers who are remembered largely for a single work, which was neither his last nor his best play. His later works, despite his established reputation as a playwright, never achieved such singular fame as The London Merchant. It will be my task to discover why.

George Lillo lived and died quietly. Physically he was unimposing and deprived of the sight of one eye. In spite of his fabled modesty, his friends were unanimous in the personal regard they felt for him. He died on September 3, 1739 at the age of forty-eight. He was buried in the vault of Shoreditch Church. Henry Fielding has left us an excellent study of his

---

20 Davies, I, xlv.
character:

He had a perfect Knowledge of Human Nature, though his Contempt of all base Means of Application, which are the necessary Steps to great Acquaintance, restrained his Conversation within very narrow Bounds: He had the Spirit of an Old Roman, joined to the Innocence of a primitive Christian; he was content with his little State of Life, in Which his excellent Temper of Mind, gave him an Happiness beyond the Power or Riches, and it was necessary for his Friends to have a sharp Insight into his Want of their services, as well as good Inclinations or Abilities to serve him. In short, he was one of the best of Men, and those who knew him best, will most regret his Loss. 21

Fielding, I, 313.
In order to be successful, a play must please the theatre audience and survive the test of criticism. I now turn to a consideration of the particular way in which *The London Merchant* has met both these tests. First the theatrical success of the play will be outlined, and secondly the reactions of critics in the two centuries of the play's history will be outlined.

The first performance of the play at Drury Lane on June 22, 1731 was a memorable one. Lillo could hardly have been confident of success: *Silvia* had been hissed only seven months before. Cibber tells us that the author deliberately chose the hottest time of the year so that the play might escape the scrutiny of the "winter criticks." Moreover the subject of the play was not a promising one: the play was based on the old ballad of George Barnwell. Certain individuals had taken special precautions lest the audience be ignorant of the humble origin of the story. Cibber describes the attempt to ridicule the play on
opening night.

The old ballad of George Barnwell . . . was on this occasion reprinted, and many thousands sold in one day. Many gaily-disposed spirits brought the ballad with them to the play, intending to make their pleasant remarks (as some afterwards owned) and ludicrous comparisons between the antient ditty and the modern drama. But the play was very carefully got up, and universally allowed to be well performed. . . . But the play, in general, spoke so much to the heart, that the gay persons before mentioned confessed, they were drawn in to drop their ballads, and pull out their handkerchiefs. ¹

Alexander Pope, who attended the first performance, commended both the actors and the author.² The play caused such a sensation that Queen Caroline sent Mr. Wilks to Drury Lane to get her the manuscript.³ She and the King attended a performance of The London Merchant at Drury Lane on October 28, 1731. Cibber testifies that the play was acted "above twenty times" that first summer season to packed houses.

As the play increased in popularity, it became customary to act the play in the Christmas and Easter holidays as a warning to young apprentices to beware lust and idleness. This custom

¹Cibber, V, 339.
²Ibid.
⁴Scouten, III, 164.
seems to have continued in effect until Elliston became manager of Drury Lane and discontinued the practice in 1819. Because Elliston was both praised by some and blamed by others for the action, the play must have enjoyed some support even into the nineteenth century.

The play enjoyed notable revivals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Mrs. Sarah Siddons revived the play at Drury Lane on November 28, 1796.\footnote{Genest, VII, 287.} She played the part of Millwood to Charles Kemble's Barnwell. Miss Pope acted the part of Maria. The revival was a successful one, and the play was performed eleven times. Mr. Fredrik DeBoer suggests that the popularity of Mrs. Siddons' revival generated the several performances Genest lists up to 1817.\footnote{Fredrik E. DeBoer, "George Lillo" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1965), p. 257.}

Charles Kemble followed his sister's success with another revival of The London Merchant at Covent Garden in 1804. Mrs. Elizabeth Inchbald described his merits in the part of Barnwell.

In spite of so coarse a moral for refined delinquents, 'George Barnwell' is an evening's entertainment, worthy of the most judicious admirer of the drama, when C. Kemble performs the character. Till he represented
it, the tragedy was fallen into absolute contempt, by the
appearance of actors in Barnwell, whose persons and ages
gave not the slightest resemblance of the bashful youth
described; and consequently could excite no mercy towards
his crimes, no pity for his sufferings. 7

Perhaps Mrs. Inchbald had David Ross in mind, who perenially act-
ed the part of Barnwell even in his later years. The actor Quin
once remarked that Ross looked less like an apprentice than the
Lord Mayor. 8 Davies was apparently justified in saying that Lil-
lo's plays often enough suffered from inept productions. On the
other hand, Kemble, who resembled a youthful George Barnwell,
continued to perform the play successfully at Covent Garden un-
til 1815.

The overall popularity of the play in the eighteenth
century, while at times artificially stimulated by zealous mer-
chants is indisputable. Mr. Harry W. Pedicord affirms that the
play was performed at Drury Lane between 1747 and 1776 a total
of fifty-four times in twenty-four seasons. In the same years
the play was performed at Covent Garden thirteen times during
nine seasons. 9 Mr. Emmett L. Avery estimates that the play was

7 The British Theatre (London, 1808), XI, 4-5.

8 John Bernard, Retrospections of the Stage (London: Col-
burn and Bentley, 1830), II, 10.

9 H.W. Pedicord, The Theatrical Public In The Time of Gar-
staged 179 times between 1731 and 1776.  

But if there was a waning of interest in the play in London after 1776, it became well known outside of London and outside of England. Genest tells of a revival at Bath on January 29, 1817 in which the execution scene, which had been omitted in representation for many years, was revived, and that "the revival of it did the manager credit." The London Merchant became a popular piece with the wandering troupes of players throughout the provinces not only in England but also in Germany. The play even became popular on the early American stage. It was acted six times in Baltimore, two times in Charleston, and once in Albany in 1785; it was acted three times in Boston in 1794, 1796, and 1797.

But if The London Merchant succeeded on the stage—Mr. Herbert L. Carson is convinced the play is "still very much

---


11 Genest, VIII, 631.

12 Lawrence M. Price, "George Barnwell Abroad," Comparative Literature, II (1950), 145.

alive"--the play has been the occasion of varied critical commentary. Critics of the play tend in the eighteenth century to be favorable to the play, in the nineteenth century to be rather harsh to the play, and in the twentieth century to be historical in their approach to the play.

Contemporary estimates of the play which have come down to us are largely enthusiastic. Pope approved the play in general, but he criticized Lillo's prose style "In a few places, where he had unawares led himself into a poetical luxuriancy, affecting to be too elevated for the simplicity of the subject." But most critics did not raise such delicate points of taste in evaluating the play. Much more typical of eighteenth century reaction to Lillo's play is the following description of an anonymous writer for The Gentleman's Magazine (August, 1731):

The Author had a difficult Task to excite Terror and Pity from Characters so low and familiar in Life: but in the Representation these Difficulties were conquer'd.--Barnwell's first Fault and Repentance, his Master's generous Pity and Forgiveness; his Relapse and Horror that attended it; Millwood's Art and Address in prevailing with him to undertake the Murder of his Uncle; the strong Convulsions of his Mind, and the beautiful Deportment of his dying Uncle on that Occasion; his Despair that succeeded it, and his being given up to Justice by her he doted on, and for whose Sake he had ruined himself; her

\[15\] Gibber, V, 339.
sullen and confirmed Wickedness; his dying Behaviour; his Friend's Constancy and Compassion, and Maria's unhappy Passion; are such Dramatick Circumstances, and so finely painted, that it is impossible not to feel the Force of them in Reading and Representation. ... It is the finest Lesson to Youth, and what is calculated for their Use is made their Entertainment. 16

Three years after the first performance of *The London Merchant* there appeared in London an anonymous volume called *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum; or, Young Man's Pocket-Companion*. Although only two copies of the volume remain in existence, Alan D. McKillop thinks that the printing in them can be traced to the press of Samuel Richardson. McKillop argues that Richardson himself is probably the author of the tract, which contains a warm endorsement of Lillo's play. 17 In any event *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum* is quite useful: it contains either the favorable judgment of Samuel Richardson on the play or that of a contemporary critic printed with Richardson's knowledge and approval. The author of the pamphlet expresses a critique of most of the plays of the time with one notable exception.

Then again it ought to be considered, that most plays are calculated, as we have hinted above, for the Condition of Persons in high Life, and are therefore


intirely unsuitable to People of Business and Trade, who, as we also observ'd before, are always presented in the meanest and most sordid Lights in which the human Species can possibly appear. I know but one Instance, and that a very late one, where the Stage has condescended to make itself useful to the City-Youth, by a dreadful Example of the Artifices of a lewd Woman, and the Seduction of an unwary young Man; and it would savour too much of Partiality, not to mention it. I mean, the Play of George Barnwell, which has met with the Success that I think it well deserves; and I could be content to compound with the young City Gentry, that they should go to this Play once a Year, if they would condition, not to desire to go oftner, till another Play of an equally good Moral and Design were acted on the Stage.¹⁸

The Weekly Register of August 21, 1731 published a defense of The London Merchant. The critic applauds Lillo's use of "low" characters. In spite of the fact that the play is a new species of tragedy, he says, it soon grips the attention of the audience. This new kind of tragedy is valid so long as it continues to please the audience.¹⁹ Rousseau thought The London Merchant a masterpiece, because its moral taught the young to distrust the illusions of love. He felt that this moral quality entitled The London Merchant to be ranked with the Misanthrope. ²⁰

¹⁸The Apprentice's Vade Mecum; or Young Man's Pocket-Companion (London, 1734), p. 16.

¹⁹Gray, pp. 70–71.

Even Voltaire is said to have praised the play. In general critics of Lillo's time in their enthusiasm for middle-class drama overestimated the worth of the play.

Consequently perhaps, many nineteenth century critics tended towards the opposite extreme. To be sure, the play still had its defenders such as Charles Dibdin, who called Lillo "an original English writer of great merit," and remarked prophetically in 1800 that if The London Merchant "had not boasted sterling and valuable merit to a most uncommon degree, it must have sunk under the weight of that calumny which was intended to crush it...

In 1805 Schiller was reported to have read the play and to have thought highly of Lillo's dramatic talent. And as late as 1826 George Daniel pleaded for a return to the annual representation of the play at the Christmas and Easter holidays, giving John Rich a sharp elbow in so doing:

The more frequent performance of this drama would speak better for the public taste than those faragos of


melodramatic absurdity that now pass current as holyday exhibitions. But the breathless attention produced on an intellectual mob, by the tricks and contortions of a man-monkey, is one of the many evidences of the march of intellect, which has made every lady and gentleman their own reviewer, and threatens to knock up the trade of Messieurs the critics of Petticoat Alley and Blow-Bladder Lane. 24

Ironically it was the Romantic critics who vented the most choler on The London Merchant. One would have expected a play which exalts the goodness in the heart of the common man to have been better received of them. Writing in 1808, Charles Lamb ridiculed the play and its annual performance at the holiday season:

Why are the 'Prentices of this famous and well-governed city, instead of an amusement, to be treated over and over again with a nauseous sermon of George Barnwell? Why at the end of their vistas are we to place the gallows? Were I an uncle, I should not much like a nephew of mine to have such an example placed before his eyes. It is really making uncle-murder too trivial to exhibit it as done upon such slight motives;--it is putting things into the heads of good young men, which they would never otherwise have dreamed of. Uncles that think anything of their lives, should fairly petition the Chamberlain against it. 25

Lamb's satiric commentary colored much of the thinking of his


century on The London Merchant. Augustus William Schlegel, delivering a lecture in Vienna that same year, had a comment curiously similar to that of Lamb's.

For in truth it is necessary to keep Lillo's honest views constantly in mind, to prevent us from finding George Barnwell as laughable as it is certainly trivial. Whoever possesses so little, or rather, no knowledge of men and of the world, ought not to set up for a public lecturer on morals. We might draw a very different conclusion from this piece, from that which the author had in view, namely that to prevent young people from entertaining a violent passion, and being led at last to steal and murder, for the first wretch who spreads her snares for them, (which they of course cannot possibly avoid,) we ought, at an early period, to make them acquainted with the true character of courtesans. Besides, I cannot approve of not making the gallows visible before the last scene; such a piece ought always to be acted with a place of execution in the background! With respect to the edification to be drawn from a drama of this kind, I should prefer the histories of malefactors, which in England are usually printed at executions; they contain, at least, real facts, instead of awkward fictions. 26

An important point of comparison is the tone of disdain and ridicule adopted by both Lamb and Schlegel, each considering the play as "nauseous" or "laughable." Ridicule is probably the acid test of a play, and The London Merchant met with its share of ridicule.

---

Writing in 1815, Hazlitt continued in the same key, calling the play "a piece of wretched cant," "a Christmas catastrophe, of a methodistical moral." These epithets still retain a certain humor for the modern reader, but Hazlitt continues in a more serious vein, comparing Lillo's heavy handed didacticism to Shakespeare's use of nature.

The account of a young unsuspecting man being seduced by the allurements of an artful prostitute is natural enough, and something might have been built on this foundation, but all the rest is absurd, and equally senseless as poetry or prose. It is a caricature on the imbecility of goodness, and the unprovoked and gratuitous depravity of vice. Shakespeare . . . did not drag the theatre into the service of the conventicle. 27

Sir Walter Scott's remarks on the play in 1819 were more urbane but no less unfavorable. Scott considered Barnwell "an idle and profligate lad." Millwood's qualities were those "of a vulgar woman of the town," and Thorowgood was very tiresome. Scott felt the play had some merit as a tale of horror, as far as that went; and of course there was the presumptive usefulness of the moral. 28 One gets the feeling that Scott may have yawned


more than once during the performance.

In that same year Thomas Campbell was willing to concede to Lillo's works a certain power, but not the attraction that invites the reader to a second reading. Lillo's works lack "the magic illusion of poetry. His strength lies in conception of situations, not in beauty of dialogue, or in the eloquence of the passions." It is interesting to note how these early nineteenth century critics tend to echo one another on the play's faults. One who identified himself only as "P.P." comes very close to repeating both Schlegel and Campbell when he writes in 1823:

If good intentions are to be accepted as an atonement for dull writing, this tedious extract from the 'Newgate Calendar' may escape uncensured; but, if judged upon the score of its actual merits, without any reference to the author's aim in producing it, few readers will hesitate to pronounce it a tasteless composition, devoid alike of ingenuity in its construction, probability in its incidents, elevation of sentiment, and elegance of language. It is indicative of the growing disenchantment of critics with the play that George Daniel glumly intoned that "Whoever shall despise the moral of this tragedy may, either in himself or his

29 Thomas Campbell, Specimens of the British Poets (London: John Murray, 1819), V, 60.

It must have surprised few people that Elliston discontinued the annual performances at Drury Lane. The changing attitude of bantering amusement toward the play in the middle of the century is best seen in a passage from Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860). In the fifteenth chapter Mr. Wopsle reads *George Barnwell*, as the play was then called, to Pip, in order that Pip might profit from the knowledge of the ways of courtesans. Pip describes the experience in language reminiscent of the ironic tone of Lamb and Schlegel.

As I never assisted at any other representation of George Barnwell, I don't know how long it may usually take; but . . . I thought it a little too much that he should complain of being cut short in his flower after all, as if he had not been running to seed, leaf after leaf, ever since his course began. . . . What stung me, was the identification of the whole affair with my unoffending self. . . . At once ferocious and maudlin, I was made to murder my uncle with no extenuating circumstances whatever; Millwood put me down in argument, on every occasion; it became sheer monomania in my master's daughter to care a button for me; and all I can say for my gasping and procrastinating conduct on the fatal morning, is, that it was worthy of the general feebleness of my character.  

By this time *The London Merchant* has almost been obliterated as drama. It is during this period that the play begins to

---

make its transition from the hands of the critic to those of the historian. While Henry Morley wrote rather dully of Lillo in 1873, "There was more of moral purpose than of genius in his tragedies," ten years later T.S. Perry recognized that Lillo had tried to do in the theatre what Richardson accomplished later in the novel, but he tags Lillo as "the merest bungler." Sir Edmund Gosse spoke of Lillo as the author of "some perfectly unreadable plays" which are nevertheless of interest as the first specimens of "tragedie bourgeoise" or modern melodrama. Lillo's historical achievement was beginning to emerge, but many were still blind to his significance. As late as 1894 an historian of the drama named John Dennis expressed the severest judgment of George Lillo, one which would no longer be tenable in the light of subsequent scholarship. "The author wrote with a good purpose, and the public appreciated his work, but it is not dramatic art, and has no pretension to the name of literature."\(^{32}\)

In the early part of the twentieth century critics tended to appreciate Lillo's play in the context of its literary and historical importance. Since the play was no longer viewed as

either a masterpiece or a "Christmas catastrophe," the question of its influence could now be raised and debated. The play was now regarded as having made a significant and far-reaching contribution to the theatre. The man largely responsible for this scholarly and integral approach was Sir Adolphus W. Ward of Cambridge University.

In 1906 Ward published editions of both The London Merchant and Fatal Curiosity which were far superior to previous editions and criticism. In his introduction, he gave us the following appreciation of The London Merchant.

As a dramatist Lillo was distinguished by no mean constructive power, by a naturalness of diction capable of becoming ardent without bombast, and of remaining plain without sinking into baldness, and by a gift, conspicuously exercised in the earlier of the two plays here presented and to some extent also in the later, of reproducing genuine types of human nature alive with emotions and passion. In dramatic history he is notable rather because of the effects of his chief works than because of those works themselves. The London Merchant, which alone entitles him to an enduring fame, is true to the genius of the English drama. Thus while our own theatre, in a period of much artificiality, owed to him a strengthening of its tie with real life and its experiences, his revival of domestic tragedy both directly and indirectly quickened the general course of dramatic literature, expanded its choice of themes, and suggested a manner of treatment most itself when nearest the language of the heart.33

Ward saw Lillo's principal contribution to the modern drama as freedom. In Ward's view, while English drama in Lillo's day had become trammeled with models from French Classical tragedy, Lillo attempted to return to the situations of real life to open up a new province for tragedy. Although Lillo's work is much out of tune with our modern tenor, one perceives a new respect for his achievement after the publication of Ward's edition.

A year later George Saintsbury in part censured the play for "impossible lingo" and "action more impossible still," but yet he found "touches of humanity, good feeling, and genuine, though awkward, pathos." And in another year Lillo's play became still more rehabilitated when Professor Ashley Thorndike, in his well known Tragedy, called it: "The only daring departure from the prevailing type, and the most important contribution to the general development of European tragedy in the eighteenth century."35

Now that Ward and Thorndike had in one sense made Lillo respectable again, others began to find things to praise in his


work. George H. Nettleton compared Lillo to Sir William D'Avenant in that both had pioneered new forms for the drama. "Lillo set in motion powerful forces that pointed toward natural tragedy." His work, Nettleton wrote, represented a "landmark in the history of English Drama," which had led the way to "prose melodrama and tragedy." In his study of the drama of sensibility, Bernbaum said: "Lillo's achievement was a remarkable one. He completely destroyed the tradition that only a tragedy dealing with great persons could attain enduring recognition."

Even though John Gassner dismissed the play as "claptrap," estimates of the play have become more and more favorable. F.J. Harvey Darton called the play "uncommonly good second-class drama." Herbert Read wrote of Lillo: "He had struck the petty bourgeois note, just as in our day authors are endeavoring to strike the proletarian note." Freedly and Reeves, in their history of the theatre, spoke of the play as having changed the whole course of English tragedy, which would have no doubt

37 Bernbaum, p. 158.
surprised Lamb and Schlegel. In 1958 Robert G. Noyes made a statement which would have shocked them: "It is not extravagant to contend that Modern European drama was born with George Barnwell." Whether or not Lillo's play was that important may be questioned, but the point is that the claim has been seriously advanced. Allardyce Nicoll explains the importance of the play in terms less sweeping but more informative:

Reading it now, we cannot divine at first what precisely it was which so affected contemporary writers and writers of the succeeding half century; but a glance at later tragic endeavor will show us that Lillo is the true father of Ibsen and of those who in our modern days have returned to domestic scenes for the terror and awe of tragic emotion.

Even Bonamy Dobrée, who is a modern editor of the play but no uncritical admirer of it, speaks of the play as having been "born 150 years before its time."

In modern criticism of Lillo's play there have been two major areas of interest. First there has been the search for the fundamental assumptions made in the play. Included under this heading are the debate over sentimentalism inspired by Bernbaum, and a significant attempt by Wallace Jackson in 1965 "to consider


\[40\] Nicoll, p. 120.
The London Merchant as in the line of descent from Dryden's All for Love and argue that a fundamentally similar set of assumptions governs the action of both plays. Both of these questions will be explored in a later chapter.

Secondly, there has been the question of the degree of influence Lillo's play has exerted on subsequent dramatic theory and practice, which we will here outline only briefly. It is generally acknowledged that Lillo's play exerted little direct influence on the English plays that immediately followed it. One exception is Edward Moore's The Gamester (1753) in which Moore consciously tried to develop Lillo's use of domestic tragedy. Sir A.W. Ward has likewise asserted that the plays of Richard Cumberland are "lineal successors" of the plays of Lillo. Unfortunately Ward did not enlarge on this assertion.

Lillo is generally thought to have influenced later English drama indirectly through his influence on continental

---

drama. Denis Diderot insisted that his contemporaries "Confess that The London Merchant is a sublime thing!" Against those who objected to it on the basis of decorum and propriety, he answered by comparing Lillo's play to Greek tragedy; he compared Millwood's despair and Barnwell's tears of repentance with the "frantic outcries of Philoctetes in Sophocles."\(^{44}\) Diderot is said to have imitated The London Merchant in at least three ways. First, he chose characters from real life; secondly, Diderot's tragedies are highly moralistic in tone; and thirdly, Diderot used prose.\(^{45}\)

Several minor French writers followed the lead of Diderot. In 1763 Claude-Joseph Dorat wrote a Lettre de Barnevelt dans sa prison à Truman son ami. Mme. de Beaumont based her novel Lettres du marquis de Roselle on Lillo's play. Louis Anseaume wrote a comedy based on the play. Louis-Sebastien Mercier wrote Jenneval, ou le Barnevelt francais. In his play Mercier did not execute his young hero in the last act but married him to the daughter of the man he had robbed.\(^{46}\) The London Merchant also provided Blin de Sainmore with a model for his tragedy Orphanis


\(^{45}\)Nettleton, "The Drama And The Stage," p. 79.

\(^{46}\)Texte, p. 141.
(1773), and Jean-Francois de La Harpe imitated it in his Barneveld, drame imité de l'anglois (1778). 47

It is through Diderot that Lillo is said to have influenced Lessing, who translated Diderot's plays into German. Lessing so admired Lillo's work that he once wrote: "Thus I should far rather be the author of The London Merchant than Cato, even granted that the latter has all the mechanical correctness which has caused it to be set up as a model for the Germans." 48 The question of Lillo's influence on Lessing is one of degree: did The London Merchant exert considerable or minor influence on Miss Sara Sampson (1755)?

George H. Nettleton affirmed in 1913 that Millwood in The London Merchant was the prototype for Marwood in Lessing's Miss Sara Sampson, as the names seem to suggest. 49 For years this thesis, which had been Ward's, was generally accepted. Then in 1926 Paul P. Kies argued that the model for Lessing's Miss Sara Sampson was not Lillo's play, but Johnson's Caelia. Kies considered The London Merchant only one of several domestic

47 Price, pp. 154-56.
49 Nettleton, "The Drama And The Stage," p. 76.
tragedies which Lessing knew. Kies contended that Lessing's play did not possess the distinctive characteristics of Lillo's play—the mercantile setting, the legalistic basis, and the strong religious element. Kies further affirmed that the plays did not resemble one another structurally. His conclusion was significant: "In other words, the importance of Lillo in Germany and, consequently, in other parts of the continent of Europe has been greatly overestimated."\(^50\) Ten years later Curtis Vail conceded a point to Kies but reaffirmed the influence of Lillo on Lessing.

Despite the fact that *The Merchant of London* is to be regarded as a quite minor source for the material of *Sara*, it would be futile to assert that this work was of slight influence on Lessing, Germany or Europe in general. It is true that it was overestimated as a source for the plot of *Sara*, ... but the fact remains that Lessing never refers to Caelia, where he has the greatest praise for the *London Merchant*.\(^51\)

Then in 1950 Lawrence M. Price challenged once more the alleged influence of Lillo on Lessing. Like Kies he found the plots of the two plays quite different; he likewise found little resemblance between Millwood and Marwood, whom he called "only cousins widely removed." He concluded with Kies that the

\(^{50}\) Paul P. Kies, "The Sources And Basic Model Of Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson*," *Modern Philology*, XXIV (1926), 66.

\(^{51}\) Vail, p. 133.
importance of Lillo's play for German middle class drama had been "greatly exaggerated." The influence Lillo exerted on Lessing may never be completely ascertained. Consequently, while Herbert L. Carson has called George Barnwell the great-grandfather of Willy Loman, we may never fully understand the extent of Lillo's impact on the modern problem play and the tragedy of the common man. It seems to me that a sound approach has been suggested by Bonamy Dobrée: Lillo's play while perhaps not a cause was a symptom of what was going on in the theatre. The play did much to hasten the advance of middle class drama.

There are three more indications of the play's importance. First, the play has gone through more than a hundred editions in the past two centuries, the most recent edition having appeared in 1965. What is more, the editions are homogeneously distributed across the years so as to suggest a continued interest in the play. Secondly, the play has always been popular with foreign readers. The London Merchant was translated into French as early as 1743, into German in 1752, into Danish in 1759, and into Dutch in 1779. Thirdly, the number of critical

---

52 Price, p. 152.
articles dealing with the play in this century is increasing as time goes on.

The fortunes of The London Merchant over the past two hundred and thirty years have been outlined, during which the play has enjoyed much popularity and suffered much calumny. But the play has survived and is still read by students of the drama if not for pleasure for knowledge. Now the causes for the enduring popularity of the play must be set forth and examined.
CHAPTER II

A DISCREPANCY

The popularity of The London Merchant was relative. Lillo's play never having achieved the success of Hamlet or Macbeth, its popularity can be measured only against that of comparable plays. Specifically, it was said that Lillo wrote better plays than The London Merchant. I will now attempt to show that Lillo wrote at least one better play, Fatal Curiosity. This play might reasonably be expected to have outstripped The London Merchant in popularity and stage history, but it did not. Therefore I must explain this discrepancy, citing factors which in part effected the ascendancy of The London Merchant.

Fatal Curiosity is usually considered by critics to have been Lillo's best play. Fielding described it as a "Master-Piece" which entitled Lillo to be called "the best Tragic Poet of his Age." But Fielding's impartiality may be questioned, for Davies tells us that Fielding revised Fatal Curiosity, directed the first production of it at the Haymarket Theatre, where he
was manager, and wrote a prologue to the play.\footnote{Davies, I, xvii.} Davies nevertheless shares Fielding's admiration for \textit{Fatal Curiosity}:

If I am not greatly mistaken, in all Dramatic Poetry, there are few scenes where the passions are so highly wrought up, as in the third Act of the \textit{Fatal Curiosity}, where a man, contrary to the conviction of his mind and amidst all the agonies which reluctant nature feels, is tempted to the commission of a most desperate and shocking action. Lillo need not be ashamed to yield to Shakespeare, who is superior to all other writers; but excepting the celebrated scenes of murder in \textit{Macbeth}, these in the \textit{Fatal Curiosity}, for just representation of anguish, remorse, despair, and horror, bear away the palm.\footnote{Ibid., I, xxvii.}

Richard Cumberland also considered \textit{Fatal Curiosity} to contain "the best specimens" of Lillo's talents. In fact Cumberland made the remark in an essay on \textit{The London Merchant}.\footnote{Richard Cumberland, "Critique On George Barnwell," \textit{The British Drama} (London: C. Cooke, 1817), I, ix.} And in the early part of this century William H. Hudson declared: "In fairness to Lillo it must be said emphatically, that \textit{The London Merchant} does not represent him at his best. That he was capable of much greater things is shown by \ldots \textit{Fatal Curiosity}."\footnote{William H. Hudson, "George Lillo," \textit{A Quiet Corner In A Library} (Chicago: Rand, McNally And Company, 1915), p. 120.} And
finally in 1965 Mr. Fredrik DeBoer wrote that "... there can be little doubt that Fatal Curiosity is Lillo's finest play." 5

From the first, critics have remarked upon the plot of Fatal Curiosity as the play's best feature. James Harris, the eighteenth century classicist, maintained that "... 'tis certain that in this Tragedy (whatever was the cause) we find the model of A Perfect Fable, under all the Characters here described." 6 Harris went on to compare the plot of Fatal Curiosity to that of Oedipus Rex, which he felt it admirably resembled. He found in the plot "a train of Events, which with perfect probability lead to its Conclusion." Sir Walter Scott also felt that the play possessed "the model of a plot." 7 And W.H. Hudson speaks of the power and compression of Lillo's plot. In the present century G.W. Knight has described Fatal Curiosity as "a grimly powerful little drama of Greek severity set on the Cornish coast in an atmosphere of foreboding and nightmare." 9

5DeBoer, p. 206.
6James Harris, Philosophical Inquiries In Three Parts By James Harris, Esq. (London: C. Nourse, 1781), II, 154.
7Scott, p. 371.
8Hudson, p. 120
9Knight, p. 195.
The plot of Fatal Curiosity is simple and swift. The action, which takes only a few hours, is much more compressed than it is in The London Merchant, a play often criticized for an allegedly superfluous fifth act. In The London Merchant whole scenes can be deleted without much loss: the omission of the prison scene in which Barnwell and Trueman grovel on the floor would constitute an improvement in the play. The gallows scene was often deleted from representation. Many of Thorowgood's speeches and parts of Barnwell's soliloquies were judiciously reduced. On the other hand, while certain lines can be cut from Fatal Curiosity, no entire scene can be deleted without damage to the play as a whole.

There are improbabilities in the plots of both plays, but those in Fatal Curiosity are less important in the total structure of the play. Specifically, in The London Merchant Barnwell's fall is the central action of the play, and yet critics like Lamb and Schlegel have objected that his progress from innocent youth to murderer is too quick and unprepared for. In Fatal Curiosity there is the problem of the failure of Old Wilmot and Agnes to recognize their own son. But where we are unprepared for Barnwell's fall (he succumbs to Millwood in the first act), we are carefully prepared by the author to accept
the failure of the parents to know the son.

First Young Wilmot has been away for seven years, during which his features may have altered considerably. Secondly, Young Wilmot enters in Act I, Scene iii dressed like an Indian; Eustace, his friend, warns him and the audience: "you look more like a sun-burnt Indian,/ Than a Briton." Third, Charlot, his betrothed, does not recognize him. Randal, his boyhood companion, does not recognize him. In addition to all this his parents believe him long dead, and they are in a state of desperation from poverty and want. All these circumstances may not justify their failure to recognize their son, but the failure becomes somewhat understandable. Moreover, even if the playgoer elects not to believe in the probability of the incident, he can still accept it as a requisite condition for his enjoyment of the rest of the play.

There is another improbability in Fatal Curiosity. Charlot, their son's betrothed, is the sole support of Old Wilmot and Agnes. How could they, even in desperation, murder someone whom they believe to be recommended to their hospitality by her? It is the same type of unpardonable ingratitude we encounter in The London Merchant when Barnwell stabs his uncle, "his nearest relation and benefactor." But where
Barnwell kills his uncle to please a prostitute he has just met, Old Wilmot and Agnes kill out of desperation. Here both plays are melodramatic, with Fatal Curiosity a shade less so.

It is character which chiefly sets Fatal Curiosity above The London Merchant. In the latter play there is considerable disparity of character development, with Millwood emerging as the character superior to all others. She wrests the center of attention from Barnwell, who is a psychological weakling next to her. The other characters are types. Trueman is the faithful apprentice and friend—an eighteenth century organization man. Maria is the pure and pathetic heroine. As the ideal merchant, Thorowgood is limited as a character. In the end even Barnwell becomes stereotyped as the repentant sinner. He goes off to the gallows and heaven. Trueman and Maria, although decorously sorrowful at Barnwell's untimely demise, will in all probability marry and inherit her father's fortune. And Thorowgood will tell his grandchildren the cautionary tale of George Barnwell.

Fatal Curiosity is closer to the spirit of tragedy. Although unwittingly, a father and mother kill their own son. As in the case of Jocasta in Oedipus Rex, there is no way in which they can reconcile their minds to the horror of their action. Self destruction is the only solution, at least for
them. But has Young Wilmot, their son, deserved his destiny? It has been said that: "Young Wilmot's curiosity is not a tragic flaw, but only the weakness of a callow and unformed character." Ward wrote that the curiosity of Young Wilmot in wishing to take his parents unawares, "if a weakness," is "a perfectly natural and pardonable one." DeBoer feels that Lillo "clearly shows him to be in the wrong."

An examination of the play will reveal that Lillo does exhibit Young Wilmot as responsible for his fate. Lillo portrays him as a seeker of inordinate pleasure in his desire to surprise his parents:

My mind at ease grows wanton. I would fain
Refine on happiness. Why may I not
Indulge my curiosity, and try,
If it be possible, by seeing first
My parents as a stranger, to improve
Their pleasure by surprise? (II.11.49-53.)

Whereupon Young Wilmot is warned by Randal, whom he presses to


12 DeBoer, p. 82.

forge the letter of introduction, that he does not foresee the possible results of his plan:

You grow luxurious in your mental pleasures.
Could I deny you aught, I would not write
This letter. To say true, I ever thought
Your boundless curiosity a weakness.

(II.ii.76-79.)

Here Randal serves as a Teiresias, warning the protagonist of his "fatal curiosity." Arthur Sherbo has described Young Wilmot as a sentimentalist. The young man desires, "By giving others joy, t'exalt my own." The consummate pleasure of the sentimentalist is the enjoyment of his own benevolence toward others. His benevolence assures him of his own goodness of heart and implies his superiority to those who are its objects. Ward speaks of this desire for inordinate pleasure as a kind of hubris or presumption, whereby Young Wilmot "tempts Providence in order to secure to himself a certain heightening or raffinement or enjoyment."

But if Young Wilmot is thinly drawn, his father rivals Millwood as one of Lillo's best characters. Unlike Thorowgood, Old Wilmot is not a perfect man. Although he has an astute mind

---


imbued with some culture (II.iii.1-5); although he is loyal and grateful to his friends and servants, he has wasted the family estate. Moreover he is afflicted by a form of melancholia, which under pressure of extreme poverty, impels him to thoughts of suicide. Only his feeling for Agnes, his wife, restrains him. His nearly cynical insights into the dark side of man's nature are beyond the horizons of the pious Thorowgood.

There's naught so monstrous but the mind of man
In some conditions may be brought t'approve.
Theft, sacrilege, treason, and parricide,
When flatt'ring opportunity enticed
And desperation drove, have been committed
By those who once would start to hear them named.

(III.i.74-79)

Old Wilmot is mainly interesting for his disillusionment with a world in which the good often enough suffer and the wicked often inherit the earth. Wilmot and Agnes have known wealth and social position (see Agnes' lines: "I've known with him the two extremes of life," I.ii.128ff.), before his "wasteful riots ruined our estate/ And drove our son

... To seek his bread 'mongst strangers." (III.i.121ff.)

While Agnes blames her husband's riots for their present state of penury, Old Wilmot, the true sentimentalist, blames his own good nature. Accordingly he gives young Randal the following
... I have passions
And love thee still; therefore, would have thee think
The world is all a scene of deep deceit,
And he who deals with mankind on the square
Is his own bubble and undoes himself.

(I.i.154-58)

To restore sympathy to Old Wilmot in spite of this apparent
cynicism, Randal is made to comment: "High-minded he was ever,
and improvident, / But pitiful and generous to a fault." A
sentimentalist may be improvident, but his heart is in the
right place. An excellent evaluation of the character of Old
Wilmot was given by Sir Walter Scott in 1819:

Old Wilmot's character, as the needy man who had
known better days, exhibits a mind naturally good,
but prepared for acting evil, even by the evil
which he has himself suffered, and opens in a
manner which excites the highest interest and ex­
pectation. But Lillo was unable to sustain the
character to the close. After discovering him­
self to be the murderer of his son, the old man
falls into the common cant of the theatre; he
talks about computing sands, increasing the noise
of thunder, adding water to the sea, and fire to
Etna, by way of describing the excess of his hor­
ror and remorse; and becomes as dully desperate,
or as desperately dull, as any other despairing
hero in the last scene of a fifth act.16

While Calvinist moralization is absent from none of
Lillo's plays, in Fatal Curiosity the didacticism is more sub-

16Scott, p. 371.
tle and muted than in The London Merchant. For instance, Old Wilmot's final words,

Proud and impatient under our afflictions,
While Heaven was laboring to make us happy,
We brought this dreadful ruin on ourselves.  
(III.i.298-300)

underscore both a warning against despair and a confession of moral responsibility. Where George Barnwell is a youth misled by the wiles of a scarlet woman, Old Wilmot and Agnes commit a crime for which they cannot forgive themselves. Where Barnwell is passively executed by society, Old Wilmot and Agnes actively reject existence. Nor do their souls, so far as we can see, take flight to heaven. Their destiny is more tragic than that of Barnwell.

Yet in spite of this patent superiority to The London Merchant, the stage history of Fatal Curiosity has been disappointing by comparison. In its first season in 1736, the play had only seven performances as against twenty performances of The London Merchant in its first run. Even so, Fielding came to the rescue. He produced the play again in 1737, adding a new afterpiece, his Historical Register for 1736. Fatal Curiosity then ran for eleven nights. After that the record is one of sporadic performances. When Genest noted a revival
by George Colman at Haymarket June 29, 1782, he added that
 Fatal Curiosity had not been acted for fifty years!¹⁷ Actually
the play had been done in 1741, 1742, and 1755. The play did
have one notable revival when it was acted at Drury Lane in
1797 for the benefit of Mrs. Siddons, who played the part of
Agnes. Charles Kemble played the part of Old Wilmot.¹⁸ Thomas
Campbell has left us an enthusiastic account of Mrs. Siddons in
the role of Agnes.

When she acted Millwood, in 'George Barnwell,' Mrs. Siddons was generally alleged to have
condescended to a part beneath her dignity. But
on the 2d of May, her performance of Agnes, in
Lillo's 'Fatal Curiosity,' was reckoned amongst
her most wonderful exhibitions. . . . When Mrs.
Siddons, as Agnes, was asked by Old Wilmot how
they should support themselves, and when she pro­
duced the jewels of their unknown son, giving a
remote hint at the idea of murdering him, she
crouched and slid up to Wilmot, with an expres­
sion in her face that made the flesh of the
spectator creep.¹⁹

Genest also lists a performance of Fatal Curiosity at Bath on

¹⁷Genest, VI, 231.
¹⁸Ibid., p. 292.
June 12, 1813, with an additional scene in which Young Wilmot re-enters after having been stabbed by his father, Genest relates that: "this was thought by some persons too shocking—and the play was not suffered to be finished."\(^{20}\)

William McBurney has recently written that, "In view of the phenomenal success of *The London Merchant* during the eighteenth century, the immediate and lasting neglect of *Fatal Curiosity* is puzzling, for it has many of the popular attractions of the earlier play."\(^{21}\) Likewise there is no comparison between the two plays in number of printed editions. A glance at Fr. Carl J. Stratman's lists of editions of both plays will reveal the impressive ascendancy of *The London Merchant* in number and distribution.\(^{22}\)

The influence of *Fatal Curiosity* is correspondingly more difficult to trace. Ward and Bernbaum claimed that it

---

\(^{20}\)Genest, VIII, 388.


was the progenitor of the Schicksalstragödie. Jacob Minor insisted Lillo's influence on the German Schicksalsdrama had been overestimated, because Fatal Curiosity, he argued, had not been the inspiration for Blunt Oder Der Gast by Karl Philipp Moritz. F. E. Sandbach attempted to restore belief in Lillo's influence on the Germans by showing that Moritz was "almost certainly" indebted to Lillo. The degree of influence exerted on the fate tragedy of the Germans by Lillo's play has not yet been definitely established.

Why did The London Merchant, the cruder play, succeed so much better than Fatal Curiosity? True, The London Merchant had come five years earlier, but in the meantime Lillo had become well known as a playwright. One expects that his later and indeed his better work would have achieved greater success, but such was not the case. A partial explanation for the success of the earlier play is to be found in the changing tastes of the audience in the early eighteenth cen-


There was in Lillo's day for the first time a broad base in the merchant class for the diffusion and enjoyment of culture. A writer no longer had to grovel before his aristocratic patron in the hope of receiving a living or an office in government. It had been only good sense for a writer like Dryden to write with his eye on the court of Charles II, appealing discreetly to men like Rochester for support in his literary undertakings. But on Henry Fielding's testimony, George Lillo never enjoyed the conversation of the aristocracy; much less did he, a successful goldsmith, look to them for sustenance. Lillo's associates were aldermen like John Eyles, playwrights like Henry Fielding, ministers like John Gray, and actors like Davies and the Cibbers. In Lillo's day the writer was attempting to please the many readers who would pick up his book at Paul's or see his play at one of the theatres. If Congreve had written for the few, Lillo wrote for the many. A whole new literature in the periodicals, drama, and later the novel was emerging for the City-bred. As Bonamy Dobrée has remarked, an apprentice may be the hero of The London Merchant, but it is named for Thorowgood—"So all the material and moral grandeur of the London Merchant is duly
displayed."\textsuperscript{25}

In this Lillo was thoroughly up to date for 1731. His contemporaries in the theatre could not forget the liquid pentameters and aristocratic themes of Dryden which eluded their craftsmanship and their readers' inclinations. Lillo took stock of his talent--his poetry could never approach Dryden's--and with the shrewdness of a businessman he saw that the heroic style of Dryden would never again appeal to the vast majority of playgoers. Lillo therefore wrote a play in prose which glorified the middle class, and they in their turn patronized the play and raised it to a rank of dignity it might never have otherwise achieved.

For the composition of the theatre audience had been changing in the thirty years since the death of Dryden. As early as 1702 John Dennis had described the advent of the man of business to the playhouse:

\begin{quote}
But thirdly, in the Reign of King Charles the Second, a considerable part of an Audience had that due application, which is requisite for the judging of Comedy. They had first of all leisure to attend to it. For that was an age of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{25}Dobrée, p. ix.
Pleasure, and not of Business. They were serene enough to receive its impressions: For they were in Ease and Plenty. But in the present Reign, a great part of the Gentlemen have not leisure, because want throws them upon employments, and there are ten times more Gentlemen now in business, than there were in King Charles his Reign. Nor have they serenity, by Reason of a War, in which all are concerned, by reason of the Taxes which make them uneasy. By reason that they are attentive to the events of affairs, and too full of great and real events, to receive due impressions from the imaginary ones of the Theatre. They come to a Playhouse full of some business which they have been soliciting, or of some Harrangue which they are to make the next day; so that they meerly come to unbend, and are utterly incapable of duly attending to the just and harmonious Symetry of a beautiful design. 

During the eighteenth century there was a movement away from the smaller courtly playhouse of the Restoration in the direction of larger houses with more democratized audiences. During Garrick's tenure as manager of Drury Lane, that theatre seated 2,000 spectators; under Sheridan the audience capacity was enlarged to 3,611. Nicoll says that the playhouse was in transition: "It was not universal as in Shake-

---


speare's time, and it was not aristocratic as in the time of
the Restoration; it was merely fashionable." The author of
The Apprentice's Vade Mecum (1734)--Samuel Richardson if we
believe Alan McKillop--bitterly criticized the anti-business
tone of the current plays:

Most of our modern Plays, and especially
those written in a late licentious Reign, which
are reckon'd the best, and are often acted, are
so far from being so much as intended for Instruc-
tion to a Man of Business, that such Persons are
generally made the Dupes and Fools of the Hero of
it. To make a Cuckold of a rich Citizen, is a
masterly Part of the Plot; and such Persons are
always introduced under the meanest and most con-
temptible Characters. . . . And this in a Kingdom
which owes its Support, and the Figure it makes
abroad, entirely to Trade; the Followers of which
are infinitely of more Consequence, and deserve
more to be encourag'd, than any other degree or
Rank of People in it.

Accordingly, there is a motif in The London Merchant
which can only be described as an apologia for the dignity of
the merchant's calling. In the first act of the play Trueman
asks Thorowgood how the London merchants have been able to
thwart an attack on England by the Spanish navy. His employer

28 Nicoll, p. 11.
29 The Apprentice's Vade Mecum, p. 11.
answers:

Your curiosity is laudable, and I gratify it with the greater pleasure because from thence you may learn how honest merchants, as such, may sometimes contribute to the safety of their country as they do at all times to its happiness; that if hereafter you should be tempted to any action that has the appearance of vice or meanness in it, upon reflecting on the dignity of our profession, you may with honest scorn reject whatever is unworthy of it.30

In the next scene Thorowgood implies that members of the merchant class are often better bred than the nobility: "Let there be plenty and of the best, that the courtiers, though they should deny us citizens politeness, may at least commend our hospitality." (I.i.2-5) Maria, Thorowgood's daughter, gets in another thrust twenty lines later: "The man of quality, who chooses to converse with a gentleman and merchant of your worth and character, may confer honor by so doing, but he loses none." (I.i.22-25) Finally there is the apostrophe to Trade at the beginning of the third act (i.1-28).

There was a political dimension to the appeal of The London Merchant to the middle class. Along with the defense

of mercantilism there is in the play a strong note of hostility to Spain. In the first scene we learn that the merchants of London have frustrated a Spanish invasion of England. In another scene Millwood explicitly vilifies the Spanish:

I would have my conquests complete, like those of the Spaniards in the New World, who first plundered the natives of all the wealth they had and then condemned the wretches to the mines for life to work for more.

(I.iii.24-27)

Hostility to Spain at this particular time would have especially appealed to most Whig merchants. Public opinion would in 1739 force Walpole into the War of Jenkins' Ear against the Spanish. John Loftis notes that the "principal motive" for entering the war was the desire to increase English trade with the New World which had been restricted by the Spanish. English merchants were among the "strongest proponents of the war," which might explain why Lillo charged his play with anti-Spanish sentiment. The London Merchant would have appealed to the political prejudices of the Whig merchants, thereby increasing its popularity.

There was a religious dimension to the appeal of The

---

London Merchant. Whether or not he wished, Dryden often seemed to ridicule connubial fidelity, as for instance in Marriage A La Mode (1674) when Rhodophil complained, "There's something of antipathy in the word marriage to the nature of love; marriage is the mere ladle of affection, that cools it when 'tis never so fiercely boiling over." (IV.iii) Characters like Horner, Pinchwife, Mrs. Loveit, and Lady Wishfort were hardly calculated to edify tradesmen whose fathers had lived under Cromwell. It was indeed the Dissenters who attacked the "immoral" conventions of the comedies of Dryden, Wycherley, Etherege, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar. The Gentlemen of Trade were bringing a new morality to the playhouse.

The strongest voice for reform was that of the Reverend Jeremy Collier, A.M. His A Short View of the Profaneness And Immorality Of The English Stage, which had first appeared in 1698, was re-issued in 1730 while George Lillo was probably composing The London Merchant. In addition to the five editions of Collier's Short View between 1698 and 1730, there was a barrage of pamphlets leveled at the "immorality" of the stage between 1698 and 1726. At least seven of these anonymous pamphlets have been attributed to Jeremy
Collier himself. Examples of this type of literature are: 

A Letter to Mr. Congreve on His Pretended Amendments (1698), A Representation of the Impiety and Immorality of the English Stage (1704), The Theatre-Royal (1718), and The Conduct of the Stage Considered (1721). Only five years before The London Merchant was first acted, William Law published The Absolute Unlawfulness of the Stage Entertainment Fully Demonstrated (1726).

Lillo was certainly aware of the Collier controversy, for in the dedication to The London Merchant he asserts the power of certain plays to teach moral principles: "Such plays are the best answers to them who deny the lawfulness of the stage." (80-81) Lillo was in full agreement with Collier that, "The Business of Plays is to recommend Vertue and discountenance Vice." In the years before Lillo certain playwrights had overtly attempted to enlarge the didactic potential of comedy. Colley Cibber wrote in the dedication of The Careless Husband (1704):

The best critics have long and justly com-

---

plained that the coarseness of most characters in our late comedies have been unfit entertainments for people of quality, especially the ladies. And therefore I was long in hopes that some able pen . . . would generously attempt to reform the town into a better taste than the world generally allows 'em. But nothing of that kind having lately appeared that would give me an opportunity of being wise at another's expense, I found it impossible any longer to resist the secret temptation of my vanity, and so even struck the first blow myself.33

In addition to the comedies of Cibber, Sir Richard Steele was known for his intention "To chasten wit, and moralize the stage," as Leonard Welsted had written in the prologue to The Conscious Lovers (1722). Lillo merely sought to moralize tragedy as Cibber and Steele had sought to moralize comedy.

The London Merchant must have satisfied the reformers: although Barnwell fornicates, robs and murders, and must on that account be hanged, yet Divine mercy whisks his repentant soul to heaven.

Social, political and religious factors contributed to the appeal of The London Merchant, so that it was able to

surpass better plays in popularity and influence. But these factors constitute the external reasons for the play's popularity; I now turn to consider factors which are internal and structural, in short to the play itself.
CHAPTER III

PLOT AND CHARACTER IN THE LONDON MERCHANT

The story of George Barnwell was not original to Lillo. Known in ballad form as early as the middle of the seventeenth century, "The Ballad Of George Barnwell" was printed up again on the day Lillo's play opened at Drury Lane in 1731. Cibber assures us that it was well known to the audience at the first performance (supra, p. 18). The ballad was later printed in full by Bishop Thomas Percy in his Reliques Of Ancient English Poetry.¹ A short summary of the source will be helpful for our discussion of plot and character in the play.

In the ballad, Barnwell is carrying a bag of his master's gold when he is accosted by Sarah Millwood, a prostitute. After they have dined, she confides that she owes ten pounds "Unto a cruel wretch." Those ten and many more she receives from Barnwell in exchange for the charms of her person.

When his master calls for a reckoning, Barnwell flies to Millwood, who pretends not to know him. Upon learning that he still has twenty pounds, she swears she was joking and gives him sanctuary. In order to get more money, Barnwell conceives of a plan to rob and murder his rich uncle, which he executes in cold-blooded fashion. He returns to Millwood and they spend the money in "filthy sort." Whereupon she turns him out and reports his crimes to the constabulary. Having narrowly escaped the trap they have set for him, Barnwell writes a letter to the lord mayor confessing his and Sarah Millwood's guilt. She is hanged at Ludlow while Barnwell himself is hanged "For murder in Polonia."

Herbert L. Carson has written that, "Lillo's plot lacked distinction, being a fairly close dramatic rendering of the old ballad." The following discussion of the use Lillo made of his source will show that Carson's judgment is unfair to Lillo's creative adaptation of his source. Lillo did not use his materials mechanically but reshaped the plot and the

---

characters extensively—sometimes for the better and occasionally for the worse.

Lillo perceived that the basic situation of the ballad was inherently dramatic: the seduction and eventual betrayal of a young man by an alluring prostitute was sure to grip the attention of almost any audience. The murder of the wealthy uncle, if less natural than the seduction, would certainly prove a pathetic and horrific scene, especially to audiences that were still used to being affected by the fratricide of Castalio and Polydore in Otway's *The Orphan*. But beyond the basic pattern of seduction, murder, betrayal, and hanging, most of the incidents and characterization were invented by Lillo.

The first scene of the first act, in which Thorowgood instructs Trueman in chauvinism and pride in his mercantile calling, is a somewhat irrelevant addition by Lillo. The following scene, in which Thorowgood and Maria extol the virtues of the citizen at the expense of the courtier, is also Lillo's. Both of these scenes might be eliminated from the play with little damage to plot or character. The last scene, on the other hand, is one of Lillo's better creations. Millwood is telling Lucy, her maid, of her scheme to ensnare George Barn-
well. As she is seated before her mirror, the scene is reminiscent of one in *The Way Of The World* (III.i) in which Lady Wishfort at her toilet converses with her maid. Compare Lady Wishfort's "Fetch me the red—the red, do you hear, sweetheart?" to Lucy's "A little more red, and you'll be irresistible!" But if the setting is from Congreve, the action is Lillo's. Millwood's narration of her first encounter with Barnwell is much more ironic than the street corner solicitation described in the ballad. Millwood relates:

I made a full stop and, gazing wishfully on his face, asked him his name. He blushed and, bowing very low, answered, 'George Barnwell.' I begged his pardon for the freedom I had taken and told him that he was the person I had long wished to see and to whom I had an affair of importance to communicate, at a proper time and place. He named a tavern; I talked of honor and reputation, and invited him to my house. He swallowed the bait, promised to come, and this is the time I expect him.

(I.iii.56-64)

Barnwell arrives at Millwood's house for supper, and the next four short scenes are devoted to his seduction. In the ballad Barnwell relates his slick seduction by Millwood with gusto.

All blithe and pleasant then,
To banqueting we go;
She proffered me to lie with her,
And said it should be so.
The original Barnwell offers no resistance. He is the fledgling man of the world, the street-wise apprentice, who has given money to a prostitute and expects the usual consideration in return. But Lillo gives us the picture of the gullible country boy, awkwardly bowing and blushing, unable to refuse to dine with a beautiful woman whom he assumes to be as ingenuous as himself.

The second act begins with a long scene which does little to further the plot. Barnwell enters Thorowgood's house after his night with Millwood. Although the audience has not seen him hand over Thorowgood's money to Millwood, the theft must be inferred from Barnwell's complaint: "To guilty love, as if that was too little, already have I added breach of trust. A thief!" (II.1.3-4) Trueman enters expressing both relief at his safe return and curiosity as to his whereabouts. Although Barnwell refuses to reveal his secret love affair, his obstinacy and Trueman's importunity take up ninety-five lines. Thus Trueman does not serve as his friend's confidant, and nothing more is revealed about Barnwell's state of mind than that he will not reveal it. In fact, right after True- man's exit there is a soliloquy in which Barnwell does reveal his state of mind. Why is the scene so protracted? Lillo
seems intent on revealing the relationship between Barnwell and Trueman even if he must interrupt the action to do it. Perhaps Lillo wishes to suggest the theme of friendship which may have been derived from Otway's Pierre and Jaffier. In addition the scene uncovers a flaw in Barnwell's character: a lack of candor where honesty might have saved him from further corruption.

The following scene is more integral to the plot. Thorowgood enters ready to castigate Barnwell for absenting himself from the household without excuse. One expects Thorowgood to require an explanation which will discover Barnwell's newly formed liaison with Millwood and his accompanying theft. Here Lillo runs into a problem. The discovery of Barnwell's embezzlement will present his master with two alternatives. Thorowgood will either dismiss his apprentice and possibly take legal action, or he will retain Barnwell while taking measures to prevent future thefts. Either way Barnwell would be of no further use to Millwood, and the story would presumably end at that.

If the action is to continue, Thorowgood must not discover Barnwell's theft. Lillo handles the problem skillfully. Thorowgood is at first prepared to take the young
apprentice to task, but then he reflects, "That modest blush, the confusion so visible in your face, speak grief and shame." Barnwell demonstrates sufficient remorse that Thorowgood tactfully and charitably refuses to hear the young man's confession of "Some youthful folly which it were prudent not to inquire into." He precludes Barnwell's confession: "It were not mercy, but cruelty, to hear what must give you such torment to reveal." (II.iv.35-37.) Thus the action is able to proceed, and the audience is able to see the humanity and charity of Thorowgood, who refuses to press a young man for the painful details of an adolescent folly.

Moved with gratitude at Thorowgood's discretion, Barnwell resolves to renounce Millwood. It is ironic that as he is exulting, "The struggle's over and virtue has prevailed," Millwood is brought on stage. At this point Lillo seems to attempt what Aristotle described as a "Reversal of Intention." At the sight of Millwood Barnwell exclaims, "Confusion! Millwood!" Accompanied by Lucy, Millwood has come to ply her latest stratagem on the young man. She tearfully explains that she must part from him forever. When he agrees that they must part, it is her turn to exclaim, "Confusion!" There is an interval of twenty-seven lines between the two exclamations. Thus
Lillo chooses a rather mechanical method for underscoring the Reversal. Lucy's comment—"Aye, we are all out! This is a turn so unexpected that I shall make nothing of my part. They must e'en play the scene betwixt themselves."—is also a highly artificial device for calling attention to the "turn." This type of aside would be more proper to comedy than tragedy.

The rest of the act moves quickly with few lines wasted. Millwood fakes a pathetic "Remember me when I'm gone" scene—enough time for her to collect her wits and regain the initiative. She leaves Barnwell alone on stage for one second, enough to give him a false sense of security, and she renews the assault. On the pretext of telling him not to look for her at her former lodgings, she begins to sob, which is Lucy's cue to tell the story of the fictitious creditor who demands money or love. Millwood deftly insinuates that George is responsible for her ruin: she is leaving the kingdom rather than "find her refuge in another's arms." The gullible boy is shattered by the ruse. He exits and returns with a bag of his master's money, resolved to ruin his career rather than see her "virtue" despoiled. Millwood leaves with the money and his promise to come to her house. It is the end of the second act.

Here it is instructive to compare the play to the
source. In the play Barnwell resolves to renounce Millwood, but in the ballad the thought of giving up his mistress never occurs to Barnwell. Again in the ballad Millwood uses a rather transparent artifice to gain ten pounds from George, who gives them to her in an offhand manner.

With that she turn'd her head,
And sickly thus did say,
'Oh me, sweet George, my grief is great;
Ten pound I have to pay

'Unto a cruel wretch,
And God he knows,' quoth she,
'I have it not.' 'Tush, rise,' I said,
'And take it here of me.'

In the play the sum stolen is much larger, and in gaining it Millwood is made to appeal to Barnwell's noblest instincts. Barnwell is shown sacrificing himself to protect the girl he loves from the clutches of a lascivious man. He vows, "I will myself prevent her ruin, though with my own!" (II.xi. 83-84.) He later ponders the purity of his motives in taking the money: "I sought not the occasion and, if my heart deceives me not, compassion and generosity were my motives." (II.xiv. 3-4.) Thus G. Wilson Knight has aptly written that it is Barnwell's kind-heartedness which betrays him into sin. 3

3Knight, p. 194.
Lillo begins the third act by launching Thorowgood on his apostrophe to Trade. It calls to mind William Henry Hudson's description of Thorowgood as "a prosy and pragmatical bore."⁴ A few lines will serve to give the flavor of the entire scene.

Methinks I would not have you only learn the method of merchandise and practice it hereafter merely as a means of getting wealth. 'Twill be well worth your pains to study it as a science, see how it is founded in reason and the nature of things, how it has promoted humanity as it has opened and yet keeps up an intercourse between nations far remote from one another in situation, customs, and religion; promoting benefits diffusing mutual love from pole to pole.

(III.1.1-9.)

Passages like this one have led Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman to remark that the play often sounds like a "Chamber of Commerce pamphlet."⁵ Wallace Jackson has observed that Lillo insists upon "the ultimate reduction of character as personality to character as purveyor of abstractions."⁶

---

⁴Hudson, p. 102.


⁶Jackson, p. 543.
Thorowgood's dialogues are a case in point. The scene may serve to further Lillo's *apologia* for the merchant's calling, but it does nothing to further the plot or our knowledge of any character. There is, however, a dramatic purpose buried in this scene. At the very end Thorowgood tells Trueman he will examine Barnwell's accounts after he has returned from the Exchange. This causes Trueman to go in search of his friend.

An equally undramatic scene follows in which Maria, alone on the stage, reads a passage on Truth to the audience. Obviously Maria serves as a chorus commenting upon Barnwell's want of honesty. Barnwell is the "wretch who combats love with duty when the mind, weakened and dissolved by the soft passion, feeble and hopeless, opposes its own desires." (III. ii.7-9.) The comment has two implications: first, in so far as Barnwell's power to reason clearly is undermined by his desire for Millwood, he is a self-deceiver; secondly, by opposing love and honor, Lillo may wish to relate Barnwell's struggle to the conventional themes of love and honor in the older heroic plays such as Dryden's *The Conquest Of Granada*.

Trueman bursts in upon Maria with the letter in which Barnwell confesses his embezzlement. After a protracted eulogy of Barnwell ("He was the delight of every eye and joy
of every heart that knew him."), Maria decides to conceal the theft from her father by replacing the sum Barnwell has taken, while Trueman goes to find Barnwell. Brooks and Heilman have stated that, "Maria's concealment of the theft is totally unrelated to Barnwell's central problem, but is presented merely in order to emphasize her benevolence—a method which is always likely to produce a sentimental effect." 7 Actually, the attempt has two very real purposes which it accomplishes. First, it adds suspense. There is a sort of rising action here, by which it appears that Barnwell, in spite of his serious embezzlement, may still be saved. In the ballad there is no Maria to attempt to save Barnwell, whose eventual fall and utter ruin are never in doubt. In this Lillo improved upon the source. Secondly, Maria's attempt to save Barnwell provides a parallel and contrast with Barnwell's attempt to save Millwood by giving her money. Both are giving money to the person they love in order to protect that person from apparent serious evil, but there is an important difference. Barnwell's love is selfish and weakened by lust: he wishes to protect Millwood from

7 Brooks and Heilman, p. 184.
another man for himself. Maria's love for Barnwell is totally altruistic, for she makes Trueman promise never to reveal her action to anyone. Thus Barnwell will never be able to repay her generosity.

The scene now shifts to Millwood's house, where Lucy tells Blunt that Millwood has prevailed upon Barnwell to murder his rich uncle. In the ballad George himself, rotter that he is, conceives the idea of braining his uncle. In the play it is the conniving Millwood who devises the plan. The question of how she is able to carry out the plan is the source of the most justified criticism of the play. The uncle is Barnwell's closest relative and benefactor. How then is Millwood, a prostitute whom George has known only a day, able to persuade him to murder the uncle for money? Barnwell's motives for killing his uncle are not psychologically convincing. Hazlitt early seized upon the improbability of Barnwell's fall.

It is one of the most improbable and purely arbitrary fictions we have ever seen. . . . Nothing can be more virtuous or prudent than George Barnwell at the end of the first act, or a more consummate rogue and fool than he is at the beginning of the second. This play . . . is an insult on the virtues and vices of human nature; it supposes that the former are relinquished and the
others adopted without common sense or reason. . . .

Lamb remarked that, "It is really making uncle-murder too trivial to exhibit it as done upon such slight motives." (Supra, p. 26.) George H. Nettleton has written that, "The motive of the action does not always seem adequate, nor is the character portrayal consistent." 

Perhaps Brooks and Heilman have uncovered the root of the difficulty: "In his eagerness to have a complete record of moral decline from good life to ignominious death, Lillo includes too much of the relationship between Millwood and Barnwell." Lillo might have done better to have begun the play after Barnwell had been stealing sums over a period of time to please Millwood. He might have prepared us and motivated Barnwell better for the murder. Barnwell's motivation would be more convincing if he were to murder a wealthy merchant, perhaps a client of Thorowgood's into whose counting house Barnwell might have been admitted on the pretext of business. Nettleton furthermore argues that if Barnwell had to rob his

---

8Hazlitt, Works, VIII, 268-69.

9Nettleton, English Drama, p. 205.

10Brooks and Heilman, p. 182.
uncle, he might have avoided killing the old man. Unfortu-
aturally, Lillo stuck to the old story, creating the most vexing problem of the play.

But it is only fair to Lillo to investigate how he has managed the problem. Brooks and Heilman are inaccurate in their criticism of Lillo's handling of the scene in which Millwood persuades Barnwell to commit the murder. "Note how Act III.iii and iv give the stage over to secondary characters at a crucial time in the main character's career." This is not the case. True, the conversation between Barnwell and Millwood is not represented on stage but is narrated at length and in detail by Lucy. Inasmuch as his story is being told to the audience, Barnwell is the center of attention in the scene.

Why did Lillo choose to narrate rather than represent the conversation? Perhaps he realized that the situation itself was so improbable that he could not make the dialogue sound convincing, and even if he could, the scene would demand too much from the actor who played Barnwell. Perhaps he wished to exploit the convention of the narrative. Because of


the removal in time and space, people are used to believing things in story form which they would not accept in a factual representation. A narrative calls the reader's or hearer's imagination into play; he fills in many of the details himself, and he imagines many things that could not be acted out effectively. Take for example, the following passage from Lucy's narration.

LUCY.
'Tis true, at the naming of the murder of his uncle, he started into a rage and, breaking from her arms, where she till then had held him with well-dissembled love and false endearments, called her 'cruel, monster, devil,' and told her she was born for his destruction. . . .

BLUNT.
I am astonished! What said he?

LUCY.
Speechless he stood, but in his face you might have read that various passions tore his very soul. Oft he in anguish threw his eyes towards Heaven, and then as often bent their beams on her, then wept and groaned and beat his breast. At length, with horror not to be expressed, he cried, 'Thou cursed fair, have I not given dreadful proofs of love? What drew me from my youthful innocence to stain my then-unspoiled soul, but cursed love? What caused me to rob my gentle master, but love? What makes me now a fugitive from his service, loathed by myself and scorned by all the world, but love? What fills my eyes with tears, my soul with torture never felt on this side death before? Why, love, love, love! And why, above all, do I resolve (for, tearing
his hair, he cried, 'I do resolve') to kill my uncle?'

(III.iv.74-103.)

Obviously it would be difficult for a most capable actor to render the part of Barnwell in a convincing and dignified manner. When David Garrick himself contemplated playing the role of Barnwell, he sent the play to John Hoadley to be revised. The passage quoted is quite melodramatic in narration; in representation it might be risible. The fact is that Lillo has failed in some ways to make Barnwell a thoroughly believable character.

In the following scene Barnwell's uncle, who has not been seen until now, comes on stage alone and delivers an apostrophe to death. The speech lasts twenty-four lines, and adds little or nothing to the play. Since the uncle comes on stage only to be dispatched by his nephew, it is in no way helpful that we should learn what is on his mind. But Lillo seems intent on writing a set piece on the inability of the mind of man to comprehend anything about death. The passage

clearly echoes Hamlet's lines on the mind of man ("And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" II.ii.320).

O Death, thou strange mysterious power, seen every day yet never understood but by the incommunicative dead, what art thou? The extensive mind of man that, with a thought, circles the earth's vast globe, sinks to the center, or ascends above the stars, that worlds exotic finds or thinks it finds, thy thick clouds attempts to pass in vain. Lost and bewildered in the horrid gloom, defeated she returns more doubtful than before, of nothing certain but of labor lost. (III.vii.i-8.)

The lines seem commonplace, and what is more, they have no relevance to the predicament of the main character.

This speech does serve at least a practical dramatic purpose. In the stage directions we are told, "During this speech, Barnwell sometimes presents the pistol, and draws it back again. At last he drops it, at which his uncle starts and draws his sword." The uncle's soliloquy is protracted so that Barnwell may demonstrate his extreme reluctance to murder his uncle. This is in keeping with the character of Barnwell that Lillo is drawing. In the ballad the murder is perfunctory and efficient.

Sudden, within a wood,
He struck his uncle down,
And beat his brains out of his head;
So sore he crack'd his crown.
Lillo shows us no cold-blooded murderer, but a man driven to the limits of sanity. The actual killing is presented in such a way as to seem almost unavoidable. Barnwell drops his gun, crying, "Oh, 'tis impossible!" He cannot carry out the murder. Just then the uncle exclaims, "A man so near me, armed and masked!" The old man draws his sword. Barnwell's "Nay then, there's no retreat!" shows that he feels trapped into the act. George then "Plucks a poniard from his bosom and stabs him."

On the stage then, both men would be holding daggers, the uncle having drawn first. It would look like a duel. The uncle would not appear a helpless victim, and George's act would look less reprehensible. One gets the distinct impression that if the uncle had been less hasty to draw his sword, there would have been no killing at all. Thus in the central action of his career Barnwell is not essentially acting but reacting to the force of circumstances.

Thereafter the scene becomes maudlin. The uncle begins to pray for his "dearest nephew." Barnwell throws off the mask and clasps the old gentleman in his arms. The uncle weeps, presses George's hand, kisses him, and finally expires. Overcome with remorse, Barnwell "Swoons away upon his uncle's dead body." Pathetic as the scene is, its purpose is clear. If the
murdered uncle can forgive Barnwell, certainly the audience may forgive him. To enforce this point, Lillo sends Barnwell into a paroxysm of self abasement. "Do I still breathe and taint with my infectious breath the wholesome air?" Barnwell considers himself a worse scoundrel than either Cain or Nero. Not only did Barnwell not want to kill his uncle, but having done so, his remorse and self-hatred cannot be contained.

While the fourth act gets off to a weak start with a plodding soliloquy by Maria, it becomes progressively more interesting and dramatic. After Lucy reveals to Thorowgood Barnwell's plan to rob and murder his uncle, Thorowgood and Trueman rush off to prevent the murder. When Barnwell returns to Millwood's house, she berates him for having failed to rob his uncle's corpse. Stunned at her cold-blooded avarice, he exclaims, "Think you I added sacrilege to murder?" As Lillo is drawing the character, Barnwell is too overcome with sorrow and grief to have stooped to so venal an act. Lillo is careful to preserve in Barnwell a fundamental decency and humanity.

Never one to be squeamish, Millwood dismisses her lover as a "Whining, preposterous, canting villain!" After this rather apt summary, she dispatches a servant for the police, who presently arrive and carry the lamenting Barnwell
off to jail. With Barnwell disposed of, Lillo gets down to
the real business of the fourth act, which is the confrontation
of Millwood and Thorowgood. Thorowgood arrives, saluting Mill-
wood as "the most impious wretch that e'er the sun beheld."
First Millwood feigns ignorance, putting the blame for Barnwell's
fall on a fictitious alliance between him and her servant, Lucy.
When Thorowgood will not swallow that one, she draws a pistol.
Deprived of the weapon by Trueman, she renews the battle of
words. She defends herself by attacking mankind in general who
have made her the scheming prostitute she is.

Men of all degrees and all professions I have known,
yet found no difference but in their several capa-
cities. All were alike wicked to the utmost of
their power. In pride, contention, avarice, cruelty,
and revenge the reverend priesthood were my unerring
guides. From suburb-magistrates ... I learned
that to charge my innocent neighbors with my crimes
was to merit their protection, for to screen the
guilty is the less scandalous when many are suspect-
ed, and detraction, like darkness and death, blackens
all objectives and levels all distinction.

(IV.xviii.22-32.)

Millwood is almost more than a match for Thorowgood. She has
fifty-eight lines to his ten. His final lines are a begrudging
tribute to his adversary: "Truth is truth, though from an
enemy and spoke in malice." Millwood is arrested and sent to
prison.

In the ballad Barnwell and Millwood are "judg'd, con-

86
demn'd, and hang'd" in very short order. But Lillo stretches out their lives to include a prison farewell and a scene before the gallows. There has been some disagreement as to the merit of Lillo's addition. Brooks and Heilman have declared that the whole of the fifth act is needless—"So what we have is an emotional orgy: a frantic 'revival' scene, so to speak, but no real conversion." 14 Herbert L. Carson felt that the fifth act added the element of suspense: there was always the possibility of a last minute reprieve. 15 Fredrik DeBoer felt that the final scene before the gallows provided "a final, necessary confrontation between the two criminals in which the contrast between them is explicitly demonstrated." 16

While there is some needless pathos in the fifth act, it is rather extreme to write off the entire act as needless. This viewpoint may suggest a misunderstanding of the overall design of the play, which is much different from the overall design of the ballad. The ballad pointed up a very simple

14 Brooks and Heilman, p. 187.

15 Carson, p. 292.

16 DeBoer, p. 44.
lesson at the end.

Lo! here's the end of youth
That after harlots haunt,
Who in the spoil of other men
About the streets do flaunt.

The ballad presents only the fall of Barnwell; the play presents the fall and the regeneration of Barnwell as a Christian through the mystery of Divine Grace. It is for the sake of this design that Barnwell has throughout been portrayed as the good man betrayed into evil by his own good nature, but eminently worth saving. The main purpose of the fifth act is to show how Barnwell, the repentant sinner, gains both human and Divine forgiveness. Indeed Thorowgood sets the tone of forgiveness and compassion at the very beginning of the first scene:

Great were his faults, but strong was the temptation. Let his ruin learn us diffidence, humanity, and circumspection, for we who wonder at his fate -- perhaps had we like him been tried, like him we had fallen too.

(V.1.47-51.)

This note of sympathetic understanding is a far cry from the "Lo! here's the end of youth/ That after harlots haunt. . . ." of the ballad.

The fifth act shows us Barnwell's rehabilitation. Thorowgood sends a "reverend divine" to minister to the con-
demned youth. Then Thorowgood himself goes to see Barnwell in his prison cell. There he learns that the minister has cured Barnwell of his despair, and that Barnwell now hopes that even so wretched a sinner as himself may be saved. Thorowgood pointedly intones, "Oh, the joy it gives to see a soul formed and prepared for Heaven!" Whereupon he embarks upon a eulogy of "the faithful minister," which, considering that Barnwell is about to be hanged, is somewhat irrelevant. Thorowgood then takes his leave, firmly convinced of Barnwell's repentance: "Much loved, and much lamented youth, farewell. Heaven strengthen thee!"

Next Trueman comes to bid farewell. After a brief conversation Trueman reminds his friend that they have not yet embraced. An exchange which may more easily be quoted than described ensues.

BARNWELL.

Never, never will I taste such joys on earth; never will I so soothe my just remorse. Are those honest arms and faithful bosom fit to embrace and to support a murderer? These iron fetters only shall clasp, and flinty pavements bear me. (Throwing himself on the ground.) Even these too good for such a bloody monster!

TRUEMAN.

Shall fortune sever those whom friendship joined? Thy miseries cannot lay thee so low but love will find thee. (Lies down by him.) Upon this rugged
couch then let us lie, for well it suits our most
deplorable condition. Here will we offer to stern
calamity, this earth the altar and ourselves the
sacrifice. Our mutual groans shall echo to each
other through the dreary vault. Our sighs shall
number the moments as they pass, and mingling
tears communicate such anguish as words were never
made to express.

BARNWELL.
Then be it so! (Rising.) Since you propose an in-
tercourse of woe, pour all your griefs into my
breast, and in exchange take mine. (Embracing.)
Where's now the anguish that you promised?
You've taken mine and make me no return. Sure,
peace and comfort dwell within these arms, and
sorrow can't approach me while I'm here. This,
too, is the work of Heaven, who, having before
spoke peace and pardon to me, now sends thee to
confirm it.

(V.v.31-53.)

Paul Parnell has described this scene as "possibly the most
conspicuous example of abasement in sentimental literature."17
This scene owes something to the farewell of Jaffeir and Pierre
in Otway's Venice Preserved. Jaffeir begs his friend's for-
giveness in similar fashion: "Crawling on my knees,/ And
prostrate on the earth, let me approach thee." (V.III.29.)
But Lillo exaggerates the pathos of the situation. The picture
of Barnwell and Trueman groveling on the prison floor is one

17Paul E. Parnell, "The Sentimental Mask," PMLA,
(1963), 533.
of the least appealing aspects of the play, at least to a modern reader. Dramatically, however, the scene does have a purpose: Barnwell observes that Trueman's forgiveness is a sign that he has been forgiven by God.

But the clincher in Barnwell's rehabilitation is Maria's confession of her hidden love for him. When she permits him a "chaste embrace" as a last farewell, Barnwell receives final absolution from guilt. He is now led off to execution, and here the original play ended.

Millwood is conspicuously absent from the fifth act as it was originally published and acted. In the original version, therefore, Barnwell rather than Millwood is the central figure at the last, contrary to the opinion of Brooks and Heilman. But to the fifth edition of the play Lillo added another scene with the following "Advertisement."

The scene added in this fifth edition is, with some variation, in the original copy but by the advice of some friends it was left out in the representation, and is now published by the advice of others. Which are in the right I shall not pretend to determine. There are amongst both gentlemen whose judgment I prefer to my own. As this play succeeded on the stage without it, I should not perhaps have published it but to distinguish this edition from the incorrect, pirated ones, which the town swarms to the great prejudice of the proprie-
The scene which Lillo added might almost be called "The Despair of Millwood," for it adds nothing to the destiny of George Barnwell, whose feet are firmly planted on the road to Paradise.

If Millwood attacked mankind in her indictment of all social classes in the fourth act, she defies Divinity Itself in the last act. There are distinctly Miltonic echoes in her challenge to the avenging arm of Jehovah.

Heaven, Thou hast done thy worst. Or if Thou hast in store some untried plague, somewhat that's worse than shame, despair, and death--unpitied death, confirmed despair, and soul-confounding shame--something that men and angels can't describe and only fiends who bear it can conceive--now, pour it now on this devoted head that I may feel the worst Thou canst inflict and bid defiance to Thy utmost power!

(V.xii.15-22.)

Millwood's unrepentant death, while contrasting to the saintly end of Barnwell, adds a whole new dimension to her character.

True, Bonamy Dobrée wrote her off as "a risible amoral vamp of the flimsiest shocker,"19 but most critics have been more

18See McBurney's edition of the play, "Appendix A," p. 82

appreciative. In the nineteenth century Joseph Texte compared Millwood to Ibsen's Hedda Gabler: "Both women are rebels against society. Both women ruin a man for spite." Lawrence M. Price has written of her that, "Here is a passive grandeur that vies with the Greek tragedies."

In the final scene that Lillo added, Millwood overshadows Barnwell. One is no longer interested in his story, but the picture of a handsome, resourceful young woman courageously facing the wrath of God has Promethean overtones. The reader would gladly follow Millwood's story beyond the gallows. We will explore Millwood's potential as a tragic heroine in a later chapter. For the present it is enough to say that Millwood's character exhibits greater consistency and complexity than that of the protagonist.

The minor characters of the play fall into two distinct groups: those associated with Barnwell, and those associated with Millwood. Each set of characters tends to assume the tone and quality of one of the two major characters. Barn-

\[\text{Texte}, \text{ p. 136.}\]

\[\text{Price}, \text{ p. 127.}\]
well's group is composed of Thorowgood, Maria, and Trueman. Each of these tends to be a type or exemplar rather than a human individual. Thorowgood, "the best of masters and of men," is the ideal merchant-father figure. His daughter is the idealized middle-class maiden: chaste, highminded, and circumspect. She is the embodiment of all that Barnwell has lost through his crimes. She is pallid and ineffectual by comparison to her foil, the intriguing Millwood. As for Trueman, William Henry Hudson has characterized him as "an inoffensive prig." Trueman is obviously Barnwell's foil—the loyal friend and incorruptible apprentice. He does not reveal the mental state of the hero, nor does he save him from the gallows. He does, however, have one function: he prevents Millwood from shooting Thorowgood.

Millwood's following includes Lucy and Blunt. Like their mistress they are considerably more alive and natural than the characters of Barnwell's group. As long as they are in the service of Millwood, they speak short lines and move easily. They have a real function in the play, which is to discover Millwood's plot to Thorowgood, thus bringing about her downfall. Their motive in this is convincing: they do not want to be implicated in the murder of Barnwell's uncle. Unable to
stop there, Lillo insists on putting them through a reformation of character for which there has been no preparation. After relating Millwood's plot to Blunt, Lucy simply declares, "I did not think her or myself so wicked as I find, upon reflection, we are." (III.iv.116-18.) Blunt undergoes a similar transformation. Suddenly infused with theological knowledge, he taunts Millwood: "The worst that we know of the Devil is that he first seduces to sin and then betrays to punishment."

(IV.xiv.4-5.) Their moral regeneration is complete when Thorowgood tells them in the last act, "Pursue your proposed reformation, and know me hereafter for your friend." (V.i.38.) Lucy and Blunt, therefore, pass over into the group built around Barnwell. They could have turned Millwood in without finding religion, but it seems as though everyone associated with Barnwell must be a model of either virtue or repentance. Lillo places them on the side of the angels for a double purpose. He wishes to underscore the complete isolation of Millwood, and he wants to win more sympathy for Barnwell. Lucy even tells Blunt, "Her barbarity to Barnwell makes me hate her."

(III.iv.115.) Barnwell is ultimately pictured as "a man more
sinned against than sinning."²²

The plot of The London Merchant in outline has qualities of movement and unity. Unfortunately, it is sometimes interrupted by speeches by minor characters on seemingly irrelevant subjects, such as trade or death. The plot does not grow out of the psychology of the main character or any other character for that matter. On the contrary, the character of Barnwell seems rather to grow out of the exigencies of the plot. And both plot and character are subservient to Lillo's didactic intentions. The elements of Lillo's didacticism therefore will compose the matter of the next chapter.

²²Nettleton, English Drama, p. 205.
Readers of The London Merchant often tend to be oppressed by what Hudson called Lillo's "didactic obsession." The dialogue of the characters is generously seasoned with moral aphorisms. When Millwood suggests that they make love, Barnwell catechizes, "To ease our present anguish by plunging into guilt is to buy a moment's pleasure with an age of pain." (I.viii.4-5.) When Barnwell returns to his master's house, Trueman exhorts him, "But business requires our attendance--business, the youth's best preservative from ill, as idleness his worst of snares." (II.iii.92-94.) In the next scene Barnwell is admonished by Thorowgood: "When vice becomes habitual, the very power of leaving it is lost." (II.iv.32.) Thorowgood is most prolific in this regard. He warns the obsequious Trueman, "Only take heed not to purchase the character of complaisant at the expense of your sincerity." (I.i.29.) He patronizes the converted Lucy--"Proselytes to virtue should be encouraged"--and scolds the impudent Millwood--"When innocence
is banished, modesty soon follows." Perhaps many of these rather puritanical saws originated in Lillo's upbringing as a strict Dissenter.

However, a strong element of didacticism had long been a part of domestic tragedy. In his seminal essay on the English domestic drama, Arthur Eustace Morgan reminded his readers that, "Even the earliest writers of domestic tragedy are careful to insist on the moral value of their work, and to point out clearly the ethical purpose."¹ Ashley Thorndike likewise related the plays of Lillo to the moralizing domestic tragedies of the Elizabethans, such as A Warning For Fair Women and Arden Of Feversham, which he feels Lillo may have been copying.²

Lillo was almost certainly influenced by the opinion of Jeremy Collier that didacticism was the valid and proper justification for writing plays at all. Collier, himself a Dissenting minister, had held that the end of a play was:

To shew the Uncertainty of Humane Greatness, the

---


²Thorndike, p. 316.
suddain Turns of Fate, and the unhappy Conclusions of Violence and Injustice: 'Tis to expose the Singularities of Pride and Fancy, to make Folly and Falsehood contemptible, and to bring every Thing that is Ill under Infamy, and Neglect. 3

From his study of "all available dramatic criticism written between 1660 and 1725," Joseph Wood Krutch has concluded that most critics tended to agree with Collier that the principal, if not the only function of the stage was the inculcating of moral principles.4

As a matter of fact, Lillo took a position that was more radical than that of Jeremy Collier. Where Collier had held that it was the end of plays to bring vice into ridicule and contempt, Lillo felt that a play should bring about a reformation of morals in a very concrete and literal manner. Lillo expressed his sanguine hopes in regard to the power of the stage in the "Dedication" of The London Merchant to Sir John Eyles.


Plays founded on moral tales in private life may be of admirable use by carrying conviction to the mind with such irresistible force as to engage all the faculties and powers of the soul in the case of virtue by stifling vice in its first principles. They who imagine this to be too much to be attributed to tragedy must be strangers to the energy of that noble species of poetry. Shakespeare, who has given such amazing proofs of his genius in that as well as in comedy, in his Hamlet has the following lines:

Had he the motive and the cause for passion
That I have, he would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty, and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculty of eyes and ears.

And farther, in the same speech:

I've heard that guilty creatures at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been so struck to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions.

Prodigious! yet strictly just. . . . Such plays are the best answers to them who deny the lawfulness of the stage.\(^5\)

Lillo further alludes to Hamlet's lines: "The play's the thing,/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." Lillo seems convinced that he can achieve in real life what Hamlet achieved in the play—to catch the conscience, to make mad the

---

\(^5\) See McBurney's edition of the play, pp. 4-5.
guilty, to make them proclaim their malefactions.

According to this view, which Lillo seems to have held without qualification, the didactic purpose of *The London Merchant* was the quasi-religious conversion of such of its audience as stood in need of one. Lillo might not have objected to Lamb's calling the play a sermon, for in the eyes of the author it had the same homiletic and pastoral ends as the sermon. He does not even mention delight as the secondary purpose of a play; his only stated purpose is to "engage all the faculties and powers of the soul in the case of virtue."

To the Calvinist playwright that Lillo was, the theatre, if it were to have any value, must directly contribute to man's eternal destiny. This view of the end of tragedy helps to explain why *The London Merchant* contains inconsistencies in plot and character: the primary allegiance of the artist is not to nature as such, but to natural forces in so far as they further supernatural ends. Bonamy Dobrée has rightfully described *The London Merchant* as a play for Dissenters. Perhaps it was with his didactic purposes in view that Lillo chose the summer

time for the premiere, "to avoid the Winter Criticks," as Cibber tells us. The play was written, not for the critics, but for the apprentices and young women of the merchant class. As Bernbaum has remarked, "... the frequent performance of George Barnwell was encouraged by influential citizens, not because they themselves enjoyed it, but because they thought young people should." 7

It is understandable that a nineteenth century critic could begin an introduction to *The London Merchant* with a distinction.

If good intentions are to be accepted as an atonement for dull writing, this tedious extract from the 'Newgate Calendar' may escape uncensured; but, if judged upon the score of its actual merits, without any reference to the author's aim in producing it, few readers will hesitate to pronounce it a tasteless composition, devoid alike of ingenuity in its construction, probability in its incidents, elevation of sentiment, and elegance of language. 8

The critic, identified only by the initials "P.P.", obviously

---

7 Bernbaum, p. 158.

dislikes the play for the reasons he gives. Notwithstanding, the play is considered popular and significant enough to be re-edited in Oxberry's *New English Drama* in 1823. Despite the editor's hostility, there must have been, ninety years after the play was first performed, a sizable portion of the public who would buy and read the play, or at least so the publisher must have thought. There are indications that many people had for many years been sympathetic to Lillo's view of tragedy, naive as we may find it today. One of these indications is provided reluctantly by P. P. at the end of his introduction. He introduces a quotation with the following description: "We must not conclude without inserting a letter sent by Ross the actor to a friend, which seems to have a kind of prescriptive right to accompany every edition of 'George Barnwell.'" According to P. P. the letter had become part of the legend associated with the story of Barnwell. The essentials of the letter, which is too lengthy to quote in full, are as follows.

The letter is dated "Hampstead, 20th August, 1787." Ross relates that in the year 1752 during the Christmas hol-

---

idays he was playing George Barnwell to Mrs. Pritchard's Mill-
wood. A friend of the actor's named Dr. Barrowby, told him of
a young patient of his, a youth who seemed beyond the help of
medicine. The young gentleman, an apprentice to a wealthy mer-
chant, often sighed heavily as if he had a great weight on his
chest. The doctor persuaded the young man to confide his
secret, which seemed to be the root of his physical disorders.

The youth made the following confession. He had formed
a liaison with the mistress of a sea captain, presently on a
voyage to the Indies. He had given her two hundred pounds of
his master's money. Three nights earlier he had gone to see
Ross and Mrs. Pritchard in the roles of Barnwell and Millwood at
Drury Lane. He was struck so forcibly by the image of his own
guilt that he was overcome with remorse and wished only to die.
Dr. Barrowby went directly to the boy's wealthy father, who
generously agreed to make good on the two hundred pounds for
his son. The result would have warmed the heart of George
Lillo.

The son soon recovered, and lived to be a very emi-
nent merchant. Doctor Barrowby never told me the
name, but the story he mentioned often ... and,
after telling it one night when I was standing by,
he said to me, 'You have done some good in your
profession; more perhaps, than many a clergyman who
preached last Sunday; '—for, the patient told the
Doctor, the play raised such horror and contrition
in his soul, that he resolved, if it would please
God to raise a friend to extricate him out of that
distress, to dedicate the rest of his life to re-
ligion and virtue. Though I never knew his name,
nor saw him, to my knowledge, I received for nine
or ten years, at my benefit, a note sealed up, with
ten guineas, and these words 'A Tribute of Gratitude;
from one who was highly obliged, and saved from ruin,
by seeing Mr. Ross's performance of Barnwell.'

After quoting the letter in full, the editor questions
the authenticity of the incident. Was Doctor Barrowby living
at the time the letter was written? Had anyone ever heard Bar-
rowby speak of the incident to Ross? The editor concludes that
even if the incident is true, it proves only that one man was
diverted from the path of evil, while the play "may also have
perverted the imaginations of hundreds." Whether or not the
story is true is unimportant. The fact that the story had "a
kind of prescriptive right" to accompany every edition of the
play indicates that many uncritical readers were willing to
accept it as true.

One John Bancks, a contemporary of Lillo's, was so
enthusiastic as to compose a poem in honor of The London Mer-

---

10 Ibid., pp. x-xii.
chant. Bancks felt that the play could not possibly produce any but the most salutary effects on the youth of the entire nation.

These Scenes attend, and learn ye Brit'ish Youth!
Sacred to keep your Chastity and Truth.
The Snares which Beauty, or Persuasion brings,
These are to you what Scepters are to Kings.
Then fly these Tempters, as your Evil Fate,
And with a Conscience dare not to debate.
In that impartial Censor we may find
Some lively Traces of the Sacred Mind:
Too weak to sway, he dictates what is right;
But if we spurn him, loses all his Light.11

Many others agreed. In 1800 Thomas Dutton placed The London Merchant in a class by itself in regard to inculcating morals in the young: "... we do not know a single drama better calculated to place the youth of the metropolis of a powerful commercial nation upon their guard against the snares... and the dangerous allurements of fallen beauty."12

In 1817 Richard Cumberland, while he fully understood the many shortcomings of Lillo as a dramatist, nevertheless found much to praise in The London Merchant.


There may be faults in this play of George Barnwell (for no play can be without them), but I will not point them out, nor be the critic of an author, who loved mankind so much better than he loved praise, that he let kings and queens pass off unincensed by his Muse, whilst he dealt instruction to apprentices and prostitutes from the condemned hole of a prison, and erected his gibbet on the pinnacle of Parnassus, as a finger-post to Melpomene, to point out the road she has since too often taken, and a warning to Apollo of the fate which too many of his votaries have deserved.¹³

Most significant of all was the tradition of performing the play at the Christmas and Easter Holidays at Drury Lane. This practice lasted for the better part of a century until it was discontinued by Elliston in 1819. Cibber explained the practice saying that the play was thought to be "a more instructive, moral, and cautionary drama, than many pieces that had been usually exhibited on those days, with little but farce and ribaldry to recommend them."¹⁴

As late as 1826, George Daniel pleaded for a return to the older custom of the holiday performances: "The more fre-


¹⁴Cibber, V, 340.
quent performance of this drama would speak better for the public taste. . . ." As proof of the play's power to edify he cites the letter of David Ross.

That it has been productive of good, the well-known story related by Ross . . . sufficiently proves; and it is not unreasonable to suppose, that many have been arrested in their career of crime, or altogether deterred, by the fearful consequences exhibited in its affecting scenes. 15

Another indication of the popular attitude toward the play may be inferred from the passage already quoted from Dickens' Great Expectations (1860). The fact that Mr. Wopsle insists on reading George Barnwell to Pip indicates that the older man believed it would do Pip good to hear it.

Others were not so sure as to the salvific effects of the play on the young apprentices of the city. Lamb, of course, had joked that the play was "putting things into the heads of good young men, which they would never otherwise have dreamed of." (Supra, p. 26.) P. P. took a more serious objection to the effects of the play.

But, the most objectionable characteristic of the piece, in our estimation, is that for which it has by many worthy people been highly valued,

15 Daniel, pp. 5-6.
viz. its effect upon the morals of the spectators . . . . the minute representation of the intrigues of a strumpet, will do more, we suspect, towards vitiating the principles and inflaming the imaginations of young men, than the 'great moral lesson' at the close will serve to benefit them.16

This criticism of Lillo's play has some justification. Like Steele and Cibber before him, Lillo attempted to fuse the voluptuous and the moral. Even though he had written Silvia; or The Country Burial "to inculcate the love of truth and virtue," the main plot and the sub-plot both revolve about the tantalizing issue of seduction. Allardyce Nicoll observed that in Marina, adapted from Shakespeare's Pericles, Lillo retained the brothel scenes "almost in their full entirety."17 Then there is the rape of Ismena in Elmerick; or Justice Triumphant, and the adultery of Alicia in Arden of Feversham. Lillo was capable of exploiting sexual subjects. In The London Merchant the following exchange between Barnwell and Millwood is a blend of morality and sensuality.

BARNWELL.

What can I answer? All that I know is that you are

16 P.P., p. vii.

17 Nicoll, p. 223.
fair and I am miserable.

MILLWOOD.
We are both so, and yet the fault is in ourselves.

BARNWELL.
To ease our present anguish by plunging into guilt is to buy a moment's pleasure with an age of pain.

MILLWOOD.
I should have thought the joys of love as lasting as they are great. If ours prove otherwise, 'tis inconstancy must make them so.

BARNWELL.
The law of heaven will not be reversed, and that requires us to govern our passions.

MILLWOOD.
To give us sense of beauty and desires, and yet forbid us to taste and be happy, is cruelty to nature. Have we passions only to torment us?

BARNWELL.
To hear you talk, though in the cause of vice, to gaze upon your beauty, press your hand, and see your snow-white bosom heave and fall, enflames my wishes.

(I.viii.1-16.)

Another skeptic in regard to the beneficial effects of The London Merchant was William Hazlitt. His conjecture is the most interesting of any yet presented. He feels that the play is apt to have the completely opposite effect its author intended:

Whatever makes a jest of vice, leaves it too much a matter of indifference for any one in his senses
to rush desperately on his ruin for its sake. We suspect that just the contrary effect must be produced by the representation of George Barnwell, which is too much in the style of the Ordinary's sermon to meet with any better success. The mind, in such cases, instead of being deterred by the alarming consequences held out to it, revolts against the denunciation of them as an insult offered to its free-will, and, in a spirit of defiance, returns a practical answer to them, by daring the worst that can happen.16

The speculation that his play would incite young men into adopting a romantic dare-all posture would probably have stunned George Lillo.

The actual effects of the play upon the morals of youth will never and need never be known. What may be inferred from the widely known letter of Ross, the poem of Bancks, from the praise of Cumberland, Dutton, and Daniel, not to mention that of The Gentleman's Magazine and The Apprentice's Vade Mecum, and from the ninety-year tradition of the holiday performances at Drury Lane, is that there was, throughout the eighteenth and part of the nineteenth century in England, a popular tradition that The London Merchant was likely to improve the morals of those young people who saw it.

16 Hazlitt, Works, I, 154.
On the other hand, there were those, among them Hazlitt, who took exception to the play's artistic worth and questioned its reputed good effect on the minds of youth. But the very fact that some writers found it necessary to attack the play testifies to its hold on the popular mind. In 1800 Charles Dibdin wrote of the play that, "... if it had not boasted sterling and valuable merit to a most uncommon degree, it must have sunk under the weight of that calumny which was intended to crush it...."\(^\text{19}\) The reputation of The London Merchant as a "great moral lesson" was firm and lasting.

Up until now this discussion has centered in matters external to the play--the intentions of the author and the reactions of the public. It is time to turn to the play itself to explore that didacticism in the form of the principal themes of the play. Among the themes woven into The London Merchant, two stand out as points about which the minor ones cluster. One of these is the reconciliation of Divine justice and Divine mercy: like his great Puritan forbearer, Milton, Lillo wished

\(^{19}\text{Charles Dibdin, A Complete History Of The Stage (London: Charles Dibdin, 1800), V, 62.}\)
that, "I may assert Eternal Providence,/ And justify the ways of God to men." The second major theme is the frailty of man.

The reconciliation of justice and mercy is the most important theme of the play, or at least the one which colors and gives meaning to the others. This theme was naturally important to Lillo, who in many respects is a Calvinist in his thinking. In The London Merchant Millwood is made to state the basic fact of the play in unmistakably Calvinistic terms. Before the gallows in the last scene she tells Barnwell, "And I was doomed before the world began to endless pains, and thou to joys eternal." ("Scene the Last," 46-47.) The allusion at the climax of the play to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination is clear. This is not to say that Lillo read Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion or was directly influenced by the theology of Calvin. He may very well have derived elements of Calvinism through reading Milton, whose The Christian Doctrine contains a chapter on predestination. Lillo might have derived his Calvinism from his parents or his long standing friendship with John Gray, his first publisher and a Dissenting minister.

Lillo introduces the theme of justice and mercy at a crucial point. At the end of the third act when the uncle has
114

just expired, Barnwell himself pronounces the following prayer.

Let Heaven from its high throne, in justice or in mercy, now look down on that dear murdered saint and me, the murderer. And if His vengeance spares, let pity strike and end my wretched being.

(III.vii.30-34.)

The theme is merely mentioned here: there is a crescendo through the next two acts. Barnwell asks Millwood, "Whither shall I fly to avoid the swift, unerring hand of justice?"

(IV.x.) When she betrays him to the police, he adds another mention of the theme, this time with a nearly cynical twist.

The hand of Heaven is in it, and this the punishment of lust and parricide. Yet Heaven, that justly cuts me off, still suffers her to live, perhaps to punish others. Tremendous mercy! So fiends are cursed with immortality to be the executioners of Heaven.

(IV.xiii.6-10.)

Thus Barnwell gives vent to a grim view of Divine mercy.. The thought of girls like Millwood serving as executioners of the Lord is certainly ironic whether intended as such by Barnwell or by Lillo.. Barnwell has earlier told Millwood that she was born "for his destruction," but the thought that she exists merely to punish him seems exceedingly self-centered. Perhaps the comment derived from Barnwell's extreme emotional reaction at being betrayed. It could also be an expression of his desire to be punished for the death he has brought about:
he wishes that the justice of Jehovah would annihilate him. While he desires to experience the ultimate in Divine retribution, Barnwell has at this point no personal sense of Divine mercy. During the final two acts of the play, he will come to a full conviction of God's mercy.

As usual it is Thorowgood, whom one critic calls the ideal Christian, who makes an important distinction between Barnwell's hope of ultimate salvation and her apparent despair. Thorowgood assures Millwood:

To see you punished as the law directs is all that now remains. Poor satisfaction, for he, innocent as he is compared to you, must suffer too. But Heaven, who knows our frame and graciously distinguishes between frailty and presumption, will make a difference, though man cannot, who sees not the heart but only judges by the outward action.

(IV.xvi.32-38.)

The divergent paths of the two sinners are clearly marked out. Because Barnwell has fallen through weakness, he is a potential recipient of Divine grace. Millwood, on the other hand, inasmuch as she has willfully chosen the path of iniquity, seems designated as an object of Divine vengeance. Paul Parnell regards Millwood as typical of a common genus of character in

---

20 Kies, p. 86.
sentimental drama—the hateful character whom everyone wants
destroyed.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed in avowing her misanthropy, Millwood ex-
perts no quarter as she has given none. She tells Thorowgood:

\begin{quote}
I hate you all! I know you, and expect no mercy—
nay, I ask for none. I have followed my inclina-
tions, and that the best of you does every day. All
actions are alike natural and indifferent to man and
beast who devour or are devoured as they meet with
others weaker or stronger than themselves.
\end{quote}

(\textit{IV.xviii.40-45.})

Her cynical self-justification has a quality reminiscent of the
thought of Thomas Hobbes. Millwood's philosophy is in reality
only a mask for her despair. While she believes in God ("I am
not fool enough to be an atheist"), she is unable to believe
that Divine mercy could extend to herself.

In Lillo's mind the crucial difference seems to rest
here. Barnwell, through the assistance of the clergyman sent
him by Thorowgood, is able to slough off his despair and to
embrace a Christian hope founded exclusively on a trust in
Divine mercy. Barnwell clearly states this belief:

\begin{quote}
The word of truth which he recommended for my con-
stant companion in this my sad retirement has at
length removed the doubts I labored under. From
thence I've learned the infinite extent of heaven-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{21}Parnell, p. 534.
ly mercy—that my offenses, though great, are not unpardonable and that 'tis not my interest only but my duty to believe and to rejoice in that hope. So shall Heaven receive the glory, and future penitents the profit of my example.

(V.ii.11-18.)

Thus learning the extent of Divine mercy, Barnwell has come to hope for salvation. From now on his speech is a mixture of terms such as "mercy," "hope," and "despair." He is undergoing a religious conversion. One suspects that he is experiencing the Calvinistic grace of election when he asserts, "I find a power within that bears my soul above the fears of death and, spite of conscious shame and guilt, gives me a taste of pleasure more than mortal." (V.iii.) And consequent on this new "power" within him, Barnwell develops a resignation to the will of God ("Just Heaven, I am your own! Do with me what you please."), which echoes Christ's "Not as I will . . . ." Barnwell is rapidly showing the signs of election.

In his last speech before going to execution, Barnwell attempts the final reconciliation of justice and mercy. His conclusion is that they are one and the same.

Justice and mercy are in Heaven the same; its utmost severity is mercy to the whole, thereby to cure man's folly and presumption which else would render even infinite mercy vain and ineffectual. Thus justice, in compassion to mankind, cuts off a wretch like me, by one such example to secure
Lillo's final solution to the question turns out to be a vague kind of deistic optimism: what is injurious to one member may be yet a benefit to the great chain of being. Pope expressed the same idea three years later in his Essay on Man --"All partial Evil, universal Good." (I.292.) It was an idea which Pope had perhaps derived from Bolingbroke, and one which would later be ridiculed by Voltaire in Candide and Johnson in Rasselas.

Even a cursory reading of "Scene the Last," which Lillo added to the fifth edition, will reveal the transcendence of the theme of justice and mercy. After Millwood has announced her intention to defy the worst that Divine vengeance can inflict upon her, Barnwell tries to save her. This is the ultimate sign of his conversion and election: he becomes a kind of minister of Divine grace for Millwood. Before the scaffold he urges her, "Who knows but Heaven, in your dying moments, may bestow that grace and mercy which your life despised?" (26-27.)

To which she adamantly returns, "Why name you mercy to a wretch like me? Mercy's beyond my hope, almost beyond my wish. I can't repent nor ask to be forgiven." (28-30.) Just as she expects no quarter from man, she expects none from God.

Barnwell, the self-appointed parson, warns her of the mortal danger of despair, but she insists, "I have sinned beyond the reach of mercy!" To which Barnwell replies, "Oh, what created being shall presume to circumscribe mercy that knows no bounds?" Millwood counters that she has been predestined to eternal damnation, and Barnwell gives up the attempt to convert her. Instead he, now on the verge of sainthood, prays for her salvation as a kind of mediator between God and Millwood.

"Since peace and comfort are denied her here, may she find mercy where she least expects it, and this be all her Hell." (66-67.)

Barnwell's stature has risen to its zenith. He has penetrated the heart of the mystery of Calvinism. Man, of his own merit, is incapable of any good, but with and by the help of Faith, he may ascend to eternal Beatitude. Man is saved only by the mercy of God. Of his own he is nothing but a wretched sinner. But what of Millwood? Is she saved or damned? To all appearances she did not grasp at the ladder and ascend with Barnwell to heaven. She apparently chose the other way
with spirit and determination. Lawrence M. Price has written that but for Millwood, "the heroic possibilities of Calvinism might never have found full expression on the stage."\textsuperscript{23}

In the world of \textit{The London Merchant}, the only unpardonable sin is despair. The last two lines of the play state that "Th'impenitent alone die unforgiven;/ To sin's like man, and to forgive like Heaven." As to whether or not Millwood actually dies impenitent, we cannot know for sure. True, the Prologue to the play speaks of "Millwood's dreadful guilt and sad despair," but that does not mean that her despair is absolute and final.

In \textit{Fatal Curiosity} Young Wilmot admonishes the audience:

\begin{quote}
But grace defend the living from despair.
The darkest hours precede the rising sun,
And mercy may appear when least expected.
\textit{(II.iii.72-74.)}
\end{quote}

William H. McBurney has written that, "In Millwood, Lillo created an immoral character for whom he felt considerable sympathy."\textsuperscript{24} It is not obvious, but Lillo portrays Millwood as ruined by older men just as she ruins Barnwell. Endowed with beauty and wit, but lacking experience and financial security,

\textsuperscript{23} Price, p. 127.

\textsuperscript{24} McBurney, "Introduction," \textit{The London Merchant}, p. xxiii.
the young Millwood had easily fallen victim to the cunning de-
signs of older men. "Another and another spoiler came, and all my gain was poverty and reproach." She early learned that wealth, no matter how gotten, is the source of security and prestige in life. From her lines at the end of the fourth act it is plain that Lillo felt compelled to state the full case for Millwood.

Women, by whom you are, the source of joy,
With cruel arts you labor to destroy.
A thousand ways our ruin you pursue,
Yet blame in us those arts first taught by you.
Oh, may from hence, each violated maid,
By flatter'd, faithless, barbarous man betray'd,
When robb'd of innocence and virgin fame,
From your destruction raise a nobler name:
To right their sex's wrongs devote their mind,
And future Millwoods prove, to plague mankind!
(IV.xviii.69-78.)

It is significant that Thorowgood does not attempt to answer these accusations. It may also indicate some sympathy on the part of Lillo that Millwood's defense is placed at the very end of the act where it is written in blank verse for greater intensity and conviction.

Herbert L. Carson calls Millwood's defense "unusual for the eighteenth century--a subtle challenge to the double
There is a strong element of fatalism in the character of Millwood. Determinism is strong in the following passage, which she addresses to the audience through Thorowgood.

What are your laws, of which you make boast, but the fool's wisdom and the coward's valor, the instrument and screen of all your villainies by which you punish in others what you act yourselves or would have acted, had you been in their circumstances? The judge who condemns the poor man for being a thief had been a thief himself, had he been poor.

(IV.xviii.60-66.)

Speaking of the fatalistic element in Millwood's character, Fredrik DeBoer writes that, "Millwood does not repent, partly because she is not able to, and partly because she will not." In this context G. Wilson Knight has observed that Millwood in "her crushing religious and social indictment does much to illuminate the psychology of crime." In the character of Millwood Lillo has anticipated the Naturalism of the nineteenth century. Millwood is portrayed as

---

25 Carson, p. 293.
27 Knight, p. 195.
understandably evil in the light of the environmental conditions which shaped her character. Had she been born into the household of a Thorowgood, she would probably have turned out much more delightful than the dull Maria. Furthermore, there is far too much truth, as Thorowgood admits, in Millwood's indictment of the social order, for the reader to conclude that she is totally lost. It is unlikely that Lillo felt as much pity for Millwood as Richard Cumberland, who lamented, "... who can be a greater object of pity than the poor unhappy Millwood of the night?" 28 Still it seems improbable that Lillo would completely condemn Millwood, who is in fact the most engaging woman in any of his plays. Ultimately, Lillo's concept of Divine mercy is such that no one, not even Millwood, is totally and absolutely excluded from salvation.

Surely such a theme as the reconciliation of Divine justice and Divine mercy must have contributed to the popularity of the play in its own day and in the years that followed. The play had a deep vein of traditional Calvinism in the form of themes such as the sacred character of work and the element

28 Cumberland, p. xi.
of predestination, but it also held out the hope that no one was so evil as to be beyond the mercy of God. The grace of election was not merely for an aristocracy of the chosen. Rather the grace of election might well be for the many, who, for all their faults, were certainly the moral equal of an eighteen-year-old apprentice who robbed and murdered his dear old uncle to please a prostitute. Even the prostitute could be saved if she would only repent. If these two could be saved, then so could many more. Oliver Elton wrote that, "Lillo was not always the conventional moralist of his day." 29 In a modest way Lillo understood the complexity of moral responsibility and psychological motivation.

Another closely related theme is that of Divine Providence. In the Prologue to the play Lillo exhorts his audience "Providence supreme to know." A firm resignation to the will of Providence, Davies tells us, was "constantly insisted upon, and strongly inculcated in all the compositions of honest Lillo." 30


30 Davies, I, xxxviii.
A nineteenth century critic considered the whole point of *Fatal Curiosity* to be "trust in the goodness of Providence." Actually the theme of that play would be better formulated in terms of the hazards of presuming too much on the part of Providence (as does Young Wilmot), and the danger of trusting too little in Providence (as do Old Wilmot and Agnes). However, the theme of Providence is uppermost in Lillo's heroic plays. In *The Christian Hero* Scanderbeg trusts Providence to save his beloved Althea; in *Elmerick* the hero trusts Providence that his course of conduct will be vindicated by the king: both men are justified in their trust.

In *The London Merchant*, however, Lillo gave the theme a specific form it never took in any of his later works. Here he is demonstrating the power of Providence to bring good out of the evil wrought by man. Barnwell falls as deeply as he does because he refuses to trust Divine Providence. After having given Millwood Thorowgood's money, and having spent the night with her, Barnwell is inconsolable. Trueman warns him that,

---

"... as Heaven can repair whatever evils time can bring upon us, he who trusts Heaven ought never to despair." (II.ii.90-91.)

But Barnwell refuses to trust Trueman or Providence, with the result that Millwood tricks him into stealing a large sum of money from his master. But even after this theft, Barnwell could still be saved, for Maria and Trueman plan to replace the sum and conceal the theft. When Maria offers to help save Barnwell, Trueman sees her act as a sign that Providence is operating to save his friend—"Heaven in mercy to my friend inspired the generous thought." (III.iii.52.) And when their plan fails, Maria exclaims, "Providence opposes all attempts to save him." (IV.iii.14.) Actually, Providence has a different plan to save George.

Had Barnwell trusted Trueman with his secret, his ruin would have been providentially prevented. From Maria's confession of love for Barnwell in the prison scene, it is probable that he might have married her, and Thorowgood having no other heir, have inherited her father's enterprises. Instead Barnwell goes on to commit "Murder the worst of crimes, and parricide the worst of murders." Providence, however, "permits a good man's fall" so that others may be warned to keep to the path of virtue by the tragic end of the sinner. Barnwell
states this point to Thorowgood in prison: "So shall Heaven receive the glory, and future penitents the profit of my example." (V.ii.17.) All is well in the end: Barnwell himself is going to heaven; for that fact God receives all the glory; and others are both warned and edified at the object lesson in morality. In the last lines of the play Trueman underscores this last point:

In vain
With bleeding hearts and weeping eyes we show
A human gen'reous sense of other's woe,
Unless we mark what drew their ruin on,
And, by avoiding that, prevent our own.
(V.xi.11-15.)

In the world of The London Merchant, then, God is both just Judge and merciful Father, to whom all the glory is due for the salvation of mankind. Man is saved by resignation to His justice and trust in His mercy. The reasons behind the rather humble role of man are to be found in the second major theme of the play, the weakness of man. This theme may be stated as follows: in spite of the light of reason and the guidance of conscience, man tends without God's help to be dominated by his passions. This theme runs through both The London Merchant and Fatal Curiosity. When Millwood suggests to Barnwell that they give in to desire, he reminds her that the
law of Heaven requires man to control his passions, and Barnwell forthwith demonstrates his inability to control his passions. When Agnes, in *Fatal Curiosity*, attempts to persuade Old Wilmot into the murder, he expresses a skeptical view of the power of reason.

Howe'er we may deceive ourselves or others,
We act from inclination, not by rule,
Or none could act amiss. And that all err,
None but the conscious hypocrite denies.
Oh, what is man, his excellence and strength,
When in an hour of trial and desertion,
Reason, his noblest power, may be suborned
To plead the cause of vile assassination?
(III.i.90-97.)

A later line of Old Wilmot's would serve as a perfect description of Barnwell's first encounter with Millwood: "Whoever stands to parley with temptation/ Does it to be o'ercome." (105.) In *The London Merchant* it is the most upright and noble character, Thorowgood himself, who gives the fullest expression to the theme of the weakness of man. After Barnwell has returned home from Millwood's house, Thorowgood forbears to rebuke the young man, but he does give him a piece of fatherly advice.

THOROWGOOD.
When we consider the frail condition of humanity it may raise our pity, not our wonder, that youth should go astray when reason, weak at the best when opposed to inclination, scarce formed and wholly unassisted by experience, faintly contends
or willingly becomes the slave of sense. The state of youth is much to be deplored, and the more so because they see it not, they being then to danger most exposed when they are least prepared for their defense.

BARNWELL.
It will be known, and you recall your pardon and abhor me.

THOROWGOOD.
I never will, so Heaven confirm to me the pardon of my offenses. Yet, be upon your guard in this gay thoughtless season of your life. Now, when the sense of pleasure's quick and passion high, the voluptuous appetites, raging and fierce, demand the strongest curb.

(II.iv.17-31.)

Barnwell's story thereafter becomes a case history in the insufficiency of reason. He feels that it is logical that he should give his master's money to Millwood to prevent her "ruin," since he feels responsible for it. His speech begins, "Now you who boast your reason all-sufficient, suppose yourselves in my condition. . . ." (II.xiii.) Thereafter he becomes thoroughly confused; his decision to forsake Millwood was founded upon reason, and his decision to take the money was founded upon reason. "Is virtue inconsistent with itself? Or are vice and virtue only empty names? . . . But why should I attempt to reason?" (II.xiv.5-9.) Lillo provides the solution in Maria's apostrophe to Truth two scenes later. Of particular
importance are the lines: "Not so the wretch who combats love with duty when the mind, weakened and dissolved by the soft passion, feeble and hopeless, opposes its own desires." (III. ii.6-9.)

Barnwell's reason is completely subverted by the time Millwood suggests the murder. Lillo calls attention to this fact when Lucy describes the affair to Blunt.

Just then, when every passion with lawless anarchy prevailed and reason was in the raging tempest lost, the cruel, artful Millwood prevailed upon the wretched youth to promise what I tremble but to think on.

(III.iv.51-54.)

Wallace Jackson has written that excessive passion itself tends to be the unspecified evil in The London Merchant. There is good reason to think so. Just before his murder, the uncle calls to mind the traditional images of death: "... how does each inordinate passion and desire cease and sicken at the view!" (III.vi.) Barnwell, about to perform the deed, bemoans the insufficiency of reason and conscience to fortify him against the seductive powers of lust:

32 Jackson, p. 544.
In vain does nature, reason, conscience, all oppose it. The impetuous passion bears down all before it and drives me on to lust, to theft, and murder. Oh, conscience, feeble guide to virtue, who only shows us when we go astray but wants the power to stop us in our course!

(III.v.25-29.)

After the murder, Barnwell tells Millwood that he fears the torments his conscience will inflict upon him: "that impartial judge, will try, convict, and sentence me for murder, and execute me with never-ending torments." (IV.x.15.)

Barnwell pictures man as an extremely frail creature. His reason and his conscience may inform him as to the immorality of his actions, but they are mere advisors without any real power to direct man's behavior into appropriate modes of action. When, however, man has performed an evil deed, his mind and conscience pursue him as the Furies did Orestes. This view corresponds to the theme of justice and mercy. God is the all powerful Father. Man is the well meaning but weak willed son. His evil acts necessitate the punishment of Divine justice, but his frailty and basic good will are the objects of Divine mercy.

Another aspect of human frailty demonstrated in The London Merchant is the theme that man is often betrayed into evil actions by apparently noble motives. Barnwell gives money to Millwood out of "compassion and generosity." In the play evil is
portrayed as a vortex enveloping a man's whole character. Lillo applies this theme literally, showing how one vice may give birth to another. In the first act Lucy, who often delivers choric comments, says of Barnwell: "So! She has wheedled him out of his virtue of obedience already and will strip him of all the rest, one after another. . . ." (I.v.84-85.) Later Lucy delivers a similar aside.

These young sinners think everything in the ways of wickedness so strange. But I could tell him that this is nothing but what's very common, for one vice as naturally begets another as a father a son. But he'll find out that himself, if he lives long enough. (II.xiii.6-10.)

Barnwell himself restates this theme immediately before the scene in which the uncle is killed. "The storm that lust began must end in blood." (III.v.36.) Precisely why lust must unavoidably bring on bloodshed is never made clear. Thematically however, the point is clear: man, once he has embarked upon a course of evil, is often unable to avoid worse crimes. Barnwell speaks of the necessity "hourly to add to the number of my crimes to conceal 'em." (II.i.10.)

There have been other approaches to the didacticism of The London Merchant, a few of which deserve to be mentioned. Perhaps the most interesting has been suggested by John Loftis.
He holds that Barnwell violates "the standard of mercantile integrity." The tragedy, he suggests, is based on a standard of conduct derived not from an aristocratic society but from a commercial one. Thus Barnwell's first and fatal mistake is to violate the trust of his master. His ruin as a man follows upon his ruin as a merchant. It is for this reason that Barnwell is contrasted to Trueman, who is the embodiment of the virtuous apprentice; and it is for this reason that much of the dialogue is devoted to the praise of the upright merchant. Perhaps this view was suggested to Loftis by Nettleton's comment that, "George Barnwell is the exaltation of trade. The virtue of the merchant's calling is second only to that of morality. Commercial cleanliness is next to godliness."n

Brooks and Heilman take a similar approach, namely that, "Barnwell's deeds are an offense, not so much against morality, as against good business." They feel that Lillo confused the legal and the moral in the following manner. Act Five is, they contend, based on the assumption that since Barnwell is

---


34Nettleton, English Drama, p. 203.
legally condemned to die, evil is sufficiently dealt with, and Barnwell's good qualities are brought too much to the fore especially in the farewell scene with Trueman and Maria. 35

Fredrik DeBoer has an interesting comment: "In general terms, the moral of the play is a warning for youth to shun the path of evil, but for Lillo the notion of vice is inseparably bound with illicit sexual relations." 36 This statement could be tailored somewhat--it would hardly apply to Fatal Curiosity--but it does point up that Puritanical thread in The London Merchant. Morality is never purely a matter of sex for Lillo. There is always the deeper element of pride, not to mention such mitigating circumstances as youth, inexperience, and background. Wallace Jackson suggests that sexual excess in The London Merchant is "a form of symbolic action standing for any mode of behavior which tends to thwart the legitimacy of contractual obligation." 37 This type of thinking ties in with Loftis's statement that Barnwell violates the commercial code. The theory

35 Brooks and Heilman, p. 188.
36 DeBoer, p. 21.
37 Jackson, p. 539.
of the social contract underlies both.

One may conclude that the didacticism of *The London Merchant* contributed to the success and influence of the play. The popular tradition that the play was a warning and edification to youth was a factor in its historical success. The themes of the play were well suited to appeal to the sensibilities of eighteenth-century audiences. *The London Merchant* assured people that none of them, if his heart were in the right place, was beyond the care of a God, who, when the rigors of justice were satisfied, was also a merciful Father. Man, however humble his social position, however dissolute his life might appear, could still attain a glorious destiny. Let him sin bravely, but let him believe more and he would be saved.

The middle-class theatre goer must have been flattered by what he saw. Merchants and fathers might find a reflection of their own good sense and charity in Thorowgood; apprentices might enjoy Barnwell's seduction and admire his conversion, while feeling slightly superior to him; the ladies might look down upon Millwood and yet sympathize with her tirade against the barbarities of the male sex, finding in Maria the image of their own merit. The average theatre goer of the eighteenth century must have thought better of himself for having seen or
read The London Merchant.

In the next chapter another powerful factor in the play's popularity will be discussed, namely the nature and forms of its sentimentalism.
CHAPTER V

THE SENTIMENTALISM OF THE LONDON MERCHANT

Brander Matthews once wrote that the majority of playgoers hope to see an amusing spectacle performed before their eyes; and that many of them—including nearly all women—desire to have their sympathies excited. The fact that The London Merchant both provided an interesting spectacle and excited the sympathies of its audiences may help to explain the long popularity enjoyed by the play. The play was especially successful in exciting the sympathies. The Abbé Prévost described the phenomenal popularity of the play and speculated on the causes thereof.

A tragedy which has been acted thirty-nine times consecutively at Drury Lane, amidst unflagging applause from a constantly crowded house; which has met with similar success wherever it has been performed; which has been printed and published to the number of many thousand copies, and is read with no less interest and pleasure than it is witnessed upon the stage—a tragedy which has called forth so many marks of approbation and esteem must occasion in those who hear it spoken of one

1 Brander Matthews, The Development Of The Drama (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), pp. 286-87.
or other of two thoughts: either that it is one of
those masterpieces the perfect beauty of which is
perceived by all; or that it is so well adapted to
the particular taste of the nation which thus de-
lights in it that it may be considered as a certain
indication of the present state of that nation's
taste. 2

The London Merchant has hardly proved to be a masterpiece of
which the perfect beauty is perceived by all; however, the second
alternative—that it was an indication of eighteenth century Eng-
lish taste—can be clearly established.

In the eighteenth century The London Merchant had a
reputation for warming the heart and moistening the eyes. Cibber
tells us that the persons who had brought copies of the old bal-
lad to the premiere in 1731 "were drawn in to drop their ballads,
and pull out their handkerchiefs." Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is
reported to have said that whoever did not cry at The London Mer-
chant "must deserve to be hanged." 3 Fielding wrote of Lillo

2Antoine-Francois Prévost, Le Pour et Contre, III, 337,
as quoted in Moulton's Library Of Literary Criticism, Vol. II:
Neo-Classicism to the Romantic Period (New York: Frederick Ungar,

3Lady Louisa Stuart, The Letters And Works Of Lady Mary
Wortley Montagu, ed. Lord Wharncliffe (Rev. ed.; London: George
Bell, 1887), I, cxxvii.
generally that "... it is evident the Author writ less from his Head, than from an Heart capable of exquisitely Feeling and Painting human Distress, but of causing none."⁴ Clément de Genève, who translated Lillo's play into French in 1748, castigated those who would not shed tears over the play: "Avaunt, ye small wits, ... ye thankless, hardened hearts, wrecked by excess and overmuch thinking! You are not made for the sweetness of shedding tears!"⁵ And John Bancks, in his poem to Lillo, described the effect of the play on himself.

   Let formal Heads have Liberty to rail,  
   Who think your Conduct and Your Diction fail:  
   Enough for Me, they fail not to controul,  
   And warm, the last Recesses of My Soul!⁶

Many writers of the period tended to draw the same distinction: whatever the artistic worth of the play may be, its effect upon the readers is heart-warming and real. As late as 1806 George Ensor wrote that Lillo's ability does not consist in setting forth his purpose, in depicting character, in develop-

⁵Quoted in J. Texte, Jean-Jaques Rousseau, p. 140.
⁶Bancks, I, 46.
ing his plot, nor in the texture of his scenes nor in elegance of language, but in "the expressiveness of untaught sensibility." 7

Writing in 1810, Richard Cumberland overlooked the artistic flaws of the piece in favor of its capacity to move audiences.

... Mr. Lillo was happy in the choice of his subjects, and shewed great power of affecting the heart, by working up the passions to such a height, as to render the distresses of common and domestic life equally interesting to the audiences as that of kings and heroes. His George Barnwell, Fatal Curiosity, and Arden of Feversham, are all planned on common and well-known stories; yet they have more frequently drawn tears from the audience, than the more pompous tragedies of Alexander the Great, All for Love, Etc. 8

Thus The London Merchant produced a decidedly sentimental effect on its auditors and readers. This fact brings one to the question: what is the specific nature of the sentimentalism of The London Merchant? In the twentieth century this question has been debated. Contemporaries did not speak of the play as "sentimental." They spoke rather of the many tears the play ex-

---


8 Cumberland, p. vi.
cited. Even Hazlitt and Lamb did not characterize the play as sentimental in the nineteenth century. In the present century "sentimental" is the word most often used to describe the play, especially by historians of the drama. For example, Donald Clive Stuart, in a popular history, uses the term in the following manner.

The tendency in comedy to treat domestic problems seriously, the tendency in tragedy to get away from heroic, romantic situations, the moralizing and sentimental trend of both forms of drama combined to produce The London Merchant by Lillo. . . . The London Merchant probably would not have been written in 1731 had it not been preceded by a generation of sentimental comedy. 9

This writer says that the "sentimental trend" of comedy and tragedy combined to "produce" The London Merchant. But Stanley T. Williams, in describing the influence of Lillo's play on other plays, writes that The London Merchant prepared the way for sentimental comedy.

Through George Barnwell domestic tragedy was established as a minor but definite form of sentimental drama. It was to extend into the latter half of the century, inspiring plays like the popular domestic tragedy The Gamester, by Edward Moore, and The Mysterious Husband, by Cumberland. Chronologically

somewhat later than the first comedies of Cibber and Steele, its influence increased rapidly in the third and fourth decades of the century, and with other sentimental tragedies, it prepared for the later sentimental comedy.10

In both cases the writer uses the term "sentimental" in connection with Lillo's play in a rather vague way. The two statements are not necessarily contradictory, especially if the terms were defined. Until then the reader does not have a very clear idea of how The London Merchant relates to the term "sentimental."

There is general agreement among historians of the drama that The London Merchant is a prime example of sentimentalism, but there is little agreement as to the nature of that quality. First it will be useful to explore the debate over the sentimentalism of The London Merchant.

What debate there was began with the publication in 1915 of Ernest Bernbaum's The Drama Of Sensibility. In the first pages Bernbaum attempted to define sentimentalism as it applied to the drama. His definition was broad and simple: "Confidence in the goodness of average human nature is the mainspring of

sentimentalism." Bernbaum held this confidence in the fundamental decency of the common man to be the basic assumption of the writers of sentimental comedy and domestic tragedy between the years 1696 and 1780.

Bernbaum relates his assumption about the goodness of common human nature to the rise of capitalism and the middle class, which both, he contends, necessitated a new ethical standard. The dramatists of sensibility were protesting against "the orthodox view of life," against the old aristocratic conventions and theories which had given birth to Restoration comedy and the heroic play. The new type of drama was being produced with the implied assumption that the nature of the common man was virtually perfectible. The new drama declined to take for its setting some exotic and remote region where the human species might achieve its lofty, aristocratic perfection. Rather the sentimental dramatists assured their audiences that decent and fine human beings are to be found in the ordinary walks of life. According to Bernbaum, sentimental comedy showed these fine

---

11 Bernbaum, p. 2.
ordinary people in conflict with their environment or ill fortune, but ultimately triumphing over both to find true happiness in marriage, family, and friends, not to mention business. Domestic tragedy showed them suffering catastrophes which they had not brought upon themselves.\textsuperscript{12} This is the tradition to which Lillo belonged. Bernbaum concluded his discussion of George Lillo with these words.

Thus Lillo was firmly rooted in the sentimental tradition. To it he owed his avowed purpose. . . . To it he owed those characters which he did not find in his source. . . . To it he owed the method of conducting his plot in such a way that the tragic conclusion seemed an accident to virtue.\textsuperscript{13}

Lest the meaning of the final clause seem ambiguous, it should be juxtaposed with a later statement in the same work which says, "The virtuous can be brought to an unhappy end only by villainous seduction of innocence or unmerited bad fortune."\textsuperscript{14} Thus it would seem to follow that Bernbaum sees Barnwell as a victim of the seductive allurements of Millwood and not as responsible for

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pp. 10ff.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., pp. 155.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 173.
Bernbaum's interpretation of the sentimentalism of The London Merchant was challenged by George Bush Rodman, writing an article for ELH in 1945. In response to Bernbaum, Rodman asked two questions. First, does The London Merchant actually protest against the orthodox view of life by revealing confidence in average human nature? And secondly, is the protagonist of that play overwhelmed by a catastrophe for which he is not morally responsible?15

Rodman answers the second question first. He argues that Barnwell is depicted as responsible for his crimes and as deserving his fate because Lillo has Barnwell confess frequently to both a sense of weakness and of sin. In support of Rodman's view it must be said that Barnwell describes himself as the worst of murderers in his soliloquy at the end of Act Three. There is also his statement in Act Five that, "I now am—what I've made myself." There is little doubt that Barnwell feels deserving of the ultimate in Divine retribution. But to my mind there is a further question. Does Lillo hold Barnwell responsible; or better

does the play show Barnwell as actually responsible for the catastrophe which comes upon him? For example, I have already indicated in Chapter Three the accidental nature of the murder (supra, p. 80). Rodman does not take up the question.

Next Rodman takes up his first question: does The London Merchant protest against the orthodox view of life by revealing confidence in average human nature? Rodman states that The London Merchant contains "considerable evidence" that Lillo did not have confidence in average human nature, but that he in fact distrusted it. Rodman feels that it is Thorowgood who most often speaks for Lillo, and Thorowgood adequately demonstrates Lillo's lack of confidence in average human nature by "repudiating the Shaftesburian notion that the most inexperienced youth has in the 'moral sense' a powerful defence against vice."16 In support of this opinion, he quotes Thorowgood's discourse on the pitfalls of youth in II.iv. (Vide supra, p. 122). It must be admitted that Thorowgood's terms--"frail condition of humanity," "voluptuous appetites," "vice," "the strongest curb"--do not suggest overmuch optimism in regard to our powers of reason and

16 Ibid., p. 52.
self control.

Rodman feels that the best statement of Barnwell's sense of his weakness and sinfulness is to be found in his soliloquy as he waits for his uncle to appear. He points especially to Barnwell's lines relating to Millwood:

She's got such firm possession of my heart and governs there with such despotic sway—aye, there's the cause of all my sin and sorrow. 'Tis more than love; 'tis the fever of the soul and madness of desire.

(III.v.21-25.)

Rodman reasons that, "The difference is that Lillo and the neoclassicists believe that the passions must be controlled by reason, and did not exalt feeling as a desirable end in itself."17 The real "lesson" Lillo wished to teach, according to Rodman, is that Barnwell began his trek to ruin and the scaffold when he let himself be influenced by his excessive pity for Millwood. The point of The London Merchant would then be that when any emotion gains dominance over reason, dire consequences will result for the individual. The great evil of the play would be pity indulged in for its own sake. Rodman draws the following

17Ibid., p. 57.
conclusion about the play.

In The London Merchant, then, we do not find an optimistic belief in the natural goodness of man and in the consequent desirability of giving free play to the emotions, nor do we find a protagonist who is overwhelmed by catastrophes for which he is not morally responsible; in short, we do not find a drama which can properly be called 'sentimental' if we accept the definitions of that term given by Fairchild and Bernbaum. Rather, in The London Merchant we find a drama that has more in common with Lord Kames' description of moral tragedy, which shows that 'disorderly passions lead to external misfortunes,' than it does with his description of 'pathetic tragedy,' which produces pity without conveying moral instruction.\(^{18}\)

Having attempted to prove that the play is not sentimental according to Bernbaum's use of that term, Rodman attempts to show in what sense the play may be said to be sentimental. The true sentimentalism of The London Merchant, in his opinion, arises not from Lillo's attempt to excite pity for Barnwell, but rather from the discrepancy between the pity Lillo endeavors to excite and the character who is supposed to be its object. "The audience is expected to be profoundly moved by the fall of a young man who is weak rather than good or evil, who lacks the

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 58.
magnitude of spirit which characterizes great tragic figures. .

He considers Barnwell a latter day Richard II without the Shakespearian character's elegance of expression.

Rodman concludes by saying that Lillo and his contemporaries saw in The London Merchant not, as Bernbaum thought, a protest against the orthodox view of life, but an affirmation of that view, which Rodman takes to be summarized in Pope's Essay on Man, II, 3-18. Pope describes man as being:

Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reasoning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much;
Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confused;
Still by himself abused, or disabused;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

Rodman makes a convincing case for this opinion, and it is certainly a valid point that Lillo was no unqualified

\[19\] Ibid., p. 59.
admirer of the human race. But that is really all that the passages quoted from Lillo by Rodman prove. It is my contention that Rodman has done violence to Bernbaum and to *The London Merchant*.

First, he takes Bernbaum's statement about the goodness of average human nature and applies it inflexibly and rigidly to the play. Bernbaum's statement does not completely cover the play, he seems to say, therefore it must be completely false. This, if I understand Rodman correctly, does not necessarily follow. Bernbaum said that, "Confidence in the goodness of average human nature is the mainspring of sentimentalism."

Thereupon Rodman takes this term "goodness" in the most absolute sense. He then shows that Lillo found some fault with human nature and concludes that Lillo did not hold to the goodness of human nature. But his passages really prove that Lillo did not believe in the goodness of man in an absolute sense. Actually one may believe in the goodness of man without denying that many reservations must be attached to the belief. For example, most men are sometimes weak and guided more by passion and prejudice than reason. Bernbaum may well have intended this type of qualified assumption, but unfortunately he is not given the benefit of the doubt. This is especially unfortunate when one considers
that Bernbaum was trying to formulate a general "assumption" to cover many diverse cases, rather than trying to formulate a perfectly tight description of The London Merchant.

On the other hand, Rodman himself assumes a similar latitude in his own attempt to define sentimentalism. The major thrust of Rodman's argument is predicated upon the theory that Barnwell experiences within himself a consciousness of sin and evil, from which it may be inferred that man is weak and wicked, according to Rodman. But he makes the statement of Barnwell, that he is "weak rather than good or evil." Thus Rodman implies that Barnwell is neither good nor evil but something else. Strictly speaking then, in spite of his feelings of guilt, Barnwell is not evil but weak. If he is weak and lacks "magnitude," how can he be responsible for his fate? Perhaps Bernbaum is not so wrong after all.

Secondly, Rodman has done violence to The London Merchant. He has in my opinion selected a few isolated passages to prove his point and neglected the whole direction of the play. Rodman cites Thorowgood's statements. These are really not an affirmation of doubt in regard to human nature, but they are essentially optimistic. Thorowgood tells Barnwell to be on his guard and to control himself in the hazardous period of youth.
Thorowgood would not tell Barnwell to do this if he did not consider it possible. Further, Thorowgood is the living proof that man's weakness can be controlled and his energies channeled into creative modes of action. Trueman and Maria are also examples of the creative self discipline that Lillo advocates. But more on this subject later; let us now turn to a contemporary answer to Rodman's article.

The same volume of ELH contains an article by Raymond D. Havens. Havens answers Rodman that the phrase, originally used by Bernbaum, "confidence in the goodness of average human nature"—is subject to more than one interpretation.

Does it mean that there is much goodness in the average human being? or that in most persons the good outweighs the bad? or that most of our fellows are in the main fair, decent, dependable, and kind? or that they are decidedly virtuous, even noble? . . . It is possible that Lillo would have assented to all four for he seems to have thought of goodness as sweetness, kindness, as the possession of good intentions. Persons so endowed ordinarily lead good lives; yet human nature, he saw, is weak and even good men when sorely tempted, as Barnwell was, may fall. That is, Lillo recognized that sin is sin but in judging his fellows he to a great extent ignored the will and fixed his attention less upon actions than upon feelings.20

While admitting that Rodman has made some acute observations about the play, Havens writes that, "Mr. Bernbaum's description of the play is just: despite the emphasis on Barnwell's sins, the work as a whole leaves the audience feeling that 'the tragic conclusion seems an accident to virtue.'" He goes on to describe Barnwell as "an amiable, spineless youth whom Lillo judges not by his actions but by how he feels about them."

And now Havens takes up the question: wherein lies the sentimentalism of the play? Havens, using an ornate metaphor of the twin roots of "the many-branching upas tree of sentimentality," writes that there are two sources of sentimentalism. The first is "the separation in our moral code of action from feeling together with the valuing of feeling apart from and above action." The second root of sentimentalism is the distrust of cold reason when it opposes the dictates of the heart. Havens finds in Tom Jones an example of his second point, which in view of my own comparison of Jones and Barnwell in an earlier chapter is somewhat interesting. Fielding, Havens contends, regarded Jones, "a 'kept man' with the intellect and the self-control of

21 Ibid., pp. 185-86.
a splendid fellow because his heart was in the right place." 22

Havens rounds out his essay by relating this concept of the two forms of sentimentalism to the intellectual and social milieu of the early eighteenth century.

Mr. Bernbaum rightly emphasized in his valuable, pioneer study the importance for eighteenth-century drama of the changed opinion of the goodness of human nature. Hobbes, Swift, Pope, Mandeville, Johnson, and many of their contemporaries saw mankind as chiefly evil—so much so that some of them held even our virtues to have developed from our vices. But with the increase of wealth and comfort, the rise of the middle class, the weakening of neoclassicism, the increased influence of women in literature and the arts, and the spread of emotional religion (mainly through the Wesleyan revival), emphasis on benevolence and belief in the goodness of one's fellows received great impetus. 23

And that ended the exchange between George Bush Rodman and Raymond D. Havens. But the controversy over the sentimentalism of The London Merchant was not finished.

Writing an article in 1950, Lawrence M. Price offered his view of the matter. He came to Rodman's conclusion but by a

22 Ibid., pp. 184-85.

23 Ibid., pp. 185-86.
Quite recently the question has been debated whether or not The London Merchant is to be regarded as sentimental drama. Only this is to be added: According to the accepted definition, the mark of the sentimental drama is that it presupposes the essential goodness of man. Theophilus Cibber characterized Lillo as 'A Dissenter, whose morals brought no disgrace on any sect or party.' If, during his lifetime, anyone had charged Lillo with belief in the goodness of man, he would have resented it as an unwarranted attack upon his orthodoxy. As a good Calvinist he believed in original sin as firmly as he believed in predestination.²⁴

While Mr. Price's findings on the fortunes of The London Merchant in Europe are invaluable, his reasoning in this passage is quite vulnerable. His basic assumption is that Lillo, whom he assumes to have been a highly orthodox Calvinist, was completely consistent in his beliefs and held no opinions not in harmony with Calvinism. Price even goes so far as to tell us what Lillo's resentment would have been had he been charged with belief in the goodness of man.

But the fact is that our knowledge of the life of Lillo is not so specific that we could anticipate his reactions to such a statement. Price actually misquotes Cibber, who in

²⁴ Price, p. 136.
fact wrote, "'Tis said, he was educated in the principles of the dissenters: be that as it will, his morals brought no disgrace on any sect or party." The statement tells us nothing about Lillo's "orthodoxy" as a Calvinist. We have no certain way of knowing precisely what type of Calvinist Lillo in fact was. If The London Merchant is any indication of his religious beliefs, it would seem that he was not a rigidly orthodox Calvinist. If he believed a young man who had committed fornication, theft, and murder, could be saved, he must have felt that man has something about him worth saving. Furthermore, in the last chapter I pointed out the strain of Deism entwined with Lillo's religious beliefs. Like most men, we may safely conjecture, George Lillo held to divergent views which were not altogether harmonious with one another.

Writing as recently as 1965, William H. McBurney says that, "Similarly, students of English sentimentalism have so exaggerated various elements of the play that 'the tragic conclusion seems an accident to virtue.'" The phrase is Bern-

25 Cibber, V, 338.

baum's. McBurney seems to attempt a reconciliation of the two positions presented by Bernbaum and Havens, on one hand, and Rodman and Price on the other. While admitting the element of fatalism in the history of Barnwell, he feels more should be made of Barnwell's share of responsibility.

Unquestionably, fate, necessity, destiny, and doom are often mentioned, and Lillo, as a Dissenter, must have believed in predestination as well as original sin. Yet neither doctrine would have led him to a Romantic fatalism or to a sentimental view of Barnwell as a good-natured youth overwhelmed by accidental catastrophe. Certain lines are fatalistic or sentimental in effect, but they are spoken by the evil Millwood, by the infatuated (and therefore irrational) Maria, and by Barnwell, who is not introduced until the moment of his fall, after which his attempts to reason are essentially specious.

... Although puzzling to the modern reader and uncertainly dramatized, Lillo's basic religious stand is unambiguous. As Trueman states in the closing speech, 'bleeding hearts and weeping eyes' are 'in vain' without the clear realization that the wages of sin is death.27

The two views need not exclude each other: Lillo's Calvinism does not necessarily preclude his having had confidence in average human nature, nor his having believed in the ultimate perfectibility of human nature that Bernbaum speaks of.

27 Ibid.
as a part of sentimentalism. From the point of view of man's own nature, it may be said that Lillo showed man as meaning well but often failing to act in accordance with the dictates of reason and conscience. But that is not to say that man is fundamentally wicked. As Fred O. Nolte put it, the "favorite premise" of the bourgeois dramatists is that man is "misguided rather than prone to sin."28

There is nevertheless a sense in which Bernbaum's assumption is still applicable to The London Merchant. Two of the major themes of the play discussed in the last chapter—the reconciliation of Divine justice with Divine mercy and the theme of Divine Providence bringing good out of evil—demonstrate that man can achieve a certain kind of Christian perfection through humility, repentance, and complete dependence upon the mercy and providence of God.

Concerning the sentimentalism of The London Merchant, it is my thesis that Bernbaum's original assumption in regard to sentimentalism—the goodness of average human nature—applies

easily and naturally to the play especially inasmuch as the play demonstrates the benevolence of the characters, and their tendency to be affected by the benevolence, good fortune, or evil fortune of others. I will consider each character individually, even the minor ones, and show how this basic form of sentimentalism affects his character and actions. There is one exception to this category, and it is of course Millwood. She will be treated as a special case.

First there is Barnwell. It is no doubt significant that the first speech Barnwell makes in the play is a statement of benevolence. When Millwood asks him for his thoughts on love, he answers naively:

If you mean the love of women, I have not thought of it at all. My youth and circumstances make such thoughts improper in me yet. But if you mean the general love we owe to mankind, I think no one has more of it in his temper than myself. I don't know that person in the world whose happiness I don't wish and wouldn't promote, were it in my power. In an especial manner I love my uncle, and my master, but, above all, my friend.

(I.v.31-38.)

Thus Barnwell's good nature is underscored from the very beginning of the play. There is dramatic irony in the fact that Barnwell will wrong all three people who are the special objects of his love, in the reverse order that he names them.
Millwood asks him to dine with her at her house, and Barnwell protests that his duty to his master calls him away. Millwood turns on the tears. Barnwell cannot stand to see a woman cry, so he agrees to dine with her saying, "Oh, Heavens! She loves me, worthless as I am. Her looks, her words, her flowing tears confess it. And can I leave her then? Oh, never, never!"

(79-81.) Millwood's first appeal to Barnwell is to his benevolent nature.

The fact that Barnwell is ensnared through his own benevolence is clearly indicated by his soliloquy after he refuses to confide in Trueman. He could actually escape all consequences of his theft but for the fact that he will not implicate Millwood.

I might have trusted Trueman to have applied to my uncle to have repaired the wrong I have done my master. But what of Millwood? Must I expose her too? Ungenerous and base! Then Heaven requires it not. But Heaven requires that I forsake her. . . . Yet shall I leave her, forever leave her, and not let her know the cause? She who loves me with such a boundless passion! Can cruelty be duty? I judge of what she then must feel by what I now endure.

(II.iii.1-12.)

Barnwell cannot conceive of anything so ungenerous and base as to reveal Millwood's avarice or hurt her feelings. He cannot conceive of "cruelty" as being the wisest course of action, be-
cause he is too fine a fellow.

In the following scene his benevolence works on the side of the angels when Thorowgood forgives him for his absence without hearing his excuse. Says Barnwell, "This goodness has o'ercome me." He will confess his misdeeds: "Though I had rather die than speak my shame, though racks could not have forced the guilty secret from my breast, your kindness has." (II.iv.11-13.) As a sentimentalist, Barnwell is strongly affected by the benevolence of others. He tells Thorowgood, "This generosity amazes and distracts me." He then resolves to forsake Millwood as a result of Thorowgood's benevolence. "This unlooked-for generosity has saved me from destruction." His good nature gets him into trouble and out of it in short order, or so he thinks.

When Millwood is about to leave him in the second act, he tells her and Lucy, "Humanity obliges me to wish you well." But Millwood fools Barnwell with the story about her would-be lover, whom she is supposedly fleeing for love of Barnwell. It is clear that she has made another appeal to his benevolence when he moans:

To be exposed to all the rigors of the various seasons, the summer's parching heat and winter's cold, unhoused to wander friendless through the unhospitable world in misery and want, attended with fear
and danger, and pursued by malice and revenge. Would'st thou endure all this for me, and can I do nothing to prevent it?

(II.xi.68-73.)

Of course he prevents her "ruin" by stealing from his master. Immediately after Millwood leaves with the money, Barnwell begins to analyze his motives for the theft: he is sure they were "compassion and generosity."

Barnwell is plunged into greater sin by his good nature. Lest the point be missed, in the third scene of Act Three, Lillo has Lucy explain Barnwell's motives for the theft to Blunt. Blunt says that Barnwell's youth and lack of experience make it possible for Millwood to gull him. Lucy, speaking perhaps for Lillo, denies this: "No, it is his love... Let me see the wisest of you all as much in love with me as Barnwell is with Millwood, and I'll engage to make as great a fool of him."

(III.iii.7-12.)

Lucy then relates how Barnwell had fled to Millwood for sanctuary and she had rebuffed him and then, seeing he still had money, welcomed him to bed and board. Lucy then describes how she prepared him to hear the murder plan.

As doubts and fears followed by reconciliation ever increase love, where the passion is sincere, so in him it caused so wild a transport of excessive fond-
ness—such joy, such grief, such pleasure, and such anguish—that nature in him seemed sinking with the weight and the charmed soul disposed to quit his breast for hers.

(III.iv.45-51.)

Such is Barnwell's benevolence toward Millwood, who now suggests he murder his uncle. Barnwell's reaction to the thought is extreme but eventually compliant. In agreeing to do it, Barnwell hammers away at his motive for his loss of purity, the theft, and finally the murder: "Why, love, love, love!" In agreeing to the murder, he mentions love seven times. Barnwell's fall might be called All for Love. His motives are a mixture of lust and benevolence.

That Lillo wishes us to accept this sentimentalized version of the murder motive can be inferred from the description of Barnwell and the intended crime as given by the incredulous Blunt.

Is it possible she could persuade him to do an act like that? He is by nature honest, grateful, compassionate, and generous; and though his love and her artful persuasions have wrought him to practice what he abhors, yet we all can witness for him with what reluctance he has still complied. So many tears he shed o'er each offense as might, if possible, sanctify theft and make a merit of crime.

(III.iv.67-73.)

This last statement seems to justify Rodman's theory that the true sentimentalism of the play lies in "the lack of correspon-
dence between the feeling of pity that Lillo tries to create and the character who is intended to arouse this feeling. . . ." 29

R.D. Havens makes an almost identical statement, namely that the sentimentalism of the play lies in "the separation in our moral code of action from feeling, together with the valuing of feeling apart from and above action." 30 When one gets down to cases, it seems both these men are saying the same thing about the sentimentalism of the play but in different terms. The fact is that Barnwell feels so rotten about the murder and sheds so many tears before and after that the net effect seems intended to dispose the audience to overlook the true nature of his offenses.

Paul Parnell has written an interesting analysis of the sentimentalism of The London Merchant, in which he stresses the element of self-abasement on the part of Barnwell. He calls the prison scene the most conspicuous example of self-abasement in all sentimental literature.

Just before his execution George Barnwell humiliates

---

29 Rodman, p. 59.

30 Havens, pp. 184–85.
himself before the employer he has robbed, the friend who has shielded him, and the girl who has loved and sacrificed for him in vain. By this time Barnwell has committed fornication, breach of trust, robbery, and murder—and moreover murder of a relative and benefactor. Nevertheless, all may be forgiven him because he admits himself wrong with such vehemence and goes to such extremes in self-humiliation.31

This sounds similar to what Havens and Rodman have been saying about the tendency within the play of feeling to be valued over action. The self-abasement that Parnell describes can be seen, from one point of view, as the reverse side of Barnwell's good nature or benevolence. I.e., once Barnwell has fallen into committing a heinous crime, because he is fundamentally good-natured he is appalled at his own guilt. To the extent that he is good-natured, Barnwell is filled with self-loathing. Thus his groveling before Trueman in prison is an outgrowth of benevolence—it is the only decent thing to do when one has sunk that low.

The fifth act is begun on a note of self-abasement as Blunt narrates Barnwell's conduct at the trial, which Thorowgood did not attend out of a wish not to hurt Barnwell's feelings by appearing at the public show of his guilt. Saya Blunt:

31Parnell, p. 533.
It was mournful, indeed. Barnwell's youth and modest deportment as he passed drew tears from every eye. When placed at the bar and arraigned before the reverend judges, with many tears and interrupting sobs he confessed and aggravated his offenses....

(Barnwell aggravated his crimes so that all might see his fundamental human decency and appropriate abhorrence of his deeds.)

In the prison scene he addresses Thorowgood as, "My honored, injured master, whose goodness has covered me a thousand times with shame...." Barnwell tells Trueman, "I feel the anguish of thy generous soul—but I was born to murder all who love me," and "Both weep." Barnwell then gratuitously affirms Millwood's hold on his soul to have been such that had she demanded it, he would have murdered even the loyal Trueman, who chides, "Prithee, aggravate thy faults no more." Says Barnwell, "I think I should! Thus good and generous as you are, I should have murdered you!" Barnwell explains that his horrid guilt is such that no one but hardened sinners can fathom it. "'Tis what the good and innocent like you can ne'er conceive." Trueman then insists on demonstrating physically through the embrace his belief in Barnwell's fundamental goodness.

Trueman then introduces Maria with the comment to Barnwell, "Again your heart must bleed for other's woes." Barnwell
is so good-natured that his heart bleeds for others. When Barnwell has stressed enough Maria's condenscension in loving him, he asks for the ultimate proof of her goodness—and his—the "chaste embrace." When she bestows it he exclaims, "Exalted goodness!" Scene The Last contains the final indication of Barnwell's good nature. His fervent attempt to convert Millwood and his prayers on her behalf cast him as the model of benevolence. It is difficult to avoid the impression that Barnwell is so benevolent and so splendid down deep that surely he must deserve a better fate than hanging. Or, as Nettleton phrased it, Barnwell is portrayed as "a man more sinned against than sinning." In other words, the tragic conclusion, as Bernbaum suggested, does in one sense seem an accident to virtue.

Thorowgood, as one would expect, is an exemplar of benevolence. His benevolence is universal, extending from the Divinity to his family, business associates, and his country. Thorowgood's religious benevolence may be inferred from the fact that he sees to it that Barnwell is ministered to by a divine in prison. Not content with that, Thorowgood checks up to see that

---

Barnwell has made his peace with his Maker before the execution. His piety is evidenced in this statement of Barnwell's repentence: "Oh, the joy it gives to see a soul formed and prepared for Heaven!" (V.ii.29.)

Thorowgood is benevolent toward his family. In his conversation with Maria in the first act, he promises he will not force her to marry any man she does not love. (I.ii.55-70.) This is a generous sentiment for an Elizabethan parent. Thorowgood's benevolence to his business associates is shown in his treatment of Barnwell and Trueman. He takes pains to lecture Trueman on the responsibilities of being a merchant. He shows his benevolence to Barnwell in many ways. His misguided forbearance in II.iv is motivated by his desire to practice charity and tolerance. On that occasion he tells Barnwell, "This remorse makes thee dearer to me than if thou hadst never offended." (39.) His consequent fatherly advice to the youth on the need for self control is motivated by benevolence. And finally his solicitude for Barnwell in prison is proof of his perfect good nature. His last words to Barnwell are choked with tears, "I must retire to indulge a weakness I find impossible to overcome.--Much loved, and much lamented youth, farewell." (V.ii.55-57.) Thorowgood is benevolent toward Lucy and Blunt after
their confession--"Pursue your proposed reformation, and know me hereafter for your friend." (V.i.38.) Within the proper limits he is even tolerant toward Millwood, commenting on her tirade, "Truth is truth, though from an enemy and spoke in malice." (IV. xviii.57.)

Thorowgood, as Lillo's ideal, is also benevolent toward his country. It is the first fact we learn in the play, which is set in Elizabethan times before the attempted Spanish invasion of England in 1588. Thorowgood, having just received a packet of letters, explains to Trueman how the merchants of London, himself obviously among them, have averted "The storm that threatened our royal mistress, pure religion, liberty, and laws."

Thorowgood explains to the fawning Trueman how this was done.

The bank of Genoa had agreed, at excessive interest and on good security, to advance the King of Spain a sum of money sufficient to equip his vast Armado. Of which, our peerless Elizabeth . . . being well informed, sent Walsingham . . . to consult the merchants of this loyal city, who agreed to direct their several agents to influence if possible, the Genoese to break their contract with the Spanish court. 'Tis done. The state and bank of Genoa, having maturely weighed and rightly judged of their true interest, prefer the friendship of the merchants of London to that of a monarch who proudly styles himself King of both Indies.

(I.i.31-43.)

With his benevolence extending to all areas and levels of life,
Thorowgood is a kind of magnanimous man of feeling.

Of Trueman, John Bancks wrote, "What Heart but throbs when Trueman's Soul is tost?/ The virtuous Friend of one to Virtue lost." When Barnwell first returns from Millwood's house, refusing to confide his adventure, Trueman complains, "Rightly did my sympathizing heart forebode last night, when thou was absent, something fatal to our peace." (II. 11. 24-25.) Trueman's benevolence expresses itself chiefly through his "sympathizing heart." He tries first to prevent Barnwell's fall and later to comfort his friend in prison. When he sees Barnwell in chains, Trueman laments, "What have I suffered since I saw you last!" Barnwell is about to be hung, and Trueman talks of his own feelings: a typical man of feeling. The embrace with Barnwell is, of course, the best instance of Trueman's benevolence. The same may be said of Maria. Her insistence on being with Barnwell to the very end, not to mention her prior attempt to prevent his fall, is both benevolent and pathetic.

Of more interest is the benevolence of Millwood's servants, Lucy and Blunt. Lucy tells Blunt of her feelings of

33Bancks, I, 52.
sympathy for Barnwell in the first act: "I confess there is something in youth and innocence that moves me mightily." (vii. 17.) This is a hint that Lucy's heart is in the right place. True, she helps Millwood to trick George into stealing the money, but when she tells Blunt how Millwood has persuaded Barnwell to murder the uncle, their reaction is surprisingly decent and fine for two people who have until now been in the pay of a prostitute. It is too good to be true. Blunt, presumably a worldly-wise pimp heretofore, weeps to hear the "sad relation." He resolves at length:

BLUNT.
'Tis time the world was rid of such a monster.

LUCY.
If we don't do our endeavors to prevent this murder, we are as bad as she.

BLUNT.
I'm afraid it is too late.

LUCY.
Perhaps not. Her barbarity to Barnwell makes me hate her. We've run too great a length with her already. I did not think her or myself so wicked as I find, upon reflection, we are.

(III.iv.111-18.)

Finally in the fifth act as Barnwell and Millwood are being led to execution, Lucy exclaims, "Oh, sorrow insupportable! Break, break, my heart!" These lines would be more appropriately
spoken by Maria, but perhaps Lillo felt he had already sufficiently demonstrated her benevolence. A broken heart is the final sign that Lucy does indeed possess a heart of gold.

Another minor character, definitely a sentimentalist, is the uncle. Immediately after being stabbed to the heart by a masked stranger, he implores heaven's blessing on the same.

Oh, I am slain! All-gracious Heaven, regard the prayer of thy dying servant! Bless with thy choicest blessing my dearest nephew, forgive my murderer, and take my soul to endless mercy!

(III.vii.12-15.)

Finding that his nephew and his murderer are one and the same, he weeps pathetically and bestows a kiss of forgiveness on Barnwell. His heart is obviously broken and he dies as much from that as the stabbing.

Millwood is the only character who is not a sentimentalist. That is, she shows no deep down good nature. If Barnwell, Thorowgood, Trueman, Maria, Blunt, Lucy, and the Uncle all show man as fundamentally decent with all his faults, what does Millwood tell us of human nature? As a young girl she has been corrupted by older men. She has experienced nothing but guile and cunning at the hands of her seducers, so she makes a comparable return. She explains her background and its misanthropic effects to Lucy in the first act.
MILLWOOD.
A conquest would be new indeed!

LUCY.
Not to you, who make 'em every day—but to me—well, 'tis what I'm never to expect, unfortunate as I am.
But your wit and beauty--

MILLWOOD.
First made me a wretch, and still continue me so.
Men, however generous or sincere to one another, are all selfish hypocrites in their affairs with us. We are no otherwise esteemed or regarded by them but as we contribute to their satisfaction.

It's a general maxim among the knowing part of mankind that a woman without virtue, like a man without honor or honesty, is capable of any action, though never so vile. And yet, what pains will they not take, what arts not use, to seduce us from our innocence and make us contemptible and wicked, even in their own opinions? Then, is it not just the villains, to their cost, should find us so? But guilt makes them suspicious and keeps them on their guard. Therefore we can take advantage only of the young and innocent part of the sex who, having never injured women, apprehend no injury from them.

(I.iii.6.41.)

Millwood's is a special case. She is the one thoroughly consistent character in the drama. She has been twisted by her early experience and cannot change. Perhaps Lillo's comment on human nature as embodied in Millwood is that this nature, while created basically good, may be warped and twisted by conditions of the environment almost to the point where reformation is humanly speaking impossible. In the sense that Millwood has
been herself pre-conditioned to perform evil actions, she like Barnwell is to a certain degree undeserving of the catastrophe which overtakes her. Millwood is wicked first from environment and then from choice.

On the basis of the evidence presented here in relation to the benevolence of all the characters, except Millwood, I conclude that the major thrust of The London Merchant is in the direction of affirming the goodness and decency of average human nature. Millwood's case is exceptional but not necessarily antagonistic to this view. If this conclusion is correct, then Bernbaum's original description of the play is, with some qualification, still a valid one.

In addition to the ideas of Bernbaum, Havens, and Rodman, another able critic has offered an insight into the sentimentalism of The London Merchant. Mr. Arthur Sherbo, in his English Sentimental Drama, observes a primary technique of the sentimental dramatists to have been "prolongation for sentimental effect." While Professor Sherbo does not discuss The London Merchant at any length, he has the following comment.

The visits of Trueman and Thorowgood to George Barnwell, in prison for murder of his uncle, afford another example of the dramatist's use of prolongation for sentimental effect (The London Merchant, V, ii).
The situation in Lillo's play is much the same as that in *The Lying Lover* and *The Witch of Edmonton*, although the relationship between Barnwell and his visitors is not so close as it is in the other two plays.\(^{34}\)

The thesis that Act Five, which consists largely of the prison visits of Trueman and Thorowgood to Barnwell, is prolonged for sentimental effect would seem to relate to Brooks and Heilman's thesis that Act Five is an unnecessary emotional orgy which is full of the "didactic and the sentimental." Lillo deliberately prolonged the action of the play for both thematic and emotional effects.

The sentimentalism of *The London Merchant* has played a distinct role in bringing the play into prominence. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the sentimentalism of the play was a plus factor, drawing tears from many audiences and eulogies from such persons as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Fielding, Bancks, Cumberland, and Daniel. In France the play drew praise from Rousseau, Diderot, Prevost, and Clement. In Germany it was praised by Lessing and perhaps imitated by Kotzebue. In the nineteenth century, as William McBurney notes, the

\(^{34}\) Sherbo, p. 59.
pathos of the play was the primary factor which called forth the attack of Lamb. He might have said the same for those of Hazlitt and Schlegel. Nonetheless, the attacks of these men, contrary to their intentions, helped to keep the play from falling into oblivion. In the twentieth century, the sentimentalism has provided the material for a debate in a prominent literary journal by students of English sentimentalism. Had the sentimentalism of *The London Merchant* not been debated by such as Bernbaum, Rodman, Havens, and Price, the play might not have become as prominent in literary anthologies and critical editions as it has.
CHAPTER VI

THE LONDON MERCHANT AS A TRAGEDY

Lillo did not invent the genre of domestic tragedy of which The London Merchant is a notable example. Domestic tragedies, or serious dramas based not on the lives of kings but on the lives of ordinary people, had been written in England for more than a century before the birth of George Lillo. Accordingly a brief sketch of the history of the form may prove useful for understanding the use Lillo made of it.

Arthur Eustace Morgan divides the development of domestic tragedy into three periods which are: (1) Early Domestic Tragedy dating from 1590 to 1610, (2) The Second Period or the century after 1680, and (3) The Modern Period. Since Lillo's work falls in the second period, our consideration will include only the first two periods.

Within the early period Morgan includes the anonymous Arden of Feversham (1592), the story of a recent crime, the murder of Thomas Arden by his wife Alice in 1551; A Warning For Fair Women (1599); The Witch of Edmonton, written in collaboration by Dekker, Ford, and Rowley, the authentic story of Mother
Sawyer; the anonymous The Yorkshire Tragedy (1608); Two Tragedies In One by Yarington; and The Changeling by Middletön and Rowley. Morgan remarks that "All these seven plays are concerned with English stories--crime stories as we have seen--with the exception of the Italian half of Yarington's 'Two Tragedies In One.'"¹ Other scholars have cited additional cases. Nettleton lists A Woman Killed With Kindness (1603) by Thomas Heywood as an Elizabethan domestic tragedy.² Allardyce Nicoll lists Heywood's The English Traveller (1633) as a somewhat later domestic tragedy.

Morgan feels that "the salient feature" of Elizabethan domestic tragedy was realism.³ Morgan's extended description of the qualities of this realism may be broken down into the following four points.

A) Elizabethan domestic tragedies were often based on actual case histories, very often a crime.

B) These tragedies frequently ended in a jail or with a gallows scene.

C) These plays had an authentic English setting, and the characters had English given names.

¹Morgan, p. 188.

²Nettleton, "The Drama And The Stage," p. 72.

³Morgan, p. 186.
D) Later domestic tragedies were sometimes written in prose. Morgan adds the comment that the earliest writers of domestic tragedy were quick to stress the moral value of their work. Each of these qualities applies to The London Merchant. It is therefore understandable that Nicoll would describe these Elizabethan domestic tragedies as "The fount of the domestic sentimentalized tragedy as expressed in the works of Lillo." The second period according to Morgan includes domestic tragedies written between 1680 and 1780. Morgan characterizes these plays as domestic in theme but as less realistic in treatment. As such he feels they are not domestic tragedies in the strictest sense. To this period belong Otway's The Orphan (1680), Southerne's The Fatal Marriage (1694), Centlivre's The Perjured Husband (1700), and Rowe's The Fair Penitent (1703). Allardyce Nicoll maintains that Nicholas Rowe is the "true source of the eighteenth century domestic tragedy." He calls Rowe the "true

---

4 Ibid., passim, pp. 177-93.
5 Nicoll, p. 116.
6 Ibid., p. 117.
link that binds Otway with Lillo." Louis I. Bredvold cites the 

fact that in the prologue to The Fair Penitent "Rowe pointed out 

that his tragedy, 'a melancholy tale of private woes,' dealt with 

a humbler theme than 'the fate of kings and empires.'"7 Bredvold 

remarks that consciously or not Rowe was preparing the way for 

bourgeois tragedy. And in fact Lillo echoed Rowe in the prologue 

to The London Merchant, where his purpose is, he says, to tell 

"In artless strains, a tale of private woe."

There are still other precedents for domestic drama 

that Morgan does not mention. For example, Bonamy Dobrée men-

tions an attempt at middle-class tragedy by Lewis Theobald called 

The Perfidious Brothers (1716).8 Bernbaum refers to The Fatal 

Extravagance (1721) by Aaron Hill as a domestic tragedy. Bern-

baum suggests that this play may well have been known to Lillo 

since it was revived for seven performances in 1730 at the same 

playhouse at which Lillo's Silvia (1730) premiered.9 Allardyce 

Nicoll and Bonamy Dobrée likewise mention Hill's play as a fore-

---

7 Bredvold, p. 93.

8 Dobrée, English Literature, p. 255.

9 Bernbaum, p. 152.
bear of Lillo's play. Bernbaum also mentions the anonymous The Rival Brothers (1704) as another antecedent. Allardyce Nicoll lists another play of "private life" entitled Fatal Love; Or, The Degenerate Brother (1730) by Osborne Sydney Wandesford.  

Others have suggested related non-dramatic precedents. Fred O. Nolte observes that the protagonist of Robinson Crusoe (1719) by Defoe is "essentially an honest, industrious burg- 
gher." Both Nolte and Cecil A. Moore suggest a comparison of Lillo's play with Addison's The Spectator, No. 69. Nolte also conjectures that Locke's philosophy, Richardson's novels, and Lillo's The London Merchant "were quite natural developments in England and were looked upon as such by the English themselves."  

In point of fact Lillo himself did not regard his attempt to deal with middle class characters in tragedy as completely original. In the prologue to The London Merchant he 

---

10 Nicoll, p. 119.

11 Nolte, p. 21.

12 See Nolte, p. 120; see C.A. Moore, Backgrounds Of English Literature 1700-1760 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1953), p. 114.

13 Nolte, p. 6.
gives full recognition to those playwrights who had written domestic tragedies before him. Describing the Tragic Muse, he writes:

In ev'ry former age, and foreign tongue,
With native grandeur thus the goddess sung.
Upon our stage, indeed, with wish'd success,
You've sometimes seen her in a humbler dress,
Great only in distress. When she complains
In Southerne's, Rowe's, or Otway's moving strains,
The brillant [sic] drops that fall from each bright eye
The absent pomp, with brighter gems supply.

(11-18)

Even though Lillo acknowledged his debt to Southerne, Rowe, and Otway, the tradition persisted that he was a highly original writer. Thomas Davies, his early editor, wrote of Lillo: "The world is indebted to this writer for the invention of a new species of dramatic poetry, which may properly be termed the inferior or lesser tragedy."¹⁴ George Nettleton called Lillo a "pioneer" and the premiere of The London Merchant a "landmark in the history of English drama." Allardyce Nicoll borrows the same term to describe the importance of Lillo's play. William Henry Hudson wrote that, "Though as a didactic tragedy of private woe The London Merchant was not an entirely new thing, its sig-

¹⁴Davies, I, iii.
nificance as an innovation ... is not therefore to be questioned."\(^{15}\) In their history of the theatre Freedley and Reeves spoke of the play as having changed the course of English tragedy; and Robert G. Noyes described the play as one of the most original tragedies of the century.

In the face of this tradition one wonders what the real source of Lillo's originality was. There is a certain unanimity as to the essence of Lillo's originality. Davies describes Lillo's contribution to tragedy in the following terms.

> It is true some of our best dramatic poets in their most affecting pieces, had lowered the buskin, and fitted it to characters in life inferior to Kings and Heroes; yet no writer had ventured to descend so low as to introduce the character of a merchant, or his apprentice into a tragedy.\(^{16}\)

George Nettleton wrote that Lillo's predecessors such as Otway and Rowe had not really gotten away from aristocratic themes. Nettleton notes that Jane Shore is after all ruined by a great nobleman.\(^{17}\) With all due regard for Nettleton's comparison of

\(^{15}\) Hudson, p. 146.

\(^{16}\) Davies, I, xii.

\(^{17}\) Nettleton, "The Drama And The Stage," p. 74.
Rowe and Lillo, a comparison of Otway and Lillo will reveal much more clearly the difference between Lillo and his forebears.

In Otway's *The Orphan* (1680) the central incident is indeed domestic, but the characters, while not kings and queens, are clearly aristocratic. Even their names are aristocratic—Acasto, Polydore, Castalio, and Monimia. Acasto, the father of the two young men, is described as an old Lord living in the country. The actions of the characters are typically aristocratic. Monimia, having lost her honor, poisons herself. Polydore provokes Castalio to a duel; and Castalio dies upon his own sword. With the theme of love vs. honor so much in the foreground, I would venture to assert that *The Orphan* has more in common with the heroic plays of Dryden than with the domestic tragedies of Lillo.

As for Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682), a simple comparison of the *Dramatis Personae* of that play with that of *The London Merchant* will reveal how Otway's play is aristocratic in tone and focus and Lillo's play is distinctly middle class and commercial in atmosphere. The Duke of Venice figures in Otway's play. Priuli, a senator, is the father of Belvidera; Thorowgood, a merchant, is the father of Maria. Jaffeir and Pierre are described as "Conspirators"; Barnwell and Trueman are described as
apprentices. Belvidera has two women listed as "attendants." Mentioned also by Otway are The Council of Ten, Guàrds, Friar, Executioner and "Rabble." Otway's list of characters sounds more like that of Othello than The London Merchant's Millwood ("a lady of pleasure"), Blunt, and Lucy. Then note the exotic names in Otway: compare his Bedamar to Lillo's Blunt.

Then compare the action. Otway's play involves a plot against the state of Venice; Lillo's play involves the ruin of an obscure apprentice. The story of Jaffeir, Pierre, and Belvidera clearly contrasts the rival claims of love and honor, a theme strongly reminiscent of the heroic plays of John Dryden. While both plays of Otway and Lillo tell the story of two friends, and both plays end with a scaffold tableau, they have little else in common. Otway is writing in the romantic and heroic tradition, while Lillo is writing in a more realistic vein. John Loftis has expressed the crux of Lillo's originality: "No one before Lillo had looked for the center of his dramatic conflict in the mental conflict of a merchant character." 18

Lillo's use of middle class characters in a tragedy excited much attention. Fred O. Nolte states that "a whole critical literature" arose in France and Germany to debate the value of the dramatic genre Lillo represented. Lillo's use of middle class characters grew out of his concept of the nature and function of dramatic art.

Lillo believed the end of tragedy to be "the exciting of the passions in order to the correcting of such of them as are criminal, either in their nature or through their excess." With his goal as the eradication of vice and the inculcation of virtue, Lillo conceived that middle class characters would be better for this purpose than characters who were kings and queens. The reasons for this view are stated in the Dedication to The London Merchant.

What I would infer is this, I think, evident truth: that tragedy is so far from losing its dignity by being accommodated to the circumstances of the generality of mankind that it is more truly august in proportion to the extent of its influence and the numbers that are properly affected by it, as it is more truly great to be the instrument of good to many who stand in need of our assistance than to a very small part of that number.

\[19\] Nolte, p. 6.
If princes, &c., were alone liable to misfortunes arising from vice or weakness in themselves or others, there would be good reason for confining the characters in tragedy to those of superior rank; but, since the contrary is evident, nothing can be more reasonable than to proportion the remedy to the disease.

I am far from denying that tragedies founded on any instructive and extraordinary events in history, or a well-invented fable where the persons introduced are of the highest rank, are without their use, even to the bulk of the audience. The strong contrast between a Tamerlane and a Bajazet may have its weight with an unsteady people and contribute to the fixing of them in the interest of a prince of the character of the former, when, through their own levity or the arts of designing men, they are rendered factious and uneasy, though they have the highest reason to be satisfied. The sentiments and example of a Cato may inspire his spectators with a just sense of the value of liberty, when they see that honest patriot prefer death to an obligation from a tyrant who would sacrifice the constitution of his country and the liberties of mankind to his ambition or revenge. I have attempted, indeed, to enlarge the province of the graver kind of poetry, and should be glad to see it carried on by some abler hand.

(11. 18-49.)

It is plain that Lillo's utilitarian concept of tragedy dictated the use of middle class characters. There were simply more merchants and apprentices to be saved than there were royalty.

From the very first performance the fitness of middle class characters for tragedy was debated. Davies tells us that the "wittings of the time" described Lillo's play as "a Newgate
Tragedy." An anonymous writer in The Weekly Register (No. LXXI, August 21, 1731) was one of the first to come to the defense of Lillo’s use of "low" characters. He praises Lillo for overcoming the prejudice against middle class characters. He argues that this kind of tragedy, although it is a new form, has a right to exist as long as it pleases the audience. 21

Another writer for The Gentleman's Magazine (August, 1731) hastened to add his support to the Register’s defense of Lillo.

The Objection, that the Characters are too low for the stage, the Register answers, --That 'tis lowness of Action, not of Character that is not allowed there. The Circumstances here are of the utmost Importance, and rise as high in Action as any to be met with in the Stories of more Pomp and Ostentation. 'Tis a Tragedy of a new kind; but while it yields a rational Pleasure, its Novelty will be no Objection. It is the finest Lesson to Youth, and what is calculated for their Use is made their Entertainment. 22

The author of The Apprentice's Vade Mecum (1734), whom Alan D. McKillop takes to be Samuel Richardson, praised The London Mer-

---

20 Davies, I, xii.

21 Gray, pp. 70-71.

chant because by the low characters: "... the Stage has condescended to make itself useful to the City-Youth." 23 In all three of these contemporary defenses of Lillo's play, the use of the middle class characters is linked to the teaching of morality. These men apparently shared Lillo's fundamental assumption that tragedy is above all didactic.

Indicative of the attention Lillo's play received is the title of the poem by John Bancks—"Of Tragedy; And The Comparison of Public and Private Characters. To Mr. Lillo." In spite of his rather difficult lines, Bancks makes a perceptive observation.

Thus Nature charms in Otway's rural Scenes:
(Each Action tells us what the Passion means.)
Acasto, or thy Thorowgood, would shine,
Enthrone'd, an Alfred; or an Antonine.
His warmer Youths, or Barnwell, on a Throne,
Had wrought a Nation's Ruin with their own.
Small Things in Greater, Greater in the Small,
We find, if Nature be the Guide thro' all:
For in feign'd Characters, as in the True,
She forms the Lab'rinth, and She gives the Clue. 24

It is not the social rank of the tragic hero that matters; rather let the playwright be faithful to nature, and he will pro-

23 The Apprentice's Vade Mecum, p. 16.
duce the genuine effects of tragedy.

Writing to a fictitious friend in the country in 1767, Charles Jenner made a strong appeal for greater realism in tragedy. For Jenner greater realism was inseparably bound up with the use of characters from ordinary life. He objects to the traditional figures of kings and queens as tragic protagonists on the grounds that they have so little in common with the generality of mankind. The fact that Jenner does not mention Lillo's play nor his ideas on the subject may indicate that there was a movement abroad in the eighteenth century toward greater realism in tragedy, at least on the part of such as Lillo, Bancks, and Jenner, who writes:

The generality of tragedies I have seen, are so out of the road of common life, founded upon distress so unlikely ever to happen, and when it does, affecting men as a community more than as individuals, that, even if I do understand them, I feel myself but little interested in their events. Every man may feel the wretchedness of having an undutiful son, an unnatural father, a false wife, a deceitful friend; but it happens to few to have kingdoms to lose, or to have their happiness only dependant on the rise and fall of states. A captive queen will affect an audience of princesses, but a virtuous wife sinking under the weight of unmerited stress will affect the whole world. ²⁵

Jenner's ideas are strikingly similar to those of George Lillo. Both men have a utilitarian concept of tragedy. Like Lillo, Jenner connects the use of ordinary characters with the inculcation of morality. The following passage from Jenner might serve as a description of the objectives of George Lillo in writing *The London Merchant* and *Fatal Curiosity*.

It appears to me ridiculous that the tragic poet should have recourse to the captivity of kings, and the dissolution of empires, in order to affect his audience, when every social connection would afford him a much finer subject, and enable him to do it with ten times the force, as well as ten times the use, in point of morality. For as the social duties are an inexhaustible fund of moral lessons, so a failure in any of them must be a continual source of domestic distress; and can any thing afford a finer field for the tragic poet to exercise his genius in, than the placing in the most striking point of view, the misery which must necessarily attend the breach of those reciprocal duties. . . .

I think it is significant that when Wallace Jackson, a modern critic, recently attempted to discover the common element in the tragedies of Dryden, Rowe, and Lillo, he came to the conclusion that Jenner advocated as tragic material—"the misery which must necessarily attend the breach of those reciprocal duties," as Jenner put it. Wallace Jackson makes the same point.

---

26 Ibid., p. 162.
From this point of view a clear line of descent may be drawn from *All for Love* through *Jane Shore* to *The London Merchant*. Rowe, like Dryden and Lillo, locates the essential tragic fact in the violation of the social contract. These tragedies, as such, are tragedies of violated postulates, or postulates that have their origin and authority in the legitimate institutions of a stable social order. Sexual excess in these dramas is, therefore, a form of symbolic action standing for any mode of behavior which tends to thwart the legitimacy of contractual obligation.  

Critics as far removed in time and milieu as Charles Jenner and Wallace Jackson describe the growing tendency in the eighteenth century to look into the lives of ordinary men for the material for tragedy. Lillo did not conceptualize a brand new approach to tragedy; rather he had the imagination to understand the changing tastes of his century and to write a play which conformed to them. Hence the enormous success of the play: the times were ripe for middle class tragedy. Davies wrote that Lillo's attempt was "fully justified by his success." 

Even in the early part of the nineteenth century writers may be found echoing the sentiments expressed in the Dedication to *The London Merchant*. In 1806 George Ensor defended Lillo's tragedy.

---

27 Jackson, p. 539.

28 Davies, I, xii.
There are some, who, deducing their notions of all propriety from the Greeks, condemn this sort of tragedy, and even exclude it from the drama. This is pedantic, aristocratic, and absurd. It is certain, generally speaking, that what approaches nearest to our own condition afflicts us most; and should the dramatist write to kings, or to citizens? If we estimate also the moral influence of both, the popular is much superior: the calamities of royal persons cannot seldom resemble the miseries of private life.

The force of this argument did not win over many of the critics of the nineteenth century. Sir Walter Scott, writing in 1811, conceded that tragedies of private life such as Lillo wrote would probably achieve "permanent popularity." However, he felt that inasmuch as their catastrophes were often "shocking and bloody," middle class tragedies would be of use chiefly to the cruder and less "fastidious" elements of society.

One of the best reasoned objections to Lillo's use of middle class characters in tragedy was written in 1819 by Thomas Campbell. Campbell began his essay by describing Lillo as "the tragic poet of middling and familiar life." He then cited the argument--given in 1806 by Ensor--that "what approaches nearest to our own condition afflicts us most." Campbell's answer to

---

29 Ensor, II, 169-70.

this argument is extremely sensitive and balanced.

Undoubtedly the genuine delineation of the human heart will please us, from whatever station or circumstances of life it is derived. In the simple pathos of tragedy probably very little difference will be felt from the choice of characters being pitched above or below the line of mediocrity in station. But something more than pathos is required in tragedy; and the very pain that attends our sympathy requires agreeable and romantic associations of the fancy to be blended with its pognancy. Whatever attaches ideas of importance, publicity, and elevation to the object of pity, forms a brightening and alluring medium to the imagination.

Even situations far depressed beneath the familiar mediocrity of life, are more picturesque and poetical than its ordinary level. It is certainly on the virtues of the middling rank of life that the strength and comforts of society chiefly depend, in the same manner as we look for the harvest not on cliffs and precipices, but on the easy slope and the uniform plain. But the painter does not in general fix on level countries for the subjects of his noblest landscapes. There is an analogy, I conceive, to this in the moral painting of tragedy. Disparities of station give it boldness of outline. The commanding situations of life are its mountain scenery—the region where its storm and sunshine may be pouredtrayed in their strongest contrast and colouring. 31

Thomas Campbell was not alone in his opposition to what he called "a more general adoption of this plebeian principle" in tragedy. In 1826 the gentleman identified as "P.P." objected to The London Merchant on similar esthetic considerations. His

31 Campbell, V, 61-62.
query was: "Who can be interested about the fate of such common-place personages as Thorowgood and his daughter, or of a vulgar, heartless strumpet like Millwood. . . ." He follows the principle earlier espoused by Thomas Campbell.

The nature displayed in Tragedy is, or should be, nature sublimated, refined, and purged of its grossness: not drawn from subjects essentially mean, nor depicting the ordinary occupations of domestic life, which no ability can elevate into importance, or divest of vulgar associations. 32

Down to the twentieth century critics are to be found who object to the play for the reasons enunciated by Thomas Campbell and P.P. For example, Allardyce Nicoll, affirming that tragedy requires an element of "majestic grandeur," finds The London Merchant and most domestic plays entirely lacking. Lillo's play in his opinion cannot give the tragic effects because of its "lowered and uninspiring tone." 33

While one may admire the reasoned eloquence of Thomas Campbell, and while one may share Nicoll's view of The London Merchant as uninspiring, one must admit that subsequent dramatic history has tended to follow the course charted by Lillo and the

32 P.P., p. iii.

other writers of domestic tragedy. *The London Merchant* has emerged as an early signpost indicating the direction modern drama would follow. Even Nicoll has called Lillo the father of Ibsen.

Arthur Miller probably never read the Dedication to *The London Merchant*, but he has expressed ideas remarkably similar to those expressed there by George Lillo. In an article written for *The New York Times* in 1949 Miller made the following remarks.

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. ... Insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero, or the so-called nobility of his character, is really but a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy. If rank or nobility of character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king. ... It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time—the heart and spirit of the average man.34

These sentiments would have been warmly applauded by the author of *The London Merchant*.

Subsequent dramatic use of middle class characters and

---

domestic themes has contributed to the importance of Lillo and his play. Had playwrights in the twentieth century returned to a more aristocratic form of tragedy, Lillo's importance would have dwindled. Since The London Merchant is now pointed to by most historians as a "landmark" in the history of drama, it may be useful to examine the qualities of the play as a tragedy.

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman have said that the play is unsuccessful as a tragedy. They object to the middle class, commercial tone of the play: "The profit motive and tragedy are irreconcilable."35 Bonamy Dobreé has called The London Merchant "sheer melodrama."36 And William McBurney, the play's most recent editor, writes of Lillo that, "Limited by current dramatic conventions and the modesty of his talent, he failed, to some extent, to convert the ballad story into true tragedy. . . ."37 Most modern critics agree that the play has serious weaknesses as a tragedy. Why does The London Merchant fail as a tragedy?

Cleanth Brooks and Robert B. Heilman in Understanding Drama have given the most complete analysis of the play as a

35 Brooks and Heilman, p. 183.
36 Dobreé, English Literature, p. 254.
37 McBurney, "Introduction" to The London Merchant, p. xxv.
tragedy. Essentially their criticism of the play is that Lillo had too many objectives in mind in writing The London Merchant, the end result being a problem play rather than a tragedy. They object that Barnwell is not actually the moral and political center of his world; that Barnwell consequently has little or no influence on the characters around him, who accordingly are less participants in than observers of his fate. On the contrary, they argue, other characters, especially Millwood, tend to upstage Barnwell. The result is a lack of unity or focus. They point to Millwood's attack on bad church practices and Thorowgood's lectures on merchandizing as examples of Lillo's diverse objectives. The end result of Millwood's attack on society is to make the play less philosophical and more sociological in interest. In the last analysis The London Merchant is more problem play than tragedy in their opinion.38

While agreeing that the sociological interest of The London Merchant distracts from the true tragic effects, I feel that there are more essential reasons for the play's failure as a tragedy.

First among these reasons is the fact that the play lacks

38Brooks and Heilman, pp. 180-83.
a tragic hero. It is not because Barnwell is an apprentice instead of a king that he falls short of tragic stature: it is because he is, generally speaking, an incompetent weakling. Hegel wrote of the tragic hero that he must possess "real capacity and downright character." More recently Mr. D.D. Raphael has written that, "Greatness of spirit; that is the essential quality of the tragic hero." Joseph Wood Krutch likewise insists on the greatness of the tragic hero:

Tragedy arises then when, as in Periclean Greece or Elizabethan England, a people fully aware of the calamities of life is nevertheless serenely confident of the greatness of man, whose mighty passions and supreme fortitude are revealed when one of these calamities overtakes him.

Barnwell simply does not possess real capacity, greatness of spirit, mighty passions, or supreme fortitude. Instead he is duped and dominated by Millwood, who seduces him, persuades him to rob his master, and incites him to murder his uncle. Thoroughly

good describes this process in terms that suggest that Barnwell is basically a passive character:

I know how, step by step, you've led him on, reluctant and unwilling, from crime to crime, to this last horrid act which you contrived and, by your cursed wiles, even forced him to commit, and then betrayed him.

(IV.xvi.23-27.)

It is only when Millwood sends for the police in the fourth act that Barnwell realizes that she does not love him and has merely used him as a tool.

In addition to the fact that he is duped by Millwood, Barnwell lacks the willpower that characterizes the tragic hero. His chief trait is a lack of resolve. In the second act no sooner has he vowed never to see Millwood again but she enters and persuades him to rob Thorowgood and to meet her at her house. Barnwell lamely asks himself:

Oh, where are all my resolutions now? Like early vapors, or the morning dew, chased by the sun's warm beams, they're vanished and lost, as though they had never been.

(II.xi.75-78.)

In the murder scene he is totally irresolute. First he declares, "Oh, 'tis impossible!" His uncle, alarmed at the sight of a man masked and armed, draws his sword. Barnwell then exclaims, "Nay then, there's no retreat!" and stabs the old man, after which he "Swoons away upon his uncle's dead body." Later
he describes himself as "a bloody monster." Barnwell does not exhibit the fortitude and passion expected of the tragic hero.

Mr. A.C. Bradley has written that:

It is the nature of the tragic hero, at once his greatness and his doom, that he knows no shrinking or half-heartedness, but identifies himself wholly with the power that moves him, and will admit the justification of no other power.  

We do not find in Barnwell that tragic "one-sidedness" Hegel found in a character such as Antigone. Hegel wrote that:

Antigone reverences the ties of blood-relationship, the gods of the nether world. Creon alone recognizes Zeus, the paramount Power of public life and the commonwealth.

Hegel found in classical tragedy characters who totally identified themselves with one ethical principle to the exclusion of other equally valid principles. Antigone chooses to bury her brother in spite of the fact that this act brings her into conflict with the law of the state, represented by Creon. Hegel sees both sides as one-sided. Thus the tragic hero with all his strength and passion identifies himself with one ethical value.

---


43 Hegel, IV, 318.
No such passionate one-sidedness inheres in the character of Barnwell. Had Barnwell not only killed his uncle for love of Millwood, but had he totally identified himself with his love for her even to the point of going to the gallows and even damnation with her, in rebellion against God, Thorowgood, and the social order, then he might have achieved tragic dimensions. Instead Barnwell repudiates his love for Millwood as sinful and abases himself before all the other characters. Barnwell is not a tragic hero: he loved and murdered not because he was strong but because he was weak. Thorowgood underscores this point in the fourth act when he distinguishes between the frailty of Barnwell and the presumption of Millwood.

But Heaven, who knows our frame and graciously distinguishes between frailty and presumption, will make a difference, though man cannot who sees not the heart but only judges by the outward action.

(IV.xvi.34-38.)

Because Barnwell is brought to ruin out of weakness and incapacity, we wholly miss in him the growth and maturation which Susan Langer sees as part of the tragic hero. Miss Langer describes this process of growth within the tragic hero.

And so, indeed, it does: the turning point of the play is the situation he cannot resolve, where he makes his 'tragic error' or exhibits his 'tragic weakness.' He is led by his own action and its repercussions in the world
to respond with more and more competence, more and more daring to a constantly gathering challenge; so his character 'grows,' i.e. he unfolds his will and knowledge and passion, as the situation grows. His career is not change of personality, but maturation. When he reaches his limit of mental and emotional development, the crisis occurs; then comes the defeat, either by death or, as in many modern tragedies, by hopelessness that is the equivalent of death, a 'death of the soul,' that ends the career.\footnote{Susan K. Langer, \textit{Feeling And Form: A Theory Of Art} (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 358.}

What has Barnwell learned after murdering his uncle for the love of Millwood? As he is being led off to prison, his words show that he has undergone no growth or maturation. "Be warn'd, ye youths, who see my sad despair,/ Avoid lewd women, false as they are fair. . . ." (IV.xiii.10-11.) Thus Barnwell's character is static and feeble to the end.

It is because of his weakness and lack of stature that Barnwell fails to protest against his fate. This is perhaps his most crucial failing as a tragic hero. It is essential to tragedy that the hero should protest against the destiny meted out to him by the gods or fate. Richard B. Sewall has written of the tragic hero that:

\begin{quote}
Rising in his pride, he protests: he pits himself in some way against whatever, in the heavens above and in the earth beneath, seems to him to be wrong, oppressive,
\end{quote}
or personally thwarting. This is the hero's commitment, made early or late, but involving him necessarily in society and in action—with Prometheus and Antigone early, with Hamlet late.  

Or as D.D. Raphael put it, the tragic hero says "No" to the universe. Great tragedy is a struggle between a man and the forces behind the universe. As Sewall says of the tragic hero, "His affair is still with the gods."

Far from protesting or suffering against God or fate, Barnwell responds with religious submission. After killing his uncle, he exhibits an intense desire to be punished for his misdeeds, telling Millwood, "I will this instant deliver myself into the hands of justice; indeed I will, for death is all I wish." (IV.xii.3-5.) Of his betrayal by Millwood he concludes, "The hand of Heaven is in it, and this the punishment of lust and parricide." (IV.xiii.5-7.) In the fifth act just before he is led to execution, Barnwell expresses his complete resignation to the will of God: "I groan but murmur not. Just Heaven, I am your own! Do with me what you please." (V.ix.10-11.)

Resignation and submission to the divine will, edifying as they may be from a Christian point of view, are not the

qualities we expect of the tragic hero. D.D. Raphael has remarked that, "Voluntary submission to the divine order forbids the turning of sinners into heroes." Ultimately Barnwell is presented as noble not for any resistance to the divine will but for his total affirmation of God's goodness and mercy together with his own unworthiness. After his consultation with the minister Thorowgood has sent to him in prison, Barnwell says:

> From thence I've learned the infinite extent of heavenly mercy—that my offenses, though great, are not unpardonable and that 'tis not my interest only but my duty to believe and to rejoice in that hope. So shall Heaven receive the glory, and future penitents the profit of my example.

(V.ii.13-18.)

Accordingly all the glory in the play goes to God. Barnwell's role is correspondingly weak and insignificant. He is to serve as an object lesson in morality, a warning to others to avoid his faults. The essential incompatibility between such a religious view of man and the requirements of tragedy is clearly set forth by D.D. Raphael:

> In another way, however, Tragedy tends to be inimical to religion. It elevates man in his struggle with necessity, while the religious attitude is one of abase-

---

46 Raphael, p. 67.
ment before that which is greater than man, before the awe-inspiring sublime. 47

But in Barnwell's failure to protest against his fate there is an all the more glaring weakness because Millwood goes to the gallows defying Heaven to inflict the worst possible torments upon her. G. Wilson Knight feels that Millwood alone "achieves tragic stature in her refusal to repent and submit to the social order." 48 Although Millwood has some potential as a tragic heroine, she is not the center of the play. Barnwell is the protagonist.

Barnwell's story falls short of the requirements of tragedy for still another reason. Richard B. Sewall alludes to a remark once made by Paul Tillich that, "Tragedy combines Guilt and Necessity." 49 The tragic hero knows guilt: Hegel wrote that, "It is a point of honour with such great characters that they are guilty." 50 But in the tragic character necessity is more important than guilt. It is necessity which evokes the

47 Raphael, p. 28.

48 Knight, p. 194.


50 Hegel, IV, 321.
truly heroic and tragic aspects of the protagonist. The tragic hero chooses to oppose and to struggle against the forces of necessity to which a weaker man would resignedly submit. Northrop Frye writes of this aspect of the tragic hero:

The tragic hero is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is our mediator with it.\footnote{Northrop Frye, \textit{Anatomy of Criticism} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 207.}

There is in Barnwell's character a combination of guilt and necessity. He is guilty for his lust, theft, and murder. But in Barnwell the more important element of necessity has been diminished to a necessity of the glands. In great tragedy necessity has to do with what Sewall calls "the affair with the gods," or the forces of destiny. In \textit{The London Merchant} the affair with the gods has been reduced to an affair with the glands. Barnwell's physical desire for Millwood leads him to fornication, theft, and murder. He confesses this fact immediately before murdering his uncle.

'Tis more than love; 'tis the fever of the soul and madness of desire. In vain does nature, reason, conscience,
all oppose it. The impetuous passion bears down all before it and drives me on to lust, to theft, and murder.

(III. v. 24-27.)

Sewall observes that when the struggle with the gods is reduced to an affair of the glands, tragedy loses its mystery and its terror. 52

The final reason for the failure of The London Merchant is related to the struggle of the hero with necessity. In speaking of the conflict between the tragic hero and necessity, D.D. Raphael observes that, "Tragic conflict differs from the conflicts presented by other forms of drama in that the victory always goes to necessity. The hero is crushed." 53 Northrop Frye writes that the tragic hero has normally had an almost divine destiny nearly within his grasp, a "paradise lost." 54 In The London Merchant the hero, although he goes to the gallows, is not ultimately crushed, and the spirit of the final act suggests that instead of losing paradise, he is on the verge of gaining it. I have already cited passages which strongly suggest

52 Sewall, "The Tragic Form," p. 351.

53 Raphael, p. 25.

that Barnwell is at the end one of the saved. (Supra, pp. 116-19.) Barnwell, far from being crushed, affirms, "Joy and gratitude now supply more tears than the horror and anguish of despair before." (V.ii.23-27.) With Barnwell so well prepared to enter heaven, the resolution of the play is not genuinely tragic. Thus Lillo failed to create a genuine tragedy in The London Merchant.

In conclusion it may be said that The London Merchant represents a return to an older Elizabethan tradition of domestic tragedy. Moreover there had been for many years before Lillo a growing tendency toward domestic tragedies, notably in the plays of Otway and Rowe. Nevertheless Lillo made a new and--for 1731--exciting contribution to the genre. While he was not the first to tell a story of "private woe," he was the first to treat middle class characters seriously in a tragedy with a distinctly middle class setting and atmosphere as opposed to the semi-aristocratic settings and situations of Otway and Rowe. To express this new atmosphere of the counting house and the jail, Lillo chose prose as his sole medium of expression. Lillo was the first dramatist to give the world a distinctly middle class tragedy in prose.

Lillo's use of middle class characters caused considera-
ble discussion. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century Lillo's use of middle class characters is warmly commended and stoutly defended. The periodical writers, Bancks, Jenner, Ensor, and others felt that nature is nature whether found in the castle or found in the cottage. A reaction set in during the nineteenth century with capable writers such as Thomas Campbell defending the more traditional form of aristocratic tragedy. This discussion must have helped to keep *The London Merchant* before the attention of the literate public as it became the center of an esthetic debate.

Another factor which has tended to increase the play's importance is the path followed by twentieth century drama. Ibsen, Galsworthy, Miller, and Williams--while they perhaps never knew Lillo's theories--still followed the tradition of using middle class characters. Therefore the significance of *The London Merchant* today is mainly as an historical precedent indicating the direction modern drama was to follow. From the point of view of tragedy the play must unfortunately be conceded to be a failure.
CONCLUSION

The London Merchant by George Lillo was an instant success on the stage from the time of its premiere in 1731. It was played to crowded houses for twenty nights in succession at Drury Lane. It became a standard piece to be played annually at the holiday seasons up until 1819. The play was successfully revived by Mrs. Siddons in 1796 and by Charles Kemble in 1804. In the eighteenth century the play became popular in the English provinces; it was also popular in Germany and on the early American stage. The play has gone through well over one hundred editions relatively evenly distributed throughout the two hundred and thirty odd years of its history. The play appears in many anthologies representing the period of the Restoration and eighteenth century in the theatre. The present century has produced a steady if not a numerically large flow of critical articles treating The London Merchant in scholarly journals.

In spite of its popular successes, The London Merchant has enjoyed an irregular history in the area of criticism. In the eighteenth century critics overestimated the worth of the
play, perhaps in their enthusiasm for the relatively fresh mode of tragedy it represented. Writers of the commercial class tended to be overly enthusiastic over the respectful treatment of bourgeois characters. Writers with a political axe to grind found in the play an affirmation of Whig sentiments and hostility to Spain.

If eighteenth century writers tended to be uncritically in favor of the play, writers in the nineteenth century tended to go to the opposite extreme. The ridicule heaped on the play by Augustus William Schlegel, William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and others was surely intended to bury *The London Merchant* in the oblivion they felt it deserved. They seem to have succeeded in so far as the play virtually disappeared from the stage in the nineteenth century. In another sense their attacks had the unintended effect of keeping the play alive, for if the play was attacked by Charles Lamb, it was defended by George Daniel. It remained for writers of the early twentieth century, such as Adolphus W. Ward, Ashley Thorndike, and George H. Nettleton to rehabilitate the critical reputation of the play.

Many complex reasons account for the fact that *The London Merchant* has survived into the twentieth century where other plays, far superior to its artistic worth, have not en-
dured. The early popularity of the play in performance was often artificially stimulated. But the play seems to have had a genuine appeal of its own as evidenced by later successful revivals. Environmental factors helped establish the play's reputation. The audiences of the day were becoming more democratized: more middle class people attended the theatre. The play had a middle class hero, and its Thorowgood glorified the life and calling of the London merchant. Furthermore the play, being highly moralistic in tone, catered to those who wished to reform the stage.

The didacticism of The London Merchant probably contributed to the success of the play in many quarters, especially in the middle class, many of whom were at the time, or had recently been, Dissenters. The play had a reputation for improving the moral life of its spectators. Whether or not the play succeeded in converting its auditors, it contained a popular message. The play attempted the Miltonic task of justifying the ways of Providence, in particular by reconciling Divine justice with Divine mercy. In effect the play held that no one, not even Barnwell and Millwood, was beyond the reach of Divine mercy if he would only repent. The only unforgivable sin, the play implied, was despair. This theme was an outgrowth of the sentimentalism of the play.
The sentimentalism of *The London Merchant* consisted in its affirmation of the basic goodness of average human nature: man is weak; he makes mistakes, but he is good at heart. He may be corrupted by the institutions of society, as Millwood was, in which case it is the social conditions which are equally to blame. Yet man is never beyond redemption. Applied to the reconciliation of justice and mercy, this doctrine of human goodness holds that man must suffer for his mistakes, but any man may be saved in virtue of his basic goodness of heart.

In describing the sentimentalism of *The London Merchant*, I have purposely borrowed the terms "the goodness of average human nature" from Ernest Bernbaum. A close analysis of the play such as has been made here supports Bernbaum's original theory that the sentimentalism of the play consists in an assumption of the goodness of average human nature. Of course, this belief requires a few qualifications in regard to human weakness and conditions of the environment, but it still defines the sentimentalism of the play.

It is in fact this sentimental view of human nature which accounts for the mixture of popularity, acclaim, and ridicule which the play has met. It was Lillo's belief in the inherent dignity of all men, not just the aristocracy, which led
him to look for the matter of a tragedy in the life of a ruined apprentice. It was this fact--the serious treatment of a merchant's apprentice--which was to project The London Merchant on to the stage of world drama. Thus Lillo's play became a precedent shattering call to dramatists to look into the heart of the common man for their material. It is this fact which makes the play significant even today for those who would understand the development of the modern theatre.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. LILLO'S COLLECTED WORKS


________. London, 1762.


II. EDITIONS OF THE LONDON MERCHANT


________. 2nd ed. London: John Gray, 1731.


The London Merchant; with the magical history of George Barnwell. Printed in the Year 1731.

George Barnwell; a tragedy, in five acts. New York: S. French, [1752].


London: W. Caxton, 1762.


Edinburgh: Martin and Wotherspoon, 1768.

London: T. Lowndes, 1770.

Boston: Greenleaf, 1774.


Gottingen: V. Bossigel, 1776.


London: W. Oxlade, 1777.

London: J. Wenman, 1777.


Worcester, Mass.: by I. Thomas, for N. Coverly, 1783.

London: W. Cavell, 1785.

London: For G. Lister, 1787.


London: R. Butters, [1787].


London: For the Proprietors, under the Direction of John Bell, 1792.

Boston: at the Apollo Press, by Belknap and Hall, 1793.

Worcester, Mass.: Isaiah Thomas, 1794.

London: R. Butters [c. 1798].


London: H. Whitworth, [1798].

London: W. Mason, [c. 1800].

Manchester, 1800.


New York: D. Longworth, 1807.

Boston: John West, 1807.

London: C. Cooke, [c. 1807].

London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, [1808].


New York: D. Longworth, 1819.
London: D. S. Maurice, [c. 1821].
London: H. Lea, [1825].
London: Haward and Adam, 1846.


New York: W. Taylor and Co., [1857].


London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, [1868].

French's Standard Drama, No. 87. New York: S. French, [1877].


III. CRITICISM


Bremner, G. "Millwood, Lady Milford and Maria Stuart," *German Life And Letters*, XI (1957), 41-48.


Cibber, Theophilus, et al. "Mr. George Lillo," *The Lives Of The


------. "The First German Translator of George Lillo's Merchant of London And The First Performances Of The Play In Germany," Symposium, IX (1955), 324-30.


Harbeson, William P. *The Elizabethan Influence on the Tragedy of the Late Eighteenth And the Early Nineteenth Centuries*. Lancaster, Pa., 1921.


Harris, James. *Philosophical Inquiries In Three Parts By James Harris, Esq*. London: C. Nourse, 1781.


Künze, A. *Lillo's Einfluss auf die Englische und die Deutsche Literatur*. Magdeburg, 1911.


Minor, Jacob (ed.). *Die Schicksalsdrama.* Berlin: W. Spemann, 1884.


_____. "George Barnwell Abroad," Comparative Literature, II (1950), 126-56.


IV. THEORETICAL WORKS


The dissertation submitted by Terrence James McNally has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

18 April 1968

Date

Signature of Adviser