Digital Lacy and the Victorian sense of humour

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1 Introduction

The Digital Lacy project aims to make 100 volumes of *Lacy's Acting Edition of Plays* (LAE) freely available in digital form, both image and transcription, along with detailed documentation. The LAE comprises 1500 titles, including for example the celebrated farce *Box and Cox*, the melodrama *Ambrose Gwynett*, the "problem play" *Society*, many fantastical spectaculars by J.R. Planché and works by a host of other authors now forgotten. Its availability fills a serious gap: Victorian theatre has not enjoyed systematic documentation or digitization on the scale of the Victorian novel: there is nothing analogous to Troy Bassett's ATCL, for example. This may reflect scholarly perceptions of the relative merits of stage and page, or maybe just perpetuates 19th century prejudice. For it is evident that the Victorian popular theatre and the Victorian popular novel were in many ways complementary. In Emily Allen's words, "Victorian theatre was the novel's ally, inspiration, and competitor"; likewise, there are clear connexions between 19th century and contemporary flavours of melodrama, comedy, documentary, or pantomime. Perhaps our reactions to Victorian theatre's exuberant combination of sensational spectacle and social comment, absurdity and realism may say as much about ourselves as about its original audiences.

Our experience of the Victorian stage is however determined in different ways from that of its original audiences: for us, it is the archive which determines what is available, and our own context which determines which aspects of that are considered salient. To quote Richard Schoch, "Our very idea of the theatrical past is determined by the more or less invisible structures of archives, in which Henry Irving is much more visible than Joseph Grimaldi." The example may be debatable but the principle is incontrovertible. This paper first explores the stages or forms in which a typical play text has been transmitted to us. *CLICK*

2 Available forms for the drama

We distinguish seven formal varieties for components of the LAE, listed here, each of which we now consider in more detail. *CLICK*

2.1 The Manuscript

After the 1843 Theatres Regulation Act, no play could be performed unless vetted by the Lord Chamberlain's Office. As an interesting consequence, an original manuscript had to be submitted, often within a few days of the play's first performance. These manuscript versions typically lack detailed notes on costume or stage directions, but do often include indications of passages to be struck out in performance, along with other significant textual variation.

Surprisingly many of them have survived, and are deposited in the British Library; some have even been digitized, as part of a Gale collection covering the period 1824-1858. This enormous resource – comprising several thousand titles – seems to have had strangely little impact on contemporary theatre studies, despite the promise of a project with the apt title "Buried Treasures" which in 2009 had catalogued and allegedly transcribed a significant number of manuscripts, perhaps because these materials do not seem to be currently accessible online. *CLICK*

2.2 Traces of Performance

Once licensed, a play might be advertised and performed. The records of performance provided by such evidence as handbills and posters have been widely if unsystematically collected and studied; notably by Allardyce Nicoll for the 4th and 5th volumes of his monumental *History of English Drama 1660-1900*. Such records cannot capture the full richness of the dramatic experience, but they give an indication of where and how often a new piece was performed: as part of a provincial tour, or benefit, a London first night, a regular run etc. General purpose periodicals such as *Punch* and specialist journals such as *The Era* are also rich with contemporary gossip about and reviews of performances. *CLICK*

2.3 Acting Editions

According to Crompton-Rhodes, "The first of the 'acting-editions' was The New English Drama, edited by William Oxberry, of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, which began printing play scripts in the early 1820s". The novelty was to include "the Stage-plot, or disposition of the characters" – for "Such an addendum must prove of incomparable value to provincial performers…" The acting edition is as much a recipe for the production of a dramatic performance, as it is a record of one. A working document, it was cheaply printed and sold unbound in bulk at a modest price. A professional actress called Clara St Casse built up a personal library of 600 such items, which eventually found its way into the special collections of the University of Warwick Many other libraries have similar holdings, suggesting that this form of publication was widely dispersed. Indeed, by the 1830s, the acting edition seems to have entirely replaced the more respectable (and expensive) octavo or dudodecimo formats in which individual dramatic titles had found their way into print hitherto. *CLICK*

2.4 Collections

Lacy was by no means the first person to hit on the idea of reprinting and publishing uniform editions or collections of such play scripts. Like his predecessors John Dick, John Cumberland, and John Duncombe, his business plan was to buy up (where necessary) or steal (where possible) the copyrights of individual texts and reprint them for a mass market, thus enabling him also to collect licence fees for successful performances. It has been plausibly argued that from the 1850s onwards, such reprints targetted the middle class amateur who might have felt uncomfortable in a real theatre, rather than the professional actor or producer. *CLICK* As a skilful entrepreneur Lacy understood what we now know as market segmentation; he also advertised at least two complementary series, Lacy's "Dramas for Private Representation" and "the New British Theatre", to say nothing of the short-lived "Lacy Home Plays" billed as "an inexhaustible source of harmless amusement"

However, the LAE continued to be his main breadwinner, with "new" titles appearing regularly until 1873 when the business was sold to Samuel French, an American publisher with whom Lacy had long co-operated; French's Acting Editions continued to be published well into the middle of the 20th century. *CLICK*

2.5 Volume sets

The first advertisements for the LAE show a simple list of 75 titles, available at 6d a title, postage included. But soon thereafter, Lacy began to complement the sales of individual titles by sales of bound volumes, each containing 15 titles. By 1870, he had reached a total of 100 volumes, which advertising puffs proudly announced as "the most perfect Edition of Plays ever published, and no Library can be considered complete without them" .

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Easier to preserve than individual paper copies, varyingly complete sets of these bound volumes are to be found in libraries across the world. No full bibliographic study of these different sets has been carried out to my knowledge, but their composition seems to have

remained stable for most of the century. I have found only a dozen or so cases where a title appearing in one volume of a set was missing from the corresponding volume in another set, and only a few other disparities. *CLICK*

2.6 Editions

Few of the authors credited in the LAE achieved any degree of fame or recognition beyond their own life time, or even within it. Nevertheless, there are some whose works received the ultimate Victorian reward of a collected edition, often in many volumes, usually shortly after their decease; examples include J.R. Planche, Douglas Jerrold, and T.W. Robertson. There are also several authors who (once respectable) were tempted into publishing fat volumes of theatrical gossip and autobiographical reminiscence, such as F.C. Burnand whose memoirs include a memorable description of Lacy and his business procedures.

A consideration of modern editions of 19th c theatre is beyond the scope of this paper. However, such evidence as I have suggests that the choice of authors on which modern reference works focus may not always correspond with the evidence attested by collections such as the LAE. Of the three LAE authors responsible for 50 or more titles, only one features in Gale's *Dictionary of Literary Biography.* Of the 71 authors responsible for more than five titles in the LAE, together accounting for about two thirds of its contents, only 20 are listed in the DLB. Wikipedia does a little better, with 57. *CLICK*

2.7 Digitization

Mass digitization efforts, such as Google's or Gale's, have swept through the holdings of major research libraries, not entirely indiscriminately but sometimes selecting on largely contingent grounds. Nevertheless, their efforts, like those of the microfilmers who preceded them, have resulted almost accidentally in a new lease of life for the long-forgotten bound volumes and scattered prompt books attesting to earlier incarnations of the theatre, and are entirely to be celebrated.

Only a few LAE titles (82) have never been digitized at all, though well over half the titles (957) seem to be available from one online source only. The Digital Lacy online catalogue includes links to over a thousand freely available digitized versions so far discovered; there are many more to come.

A digitization in page image form is not however the same thing as a machine-tractable transcription, and does not offer the same affordances for analysis. Only a handful of LAE titles are currently available in some transcribed form online: Project Gutenberg offers a total of 23 titles complete with some vapid automatically-generated summaries; Proquest's "Literature Online" collection includes 42 LAE titles in RTF format, derived from an old Chadwyck-Healey product. The Digital Lacy project has begun the task of making available preliminary TEI versions of texts originally produced for the Victorian Plays Project from the Birmingham Library collection mentioned earlier: around 60 are online so far. *CLICK*

3 Representativeness

Every type of collection necessarily provokes questions of representativeness and selection bias. Although we cannot be certain of the rationale behind all of Lacy's selection decisions, clearly the LAE was not composed in an opportunistic or haphazard manner. By contrast, the 25,000 entries constituting Allardyce Nicoll's monumental *Handlist*s approximate an exhaustive listing of theatrical activitybetween 1800 and 1900. By comparing statistical properties of the two we should be able to detect any systematic bias, and characterize more reliably the sample before us. [Both LAE and Nicoll datasets are freely available from the project's Github repository at `https://github.com/lb42/Lacy/`]

We present here some tentative statistically-based conclusions, based on analyses of date, size,authorship, and genre. *CLICK*

3.1 Date

Nearly every play in the Lacy dataset has a date of first performance, usually explicitly given in the front matter of the text. Many also have a date of licensing, usually a few days or weeks earlier. These dates supply a *terminus a quo* for the play's composition: it cannot have been written after its first performance date, nor performed before its licensing date. This is not an entirely satisfactory procedure but short of much more extensive bibliographic research it is the best we can do. Within limits, each item in the two datasets is datable.

As a first experiment, we calculated the number of titles with a first performance date in each decade between 1800 and 1900, for both datasets. Each bar here represents that count as a percentage of all titles: blue for Nicoll, red for Lacy. The height of the blue bars rises steadily through the century, reflecting a steady rise in theatrical activity. The red bars however, although rising in line with the blue for the first three or four decades, shoot up in the 1850s and 1860s before tailing off abruptly, with no titles at all from the 80s or 90s. We conclude that while Lacy has a strong preference for plays from the mid century, his coverage of the earlier parts of the century is reasonable, and certainly more reliable than for its end. We should be wary of making any inferences about plays produced after the 1870s. *CLICK*

3.2 Size

The Nicoll data gives no indication of the size of each play, and it is therefore not possible to ascertain whether Lacy has a systematic preference for longer or shorter pieces. The data available suggests that in fact there is a good mix of sizes in the LAE.

This graphic shows the counts for "small" (less than 20 printed pages), "medium" (less than 50), or "large" (50 or more) plays, expressed as a percentage of the total number of plays assigned to each decade. For the decades before the 1820s, the preponderance of long plays may be attributable to the influence of the traditional repertoire (Shakespeare et al). Lack of data makes the counts for the 80s and 90s inherently unreliable, as previously noted. However, for the six decades between, we observe a reasonably stable distribution of roughly 50% small, 40% medium, and 10% long titles. *CLICK*

3.3 Authorship

Authorship is a much contested property. The best we can do, faced with numerous incidences of multiple authorship, simple pseudonymity, and anonymity, is to believe what the title page tells us, even if there is good reason to believe that the work in question is misattributed, plagiarized, or downright stolen. It tells us mostly that where authors are not entirely unknown – and approximately half of the entries in Nicoll's lists fall into that category – they are primarily male and middle class, and occasionally polyphiloprogenitive. Which is to say that several Victorian dramatists were remarkably prolific.

	LAE			Nicoll's Handlists		
	authors	titles	%titles	authors	titles	%titles
Few (<5)	267	431	26.9	3290	5250	31.7
Some (5-10)	54	568	35.5	274	2043	12.3
Many (>10)	17	599	37.4	309	9222	55.8
total	338	1598		3873	16515	

This table shows the numbers of authors represented by "many" (more than 10), "some" (between 5 and 10), or "few" (less than 5) titles, in the LAE and in Nicoll's Handlists. For both datasets, less than a third of all titles are produced by less prolific authors, despite their greater numbers. The most prolific authors account for 37% of Lacy titles, significantly less than in the Nicoll lists where they account for more than half. These differences suggest a conscious decision on Lacy's part to diversify as far as possible his chosen authors. *CLICK*

3.4 Genre

Victorian theatre is obsessed with itself. The ostentatiously exuberant language of the title pages bear witness to its self-importance even where this is being mocked. The theatre itself is very often the subject of the play. In Planche's *Garrick Fever* (Olympic, 1839, L0321) an Irish actor much given to channelling Garrick's Shakespeare is mistaken for the genuine article, thus enabling him to gain the approval of his girl friend'sactor-manager father. In the same author's *The Camp at the Olympic* (played somewhat recursively at the Olympic in October 1853, L0170) real life theatre managers Mr and Mrs Wigan attempt to decide on the style of their next production – a conceit so pleasing that it was more or less entirely stolen by Henry James Byron ten years later for his *1863 ; or, The Sensations of the Past Season* (St James's. Dec. 1863, L0911)

When compiling his Handlists, Nicoll added a code to each entry to indicate "the nature of the play itself", with the caveat that "Where possible, the designation employed in the original bills has here been followed" – These characterisations are thus indicative of the language with which Victorian theatre chose to describe itself at a particular moment , rather than any kind of formally organized taxonomy. The two lists propose some very general terms (D for drama, F for Farce, P for Pantomime etc.); and many others more nuanced such as "Military Drama", "Operatic Drama", "Poetic Drama" etc. Of the 178 different codes, nearly two thirds (117) are used fewer than 5 times. Or, to put it another way, the top ten codes between them account for 19,833 out of the total number of 24,408 entries – over 80% of the whole population. This suggests that we will not go too far wrong if we simply disregard the 160 codes with relative frequencies below 1%.

A similar frequency distribution applies in the 1477 titles which appear both as an entry in Nicoll's handlists and as a title in the LAE: here, 97% of titles are accounted for by the top 20 codes.

CLICK The height of the bars here indicates the number of titles for each category code, expressed as a percentage. Only codes with values of 1% or above in the Nicoll list are included. Several differences between the two datasets are apparent: for example, 30% of LAE titles (red) are coded F (farce), but only 11% of Nicoll titles (blue) . Conversely, 30% of the titles in Nicoll's list are coded D (Drama), but this code is used for only 20% of LAE titles. Several categories (notably Ext for Extravaganza, and Bsq, for Burlesque) are over-represented in the LAE . Particularly striking is the under-representation of category P (pantomime) which makes up 10% of Nicoll entries, but less than 1% of Lacy titles. We may hypothesize, again, that this follows conscious selection by Lacy – thinking perhaps that pantomime scripts are unlikely to sell as well as farce – or seek some other explanation. *CLICK*

4 Conclusion

We conclude that the LAE is a good source of information about the development of specifically comic performance of various kinds and sizes in the period between 1850 and 1870. Before 1850 the data is harder to analyse because of interference from older classic titles; after 1870 the data is simply missing. We suggest that the LAE provides a sound basis for understanding the evolution of the Victorian sense of humour over this period.