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LIBERTAS REBORN: A *LEGEND OF FLORENCE* AND LEIGH HUNT'S
LITERARY REVIVAL

by

Adrienne Gardner Malan

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Adrienne Gardner Malan

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

Date

Nicholas A. Mason, Chair

Date

Matthew F. Wickman

Date

Leslee Thorne-Murphy

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Adrienne Gardner Malan in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

Nicholas A. Mason
Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Department

Phillip A. Snyder
Graduate Coordinator

Accepted for the College

Gregory Clark
Associate Dean, College of Humanities

ABSTRACT

LIBERTAS REBORN: A *LEGEND OF FLORENCE* AND LEIGH HUNT'S LITERARY REVIVAL

Adrienne Gardner Malan

Department of English

Master of Arts

According to traditional accounts, following the premature deaths of Keats, Shelley, and Byron in the 1820s, literature in England fell into a sort of slumber until the late 1830s and early 1840s, when a new generation—a generation we now call the Victorians—came on the scene. Literary scholarship has tended to ignore this period of slumber as an uninteresting gap between the two dynamic movements of Romanticism and Victorianism. It was during this transitional period, however, that Leigh Hunt, one of the most radical of Romantic figures, wrote and staged *A Legend of Florence* (1840) in an attempt to stimulate a literary revival.

Hunt's play reasserts the radical philosophies that defined his younger days, when as the central figure of the "Cockney School" he had drawn other radical writers such as Keats and Shelley into his circle. These philosophies included the primacy of literature, political radicalism, sexual liberation, and group authorship. By writing a play in 1840

that reasserted these ideals, Hunt hoped to gather a new coterie following reminiscent of the Cockney School. Responses to the play from Hunt's younger Victorian contemporaries, however, demonstrate how Hunt's once radical "Cockney" ideals had now become relatively safe. The nostalgic fondness with which *A Legend of Florence* was greeted therefore highlights how in 1840 Romanticism was in the process of being absorbed into Victorian philosophy and aesthetics.

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Introduction:

Leigh Hunt's First-Life Agenda

In the October 1817 issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, a critic disguised as "Z" attacked Leigh Hunt's soon-to-be infamous poem *The Story of Rimini*. Dubbing Hunt's circle of poets "the Cockney School," Z claims "its chief Doctor and Professor is Mr Leigh Hunt, a man certainly of some talents, of extravagant pretensions both in wit, poetry, and politics, and withal of exquisitely bad taste, and extremely vulgar modes of thinking and manners in all respects" ("On the Cockney School No I" 38). Over the next six years, *Blackwood's* published a series of scathing attacks on Leigh Hunt and the circle of poets that was quickly gathering around him. For *Blackwood's*, Hunt was "the meanest, the filthiest, and the most vulgar of Cockney poetasters" ("Cockney School No IV" 520).

However malicious, the Cockney School attacks on Hunt would be trumped in cruelty and effect almost forty years later by Dickens' *Bleak House*. Dickens used Hunt's well-known financial foibles as inspiration for the character of Harold Skimpole. In the novel, Skimpole is first introduced as one having "a fine guileless inaptitude for all worldly affairs" and as "a perfect child" (Dickens 117). But this childish innocence is quickly revealed to be manipulative arrogance. In a matter of paragraphs Skimpole goes from one who has a "perfect charm in him" (118) to an utterly deplorable character who believes his affairs are "the general business of the community and must not be slighted" (120). Skimpole himself proclaims the depth of his immorality when he cheerfully states to a group of his benefactors, "I almost feel as if *you* ought to be grateful to *me*, for giving you the opportunity of enjoying the luxury of generosity" (121). By creating the

caricature of Leigh Hunt as the reprehensible Harold Skimpole of *Bleak House*, Dickens unwittingly sealed the legacy of Hunt for future generations.

Hunt's literary reputation has been held captive by these two attacks on his character, and, as a result, serious critical work on Hunt has been sporadic in the one hundred and thirty years since his death. During most of this time, as one of Hunt's recent biographers, Anthony Holden, aptly notes, Hunt was "a walk-on cameo player in the biographies of others...usually [described] in disparaging terms, always as a lesser man" (x). A few exceptions are worth noting, however, as several scholars during the last century have attempted to evaluate the work of Leigh Hunt and his contributions to literary history.

Following Hunt's death in 1859 his son, Thornton, worked to preserve the memory of his father by publishing first *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt, Now Finally Collected, Revised by Himself, and edited by his Son, Thornton Hunt* (1860) and then later that year a revised edition of Hunt's autobiography. Several years following these publications, Thornton published a two-volume collection of Hunt's letters, *The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt*. Aside from collections of Hunt's poems and his essays, which were both published in various forms, the work of Thornton remained the most important on Hunt until Edmund Blunden's *Leigh Hunt's 'Examiner' Examined, 1808-1825* (1928) ushered in a wave of scholarly work on Hunt in the 1930s, all of which attempted to shed the stigma of Harold Skimpole from Hunt's reputation. Blunden's interest in Hunt also prompted him to write *Leigh Hunt: A Biography* (1930), which included material on the life of Hunt that had never before been published.

While Blunden was at work in England, another Hunt admirer, Luther Brewer, was quietly amassing a library of Hunt material and memorabilia in the small town of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Brewer's private collection was at first mostly accessible only to his circle of associates in Iowa, but following his death, the collection was purchased by the University of Iowa and, under their continued efforts, has become the foremost collection of Leigh Hunt materials worldwide.

At about this same time in yet another corner of the globe, a third Leigh Hunt aficionado was working to turn a doctoral dissertation into a two-volume, 900-page study of Hunt's life and work. Louis Landré's *Leigh Hunt: Contribution à l'histoire du Romantisme Anglais* was published in France in 1936. While scholars today recognize Landré's contribution to Hunt studies, his work unfortunately remains largely inaccessible since the book has yet to be translated from French.

Following this global spread of critical work in the 1930s, only a few publications in the next fifty years are worth noting: Molly Tatchell's *Leigh Hunt and His Family in Hammersmith* (1969), James Thompson's biography *Leigh Hunt* (1977), and importantly the proceedings from the 1984 symposium on Hunt at the University of Iowa edited by Robert A. McCown.

Starting in the 1990s, however, scholarly work on Leigh Hunt has become more consistent and even-handed, finally giving him leading-role attention. The recent boom in Hunt studies began with Rodney Stenning Edgecombe's *Leigh Hunt and the Poetry of Fancy* in 1994 and has accelerated rapidly since then. Jeffrey Cox's *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (1998) highlights the importance of the school of poets that Hunt led as well as Hunt's influence on Keats and

Shelley. His work is groundbreaking not only for Romantic studies, redefining as it does traditional notions of the second-generation Romantics, but also particularly for Hunt studies, since he points out that the practice of referring to the coterie of poets at this time as the Shelley or Keats circle is fallacious; it was really Hunt that brought together and formed the center of this group of poets. Cox states, “what we call the second generation of romantic poets is not merely a temporal gathering of distinct voices but a self-consciously defined group, an association of intellectuals that centered on Leigh Hunt and that came to be known as the Cockney School” (4-5).

The 2003 release of *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, a six-volume series edited by Robert Morrison and Michael Eberle-Sinatra, was a watershed moment in Hunt studies. A scholarly edition of Hunt’s work has been both long-awaited and long-deserved and, more importantly, signals the emergence of Hunt from behind the shadow of Harold Skimpole and the Cockney School attacks into mainstream scholarly discussion. The editors of this collection argue persuasively for a reassessment of Hunt from a minor Romantic to a role as a central figure of the era. *The Selected Writings* spans Hunt’s work from his periodical and literary essays to his poetry. This series encourages continued scholarly work on Hunt by making accessible a large portion of his writings.

Most recently, two major biographies on Hunt were published in 2005, Anthony Holden’s *The Wit in the Dungeon: The Remarkable Life of Leigh Hunt—Poet, Revolutionary, and the Last of the Romantics* and Nicholas Roe’s *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt*. Holden, a journalist turned biographer, takes a traditional biographical approach in his book by discussing Hunt’s life from birth to death. As the

biographer of such famous names as Laurence Olivier, Princess Diana, William Shakespeare, and Tchaikovsky, his work takes less of a scholarly approach to Hunt and focuses more on, as his title suggests, the remarkable life Leigh Hunt led. He does, however, carefully point out the importance of Hunt to his literary contemporaries.

Nicholas Roe, who, on the other hand, is a renowned scholar, focuses his biography on what he terms Hunt's "first life"—from his birth to the death of his beloved friend Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1822. Roe's narrow focus follows the pattern of most studies on Hunt, since it was during this "first life" period when much of what Hunt is best known for happened, including his dramatic criticism, his editorship of the *Examiner*, his imprisonment for libel, his publication of *The Story of Rimini*, his being targeted in the Cockney School attacks, and his friendship with such famous second-generation Romantics as Shelley, Keats, and Byron. As an academic, Roe takes a scholarly approach to Hunt's life and argues in the book for Hunt's central position in Romantic studies by discussing the importance of Hunt's role as both a political and literary voice in England. The publication of these two biographies in the same year emphasizes both the current scholarly as well as popular interest in Hunt.

The feast of Hunt scholarship in the last fifteen years—to borrow a food metaphor for literature beloved by Hunt—is an important addition to Romantic studies and is quickly paving the way for increased study of Hunt's life, work, and influence on other writers. One aspect of Hunt studies that has been largely ignored, however, is a concentrated examination of Hunt's life and works following the death of his now-more-famous friends, a period we might call, following Roe's lead, Hunt's "second life." One of the most singular things about Leigh Hunt is that while he is classified as a Romantic,

he lived well into the Victorian era, passing away at the age of 75 in 1859. In literary studies, the Romantic and Victorian eras are often thought of as ideologically, stylistically, and thematically distinct. But with an important literary figure like Hunt spanning all of the Romantic era and a large part of the Victorian era, such categorizing must be called into question, especially when one considers that Hunt continued his involvement with the literary world by editing, critiquing, and producing his own work up until the end of his life. His last publication came just eight days before he died, appearing in the August 20 edition of the *Spectator* in a series he wrote called “The Occasional.”

While Hunt’s intriguing “first life” has rightly claimed the majority of scholarly attention up to this point, there is no reason to ignore or short-change his “second life.” Hunt’s lifestyle may have been much quieter following his return from Italy and his resettling in London, but his influence on important literary figures and the body of work he produced during this time offer insights into not only Hunt himself, but also the development of British literature during the transitional decades between the peaks of Romanticism and Victorianism.

My thesis will give this much-needed attention to Hunt’s second life by arguing that it was largely an attempt to recreate his first life. During a period of general literary stagnation, the 1830s, Hunt worked to draw new, young writers such as Thomas Carlyle, Robert Browning, Charles Dickens, and Alfred Tennyson toward him—just as he had done earlier with Keats and Shelley—through the revival of an agenda clearly discernible in the work of his first life. Specifically, I will focus on how he attempted to revolutionize the literary scene and garner a new following of poets through the production of his

widely-acclaimed play of 1840, *A Legend of Florence*. This play has received little critical attention from scholars, but its contemporary success demands scholarly attention since even *Blackwood's*, Hunt's greatest nemesis, conceded that "Leigh Hunt is now a successful dramatist, and we rejoice in his success as cordially as his best friends can do—for he deserves it" ("Leigh Hunt's Legend" 303). After the venomous attacks *Blackwood's* inflicted on Hunt some twenty-three years earlier, this glowing review of his play signals the significance of *A Legend of Florence* not only to Hunt studies, but to studies of literature from this time period. My thesis revisits Hunt's play in order to give it the critical attention it deserves as a unifying work between Hunt's radical younger days and his quieter days as an aged man of letters.

Four Defining Philosophies

Before turning in the body of this study to Hunt's later years, it is important to lay out the major philosophies he established in the first half of his life. In examining Hunt's first life, four defining philosophies emerge: the primacy of literature, radical politics, sexual liberation, and group authorship. While I will only briefly discuss each philosophy as it is manifest in Hunt's writings and in his life, it is important to recognize that he created a complex interplay between these philosophies in his writings that captured the interest of important rising literary figures, drawing them towards himself until he became the center of an important group of poets, painters, and musicians.

1. The Primacy of Literature. From the time of his first critical work at the *News* (1805-7), Hunt emphasized the centrality of literature. Within the pages of his reviews, he clearly outlined the political and cultural influence of literature, stating "the most flourishing times of independence have been the most glorious times of literature" (qtd.

in Kucich and Cox 1:3) and “[t]he wise men of all ages have determined that to corrupt the public taste is eventually to corrupt the public virtue” (Hunt, “*Theatricals*” 19). For Hunt, a time period of good literature corresponded with a time period of “social wisdom and morality” (19). When literature that cultivates virtue ceases to be produced, it is a sign that public morality and “good sense” will soon follow (19). In this regard, Hunt saw literature as the hinge on which a productive society swings. His critical efforts at the *News* were focused on elevating the quality of one branch of literature, drama, in order to encourage a renewal of good literature which would subsequently inspire growth and productivity in society.

Besides directly commenting on the centrality of literature in his dramatic reviews, Hunt purposefully noted whenever the royal family attended a play. Kucich and Cox claim this practice signaled that for Hunt the presence of the ruling family at the theater demonstrated the political importance of drama (1:4). But from a wider perspective, this habit signals that in Hunt’s mind the participation of the ruling family in literary events was crucial to the proper functioning of society. Their good sense to be involved in literary activities implied a character worthy to rule and this, in turn, inspires those below them in society to immerse themselves in literature. If a society is to achieve its ultimate potential, it must be led by a ruling body who is educated in good literature.

Most importantly, Hunt’s commitment to the primacy of literature caused him to revolutionize the practice of reviewing plays during his time at the *News*. The system of “puffing” productions—positively reviewing plays and actors’ performances in exchange for free tickets and expensive dinners—had imbedded itself into dramatic criticism when Hunt first entered the critical scene in 1805. The young and idealistic Hunt refused to

participate in such deplorable practices and instead determined to follow a less popular route—at least with managers and actors—by objectively reviewing productions. Hunt's efforts in reforming dramatic criticism are still widely recognized today as an important step forward in literary criticism.

2. *Radical Politics*. As Hunt's career transitioned from drama critic to editor, he continued to push forward the idea of the primacy of literature at the same time as he developed another aspect of his agenda: radical politics. The project of the *Examiner*, which Leigh Hunt and his brother John founded in 1808, was to mesh politics, culture, and literature in the weekly pages of the paper. As Hunt notes in his autobiography, "the main objects of the Examiner newspaper were to assist in producing Reform in Parliament, liberality of opinion in general (especially freedom from superstition), and a fusion of literary taste into all subjects whatsoever" (*Autobiography* 1:203). The division of the *Examiner* into three sections—The Political Examiner, The London Examiner, and The Theatrical Examiner—helped accomplish these objectives. This format allowed Hunt to elevate the idea of literature by placing commentary on a few lines of his own poetry or the poetry of someone else next to important current social and political issues such as "the national debt, the continuing wars in India, Catholic Emancipation, the struggle for freedom in the Americas, the rights of the poor, child labor, the slave trade, the freedom of the press, reform of military discipline, and prison conditions" (Cox 43). By consistently commenting on literature at the same time that he was loudly voicing his opinion on raging political debates, Hunt used the *Examiner* to solidify his ideology of the primacy of literature and the importance of radical politics in a day of political distress.

Hunt is probably best known for the radical political ideas he pushed forward in the *Examiner* since they frequently caused him trouble with the Crown. He wryly comments in his *Autobiography* that the *Examiner* “began with being of no party; but Reform soon gave it one” (1:203). Hunt’s cries in the *Examiner* for governmental reform at all levels, from abolition of the slave trade to tax reform to the abandonment of the death penalty, testify of his radical agenda. Unwilling to settle for political apathy, Hunt consistently pointed out the failings of the government. His outspoken criticism of the Crown in matters such as the practice of military floggings, the promotion of the incompetent Duke of York, the madness of King George III, and the need for a regency—a position he would, of course, later change—brought libel suits, all of which he successfully defeated. As his criticism and his calls for reform continued, however, he was finally found guilty of libel for stating on the occasion of the Prince Regent’s fiftieth birthday that he was “a man who has just closed half a century without one single claim on the gratitude of his country or the respect of posterity!” (“The Prince” 1:221). The subsequent two-year jail sentence Hunt served drew the who’s-who of literary London to his cell and preserved him as a martyr for the free press. Hunt made his prison sentence into a mockery by decorating his jail cell as one would a parlor. In his own words he states,

I turned [it] into a noble room. I papered the walls with a trellis of roses; I had the ceiling colored with clouds and sky; the barred windows I screened with Venetian blinds; and when my bookcases were set up with their busts, and flowers and a pianoforte made their appearance, perhaps there was not a handsomer room on that side the water. I took a pleasure,

when a stranger knocked at the door, to see him come in and stare about him. (*Autobiography* 1:292)

All of this famously earned Hunt the title recorded by Byron in his letter to Thomas Moore of “the wit in the dungeon” (Moore 183).

3. *Sexual Liberation*. Just as Hunt’s radical political ideals gained him contemporary as well as posthumous fame, so did his articulation of a third agenda, sexual liberation, in his now infamous poem *The Story of Rimini*. Here, Hunt resurrects the story of the condemned lovers of Dante’s *Inferno*, Francesca and Paolo. As Nicholas Roe claims, “the emphasis [in the poem] has shifted from sin and damnation to a sympathetic understanding” (*John Keats* 120). By treating the lovers in the story with sympathy rather than condemnation, Hunt criticizes the institutionalized practice of arranged marriages. Cox explains that *The Story of Rimini* was seen as “dangerous” because of the “vision of sexuality” that it embodied (26). That vision included the sexually liberal idea of choice in marriage. Instead of promoting socially or economically convenient marriages, Hunt champions the idea of marrying for love, at least one aspect of which is physical attraction. Throughout the poem, Hunt celebrates the attraction between Paolo and Francesca, drawing attention to them in order to ensure his readers feel the two are justified in their love. The poem ends with the lovers laid “side by side, and hand in hand...in the green ground” (IV.518-19). This change in plot from Dante’s poem allows Hunt to honor their relationship by giving them the same rights and privileges at death of a legally recognized married couple. Receiving this right implied consummation of the relationship—an act traditionally reserved for marriage. Hunt’s

eneration of the sexual relationship between the two affirms the sexual agenda of the poem, the call for a sexual revolution from the oppressive practice of arranged marriages.

While *The Story of Rimini* alone suggests Hunt's ideology of sexual liberation, there has also been suspicion about how his relationship with his sister-in-law Bess played out his nontraditional views on sexuality. Bess had stayed alone with Hunt during part of his prison sentence while Marianne was miles away in Brighton caring for the Hunt children. It was during this time that Hunt began writing *The Story of Rimini*; his exploration of the relationship between husband, wife, and sibling in the poem is too similar to his own situation at the time to be considered mere coincidence. But while we don't know what happened between the two during their prison time together, the content of their letters provides evidence that an intimate relationship existed—despite Thornton Hunt's efforts to edit out such material in his edition of *The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt*. Hunt writes, for instance, in one letter, “Here is a kiss for you, as long as I can make it” (qtd. in Roe, *Fiery Heart* 194). He then drew a large oval on his letter, presumably the kiss. Bess's letters echo Hunt's sentiments: “Your affectionate...letter went to my heart's core—what power over me has every word you say—a letter like this before me intoxicates me with delight...for it is happiness inexpressible to feel that I am still dear to you, that you would *wish* to make me happy—even though the distance between us will not allow me to see that wish expressed” (194).

Their intimacy also reached beyond the private realm of correspondence. Benjamin Haydon complained in his diary of Hunt's “smuggering fondness” for Bess, claiming he would “dawdle over her bosom, to inhale her breath, to lean against her thigh and play with her petticoats” (*Diary* 83). Bryan Waller Proctor, otherwise known as

Barry Cornwall, also records, “Hunt has a crochet or theory about social intercourse (between the sexes)...He was at one time too frequently harping on this subject. This used to irritate Hazlitt who said ‘D— him; it’s always coming out like a rash. Why doesn’t he write a book about it, and get rid of it’” (197). Hunt’s harping too long was no doubt an attempt to convert others to his ideas of sexuality. While Procter reports that Hunt “never made any converts,” more recent scholars are willing to give Hunt more credit for his powers of persuasion. Nicholas Roe, for example, suggests that Hunt was a “pioneer of sexual freedom” and that his “liaison” with Bess may have been inspiration for both Shelley’s and Byron’s sexual ideologies (*Fiery Heart* 195-7). Whether they took their ideas from Hunt or not, it is clear that Hunt professed a notion of sexual liberty and that to some degree he lived that notion out.

4. *Group Authorship*. As Hunt gained notoriety as a writer and thinker in the early part of the nineteenth century, he quickly captured the interest of the rising thinkers of the age. Nicholas Roe claims,

Hunt emerged from prison as the figurehead for a new generation of young, liberal-minded writers and artists including Benjamin Haydon, Percy Bysshe Shelley, James and Horace Smith, Charles Lamb, Lord Byron, Thomas Moore, C[harles] C[owden] C[larke], William Hazlitt, John Hamilton Reynolds, and, in prospect, John Keats. (*Fiery Heart* 227)

These men were attracted to Hunt’s ideals and individually and collectively made their way towards him to meet the great editor and martyr of the *Examiner*. Hunt’s home at Hampstead Heath became their literary sanctuary. As they gathered there during all hours

of the day—some even staying for a time with Hunt and his family—he began to develop a philosophy of group authorship that became a key motivator in his life.

Cox's *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School* exhaustively documents the importance of group authorship to not only Hunt but the entire Cockney School. In direct contrast with the notion of the solitary, inspired poet popularized by Wordsworth, Cox claims that Hunt “clearly saw writing as a social activity or even what we would call an ideological activity” (7). He goes on to describe how Hunt’s essay “Politics and Poetics” presents “a socialized scene of writing. He depicts himself writing not in splendid isolation, alone with nature, but at a desk in the city surrounded by historical and political texts” (7). It is not surprising to find Hunt, as the central figure of the group, encouraging the idea of group authorship in the other members of the coterie. Cox points out the many manifestations of this ideology in their interactions with one another. For example, they gave manuscripts of their poetry to each other as gifts; they dedicated their published poems to each other; they circulated drafts of their poetry among themselves prior to publication in order to receive feedback; they wrote poems in response to one another (such as Keats’ “On *The Story of Rimini*” or Reynolds’ “Sonnet to Keats, on Reading His Sonnet Written in Chaucer”); they penned occasional verses celebrating moments spent together; and on a larger scale, they collaborated on collections of published poetry (69-79).

Hunt actively encouraged these group collaborations, and, as Cox points out, his role as editor of the *Examiner* gave him the added benefit of heading a publication that allowed for the easy exchange of ideas (73). In his position as editor, he could solicit articles and samples of poetry from his coterie and then editorialize on whatever he

published from them. In this way he provided a public venue for collaboration and modeled the power of its influence through his editorial work.

In private as well as public settings, however, Hunt remained committed to collaborative writing. One example of this is his sonnet-writing contest with Keats. The task was to write a poem about a grasshopper and a cricket in fifteen minutes and then share the fruits of their labors with one another. The contest was later repeated with Shelley added to the group and the subject changed to the Nile. These poetry-writing contests have become classic Huntian anecdotes, largely because they illustrate the extent to which the notion of group authorship motivated him—Hunt actively (and creatively) sought situations where literature could be collaboratively produced.

Finally, Hunt's enthusiasm at the prospect of the collaborative project of the *Liberal* in Italy with Byron and Shelley is what drew him away from the other members of his coterie, clearly demonstrating the prominence of the ideology of group authorship to him. Only the prospect of group authorship could remove him from the firmly established center of collaboration he had created at Hampstead Heath. Unfortunately, Shelley's death doomed the journal to failure—if it wasn't already doomed to such a fate by the increasingly unstable relationship between Byron and the other two—and this experiment with group authorship was limited to a single issue of the journal.

Trajectory

It is evident through this brief examination of Hunt's life and works that he founded his first life on the implementation of the four-part agenda of the primacy of literature, radical politics, sexual liberation, and group authorship. While doing so brought him imprisonment and public ridicule in the form of the Cockney School attacks,

it also brought him success, fame, and friendships. But the power of Hunt's first-life agenda in gathering a literary following was not strong enough to keep the group together. Personal crisis drove the Shelleys from England, while illness necessitated Keats' making the long journey to Italy's warmer climate. Hunt followed in their wake, hoping to continue the literary soirées on a much smaller scale with Byron and Shelley. It was not the removal of these key figures to Italy that forced the demise of the group, however, but the subsequent deaths of Keats, Shelley, and eventually Byron, leaving Hunt, once the center of a bustling sphere of creativity, alone in Italy. It was also the abandonment of Hunt in Italy that closed the final chapter of his first life and required him to return to start a new life in an England that his friend Mary Novello warned him was much different than the one he had left almost five years before.

My thesis picks up Hunt's story at this point in his life, attempting to illustrate how he reimmersed himself into literary London in order to recreate the success and friendships he had achieved in his first life through the production of his play, *A Legend of Florence*. Accordingly, Chapter 2 discusses the position of Hunt at the end of his first life and his literary role at the beginning of his second life, particularly in relationship to the rising authors of a new generation. The early deaths of Keats, Shelley, and Byron had left a gap in the literature of the 1830s when these now mature poets should have been still producing. I argue that Hunt wrote *A Legend of Florence* in order to capitalize on this period of literary stagnation. I also analyze the play in terms of Hunt's "first life" agenda in order to demonstrate how he attempted to revive literature and reassert himself as a central literary figure with a new gathering of poets around him.

Chapter 3 addresses the reception of Hunt's play by analyzing contemporary reviews of *A Legend of Florence*, something that has yet to be done in Hunt studies. I argue that while *A Legend of Florence* was hailed as a dramatic success, the enthusiastic response to the play is indicative of the unique literary moment the play is a product of rather than a sign of the literary value of *A Legend of Florence*. Reception of the play highlights the waning of the literary movement we now identify as Romanticism and the rising of what we now term Victorianism—a shift that caused Hunt's contemporaries to respond to the play with nostalgic fondness for the past movement Hunt represented rather than with radical zeal for his attempted rebirth of that movement. Ultimately, this nostalgic response signals the complete containment by the dominant culture of the radical sub-culture the Cockney School sought to establish.

Chapter Two:

A Legend of Florence: The Rebirth of Hunt's First-Life Agenda

When Hunt first set sail for Italy in December 1821, he could have had no idea that six months later, after finally arriving following an arduous journey full of setbacks, he would be crouched in a carriage on the beach of Livorno, staring into the flames consuming his beloved Shelley's body and clutching the dead man's heart. But such was the stark reality Hunt faced only days after reaching Italy. Unfortunately, the situation would get worse before it would get better. Hunt's only associates in Italy, Mary Shelley and Lord Byron, would both choose to leave soon after his arrival and Shelley's death—Mary for England and Byron for Greece—stranding Hunt with seven children, a sick wife, and no money. As a result, he was forced to remain in Italy until financial assistance could be procured to bring his family back to England in 1825.

The assistance finally came from the publisher Henry Colburn, who offered Hunt a £200 advance in return for the promise of literary work, specifically a biography on Byron. The advance of the money allowed Hunt to return to England, but the work it required of Hunt came at a heavy fee. Hunt's gossipy best-seller *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries* was a vicious attack on the poet, full of anecdotes claiming to reveal his true character to the world. No doubt the retelling of such tales also helped sooth Hunt's anger towards Byron for the miserable treatment he and his family received from him during their time in Italy.

Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries was widely popular but it ruined Hunt's reputation and damaged several friendships. Haydon in particular wrote: "Poor Leigh! Why does he write such twaddle? He is now writing his life, which will be a

monkish mixture of petticoat twaddling and Grandison cant” (qtd. in Blunden 228). The public was well aware of the financial assistance Byron had given Hunt, and, as Holden points out, the gossipy nature of the book made Hunt look like “an ungrateful wretch, out to settle petty scores” (216). Hunt’s willingness to write the book demonstrates the low point he had reached following the close of his “first life.” Rather than publishing works grounded in the four philosophies outlined in chapter 1, Hunt had turned to sensational writing—the very kind of literature he had scorned in the pages of the *News* as the type that defiled a society. *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries* reveals that Hunt’s principal motivation during this time period was not literary, political, or ideological but financial—he had to write in order to support his family.

With Hunt himself contributing to the body of “bad literature” being produced at the time, the book also signals the literary slumber Britain was beginning to fall into following the premature deaths of such important poets as Keats, Shelley, and Byron. Robert Morrison explains why the work of Hunt and other literary figures of the mid-nineteenth century has tended to be ignored. He calls the 1820s and 30s,

that anomalous period in English literary history that has frequently fallen between the critical cracks. For Romanticists, most of these years are ‘too late’, the pale and uneventful hinterland that followed the death of Lord Byron in 1824. But for Victorianists, they are almost all ‘too early’, an inchoate and uninspiring time that preceded Victoria’s ascension to the throne in 1837. (“Introduction” 3:xi)

Hunt found himself lost in this hinterland during a period in which his personal misfortunes were greater than at any other point in his life: he was not on speaking terms

with his beloved brother John over a dispute regarding *The Examiner*; he was suffering from the ill health of his wife, Marianne, who was heavily drinking at this point and borrowing money to support the family—all behind his back; and his son, John, was wreaking havoc by running up debts all across London and secretly borrowing money from Hunt's friends to cover them.

Unfortunately, it was also during this period that "Hunt's literary character and reputation" were "all but identified with his attitude to money" (Holden 206). Hunt had always struggled financially, but, as Morrison says, in "the 1820s and 1830s Hunt's personal fortunes were at their lowest ebb" ("Introduction" 3:xiii). Morrison argues that as a result, the "wearier and sadder" Hunt of this period was "less reckless and defiant, and increasingly drawn toward the manufacturing of a simplistic, sentimental pap in which he sought to evade rather than explore complex contemporary anxieties" (3:xii). The lack of scholarly criticism on the work Hunt produced during this phase of his life indicates that most scholars agree with Morrison, finding little worthwhile after the 1820s to talk about. This chapter will demonstrate, however, that Hunt was not limited to "sentimental pap" and that instead, it was during this period that he wrote one of the most important—and most underappreciated—works of his life, *A Legend of Florence*. He did so for the calculated purpose of gathering around himself a group of the rising generation of poets whom he saw emerging onto the currently quiet literary scene, just as he gathered the poets of the 1810s into the Cockney circle. Hunt realized that these new writers—including Browning, Carlyle, Dickens, and Tennyson—would soon create a literary reawakening. And rather than be left behind, he seized the opportunity to rise as the leader of a new generation of poets by forming literary friendships with promising

young writers and by writing *A Legend of Florence* at a time, in a genre, and with a subject matter that allowed him to reassert the philosophies he had developed in his first life and extend the movement of what we now call Romanticism into a new generation. Finally, this chapter will demonstrate how Hunt writes these philosophies into the play itself in order to make it function as a literary revival piece that would inspire the reawakening of contemporary literature.

Regathering a Coterie

Friendships had always been important to Hunt, and, as my first chapter demonstrates, literary friendships were especially important to him because they allowed him to engage in collaborative writing. After the years he spent in Italy isolated from the London literary scene, Hunt was anxious to be among other writers again. Holden states that once back in London, Hunt “seized the chance to re-establish his literary salon” (205). The absence of key figures from his former circle, however, required that he turn to the young writers of a new generation to fill the empty chairs. Some of the new circle Hunt mingled with included Robert Browning, Thomas Carlyle, Richard Henry Horne, Thomas Noon Talfourd, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Edward Bulwer, Walter Savage Landor, Richard Monkton Milnes, Daniel Maclise, Charles Macready, and John Forster (254-5).

One of the first writers of this new circle Hunt became acquainted with was actually a man of his own generation, Walter Savage Landor, whom Hunt met in Florence. Shelley’s death had left Hunt bitterly depressed, and Landor’s friendship had been a welcome relief. Hunt’s friendship with Landor continued after both returned to London. Once back in England, Hunt made friends with John Forster, an apprentice at a

number of different journals to which Hunt contributed, including the *New Monthly Magazine* and the *True Sun*. Forster claims that Hunt was “the first distinguished man of letters I ever knew” and that he “influenced all my modes of literary thought at the outset of my life....Very probably Leigh Hunt led me, at least confirmed me in adopting literature as a profession” (Brewer 248). In turn, Forster encouraged a friendship between Hunt and Edward Bulwer by enlisting Bulwer’s help in obtaining financial support for Hunt. Bulwer was a noted philanthropist whose project was to financially assist literary figures he felt had been shunned by society (Lytton 373-4). Forster was also the one who introduced Hunt to Charles Dickens, beginning what would become a close friendship.

Among Hunt’s most important relationships during this time, however, were those that most closely resembled the relationships he had cultivated as the editor of *The Examiner*, when he gave favorable reviews to promising young poets. Morrison notes that “as a reviewer in the 1810s, Hunt is commonly credited with discerning the potential of Keats and Shelley. But in the 1830s his record is equally impressive, if far less broadly recognized” (“Introduction” 3:xix). This time the poets he would publicly encourage were the leaders of what we now see as a new era: the Victorian Age.

As part of his efforts to establish himself as a member of a network of poets and writers like he had done in his first life, Hunt resumed the role of talent scout by promoting the work of young poets whom he saw as promising. Hunt favorably reviewed some of the first published works of Carlyle, Dickens, Browning, and Tennyson. His role in reviewing the works of these men was not as crucial as it was in the case of Keats and even Shelley, but as an established literary critic, Hunt’s positive reviews helped forward their literary reputations and popularity. One of the first works of Carlyle that Hunt

reviewed was his lecture series *On the History of Literature*. Although he had reservations about the lack of references in the lectures to certain literary figures such as Cicero and Pope and the heavy emphasis on Dante, he positively reviewed the series in the *True Sun*. Importantly, however, Hunt gave notice to Carlyle's now famous but then newly published *Sartor Resartus* by claiming that it "will cause a great deal of after-dinner talk among the possessors of great houses and masters of footmen" ("*True Sun*" 3:244). Hunt also took the time to notice Dickens' second novel, *Oliver Twist*, in the *Examiner*, where he claims that although parts of the novel contained "immaturities," Dickens "will be read and referred to with profit and delight, as a portion of the absolute truth of the past, and of the very *history*, as it were, of the character and moral abuses of our time" ("The Literary Examiner" 3:368). Hunt reviewed one of Browning's first poems, *Paracelsus*, in *Leigh Hunt's Literary Journal*, where he stated matter-of-factly that "some questions may be raised as to points in the execution of Mr Browning's poem, but there can be none as to the high poetic power displayed in it" ("Browning's *Paracelsus*" 3:311). In the *Tatler* Hunt reviewed Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* almost a year after their publication but as soon as they came to his attention, claiming he had not seen "such poetical writing since the last volume of Mr Keats" and that the poet "may take [his] stand at once among the first poets of the day" ("Notices" 3:154). The public attention Hunt brought these authors helped establish their importance in the eyes of the reading public but also brought Hunt himself attention again as the nurturer of fresh literary talent.

While he cultivated friendships with each of these men, Hunt was particularly interested in Carlyle as a friend with whom he might develop a relationship reminiscent

of the one he had with Shelley. Hunt had convinced Carlyle to live around the corner from him in Chelsea when the Scottish thinker and his wife, Jane, moved to London in 1834. In this regard, he had a more physically close relationship with him than with any of the other new writers with whom he had begun to associate. Carlyle immediately picked up on Hunt's hopes for their friendship. When Carlyle was in London to finalize the arrangements for his new home, he stopped for tea at Hunt's house. In a letter home to Jane, he states that the Hunt children "would fain have given me the Husband's shoes (à la Shelley, for I was to be the new Shelley)" (153). Hunt and Carlyle would spend many hours walking and talking, but despite Hunt's hopes of finding in Carlyle a companion with whom he could connect on the level that he and Shelley had, he soon realized that Carlyle held none of the ideals of his beloved Shelley. Carlyle wrote, "I was not a Shelley—had a foundation of Presbyterianism which was not agreeable to him. He met with such contradiction and ceased to come to walk with me" (Ashton 195).

As his relationship with Carlyle demonstrates, and despite Hunt's efforts, his new circle of friends lacked the unity of the one he had cultivated in his younger years. This may have been partly because he was in more financial troubles than ever before, his home life was significantly shakier, and he was simply older. Rather than the edgy "Libertas" (the nickname given him by Keats) who had chosen prison over retraction, Hunt was now seen as an old man of letters. For Carlyle, Dickens, Browning, and Tennyson, Hunt was like a museum piece of a generation cut down in the prime of their lives—a living relic who had rubbed shoulders with their literary heroes. Carlyle's and Browning's requests for Marianne Hunt to sculpt busts of Shelley for them reveals their fascination with Hunt's connection to the poets of another era. Holden writes that, after

first meeting Hunt in 1837, “Dickens was wide-eyed enough to want to follow where Keats, Shelley and Byron had once trod” (294). Viewing Hunt as more of a vestige from the past rather than an inspirational leader of the present meant that the new group of poets wasn’t forming the same tight-knit circle the Cockney School had formed; their interactions with Hunt and one another were more social than literary. While Hunt and Dickens may have exchanged copies of their books after publication, an act reminiscent of Cockney circle interactions, there were no sonnet-writing contests or poems written in response to one another’s poetry from any of the members of this new circle of friends. Besides the reasons mentioned above for this lack of unity, the group lacked a textual home like the one the Cockney circle had found in the *Examiner*.

The opportune moment to establish a founding text for the new group came with Hunt’s appointment as editor of the *Monthly Repository* in 1837. If the *Examiner* was, as Cox states, “the voice of the second generation of romantics, the organ of the Cockney School” (43), then the *Monthly Repository* may have been Hunt’s attempt to revive a collaborative home for the new group of poets he was attempting to gather. Holden notes that among the magazine’s contributors were “Landor, Carlyle, Browning and its previous editor, Richard Hengist Horne” (248). Following the first issue of the magazine, Hunt wrote to Tennyson, proclaiming the importance of the *Monthly Repository*: “I want my magazine to be such a magazine as was never seen before...I...wish to be a sort of Robin Hood of an editor” (“Leigh Hunt” 310). Hunt’s obvious enthusiasm for this new project reveals that he saw this moment as a golden opportunity to emerge as the figurehead of what he hoped to make the premier magazine of the time by gathering together a host of the most important writers of the day. In the same letter he wastes no

time in asking Tennyson to contribute, begging, “look into your desk, & see if you can oblige me *with a few verses & your name to them* for my new adventure” (310). By assuming the editorship and soliciting the work of Tennyson and other important new writers for his magazine, Hunt was again promoting his ideal of group authorship and asserting himself as the focal point of such collaboration.

Besides allowing Hunt the opportunity to create a venue for the ideology of group authorship, the *Monthly Repository* also allowed Hunt to reaffirm two other agendas from his first life: the primacy of literature and radical politics. In the first issue under his editorship, Hunt states, the magazine will be “very unsectarian, very miscellaneous, very much given to literature and unlimited enquiry, a great lover of all the wit and humour it can bring into it, and an ardent Reformer” (“Editor’s Address” 3:333). This paper, like the *Examiner*, then, would unite politics and literature in a way that would hopefully ignite enthusiasm in his readership.

Hunt’s efforts to revive the *Monthly Repository* failed, however, and in April of 1838 the magazine published its last issue. Before Hunt’s editorship, the magazine had been seen as simply an outlet for the Dissenter movement, and despite Hunt’s attempt to involve new writers and thinkers in the magazine, the public was unable to see past the magazine’s earlier sectarian connections. Again, Hunt was left with the task of finding some way to stimulate this new group of poets in order to make them more than literary friends and turn them into a literary body with a purpose. Hunt turned next to a type of text that again reminds us of his earlier days when he gathered the Cockneys around him: drama.

Resurrecting the Drama

From his youngest days, drama had been an important part of Hunt's life. In his *Autobiography*, he remarks, "The propensity to dramatic writing has been strong in me from boyhood" (2:286). Hunt claims that around 1805 he "had written a tragedy, a comedy, and a farce" (1:149) and that he had placed the farce into the hands his actor friend, Michael Kelly, to pass on to the manager of one of the theaters with which he was connected. Nothing came of this attempt, and instead Hunt turned his love of the theater into a brief career as a drama critic for his brother John's paper the *News*. From 1805-1807 Hunt enjoyed immense success as a theater critic and made important contributions to the genre of dramatic criticism.

Despite his early failure at getting his farce produced, however, Hunt's natural inclination towards drama and his earlier successes as a drama critic led him to once more try his hand at play-writing. Many years later as a prisoner of the Crown in Surrey jail, Hunt wrote *The Descent of Liberty*, a revival of the masque, a dramatic form popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While Hunt's masque has generally been disregarded as one of the many unstageable closet dramas of the Romantic era, Jeffrey Cox points out the importance of *The Descent of Liberty* in his book *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*. He states that Hunt's masque "led the way" (124) toward a trend in the Cockney circle of penning "dramas on mythological subjects" (123). He points out that Hunt's masque had prompted not only "Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* but also Mary Shelley's *Midas* and *Proserpine*, various 'dramatic sketches' by 'Barry Cornwall,' and Horace Smith's *Amarynthus, the Nympholept*" (123). Most importantly, however, Cox argues in the book for the importance of Hunt's revival of the masque because of the

literary and political statement that it made, calling it “a kind of canon reformation” (124). In other words, Hunt’s revival of the masque was immediately recognized by his coterie for the literary revolution it was as they quickly imitated Hunt’s revival of the masque by writing their own. Now, in his second life when he was again trying to gather a coterie following, Hunt naturally turned to the genre he had employed so successfully to revolutionize the writers of an earlier age. In 1837 Hunt chose not to try and revive the archaic masque again, but, instead, he chose to revive an equally out-of-fashion dramatic form, the poetic drama. And with the revival of the poetic drama in *A Legend of Florence*, Hunt hoped to create a similar literary revolution and following as he had experienced among the Cockney School by extending Romanticism into a new generation.

The enthusiasm of many of Hunt’s new literary friends for drama would have also encouraged him that a revival of this genre would be welcomed by them. Edward Bulwer-Lytton had written several successful plays, Horne had recently penned *The Death of Marlowe*, which he had dedicated to Hunt, and John Forster was employed as drama critic at the *Examiner*. Even more notably, Browning wrote and had produced a historical drama, *Stratford*, in 1837 which received marginal success. Browning’s success as a playwright during his early years was limited, but he is most famously known for his achievement with a poetic form he borrowed from drama, the dramatic monologue. The experience of Hunt’s younger contemporaries with drama put them in a position to appreciate more readily the literary revival Hunt was trying to effect with the poetic drama.

A Cockney Subject

Just as the dramatic format of Hunt's literary revival is an allusion to his younger days as leader of the Cockney circle, so is the subject matter he chose for his revival. In 1837 Hunt wrote in a letter to his friend Forster, "I have got SUCH a subject for a tragedy! so full of loveliness and pity, and final funereal awe" (*Correspondence* 1:278). The subject was the legend of Ginevra, which Hunt claimed he had learned while living in Italy. He writes in the preface to the printed version of *A Legend of Florence*, "When I resided near Florence...I was in the habit of going through a street in that city, called the 'Street of Death,' (*Via della Morte*),—a name given it from the circumstance of a lady's having passed through it at night-time in her grave-clothes, who had been buried during a trance" (vii). Hunt also confirms that while the story is "no less probable than romantic...nobody...in Italy ever doubted the main facts" (viii). Hunt indicates that he had read many of the particulars of the legend in *L'Osservatore Fiorentino* (1821), a history of Florence, including the names of the participants which have all been "handed down as belonging to the actual persons" (viii).

According to the legend, the virtuous maid Ginevra loved Rondinelli but married instead Agolanti, a wealthy Florentine. After a few years of unhappy marriage, she entered a trance as a result of the cruel treatment she received from her husband and was presumed to be dead. Her body was entombed but then she "rose from the dead" and came back to her husband's home. He was afraid of her, thinking she was a supernatural being, and sent her away. She then went to Rondinelli for refuge; he brought her in and nursed her back to health. Following her return to good health, Agolanti asserted his right as her legal husband. She appealed, however, to an ecclesiastical court, which determined

that her “death” released her from her first marriage and freed her to marry her true love, Rondinelli.

The plot of the play is reminiscent of *The Story of Rimini*, since it too deals with arranged marriages and with the love triangle created by this corrupt practice. Just as in his earlier poem, Hunt uses *A Legend of Florence* as a platform to call for the reform of marriage practices. More importantly, however, in revisiting the legend of Ginevra, Hunt revisits a story Shelley had taken an interest in the year before his death in a poem entitled “Ginevra.” Hunt draws attention to the fact that he is acting under the influence of Shelley by noting in the preface to his play, “Among the pleasures which I have had in making the endeavour...is the melancholy one of thinking, that the beloved friend whom I lost in that country [Italy] had chosen the same subject for a poem, of which he has left a fragment” (viii). He also points out that the title page of the printed version of his play contains “the motto” from Shelley’s poem, affirming that what follows in the play is meant to remind readers of his connection to Shelley, whom he knew they admired, for the purpose of drawing towards himself some new Shelley in order to fully reestablish the coterie experience of his younger days.

Understanding Shelley’s motivation for writing his poem “Ginevra” allows us to come to an understanding of what motivated Hunt to choose this story to reassert himself and his first-life agenda. Shelley wrote “Ginevra” in 1821 in response to his devastation over the arranged marriage of Emilia Viviani, who at the time was his current love interest. The Shelleys became acquainted with Emilia after learning her sad story from one of their Italian friends. As Mary tells Hunt in a letter, Emilia was sent to a convent by her jealous mother and locked up there until her forced marriage to a man whom she had

never met. Mary writes in this letter of her astonishment at the primitive way marriage is arranged in Italy, which included withholding the name of the proposed spouse until a description of him was accepted by the intended bride's parents. At first both the Shelleys took an interest in Emilia, but when Percy's interest turned into something deeper, Mary quickly became disenchanted with Emilia and her unfortunate fate, including her arranged marriage. Shelley's affair with Emilia—among his affairs with other women at this same time—put a strain on the Shelleys' relationship, something Hunt was certainly aware of when he arrived in Italy. Nothing is more suggestive of Hunt's awareness of their marital problems than his refusal to give Mary the heart of her dead husband because he believed he had more claim to Shelley's heart than she did (Holden 166).

Shelley's relationship with Emilia Viviani and the poem it produced are one of many examples of his radical views on sexuality. Hunt's decision to choose the same subject matter for his poem indicates his reaffirmation of the notions of sexual liberation he had also espoused in his younger days. Since the purpose of writing the play was in part to bring forward some new Shelley, it makes sense that Hunt would choose to do so by articulating the philosophies of sexuality that had helped to establish the friendship between the two.

A Legend of Florence

With this understanding of how Hunt's attempt at a literary resurgence at this specific time, in this genre, and with this subject matter drew upon his earlier life, it is now possible to examine the various ways in which Hunt infused *A Legend of Florence* with the prevailing ideologies he had established in his first life. As has already been pointed out, the play began as something of a collaborative project by invoking the

memory of Shelley in the choice of the subject matter. Just as the poets of the Cockney circle wrote poems responding to each other's poems, so did Hunt write a *Legend of Florence* as a response to Shelley's poem "Ginevra." And with an excerpt from Shelley's poem standing at the front of his play, Hunt signaled he was linking *A Legend of Florence* to a group authorship project begun almost twenty years earlier.

Also reminiscent of the Cockney School days when Hunt's notion of group authorship was first formed and cultivated, Hunt gathered his new literary friends around for a reading of his play once he had finished penning it. He did so despite his preference for seeing dramas performed rather than read aloud, indicating the level to which he was committed to the idea of group authorship and also making clear that *A Legend of Florence* was a revival of his first life agenda. Charles Robinson notes that on numerous occasions Hunt either gathered groups of friends together for the purpose of hearing his play read or took the opportunity of reading it to a group gathered for some other occasion. In other words, he actively sought the participation of his literary friends in writing the play. During the period between Hunt's completion of the play and the final staging of it, the play was read by such friends as John Forster, James Sheridan Knowles, Charles Dickens, Thomas and Jane Carlyle, Bryan Waller Proctor, Robert Bell, Egerton Webbe, John Hunter, George Craik, Thornton Hunt and his wife Katherine, Percy Hunt, Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, Edward Bulwer, Richard Hengist Horne, Charles Ollier, and Mary Shelley (Robinson 46-7). Besides appealing to his friends for feedback on his play, Hunt also recruited Egerton Webbe and Vincent Novello to write the music for it. Hunt's efforts to involve his friends in the creation of his dramatic revival indicate that he meant for the play to be the banner text for the new movement he hoped to begin

among them—a movement that today can be seen as an extension of Romanticism into a new era.

The response of his friends to the play was largely positive, although they did call for a revision of the final act of the play, which they claimed was too undramatic. Hunt's original ending had closely followed the legend itself, with Rondinelli and Ginevra being allowed to marry after a court had dissolved the marriage of Ginevra and Agolanti as a result of her "death." Hunt accepted his friends' suggestions and instead closed the play with the death of the villainous Agolanti, who refuses to release Ginevra from their unhappy marriage. Charles Robinson claims there are "scores of letters showing that Hunt was revising his literary text with apparent abandon—presumably sacrificing his initial aesthetic judgments and artistic control to friends, actors, designers, stage and acting managers, and the commercialism of the theatre itself" (44). What Robinson doesn't understand, however, is that Hunt's revisions are a manifestation of his collaborative mindset, not an example of artistic abandon. By gathering friends to hear his play, Hunt was inviting them to participate in a group authorship project that was really part of a larger project to extend the coterie days of Hampstead into the mid 1800s under the inspiration of *A Legend of Florence*.

These group readings are an outward sign of Hunt's revival of the ideal of group authorship. The other core philosophies of his first life—the primacy of literature, radical politics, and sexual liberation—would be revived in the play itself. Incorporating these other aspects of his agenda into the play demonstrates his understanding that it was in part these philosophies that had gathered the Cockney circle around him in the first place.

These elements become essential parts of the play in order for it to inspire a coterie following.

The very fact that Hunt turned to a literary form to comment on a social practice—arranged marriages—indicates the important position literature held in his mind. By writing a play that portrays on stage a social reality, Hunt reasserted his faith in literature’s power to influence society and bring about reform. Hunt also demonstrated the central role of literature by preserving the original setting of the legend in his play. The story takes place during the pontificate of Pope Leo X, a member of the Medici family in Italy and a renowned patron of the arts. Having been educated by humanist scholars during his childhood, Leo X had gained an early appreciation for the arts and literature. During his time as pope, Leo X patronized the work of such famous painters as Leonardo da Vinci, Baccio Bandinelli, Raphael, Benvenuto Cellini, and Michelangelo (Menning 296) as well as numerous writers. In the play, Hunt alludes to this widespread patronage when Colonna tells Da Riva, “I am to bring thy verse and thee / To his Beatitude’s most knowing knowledge” (1.3.39-40). Hunt shows his approval for the Pope’s love of the arts when Colonna states:

Our blessed Father seems to be of the opinion,
That whatsoever good or beauty exists
Must needs belong, like angels, to the church;
And as he finds them...He makes us know them better; bids them come
Forth from the crowd, and show their winged wits,
And rise, and sit within his princely beams. (1.3.47-54)

As Hunt made clear in his dramatic reviews in the *News*, society depended on the upper classes to set the example of good taste in literature. Leo X, then, is a prime example of Hunt's idea of the primacy of literature, considering the extent to which he went to promote the arts. During his pontificate, the Catholic church experienced a serious theological crisis with the posting of Martin Luther's 95 theses and the subsequent start of the Reformation. Leo X ignored this crisis while continuing to lavishly support the arts and further the cause of his own family (Menning 296). Hunt's praise of Leo X in the play for the very attributes he is most often criticized for clearly indicates the value Hunt placed on making the arts a central component of society.

Besides setting the story of the play during the pontificate of this great patron of the arts, Hunt also suggests the social significance of poets by having his characters describe the poet Da Riva as an "immortal boy" and a "good fellow" (1.1.1). At one point, Da Riva is even referred to as "poet and prophet" (2.1.67). Following this praise, Da Riva proceeds to announce that there will be

A time, when sense and reason shall have grown
As much more rife than now, and foolish thorns
As much less in request, as we, now living,
Surpass rude times and savage ancestors. (2.1.75-8)

This brief speech Hunt gives Da Riva proclaims that the poet, from his glorified position, has the ability to see into the future, to see the potential of mankind unseen by ordinary people. In response to this prophecy, Colonna says, "glory be to poetry and to poets / Their cookery is no mincing!... / They certainly, while they're about it, do / Cut and carve worlds out, with their golden swords, / To which poor Alexander's was a pumpkin"

(2.1.91-5). Hunt raises the poet above even the greatest conqueror of all time; while his world could be destroyed, the world the poet creates is immortal.

While Hunt's idea of the primacy of literature is everywhere implied in the play, the reassertion of his radical politics and his sexually liberal ideals are more overt. Just as the *Examiner* had turned into a platform for reform as Hunt's way of articulating his radical politics, so does *A Legend of Florence* indicate the persistence of Hunt's radical politics in his second life by turning to the cause of reform. This time the corrupt system is the practice of arranged marriages. Hunt doesn't immediately reveal that the platform of the play is the reform of marriage practices but rather first leads his audience to believe that Ginevra is simply caught in a bad marriage. From the beginning of the play, Hunt paints Ginevra's spouse, Agolanti, as a domineering, unsatisfied husband—one who always questions the intentions of his wife and is never content with the love he receives from her. He is described in the play as being “as celestial out of his own house, / As he is devil within it” (1.1.52-3). Da Riva states that Agolanti,

Looks on himself as the most unresponded to
 And unaccountably ill-used bad temper
 In Tuscany; rages at every word
 And look [Ginevra] gives another; and fills the house
 With miseries, which, because they ease himself,
 And his vile spleen, he thinks her bound to suffer;
 And then finds malice in her very suffering! (1.1.88-98)

Agolanti feels shunned by Ginevra but deals with his pain sadistically. In a scene between Agolanti and Ginevra, Hunt reveals the violent nature of Agolanti's treatment of

her. When Ginevra cheerfully greets him, saying, “The world seems glad after its hearty drink / Of rain. I fear’d when you come back this morning, / The shower had stopp’d you, or that you were ill” (2.2.9-11), he angrily responds, “You fear’d! you hoped. What fear you that I fear, / Or hope for that I hope for? A truce, madam, / To these exordiums and pretended interests, / Whose only shallow intent is to delay, / Or to divert, the sole dire subject---me” (2.2.12-6). He finds in her kindness malice that does not exist. Throughout this scene he baits her to react to his cruelty. At first she responds only with “what can I say / Or what alas! not say, and not be chided?” (2.2.65-6). When she begs him to stop harassing her, claiming that she has “not the strength for it” (2.2.67), he flippantly replies, “I’ve known you weaker” (2.2.70). He then forces her to answer whether she has ever said something that was aimed to hurt him. She admits that she has, that she is a “woman, not an angel” (2.2.85). After this, he accuses her of never loving him, “not when before the altar / With a mean coldness, a worldly-minded coldness / And lie on your lips, you took me for your husband” (2.2.106-8). This finally brings the response he seems to have been looking for throughout the scene. Ginevra cries, “What have I done, / Good God! what have I done, that I am thus / At the mercy of a mystery of tyranny, / Which from its victim demands every virtue, / And brings it none?” (2.2.119-22).

It isn’t until after painting this painful scene of abuse that Hunt reveals that Agolanti and Ginevra’s union is an arranged marriage, not one of choice. During a heated confrontation with Agolanti, the spurned Rondinelli explains the circumstances behind Agolanti and Ginevra’s “courtship” and marriage: “My acquaintance / Not long preceded yours; and was too brief / To let my love win on her filial eyes, / Before your own came beaming with that wealth, / Which, with all other shows of good and prosperous, / Her

parents justly thought her due” (3.2.92-7). While Agolanti chose to court Ginevra, it was Ginevra’s parents who chose Agolanti as her marriage partner. By opening the play with descriptions of a cruel husband, Hunt enlists sympathy on the side of Ginevra. Her patience and kindness in response to such brutality rallies the audience to her side. Then, when Hunt later reveals that Ginevra’s pitiful situation is the result of the pure selfishness of her parents in choosing her spouse based on economic motivations, the audience is left outraged. The result is their immediate animosity toward the practice of arranged marriages.

Hunt uses the play to forcefully demonstrate the consequences of having no choice in marriage, since the implication is clearly that if Ginevra had been allowed a choice in her marriage, she would have chosen her first love, Rondinelli, and not the wealthy Agolanti. Once Rondinelli reveals that Ginevra is the victim of an arranged marriage, Ginevra’s cry, “What have I done, / Good God! what have I done, that I am thus / At the mercy of a mystery of tyranny” (2.2.119-21) at the end of the scene described above suddenly becomes a plea for the reform of the corrupt practice of arranged marriages. What began as the retelling of a story is now a call for action—an insistence for social reform.

By calling arranged marriages “a mystery of tyranny,” Hunt conjures images of political repression. Years earlier Hunt himself had employed the term “tyranny” in the *Examiner* to describe the reckless rule of Charles I in France and to warn the Prince Regent that “Extravagance in a king very often leads him into tyrannical proceedings” (A Letter” 1:70). Ironically, it was the extravagance of the Regent, despite this warning, that led Hunt to mock him in the pages of the *Examiner* and won him the ultimate

demonstration of political tyranny—a prison sentence. Accordingly, Hunt’s use of the term tyranny in 1837 couldn’t help but remind his contemporaries of the famous years he had suffered in jail at the hands of the tyrant Prince Regent, a purposeful move on Hunt’s part to again conjure images of his radical, youthful self that had inspired the poets of another age. As one with firsthand experience with a “mystery of tyranny,” Hunt’s juxtaposition of arranged marriages and political repression became an especially poignant reassertion of the radical politics of reform. He could speak with authority on reform because he had suffered from political corruption—the breeding ground for social corruption. Just as in the *Examiner*, Hunt was again asserting his radicalism. This time, however, it was merely taking the shape of verses in a tragic play.

Asserting radical politics in his play was so important to Hunt that it even forced him to reject a suggestion for revision that came from one of his many group readings. Madame Vestris, manager of Covent Garden Theatre for the 1840 season, repeatedly tried to persuade Hunt to change the ending of the play by making Agolanti repentant and giving him his wife back. Although Hunt had agreed to rewrite the undramatic ending of the first version of his play in favor of a more dramatic one at the suggestion of friends, he refused to oblige Madame Vestris, claiming that his “conscience would not allow” him to change the play. He stated that he felt he had a “piece of legislation on [his] hands, the duty of which [he] could not give up” (T. Hunt 302-3). Hunt asserted that there either had to be a divorce or a murder, but that the play could not end with the reunification of the couple.

Hunt’s response to Madame Vestris, couched in the political language of “legislation” and “duty,” again reveals his reassertion of radical politics in the play—

even at the expense of his group authorship project. Making Agolanti repentant would weaken his call for the reform of the corrupt social practice of arranging marriages and subvert his effort to promote radical politics. To reconcile the spouses would be to admit that arranged marriages can eventually produce happiness. Such an admission would condone a corrupt system and Hunt, with his constant championing of reform, could never make such a concession.

In speaking of his play as a piece of legislation, Hunt also confirms that the play is meant to offer a solution to the problem of the socially corrupt practice of arranging marriages, not just to call for reform. If the solution to political tyranny is revolution, then the solution to marital tyranny must also be revolution. And just as political violence must be stopped with physical violence, Hunt proposes to combat social corruption with social liberation. And what better way to liberate society than to call for a sexual revolution?

As has been implied above, Hunt's ultimate solution to reforming the practice of arranged marriages is choice in marriage. If Ginevra and Rondinelli had been allowed to choose to marry, they both would have been spared the pain of her abusive arranged marriage. But although the idea of choice in marriage would have been sexually liberal at the time of the setting of the play (the sixteenth century), it was not a sexually liberal idea in early Victorian England. So in order to bolster his radical politics of reform, Hunt had to propose an immediate answer to the problem of tyrannical arranged marriages that would have been seen as sexually liberal for his contemporary audience.

Hunt's immediate answer, then, is to call for the sexual liberation of the spouses within the marriage relationship. Since they had no choice in entering the marriage—

especially the wife—there could be no expectation that they would find happiness in such a forced situation. Hunt articulates this idea in a discussion between Colonna and Da Riva. They marvel that the tyrannical Agolanti has “No taste of good in him at all? no corner / In his heart, for some small household grace to sneak in?” (1.1.64-5). In other words, they imply that Agolanti should be willing to turn a blind eye and allow an affair—a “household grace” in the case of such an unhappy and forced union—between Ginevra and Rondinelli to take place. For Hunt, a person who has been forced into a marital relationship should be able—with the knowledge and approval of his or her spouse—to entertain a sexual relationship outside the marriage as a means of finding the happiness an arranged marriage prevents.

To make such a sexually liberal idea seem more desirable, Hunt clearly demonstrates how unhappy the state of marriage is. In an exchange between Da Riva and Colonna, Agolanti acknowledges the misery caused by arranged marriages. When they accuse him of treating his wife maliciously, “Cast[ing] her / Into strange swoons, and monstrous shows of death” (3.1.60-1), he responds, “Why select me, as the scape-goat of a common / And self-resented misery?” (3.1.69-70). He then lists the names of several unhappy married couples in Florence, claiming that you could “Take any dozen couples, the first you think of, / Those you know best; and see, if matrimony / Has been success with them, or a dull failure; / Dull at the best; probably, damn’d with discord; / A hell, the worse for being carried about / With quiet looks” (3.1.82-7). Da Riva and Colonna chastise Agolanti for espousing such a pessimistic view of marriage, yet they themselves have claimed earlier in the play, “there are a hundred marriages / In Florence, and a hundred more to those, / And hundreds to those hundreds, bad as [Ginevra and

Agolanti's]; / As ill assorted, and as lover-hated" (2.1.39-42). The despairing views of marriage uttered by Agolanti, Da Riva, and Colonna allow Hunt to make clear the widespread reach of social corruption in the form of arranged marriages. Doing so makes his audience more sympathetic to the sexual revolution he proposes.

Throughout the play Hunt promotes this idea of sexual liberation by allowing the other characters to subvert the marriage relationship of Ginevra and Agolanti. For example, Colonna and Da Riva determine in the first scene of the play to "lay our loving heads together, to see / What can be done to help this gentle lady / For poor [Rondinelli's] sake, and for her own" (1.2.123-5). They make clear that their concern is not for the unhappy marriage but rather for the forbidden lovers, implying that the marriage relationship cannot be healed and so a new relationship needs to be cultivated as a substitute. In order to cultivate this relationship, Da Riva and Colonna speak to Rondinelli of Ginevra's love for him, which they say is evidenced by her "pure look...at the mention of [his] name...as though her mind retreated / To some blest, serious thought, far off but possible" (2.1.15-19). They hint to him that even the virtuous Ginevra entertains thoughts of an illicit relationship with him and go so far as to lie to Rondinelli in an attempt to affirm Ginevra's love for him. Colonna assures Rondinelli that Ginevra blushed to hear his name mentioned but confides in an aside to the audience, "I did not see the blush, I must confess; / But being so virtuous, there must have been one, / And he'll be glad to hear of it" (2.1.21-3). Da Riva's and Colonna's encouragement of an extra-marital relationship is Hunt's encouragement of the sexual liberation of husbands and wives.

Besides directly encouraging the would-be lover, Da Riva and Colonna help carry out the subversive behavior they've inspired by delivering a letter from Rondinelli to Agolanti. The letter warns "If Signor Agolanti values his wife's peace, *and life*, he will meet the writer of this letter instantly" (3.1.100). Essentially, the letter asks the husband to come and answer to an outside party for the ill treatment of his wife. Doing so again allows Hunt to subvert the position of the husband while simultaneously elevating the position of the admirer.

One of the key ways Hunt articulates his idea of sexual liberation in the play is by juxtaposing the husband and the professed lover. This is clearly demonstrated when the two meet in response to the letter Rondinelli has sent Agolanti. Rondinelli accuses Agolanti of being an "imposter" and commands him to stop his ruthless treatment of Ginevra. Rondinelli says, "Let the saint be worse / By one hair's-breadth of sickness, and you take / No step to show that you would have prevented it, / And every soul in Florence...shall loathe you" (3.2.165-70). Agolanti's position as a husband is overthrown, and another man, whose love exceeds his, is allowed to take his place in protecting the wife. Agolanti does not carry out his husbandly duties of protecting his wife because their marriage is an unnatural one, a forced relationship. Rondinelli, on the contrary, feels the proper emotions of a husband despite his lack of legal claim to this title, suggesting that it is not legal status that matters but rather emotional status.

The absence of natural husbandly feeling in Agolanti is never more apparent than after he learns of Ginevra's death. Agolanti's reaction is disbelief mingled with coldness. In response to the servant's report that Ginevra has died, he says, "Thou say'st what cannot be. A hundred times / I've seen her worse than she is now" (3.2.193-4).

Rondinelli, on the other hand, responds with the proper bereavement of a lover: “Oh horror! / ...Oh dreadful! / ...She’s gone; and I am alone. Earth’s blank; / Misery certain” (3.2.195-201). By contrasting the passionate response of Rondinelli with the unfeeling response of Agolanti, Hunt is again attempting to illustrate the need for sexual liberation in the marriage relationship. Agolanti’s oppressive behavior towards Ginevra prevents him from feeling proper despair at her loss and indicates the absence of love in their marriage. Hunt’s response to this absence is to suggest that an outside admirer, such as Rondinelli, whose love has been purely manifested step in and fill the emptiness.

Hunt pushes the coldness of Agolanti a step further still, however, when Ginevra, upon awaking from the trance that had led to her presumed death, comes to him crying, “Agolanti! / Francesco Agolanti! husband / ...Come forth, and help me in—Oh help me in!” (4.3.35-40). Agolanti fails to recognize his wife, however, and instead, thinking she is a spirit, abuses her as a “Detestable thing! witch! mockery of the blessed!” (4.3.44). In desperation Ginevra goes to Rondinelli, who also assumes she is a spirit at first. However, rather than retreating in horror at the sight of her, Rondinelli allows her to speak and explain that she is still alive. To confirm her story, he even reaches out a hand to touch her. Once again, Hunt juxtaposes the response of the husband with the true lover in order to demonstrate the inability of arranged marriages to cultivate true feelings of love. Rondinelli’s behavior consistently demonstrates the desirability of sexual liberation in marriage—he is always virtuous while Agolanti is always a tyrant.

In the final act of the play, Hunt anticipates his audience’s potential response to his proposal for a sexual revolution. After Ginevra’s false “death,” she recovers her health in the home of Rondinelli and his mother. With her health restored, Ginevra is

prepared to enter a convent rather than return to live with the oppressive Agolanti. However, when he comes feigning remorse and “seeking pardon” (5.2.50), Ginevra agrees to return to live with him rather than “stand betwixt his will and power” by entering the convent (5.2.51). Her willingness to submit to the “law” that binds her to a tyrannical spouse rather than set herself free from his power by entering into a relationship with Rondinelli demonstrates the depths to which Hunt saw the corruption of arranged marriages reaching. In response to Agolanti’s entreaty to Ginevra, “Come, bear thee up, / And bravely.... We’ll leave this place” (5.3.25-6), Da Riva appeals to Rondinelli: “will you let him? / Think of herself.— ’Tis none of yours, this business, / But the whole earth’s” (5.3.28-30). Through Da Riva, Hunt makes clear that the extra-marital relationship he proposes between Ginevra and Rondinelli is a universal proposal; anyone caught in an oppressive marriage should be allowed sexual liberty by seeking love outside the bonds of marriage.

In response to Ginevra’s submission to his will, Agolanti triumphantly cries, “She’s mine! / Who stays us... Who triumphs now? Who laughs? Who / mocks at pandars, / Cowards, and shameless women?” (5.3.38-41). His outburst affirms what all arranged marriages imply, that the relationship is merely a symbol of power and wealth rather than love and respect. Ginevra shrinks in horror from him, crying, “Every thing warns me. I will not return. / ...I’ll not go back to that unsacred house” (5.3.46, 48). Instead, Ginevra demands to be taken to the convent. Ginevra’s preference for a socially acceptable way out of her marriage rather than the radical alternative Hunt proposes demonstrates his awareness of his Victorian audience. In response to this anticipated hesitation from his audience, Hunt follows the practice of subversion he promotes in the

play by hiding his radicalism under the cloak of a more culturally acceptable conclusion. In response to Ginevra's plea to be taken to a convent, Agolanti demands, "Let not her stir. Nor dare to stir one soul, / Lest in the madness of my wrongs I smite ye" (5.3.59-60). Ginevra tries to elicit his sympathy on her behalf, but she is overcome by her emotions and faints. Rondinelli rushes to catch her and when he does so, Agolanti draws his sword to kill him. Colonna anticipates his move and fatally stabs Agolanti first.

On the surface, Hunt's dramatic murder of Agolanti may seem like a conservative rather than a radical move. However, it is important to remember that Hunt never recants his proposal for the sexual liberation of oppressed spouses. If anything, Da Riva's final warning to Rondinelli that this is the business of the whole world and not just him is an emphatic affirmation of the revolution the rest of the play proposes. Throughout the play, Agolanti has been the voice of opposition to Hunt's radical ideas. Ending with his murder allows Hunt to make a statement of violence against those who oppose his liberal ideas. And as a final affirmation of his proposed sexual revolution, Hunt has the "poet and prophet" Da Riva condone the act of violence. In response to Colonna's question "One must have perish'd ... / Which was the corse to be?" (5.3.79-81), Da Riva proclaims, "There's not a heart here, but will say, 'Twas he" (82). Da Riva's statement not only reaffirms Hunt's idea of the primacy of literature—as a poet Da Riva has the ability to see the social benefit of Agolanti's murder and to share this insight with others—but also justifies the radical politics Hunt puts forward in the play. The result is the reassertion of Hunt's identity as a radical reformer with liberal ideas who had captivated the attention of the great writers of a past generation. By reminding the young poets of the day of his radical persona, Hunt hoped to attract their attention and rally them around him as the

central figure of a new movement in literature—a movement that attempted to extend the life of Romanticism.

When *A Legend of Florence* opened at Covent Garden Theater on 7 February 1840, Ann Blainey notes that “All literary London was there, and those who were not, wished they were” (172). And when the curtain closed at the end of the play, the audience erupted into loud applause, calling for Hunt to take the stage. The man who took the stage, however, was the same radical Libertas of the Romantic movement whom British authorities had felt compelled to silence with a prison sentence and who had shocked polite society with *The Story of Rimini*. The irony of the “King of the Cockneys,” one of the most radical poets of the Romantic era, receiving the enthusiastic applause of the notoriously conservative Victorians for a production that reasserted all the radicalism of his younger days is a puzzle for the next chapter to solve.

Chapter Three:

After the Curtain's Close: The Nostalgic Reception of *A Legend of Florence*

As Chapter 2 establishes, *A Legend of Florence* was Hunt's attempt to revive the spirit of his radical younger days when the Cockney School was flourishing and he was at the head of a literary movement or, as he famously phrased it, "a new school of poetry" ("Young Poets" 2:73). The play itself embodies the key philosophies that motivated Hunt and the Cockney School during the group's short but influential years as a coterie force in literary London. Hunt's revival was in response to what scholars today have identified as the transitional literary period of the 1820s and 1830s, a time that, as Philip Davis notes in the Victorian volume of *The Oxford English Literary History*, "begins with endings" due to the "premature" deaths of Keats, Shelley, Byron, and Hazlitt (3). And although the careers of these writers were short, their influence on the early Victorian writers was important. Carol Christ explains this influence:

The poetry that we have come to call Victorian develops in the context of Romanticism....When Browning first read Shelley, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, Shelley quickly became his God.... When Tennyson, at fourteen, heard that Byron had died, he felt the world had come to an end, melodramatically carving in stone 'BYRON IS DEAD'....Although Victorian poetics came to distance itself from Romantic poetics, the first generation of Victorian poets initially saw themselves as writing in a Romantic tradition. (2)

The Victorians' shift away from the ideas of Romanticism that Christ alludes to largely occurred during the transitional period of the 1830s. It wasn't that the early Victorians

such as Browning and Tennyson were reacting against what we call today Romanticism, but rather that they began regarding it with a detached sentimentalism. Linda Williams explains this shift in terms of nostalgia. She writes: “The Victorians had a great talent for nostalgia. This means that their interpretation of the past was double-edged, countering present loss with rosily remembered bygone times” (45-6). In other words, the 1830s became a time for fondly remembering what once was but no longer existed. And, as Williams further explains, “The fact that the romantic paradigm was no longer applicable to an acutely altered Britain gradually became a cause for celebration rather than lament. Against a fetishized past, poets countered with a strong vision of the present” (49).

It was amid the rise of this celebration of the past and assertion of a new vision that Hunt’s *A Legend of Florence* made its appearance on the literary scene. This chapter will demonstrate how the staging and reception of *A Legend of Florence*, perhaps more than any other literary event of the late 1830s, manifests the way Romanticism had become fuel for sentimental nostalgia rather than revolutionary zeal for the early Victorians. By examining contemporary responses to *A Legend of Florence*, this nostalgic propensity reveals itself and becomes an indication that the radicalism Hunt’s Cockney Circle sought to establish had effectively become contained by the dominant culture.¹

Initial Response

The first response to *A Legend of Florence* comes from the opening night audience, whose excitement over the play’s debut is recorded in numerous accounts. The *Theatrical Observer* stated that Covent Garden was “crammed in every part” (1) and the

¹ In the discussion of the responses to *A Legend of Florence* that follows, I make use of the terms “Romantic” and “Victorian” not because these are terms that would have been in use at the time but simply for the ease of communicating with modern students of literature.

Times reported that “the audience, who were enthusiastic at the end of every act, were tumultuous at the fall of the curtain...Mr. Leigh Hunt was called for, and came before the curtain *in propria persona*” (“Covent Garden Theatre” 6).

Following opening night, this same enthusiasm for the play continued to manifest itself in the large number of congratulatory letters Hunt received regarding the play. For example, William Hazlitt Jr. wrote: “I beg to offer my warm congratulations on the success of your play. Both Mrs. Hazlitt & myself are very desirous of seeing it again” (“Leigh Hunt” 361). And Laman Blanchard, one of Hunt’s journalist friends, flattered Hunt by writing,

Do tell me how you felt when you heard your name ringing through the walls of the great theatre. Are you aware that when you came on, you stood on your head instead of your heels? ...What do you think of the fiddlers—and of that man with the bassoon who, I understand, stood in the same attitude gazing on the spot where you stood till 2 in the morning—hours after all the audience had left—when he was removed by three policemen? (qtd. in Blunden 281-2)

The reports of the audience’s reaction on opening night provide insight into what was creating the excitement over Hunt’s play. Each of these responses indicates that it was more the author than the play that generated enthusiasm. Hunt, as a figure representative of a dying era, held celebrity-like status for his younger contemporaries, who saw him as the man who had lived among such literary giants as Keats, Shelley, and Byron—hence Blanchard’s obviously exaggerated account of the star-struck response of

the bassoon player. He was a living reminder of a glorious past Victorians were fascinated with but felt distanced from.

Not only did *A Legend of Florence* generate excitement for Hunt from his younger contemporaries, but it also moved friends from his radical younger days to reminisce about the past. Hunt's estranged friend Benjamin Haydon recorded in his journal after opening night that he was "highly pleased" by the audience's "enthusiastic" response to Hunt (*Autobiography* 669). He further notes: "at the conclusion [Hunt] was brought on the stage—grey, sturdy, worn and timid. I was much affected. Think of poor Hunt being ruined for telling mankind what George IV was ashamed they should know" (669). Years later, Hunt's friends Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke were still sentimental about *A Legend of Florence's* opening night. In their book *Recollections of Writers*, written in 1878, the Cowden Clarkes remembered: "A touching sight was it to see that honoured head, grown grey in the cause of letters....a head that we remembered jet black with thick, clustered hair, and held proudly up with youthful poet thought and patriot ardour, now silvered and gently inclined to receive the applause thus for the first time publicly" (86-7). These accounts from Haydon and the Cowden Clarkes reveal the same propensity to celebrate Hunt rather than the play. At the same time, they are examples of the nostalgic response to *A Legend of Florence* because both of these parties—participants in the radical days of the Cockney School—write of the present Hunt in terms of the past. Their retrospective responses are yet another manifestation of the general response to Hunt as a symbol of the past—of days that were now looked back on with tempered fondness and not with radical fervor. The response from the audience as well as from Hunt's contemporaries and long-time friends reveals that the excitement

over *A Legend of Florence* was generally not owing to its literary greatness or its revival of Romantic radicalism. Rather, the response reveals that the play is important for the way it demonstrates fond reminiscing over a past movement and Hunt's role as a figurehead of that movement.

Public Reviews

Another way responses to *A Legend of Florence* reveal a nostalgia for Romanticism is through the public reviews the play received in the leading periodicals of the day. Before delving into these reviews, it is first necessary to preface them with a brief discussion of the practice of reviewing in nineteenth-century Britain. A system of "puffing" had firmly embedded itself into the culture of reviewing that routinely included the shameless plugging of newly published literary pieces in advertisements and written reviews by both the authors themselves and their associates in the periodical industry. Nicholas Mason's paradigm-shifting article "'The Quack Has Become God': Puffery, Print, and the 'Death' of Literature in Romantic-Era Britain" carefully documents the history of puffing in Britain, a corruption which, after beginning in the 1730s, "a century later...had essentially become naturalized in British society" (12). His article makes clear the depth to which the system of puffing had penetrated by the mid-nineteenth century and leads him to advise "due caution when working with reviews from this era" (29). This caution is particularly relevant to a study of reviews of *A Legend of Florence* since Hunt's extensive career in journalism as both an editor and a contributor had allowed him to form a wide network of connections within the industry. As the perusal of only a handful of the many reviews *A Legend of Florence* received will demonstrate, they are in large part puffs of the play rather than genuinely objective responses. But it is the puffery

of these reviews—as well as Hunt’s response to them as puffs—that ironically makes them so crucial to an understanding of how *A Legend of Florence* is a text symbolic of the nostalgia for Romanticism in the late 1830s and early 1840s.

The reviews of *A Legend of Florence* that appeared in both the *Times* and the *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist* serve as classic examples of puffs since Hunt had intimate connections with both publications. The *Times* was edited by Thomas Barnes, a life-long friend from Hunt’s school days at Christ’s Hospital, and the *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist* belonged to Henry Colburn, a man infamous among his contemporaries for his affinity for puffery (Houghton 3:161-2). Hunt had been a contributor to Colburn’s periodical since the late 1820s as a way of working off the debt he owed Colburn for rescuing him from his financially-imposed exile in Italy. Hunt’s friend Theodore Hook was also serving as editor of the magazine at the time *A Legend of Florence* was produced (167). With this understanding of Hunt’s ties to both publications, otherwise contradictory statements in their reviews suddenly make sense. For example, in its February 8, 1840 issue, the *Times* claimed, “[t]he success of the drama was great and unequivocal” (“Covent Garden Theatre” 6). But despite finding the play “agreeable,” the *Times* also admits that the play is “without intricacy or underplot” and that “[g]reat creative power, novel development of character, is not to be looked for” (“Covent Garden Theatre”6). For its part, the *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, in its March issue, lauded the play as an “entire success” with “many detached beauties” (“A Legend” 438). Later in the review, however, it confesses that *A Legend of Florence* “is a drama infinitely better adapted to the closet than the theatre” and that “it is ineffective as a *dramatic* representation” (“A Legend” 438-9).

While the schizophrenic tendencies of these reviews make them clear examples of puffery, the most egregious puffing of *A Legend of Florence* is found, not surprisingly, in the *Examiner*, where Hunt's connections ran deepest. Not only had Hunt and his brother John founded the *Examiner*, but Hunt had famously served as its editor for more than a decade, even suffering a prison sentence for the views he published within its pages. Besides these longstanding ties to the paper, Hunt's close friend John Forster was its dramatic critic and thus had the task of reviewing *A Legend of Florence*. As noted in Chapter 2, Forster acknowledged that Hunt had "influenced all my modes of literary thought at the outset of my life....Very probably Leigh Hunt led me, at least confirmed me in adopting literature as a profession" (qtd. in Brewer 248). Hunt may have played an important role in Forster's early life and career, but Forster quickly came to play just as important a role in Hunt's career during his declining years. John Fenstermaker, one of Forster's biographers, claims that in Hunt's latter years, Forster "took every available occasion to notice Hunt's publications, favorably reviewing his works, and to act behind the scenes with friends, publishers, and theater managers" (30). Forster tried to help promote *A Legend of Florence* by packing two reviews of the play—a literary review of the text and a dramatic review of the production—into one issue of the *Examiner*. But Forster's editor, Albany Fonblanque, who had joined the *Examiner* staff just as Hunt was leaving it, wrote to Forster insisting that the two reviews be printed in two separate issues of the paper. Fonblanque admits to Forster, however, that despite his editorial decision, he was "as anxious as [Forster] to give the best support to Hunt" (qtd. in Davies 17).

In his first review of the play on February 8, 1840, Forster all but admits to his intimate acquaintance with Hunt when he states: "The production of a new play, by Leigh

Hunt, is an event in theatrical annals that will interest every one. We will not enter into the peculiar circumstances which give it inexpressible interest to us” (“Theatrical Examiner: The New Play” 85). Forster then goes on to state that “One incident connected with [Hunt’s play] will claim a sure and general sympathy. We mean the brave and gallant effort it implied to redeem the worldly failure of a life, whose successes, till now, have been all unworldly. Brave men will feel this best, and best know what a large respect is due to it” (85). By opening with this sympathetic appeal to Hunt’s personal situation, Forster seems to be preparing his readers for the puff that follows, where he sandwiches genuine criticisms of the play between exuberant praises. Forster first remarks that the play met with “complete success” but then admits that the play lacks “what may be called the theatrical movement of the scene; and the situations, or conventional effects, were rare” (85). This criticism is quickly brushed aside, however, by Forster’s follow-up praise: “But the play had thought, fancy, feeling, passion; and these things are quite enough” (85). In a private 1840 letter between Forster and Hunt, Forster advises Hunt how to fix the structural problems he noticed in manuscript versions of the play, revealing that Forster was keenly aware of *A Legend of Florence*’s faults, despite the glowing tenor of his review (Davies 18-19).

The most interesting part of Forster’s first review, however, is his claim that *A Legend of Florence* is “[t]he story is...of a kind of home, whose doors, in theatres, have hitherto been carefully closed. Perhaps few men would have encountered the risk of flinging them so widely open” (“Theatrical Examiner: The New Play” 85). The statement acknowledges at least one aspect of the radicalism Hunt was attempting to reassert in the play—the radicalism of reform. But Forster follows this acknowledgement by saying,

“We may say this now, since the result has proved its advantage” (85). Admitting that Hunt’s ideas of reform have been tolerated by the majority effectively undermines the idea that what Hunt does in the play is radical since the radical must be seen as something outside of the mainstream. In this way, the radicalism that defined Hunt’s first life is now revealed as acceptable to society at large, indicating that the liberal agenda that had defined Hunt’s first life and that reappears in *A Legend of Florence* had now become simply a symbol of a past movement. Rather than react either against or in favor of this proposed radicalism, Hunt’s younger contemporaries simply associated it with a past movement that they admired with nostalgic fondness but that they were removed from and, therefore, not motivated by.

Forster continues to puff the play in his second review, published in the February 16, 1840 issue of the *Examiner*. Here he writes that after viewing the third performance of the play, he found “no diminution of effect in the prominent scenes” (“Theatrical Examiner: Covent Garden” 102). Forster then apologizes that the *Examiner* has been unable until this issue to give the play the attention “which is so justly due to its own pretensions and to the high and various claims of the writer” (102). The statement reveals not only Forster’s desire to give as much attention as possible to *A Legend of Florence* but also his inability to separate the play from the writer. This propensity to see past the play and focus on Hunt himself—a hallmark of the responses to the play—reaffirms not only that the review was a puff but also that contemporary society was shaping a new role for Hunt. In this new role, Hunt was defined as a figure from a dying movement who inspired both sympathy and awe for his participation in the radicalism of the past but not for his radicalism or relevance to the present.

Besides the puffery manifest in the reviews discussed to this point, the *Theatrical Journal's* review of *A Legend of Florence* (February 15, 1840) presents another aspect of puffing unique to the theater: free tickets. Just as puffing literary pieces in the press encouraged higher profits, so did reserving free tickets for the author of a play to disperse among his friends and family—audience members whose enthusiasm for the production would give the impression of a successful play. The *Theatrical Journal* points out that “it was evident at first glance that the amount of free visitors was very small [compared] to the number generally present on such occasions” (“Covent Garden” 78). The review then claims to have been “informed” that Hunt was “limited to very few more [free visitors] than sufficed for the members of his own family” (78), comparing Hunt’s group with the extravagant “two hundred friends” packed into the house as free guests by another playwright. The review offers this as evidence that “the enthusiasm and applause created by the first attempt of this new claimant for histrionic fame and authorship, must have arisen solely from the merit of the performance, and not for the blind over-zeal of ill-judging friends and *claquers*” (78).

Hunt’s letters reveal, however, that he was immensely concerned over the matter of free tickets and that “owing, partly to inexperience, & partly to the most tremendous whirl of occupation [he had] ever been in” as a result of the “unexpectedness of the announcement of the play,” he had inadvertently been “foolish enough...to give up seats which [he] had secured for some friends” (“Leigh Hunt” 359). Despite having mistakenly given away seats, we do know that Hunt obtained free tickets for a number of friends,

including the poet Sarah Flowers², William Hazlitt Jr. and his wife, Benjamin Haydon and his wife, and Mary Shelley (“Leigh Hunt” 358-9, 361; Haydon, *Autobiography* 669). Other of Hunt’s friends who attended the play on opening night, although it is not clear whether they received free tickets, include Mary and Charles Cowden Clarke, George Henry Lewes, John Forster, the Carlyles, John Abraham Heraud, and Richard Rothwell (Robinson 50). As has already been demonstrated, Hunt’s friends were anxious for the success of his play, and despite the literary talent of many of them, they may still have been induced to act as “claqueurs” in order to ensure the positive reception of *A Legend of Florence*.

If the reviews in the *Times*, the *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist*, the *Examiner*, and the *Theatrical Journal* represent one extreme of puffery, the review of *A Legend of Florence* in the *Monthly Chronicle* presents a more tempered view of the play, although even this review cannot be seen as wholly disinterested. Hunt was a frequent contributor to this periodical, and the review of *A Legend of Florence* was written by Hunt’s friend, the writer and critic George Henry Lewes. Lewes’ attempt at objectivity in the review is immediately recognizable; he begins by denouncing the practice of seeing a play and then hastily writing a review of it, declaring that criticism in England has become sloppy but that it has an important role in helping to shape the “taste of the public, and must therefore be jealously watched” (202). However, Lewes’ friendship with Hunt raises suspicion about his ability to be truly objective, especially since at this time Lewes was relying on Hunt’s intimate acquaintance with Mary Shelley to open the door for him to finally be granted permission to write a biography of Shelley. Besides the

² Presumably Hunt would have also obtained tickets for Sarah’s husband (William Bridges Adams), her sister Eliza, and her sister’s husband (William Fox) since they were all close friends of Hunt and since the two couples (the Adams and the Foxs) were living together at the time *A Legend of Florence* was staged.

potential this desire had for clouding Lewes' critical judgment, he also records years later in his book *Modern British Dramatists* the excitement he felt over the literary revival Hunt was making of the poetic drama. With regard to the opening night of the play, Lewes writes, "so many of us were anxious for the success of the poet; so many were delighted to see the poetical drama once more triumphing" (qtd. in Blunden 282). This excitement is reflected in his review, as he praises the second scene of Act Two, claiming it is "the finest scene in the play, and one which we have no hesitation in saying might have been owned with pride by Shakespeare in his bloom of power" (206). He then compares aspects of the scene to *Othello*. His ultimate judgment is that *A Legend of Florence* is "one of the finest plays that has been produced since Beaumont and Fletcher, and which beats even their happiest efforts in characterization, however inferior in abandonment of passion, variety of incident, and beauty of language" (211). But alongside such effusive praise, he asserts that the introduction is "faulty" because it follows the patterns of the Greeks by "telling us what we are going to see, instead of letting us see it at once" (204). Both his introduction to the review, where he acknowledges the importance of critical reviewing, and his willingness to admit the play's problems make it clear that his response to *A Legend of Florence* is more than just pure puffery.

If Lewes' review falls somewhere between the blatant puffery of Forster's review and truly objective criticism, then the reviews of *A Legend of Florence* found in the *Spectator* represent yet another extreme. The *Spectator*'s first review, published February 8, 1840, after the play's opening night, has all the characteristics of a puff. The review states, "Leigh Hunt, who in the course of a long and active literary career, has by turns

distinguished himself as a critic, poet, politician, and essayist, has, in the autumn of life, entered on a fresh pursuit of the most arduous kind” (“The Theatres” 129). This reference to Hunt’s literary career again shows the constant awareness during this time period of the past and the past’s role in the present. The review also tries to arouse sympathy for Hunt and his play by reminding its readers of Hunt’s precarious financial situation, stating that “the personal friends of Mr. Hunt” as well as “thousands of admiring readers” had a “curiosity” which had “deepened into anxiety, in consideration of the importance of success to the author’s fireside comforts” (129). The review puts its readers’ anxieties to rest, however, by remarking, “our readers will share the gratification with which we can report that his success has been triumphant” (129).

Despite the puff-like qualities of this review, it is important to point out that Hunt’s connection with the *Spectator* appears to have been much less intimate than with many of the other periodicals already discussed. He doesn’t seem to have had any associations with the *Spectator* until after *A Legend of Florence* closed, when his son Thornton began working for the periodical as an editor in the summer of 1840. However, Thornton obtained the position at the *Spectator* after having met the paper’s proprietor and editor, R.S. Rintoul, while working with him on the *Colonial Gazette* (Thomas 56). Whether this relationship formed prior to the staging of Hunt’s play remains unclear.

But no matter what Hunt’s connection to the *Spectator* was, the second review of *A Legend of Florence* in the February 15, 1840 issue takes a completely different tone, virtually recanting any puffery it may have been guilty of in the first review. The *Spectator* attacks Hunt’s play at every level, condemning “the awkwardness of the subject,” as well as finding “on perusal” Hunt’s blank verse to be “much less metrical

than it sounds in the delivery” (“The Theatres” 156). This last criticism makes clear that the review is no longer responding merely to the production, but also to the printed version of the play, which was published and available for purchase immediately following the play’s opening. The *Spectator* even complains of the play’s inability to arouse deep feelings, leaving one more like a “passive...bystander at a family quarrel, who, while he feels sorry for the occurrence, and pity for the weaker party, is perplexed by the intricacies of the affair, and inclined to think that there is blame on both sides” (156). The *Spectator*’s first opinion of the play—and its sympathy for Hunt as its author—seems to have been tempered by seeing the play again as well as by having the opportunity to peruse it in printed form.

Most importantly, however, the *Spectator*’s second review of *A Legend of Florence* reveals, just as Forster’s review does, that the audience had failed to understand the Romantic revival Hunt was attempting. This is manifest in the review’s claim that Agolanti is “provoked, beyond what any man of ordinary infirm temper could bear patiently” and that Rondinelli’s “advice on the husband in the avowed capacity of an ardent admirer of the lady, is...intolerable” (“The Theatres” 156). These comments reveal that, where Hunt was trying to invoke images of tyranny in order to inspire a revolutionary overthrow of oppressive marriages, the *Spectator* is left with “an impression of improbability in the circumstances that sets [them] questioning when they should be sorrowing” (156). The ultimate misunderstanding of the radicalism of the play is manifest, however, in the *Spectator*’s complaint that “[t]he sudden killing of the husband...cuts the knot that would be difficult to untie; and although the almost unanimous verdict is ‘sarved him right,’ he has too much worldly rectitude on his side for

the gratification of the lovers” (156). By finding justification for Agolanti’s rage and not for the lovers’ plight, the *Spectator* rejects Hunt’s sexually liberal ideas in favor of adhering to the marriage tradition. It does so, however, without raising alarm that Hunt would propose such ideas. Its complacency about the play’s sexual liberalism—a complacency nearly universal in printed responses to *A Legend of Florence*—stands in stark contrast to the utter outrage expressed by such publications as *Blackwood’s* and the *Quarterly Review* when Hunt articulated similar ideas in *The Story of Rimini*. The vastly different responses to Hunt’s consistently professed philosophy are resounding evidence of the shift responses to *A Legend of Florence* signal. What once was scandalously radical is now quaintly acceptable. Hunt’s call for a revolution appears to his contemporary audience as a voice from the past speaking to the past, not as a revived voice speaking to the present.

The reviews discussed up to this point clearly demonstrate the range of largely positive responses *A Legend of Florence* received as well as the role Hunt had come to play in contemporary society. This role is made especially clear in the way that Hunt’s partisan reviewers shift the focus from *A Legend of Florence* and center it instead on him. Throughout the reviews, he is made into a figure of sympathy, someone who deserves praise because of the trials he has endured in the name of reform. In this way, the reviews manifest the propensity of Hunt’s early Victorian contemporaries for seeing him as an icon of the past and not as a participant in the present. By consistently associating Hunt with a past movement, these early Victorians reveal a fascination with the past and with Hunt as a living relic of this past—a way for them to connect with a period they can otherwise only imagine.

What enhances the significance of these seemingly soft reviews of *A Legend of Florence*, however, is the way that Hunt himself encourages this puffery and, by extension, contributes to the Victorians' classification of him as part of a past era. In a letter to John Forster, for instance, Hunt demonstrates that he has been overshadowed by the emergence of a new era by revealing that he is reliant on the younger Forster for the success of his play. Just prior to the play's opening night, he wrote to Forster, "Pray be as kind and *un-pain-giving*...to a set of performers, most anxious to do all they can for your friend, as you can find it in your conscience to be" (*Correspondence* 281). Hunt, the great unbiased dramatic critic who had fought the theater world's cronyism during his early career at the *News* and the admired independent editor of the *Examiner* who had gone to jail in the name of reform, is caught pandering for a positive review of his play. The message Hunt's letter sends is conflicted: he wrote *A Legend of Florence* as a reassertion of the philosophies of his first life, but here he is undermining his own commitment to reform. Once a radical—unbiased and determined to speak the truth, no matter the consequences—Hunt now reveals himself to be a domesticated, distinguished man of letters who depends on others rather than pioneers his own path. His willingness to participate in the puffing system by encouraging Forster to praise his play is a bold admission of what the puffed reviews themselves only hint at—the taming of Hunt and the absorption of his radicalism into mainstream Victorianism.

Blackwood's and the Crown

In closing, to truly understand the extent to which Hunt's Cockney School Romanticism had been rendered safe, it is illuminating to look at the responses to *A Legend of Florence* by the two greatest enemies of Hunt's youth: *Blackwood's* and the

Crown. Doing so again reveals that what on one level is a fond nostalgia for the past is at a deeper and more significant level the containment of radical Romanticism by an emergent movement.

In October 1817, when the first Cockney School attack appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*, the periodical was largely defined by the anonymous and often vicious pens of John Gibson Lockhart and John Wilson. Lockhart, in particular, took the lead in attacking Hunt and his Cockney circle over a period of six years. But with the departure of Lockhart from the magazine in 1825, it became increasingly mellow, although no less conservative (Houghton 1:8). As late as 1832, however, John Wilson was still using the venom from the Cockney School attacks to target one of the emerging writers of a new generation. In the May 1832 issue, Wilson wrote a review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* that began: "Almost all men, women, and children, are poets, except those who write verses. We shall not define poetry, because the Cockneys have done so; and were they to go to church, we should be strongly tempted to break the Sabbath" (721). The extent of *Blackwood's* lingering disgust for the Cockney School is clearly manifest by the fact that the magazine still finds it humorous to use them as the brunt of a joke despite the fact that all but a few of the Cockneys had long since died.

Turning his attention to Tennyson's poems, Wilson continues to make connections to the Cockney School: "One of the saddest misfortunes that can befall a young poet, is to be the Pet of a Coterie; and the very saddest of all, if in Cockneydom. Such has been the unlucky lot of Alfred Tennyson. He has been elevated to the throne of Little Britain, and sonnets were showered over his coronation from the most remote regions of his empire, even from Hampstead Hill" (724). The reference to Hampstead is

specifically to Hunt, whose home there was the unofficial gathering place of the Cockneys during their heyday. It may also be a reference to Hunt's glowing review of the same book of Tennyson's poetry the year before in the *Tatler*. Wilson's review continues to malign the Cockneys by claiming that Tennyson's attempts to be original in his poetry are a sign that he had fallen under the "curse of Cockneyism" (727). The persistence of *Blackwood's* animosity towards the radical Cockney School is best manifest, however, in Wilson's tirade against a review printed in the liberal *Westminster* about Tennyson's poetry. Speaking of the review, he rants: "It is a perfect specimen of the super-hyperbolic ultra-extravagance of outrageous Cockney eulogistic foolishness, with which not even a quantity of common sense less than nothing has been suffered, for an indivisible moment of time, to mingle" (728-29).

Wilson's review makes clear that in 1832 *Blackwood's* was far from penitent over its past Cockney-spurring. But between 1832 and 1840 something, however, changed, and in the March 1840 issue the same John Wilson wrote a review of *A Legend of Florence*, boldly announcing, "Leigh Hunt is now a successful dramatist, and we rejoice in his success as cordially as his best friends can do—for he deserves it" ("Leigh Hunt's" 303). In stark contrast to not only the 1832 review of Tennyson's poems, which is full of Cockney-baiting, but more sharply to the infamous Cockney School attacks instigated in 1817 by Lockhart, the review promises to "praise, but not to flatter" Hunt (303). And for almost fifteen pages—significantly more than any other periodical devoted to the play—it does so, reprinting long extracts from the play, commenting briefly on the success of these scenes, and never uttering a single word of criticism against the play or the author. After reprinting one scene of the play, for example, Wilson states, "it is not to point out

the many exquisite beauties in these scenes...that we desire here to say a few words; but merely to satisfy our own feelings of gratitude to the poet” (313).

The review demonstrates a significant change from *Blackwood's* earlier vehemence against Hunt and all things Cockney, but it is important to realize that the change wasn't merely a reflection of internal shifts at the magazine. In 1840, *Maga* still proclaimed its conservative politics. What accounts for the amazing transformation in their approach to Hunt's work is the greater transformation that was happening culturally. In short, *Blackwood's* review indicates that by 1840 the once subversive Romanticism had been largely contained by the dominant culture—a containment that *Blackwood's* unsuccessfully tried to eradicate at the height of Cockney radicalism in the 1810s and 20s. Jeffrey Cox points out that the early attacks against the Cockney School were “reactionary, a conservative” response that came because “conservatives were concerned about [the group's] cultural authority” (22). Although the Cockney School attacks failed to stunt the group's “cultural authority,” the disintegration of the group and the shift in cultural values over time made it so that by 1840 what *Blackwood's* had once identified as vulgar and immoral in *The Story of Rimini* they now read as moving and praiseworthy in *A Legend of Florence*—this despite the fact that the sexual ideologies Hunt proposed in the two pieces were nearly identical. For example, of the scene where Hunt sends Agolanti to confront Rondinelli in a dramatic clash that is meant to undermine the traditional approach to marriage, *Blackwood's* writes, “[t]he husband has not one inch of firm ground for his big toe—the lover stands with both feet planted on a rock” (“Leigh Hunt's” 310). In other words, *Blackwood's* fails to recognize the radical reassertions Hunt is making in the play because, from their position in 1840, such philosophies no

longer seemed radical. As a conservative magazine, *Blackwood's* response to Hunt's reassertion of his radical ideologies is a perfect example of how Romanticism had begun to pass from the radical fringes of society into the mainstream.

But even more powerful than the *Blackwood's* review as evidence of the containment of Hunt and Romanticism is the response of the Crown to Hunt's play and, in turn, Hunt's response to his royal supporters. It's hard to judge whether *Blackwood's* or the Crown was a greater threat to Hunt during his radical days—the one destroyed his literary reputation, while the other robbed him of his liberty. But, as the reviews in *Blackwood's* and elsewhere demonstrate, 1840 was nothing like 1813, when Hunt began his sentence at Surrey jail. For one, in 1840 it was the young Victoria who sat on the throne, not the corpulent George IV. For another, Hunt's opinion of the monarchy had significantly changed since the 1810s. Hunt, in fact, reveled in the attendance of the Queen—and her new husband, Prince Albert—not once, but twice at his play. In a letter dated March 10, 1840 to Charles Mathews, manager of Covent Garden, Hunt thanks him for passing along word of the Queen's pleasure with the play and indicates that the knowledge of her approval is one of the only things that could make him “get up, well and at leisure, from the midst of positive illness & business” (“Leigh Hunt” 363). Hunt's joy at the Queen's attendance at *A Legend of Florence* even makes its way into his *Autobiography*, written in 1850, ten years after the staging of the play. Here he proudly writes that the play “received crown upon crown in the presence, twice over (a rare movement in royalty), of her Majesty and Prince Albert, the former of whom was pleased to express her satisfaction with it to the manager, and the latter to a great statesman” (2:279). Another letter, dated July 19, 1842, is even more suggestive of Hunt's

endorsement of Victoria's attendance. He states, "what touched my feelings in a very particular manner on her Majesty's part, was, that she went, two weeks running, to see the play...& expressed herself in cordial terms about it to the manager...yet I do believe (and it makes me love her the better, to think so) that she expressed herself on that occasion, & repeated her visit to the play, chiefly for the purpose of doing me & it a service" ("Leigh Hunt" 403-04).

One way to make sense of Hunt's enthusiasm over the Queen's attendance at his play is to see it in light of his belief in literature's central role in society. As Hunt explains in his dramatic criticism for the *News*, literature manifests its importance to society through the attendance of the upper classes, especially royalty, at plays because their support of the arts cultivates good taste among the public at large. However, as Hunt's letters indicate, his enthusiasm for the royal notice given his play stemmed more from the personal pride he took in the Queen's attendance than from any philosophical pleasure at seeing his theory of literature played out. Hunt's response to Victoria's presence reveals the dramatic shift he made from his anti-monarchist rants in the *Examiner* over the corruption and extravagance of the Crown to his "love" for it. Of course, the transfer in power from George IV to William to Victoria made Hunt's change of heart possible, but the extreme shift in passions Hunt demonstrates, moving from abhorrence to approbation, is yet another manifestation of the taming of his radicalism and the absorption of Romanticism.

The Museum Piece

Following the opening night of *A Legend of Florence* at Covent Garden, the excitement generated over the play eventually died away and Hunt slowly and quietly

faded into the backdrop of literary London. Perhaps the final signal that Hunt was merely a living relic of an earlier period came at the passing of Wordsworth in 1850, when the laureateship was offered not to Hunt as the oldest and most distinguished man of letters in England, but to a rising and immensely popular literary figure of a new generation, Alfred Tennyson. The statement was stark. It confirmed what the reception of *A Legend of Florence* had already made apparent, that Hunt's day was over, his generation had passed, and that a new era was already well under way.

Hunt spent his last years as a quiet eccentric, occasionally receiving visits from aspiring young writers such as Fredrick Locker-Lambson and from American men of letters visiting England such as George Ticknor, Benjamin B. Thatcher, Charles Sumner, James Russell Lowell, S. Adams Lee, James T. Fields, and, most famously, Nathaniel Hawthorne (Holden 329). While many of these visitors came as a result of their admiration for Hunt himself, there is no doubt that others came to see the man who had rubbed shoulders with the literary giants of a bygone era. Mrs. James T. Field, who accompanied her husband in visiting Hunt, makes this abundantly clear in her memoirs, *A Shelf of Old Books By Mrs. James T. Fields*. When she and her husband came to Hunt's Hammersmith home to pay him a visit in 1859, she falsely assumed that this home was the same one he had lived in during his years of friendship with Keats. Under this assumption, Mrs. Fields wrote, "it was our privilege to see Leigh Hunt in London, and to make a traveler's slight acquaintance with the interior which had inspired Keats" (7). Hunt's intimate friendship with Percy Shelley, his tempestuous relationship with Lord Byron, and his poetry writing contests with Keats made him a novelty in the 1850s. He

was a man from a generation of poets only found now in the pages of books—a generation faded away in the prime of their lives.

It is this connection to the poets of the Romantic era that has been seen as Hunt's great contribution to literary history rather than his own prolific work. *A Legend of Florence* marks the transition away from identifying Hunt as a radical and towards patronizing him as a museum piece representing a dead movement. What began as an attempt to stir up a literary revival reminiscent of the Cockney School days resulted in nothing more than nostalgic responses for a glorious but no longer relevant past. After the curtain closed on *A Legend of Florence*, the initial enthusiasm for Hunt and the era he represented wore off, making it so that a deep regard for the play was never cultivated. The early Victorians failed to see the aging Hunt who authored *A Legend of Florence* as the same Hunt who had participated in the radical movement of the previous generation.

During both his "first" and "second" lives, Hunt had moments in which he enjoyed the brief acclaim of an awe-struck public. The first time was when he stood trial for libeling the Prince Regent as a crowd gathered outside the courtroom to get a glimpse of the great martyr of the free press, the modern victim of tyranny. At that moment, Hunt was the great radical of the Romantic era. The second time was when he took the stage at Covent Garden and bowed in gracious acknowledgement of the audience's enthusiastic applause. But at that moment he was no longer the great radical of the Romantic era. He merely stood as a symbol of the past, a living reality that Romanticism was on the wane and a new movement had begun.

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