

The Harmless Impudence of a Revolutionary: Radical Classics in 1850s London

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‘I believe,’ wrote Robert Brough, ‘in the Revolution’.¹ Brough lived a short, precarious life – as poet, editor, burlesque writer, Bohemian, drunk and debtor – and staked a remarkable claim on the classical past. His ancient world spoke for the powerless in Victorian Britain – for the poor, the marginalized and the abandoned. He hoped that it would point the way towards a contemporary revolution. His life, his politics, and his singular encounters with the classical past will be discussed in this chapter. It will focus on a period of acute political tension in Britain: the 1850s, and the years surrounding the Crimean War. It will explore Brough’s radical classics through three of his works: a volume of ballads, *Songs of the Governing Classes*, a failed ‘squib’, *Olympus in a Muddle*, and his greatest triumph - a burlesque *Medea*. The central questions of the chapter are these: could Brough rewrite antiquity to make the working classes into its heroes and heroines? And could he use that antiquity to reshape contemporary politics? For a time, he believed that he could. ‘’Tis wondrous,’ as he put it, ‘how the smallest folks, / Whom you have wrong’d, can tease ye!’²

His ambitions could hardly have been larger. In a period when the working classes (with some notable exceptions)³ rarely received a classical education, to claim antiquity for the dispossessed was an intensely ambitious agenda. But Brough’s commitment and belief were equally intense. He listened to Britain’s ‘governing classes’⁴ reinventing the past to justify their status and power, and heard only anxiety:

We’ve lectures long
By the Peers, on “Art and Song,” –
Pointing all the moral strong –
“Class array’d,
‘Gainst its ruling class is wrong” –
*Who’s afraid?*⁵

Brough's determination to seize the ancient world was still more remarkable, because he himself never received a formal classical education: 'Robert Brough had neither Latin nor Greek [...]. I am sure, poor fellow, that he had a sufficient appreciation of the advantages of a classical education; but as from the age of fifteen or sixteen he had to earn his livelihood by the labour of his own hands and brain, the most he could do was to add to his stock of knowledge such adjuncts as he deemed most valuable for his working career.'⁶ Born in London in April 1828, he grew up in Wales, where his father brewed 'Brough's Beer'. When Robert was thirteen, the brewery fell into bankruptcy – and he was soon sent out into the world to earn himself a living.

Brough's existence was far from an easy one. His days and years were harried and anxious. 'Poor Robert Brough,' wrote the *New York Times*. 'In pure fun, in genuine mirth, there was no man in the whole range of English litterateurs worthy to break a lance with him [...]. A grim, sardonic, lachrymose man, with a very feeble constitution, he was only gay by fits and starts, and spirits and energy often deserted him when most required.'⁷ 'Poor Brough' was rarely well. 'I never knew,' remarked one of his friends, later, 'anyone who was such a perfect martyr to dyspepsia.'⁸ He nevertheless guzzled life – approaching it with immoderate delight and appetite – and became a fixture of London's literary Bohemia, 'a land,' as Thackeray put it, 'of tin dish-covers from taverns, and foaming porter: a land of lotos-eating (with lots of cayenne pepper) [...] where most are poor.'⁹ James Hannay captured the sweet chaos of Brough's days in his chronicle of London life, where Brough appears as 'Bob Marston':¹⁰

Bob's horror of the polite and conventional world was such that he once gave it as a reason for leaving a place, that "the clergyman of the parish had called upon him." "By Jove," he went on "when it came to *that*, I thought it was time to be going back to London." A dress-coat was a Nessus' shirt to him, and patent-leather boots a torture [...].

How kind of thee, Bob, after taking a house, to say to an intimate friend, "I'm a householder now, old boy, and always good to be bail!" How cheerfully didst thou reflect, when circumstances forced thee to drink the smallest of beer, that at least the stuff had the merit of being wet. The law itself did not appal or humiliate thy Aristophanic spirit; for when a cruelly sarcastic beak [magistrate], in inflicting a fine of five shillings, inquired whether certain fluids did not impregnate thy writings, the answer was ready – "Yes, and they sell in consequence."¹¹

Brough worked urgently: he depended upon his words to feed himself and his family. Time to reflect was a luxury he never possessed, and little of his writing satisfied him. When short of money and in wretched health, he wrote, in the preface to his *Life of Sir John Falstaff*: 'The author may be permitted one little word of apology, and, perhaps, self-justification [...]. The concluding portion of his labours has been achieved under acute and prolonged physical suffering. This may be no excuse for loose or indifferent writing; but, in the memorable words of Ben Johnson to John Sylvester – *it is true*.'¹² To this, the *Saturday Review* responded: 'If this is the true account of the production of any book whatever, its author ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself.' As for Brough's book itself, it was 'bad throughout; yet we must own in honesty that we have not read the whole'.¹³

Contempt answered Brough all his professional life. No matter how successful he became – and many of his classical burlesques were undisputed triumphs – there was not a work of his which was not greeted with scorn and condescension by some. Along with the other 'most miserable scribblers of burlesque'¹⁴ Brough was a favoured target of the *Saturday Review* – which judged his writing 'nothing less than an elaborate effort to vulgarize one of the noblest productions of human genius'.¹⁵ This was a common refrain: lacking the capacity to respond to 'the noblest productions' properly, Brough sullied whatever he touched. Even his greatest triumph, a joyous extraordinary burlesque of *Medea*, was altogether too stained with 'the mud of Cockney existence' for *The Times*:

If the whole human race were suddenly deprived of the power of writing mock tragedy, so that the art of burlesquing became classed with those obsolete processes that were peculiar to the ancient inhabitants of Egypt and of China, there would be no great cause

for lamentation. [...] As soon as a poetical thought begins to show itself over the horizon, it is surely a work of supererogation to begin encumbering it with weights of facetiousness that drag it down into the mud of Cockney existence.¹⁶

What could a Cockney have to say to Euripides? Brough could not opt out of the discourses of classics and class. By stepping, without a classical education, into London's literary world, he stepped into them. His critics (and they were many – Brough made enemies with abandon)¹⁷ reached for the full weight of Victorian classicism to silence and to ridicule him – ‘fellows who, if once you get into their pillory, will pelt you with Greek roots, like so many cabbage-stumps’.¹⁸ As one of Brough's friends put it: ‘we [Brough and his collaborators on one radical magazine], in our rivals' opinion, were Radicals, scoffers, ribalds, ignoramuses, lacking the blessings of a University education – mere pressmen, living by our wits, and without many of them to live on. We held the opposition to be bigoted Tories, self-sufficient prigs, hammering out their thin coating of classics to cover their otherwise universal ignorance.’¹⁹ ‘Pelted’ with antiquity, Brough could abandon the field, or he could claim the classics on his own terms.

Brough was never inclined to submit to the better judgement of his ‘betters’. He was ‘an ardent hater’²⁰ – a passionate opponent of the privileged classes. ‘That he had a fierce hatred of the governing classes there is no doubt.’²¹ ‘I have often wondered,’ wrote one friend, ‘what gave Robert Brough that deep vindictive hatred of wealth and rank and respectability which permeated his life [...]. It was probably innate; it was certainly engrained. It was largely increased by poverty.’²² And Brough was well aware that classics and radical politics had a history together. One scholar, Barthold Georg Niebuhr, fascinated him in particular.²³ In 1828, Julius Hare and Connop Thirlwall had translated Niebuhr's *History of Rome*²⁴ from German into English.²⁵ When the translation was published, *The Quarterly Review* alleged that Niebuhr's history was not only academically unsound, it was also politically explosive.²⁶ Students at Heidelberg had recently been reading Niebuhr, it remarked, and the results –

evidence of the destructive power of the ‘wrong’ kind of classics to established authority – had not been pleasant:

At this moment the university of Heidelberg is completely deserted. It appears that these ungovernable youths were holding democratic meetings; and a report having spread that the Grand Duke of Baden intended to arrest some of the leaders, the whole swarm of about eight hundred burst forth into the streets, bawling out *Burschen, heraus!* ‘Turn out, turn out,’ and marched off to a town a few leagues from Heidelberg, from whence they dispatched terms of capitulation to their professors.²⁷

There is little evidence that students in Heidelberg were truly driven to riot and revolution by their reading of Niebuhr. But the widespread unease caused by his singularly dense (for many, impenetrable)²⁸ history is striking. Classics, in the wrong hands (in the right hands), was combustible. Brough, then, had cause to hope that antiquity’s potential to spark off social agitation – widely acknowledged – was largely untapped.

Of course, there was no revolution. And Robert Brough’s name has no place in nineteenth-century political history. His story should be simple. An ever-earnest, ever-hopeful revolutionary, whose efforts to stoke public anger against the ‘governing classes’ never found success, whose radical classics never ignited.²⁹ But it is both more troubled and more complex. Brough deserves a place in this volume not just because he tried to put classics and class together, but because he found it impossible, and was forced to put his hopes aside. As Henry Stead explores in his Introduction, those who struggled for social reform – and sought to put the classics to work in that struggle – encountered setbacks, failure and ridicule at least as often as success.

Throughout his adult life, Brough was indeed ‘an ardent hater.’³⁰ But his hatred was tamed, and his radical classics were muzzled: by an official pen, by collaborators – and ultimately, out of stark economic necessity, by Brough himself. Brough’s story demands that we question the stability and authenticity of class politics and class positioning, in nineteenth century classicism. The dialogue between classics and class is altogether more elusive than it

might at first seem: even the most strident texts, even the most ‘ardent haters’, are veined with contradictions, accommodations, censorship, and self-sabotage.

Vulgar Declamation

The summer of 1855 was a bad time to be an aristocrat in Britain. Daily reports on the Crimean War – stuffed with instances of incompetence and mismanagement by aristocratic generals – fuelled increasing public anger. British commanders such as Lord Raglan and Lord Lucan, who entered the war imagining themselves as ancient heroes reborn³¹ had their ambitions blasted into bathos by the Russian winter: ‘Our generals’ marquees were as incapable of resisting the hurricane as the bell-tents of the common soldiers. Lord Lucan was seen for hours sitting up to his knees in sludge amid the wreck of his establishment, meditative as Marius amid the ruins of Carthage.’³² Were these men truly born to lead? Many found it hard to believe. From Parliament to the village hall, inherited privilege came under steady attack. Lord Palmerston, on the defensive, was heard to snap at one MP: ‘He performs what he thinks a public duty in pointing out old errors and instances of mismanagement in regard to the army [...], and has thought proper to mingle with his observations and comments a deal of what I must call vulgar declamation against the aristocracy of this country.’³³ In this public mood, Robert Brough saw an opportunity.

In June 1855, he put the final touches to his *Songs of the ‘Governing Classes’* – a collection of ballads with one very large, simple target:

The feeling of which the following ballads are the faintest echo and imperfect expression, is a deeply-rooted belief that to the institution of aristocracy in this country (not merely to its “undue preponderance,” but to its absolute existence) is mainly attributable all the political injustice [...] we have to deplore – a feeling by no means recently implanted or even greatly developed in the writer’s heart, but one which the preparation of the public mind by recent events and disclosures has afforded him the opportunity of spreading.³⁴

Songs of the 'Governing Classes' was saturated with the classics – but with a shabby, shameful past, not a glorious one. A succession of tawdry aristocrats creep across the pages, caught half-way between the nineteenth century and the ancient world:

Lord J.'s a sage – the Viscount P.[almerston]
 A statesman sound – Lord X., a hero;
 Some good in all the great must be,
 Suppose we look for it – in Nero.

There is a tale, devoid of proof,
 That, for a lark, he set Rome burning,
 And fiddled on his palace roof [...].
Row Polkas to each homestead's crash,
 To ev'ry death – *Pop goes the Weasel!*³⁵

Glib though the rhymes may be, Brough's appropriation of the classical was the opposite of perfunctory – he was keenly aware of the connections which had been forged between classics and radical politics earlier in the nineteenth century. The finale of *Songs of the 'Governing Classes'* crosses the story of Coriolanus – long bound up with political protest³⁶ – with the incendiary histories of Niebuhr. In this ballad of a Roman general, the hapless contemporary commanders of the Crimean war are clear in Brough's sights:

“Coriolanus snubs the People [...].
 Taxes are doubled, and armies perish;
 Slavery spreads.” “He's your chosen man.”
 “Yes, but suppose we chose the wrong one?”
 “It can't be help'd!” Said the mob, “It can.”

Roman history is edifying,
 And though by Niebuhr, in the German tongue,
 Proved to consist of nine-tenths lying,
 Morals, here and there, may from it be wrung.

Soon, by the force of wrath and brickbats
 Urged from Rome, the Consul flees.
 This is the story of Coriolanus –
 You may apply it how you please.³⁷

Reading of this ancient Lord Lucan, driven out of ancient Rome by the 'brickbats' of a contemporary mob, a weary friend remarked that 'the statements in this poem will not bear

analysis, and are to a certain extent uncalled for; but that Robert Brough felt them there is no doubt.³⁸ *Songs of the 'Governing Classes'* is unapologetic in its anger, and unambiguous in its radical classicism. One cannot put down the volume uncertain of Brough's politics:

And as for giving working men
 Ideas above their station
 'Tis positively wrong, as well
 AS VULGAR DECLAMATION.³⁹

A few short weeks after finishing *Songs of the 'Governing Classes'*, Brough was at work on another project, with his brother William – a 'squib'⁴⁰ entitled *Olympus in a Muddle, or, Wrong people in the wrong place*,⁴¹ first performed on 23 August, at the Haymarket Theatre, London.

Its conceit was simple: 'Jupiter, having quarrelled with the Goddess of Wisdom, makes a new set of administrative arrangements, appointing the various gods and goddesses to the posts for which they are the most unfit.'⁴² Mars became a scullion, Venus the goddess of war, Neptune was given the chariot of the sun – and so on. Light-hearted it may have been, but its political message was unmistakable. As the Crimean War rumbled on, 'the right men in the right place' had become a rallying-cry for reform. Politicians, army officers and newspapers alike argued that appointments to high office, henceforth, ought to be made on the basis of merit alone – not inherited privilege:

Mr. Lindsay, M.P. [...] said [...] It was wrong in principle to intrust the government of the country to men simply because they happened to be lords and honourables, and that some other claim to govern ought to be required. [...]

Sir C. Napier, who was received with great cheering, briefly thanked the meeting for the reception [...] believing that, after the disasters which had occurred in the Crimea, it was only by placing the right men in the right place that the safety of the country could be secured. (Loud cheers.)⁴³

Brough's Olympus quickly descends into chaos. Jupiter's thunder fizzles, Apollo forgets the tea, Venus gets stuck in her armour, Mercury steals the spoons – and Poseidon crashes the chariot of the sun. Minerva watches it all unfold, and ensures that the audience do not miss the point:

MINERVA: When Vulcan forged the bolts of Jove
 The bolts would work we know –
 When Phoebus Sol's bright Chariot drove
 He knew the way to go.
 And Mars could fight – Apollo write
 Each fitted was to do
 The work he was appointed for
 When this old world was new. [...]
 Each held a post he understood
 The duties of quite pat
 And wasn't chosen for being good
 At anything but that. [...]
 No doubt a many living now
 Would be delighted to
 Go back to the old plan pursued
 When this old world was new.⁴⁴

Brough's timing was perfect. His targets were ripe, and public opinion was moving in his direction; his radical classics could scarcely have been more relevant. In fact, a few days before *Olympus in a Muddle* was first performed, *The Bradford Observer*, with remarkable hubris, cast the stagnating Crimean campaign as a new and greater *Iliad*, presided over by new Olympians:

What was the conflict between Europe and Asia in the Trojan war, to the conflict pending for now two years between the principles of European and Asiatic thought and life! A new *Iliad* – we may call it a *Sebastopoliad* – is being enacted in these very days; a new epic of the nineteenth century is being developed before our eyes [...]. Homer [...] represented the denizens of Olympus as taking part in the Greco-Trojan conflict; but, though we have outlived the Grecian mythology, can we doubt that something corresponding to the Homeric gods and goddess is mixed up with the tremendous epic of our age?⁴⁵

This Olympus seemed ready to fall. Indeed, when the manuscript of *Olympus in a Muddle* was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office, prior to being licensed for performance, the

edgy censor demanded changes. Brough's final scene, where Jupiter admits his foolishness and capitulates to Minerva – and the script's last line in particular – cut rather too close for comfort:

JUPITER: Oh
Minerva – you come back – my best of friends. (*seizing her hands*)
How for my audience shall I make amends?

MINERVA: How! By allowing wisdom to direct
The acts you do – the servants you select –
Come then confess you're wrong – your steps retrace
And put the right man in the right place.⁴⁶

Minerva's speech could have been lifted from any of a hundred contemporary debates and public meetings – and would not be permitted on stage. The day-books of the Lord Chamberlain's office record the decision: 'Last line for "right men" put "right gods" "in the right places".'⁴⁷ Beyond this, while the cuts demanded were not extensive, they were still recognized in reviews: 'The piece [*Olympus in a Muddle*] had a political tendency and we understand that the functionary so obnoxious to the English constitution and the English society – the licenser, or Lord Chamberlain – struck out all the points of the piece before he would grant his license for the performance.'⁴⁸ But the Lord Chamberlain's pencil did not prevent Brough's political message being heard loud and clear by audiences: It was 'an attempt to extract some amusement out of the political topic of the day.'⁴⁹ 'The reformers' favourite motto,' as the *Theatrical Journal* noted, of "'the right man in the right place" has been burlesqued.'⁵⁰

In the summer of 1855, Robert Brough was unapologetic in his radical agenda. Loaded with puns though his work was, it was also in deadly earnest: forthright in its condemnation of the contemporary aristocracy, and its use of the classical past to advance his political agenda. Brough was betting that the time for radical classics had come – and scorned suggestions from his friends that he might moderate his views, or protect his position. As he

wrote, with perhaps a trace of nervousness, in the preface to *Songs of the 'Governing Classes'*:

I have been advised not to print my name to this volume of poems, (for poems I believe they are to be called, if bad ones) on the grounds, that being only known (where at all) as a "profane jester and satirist," the public will refuse to take me *au serieux*; and that what is at all events an attempted expression of earnest convictions, will stand a risk of being passed by as a collection of ephemeral squibs written in a spirit of the merest tomfoolery [...]. I have certainly made jokes for a livelihood, just as I should have made boots, if I had been brought up to the business [...]; but I do not see that I am thereby disqualified from giving serious utterance to my feelings on vital questions.⁵¹

But Brough's time had not come. That summer, in spite of his established reputation and previous successes, in spite of continuing public anger at the aristocracy, his audience melted away. *Songs of the 'Governing Classes'* had 'had scarcely any sale'.⁵² *Olympus in a Muddle* was most vilely received. 'The piece,' the *Daily News* wrote, 'went off very flatly; and when the curtain fell the applause was feeble, and mingled with loud disapprobation.'⁵³ The *Morning Chronicle* twisted the knife:

The idea – not in itself novel – was treated without elegance or tact. The incidents introduced were common-place; the dialogue bald and flagging; the jokes – such as they were – nothing better than puns of a very so-so character. [...] Its progress was not unmarked by ominous sibillations, and the fall of the curtain was followed by a very vigorous contest between the hissers and the applauders.⁵⁴

Brough had offered his radical classics to the world, and his audience had deserted him – staying, if they stayed, only to hiss. Reflecting on his life, from the end of the nineteenth century, one admirer wrote: 'Robert Brough was far too intensely genuine to devote himself exclusively to popular amusement [...]. His hatred of shams, his detestation of political self-seeking, his scorn of hereditary claims to govern or to oppress mankind [...] were deep and constant. Still, he knew the limitations of his own power to help the cause.'⁵⁵ At the beginning of 1855, Brough was not ready to acknowledge those 'limitations' – but by the end of the year, he had been compelled to do so.

Harmless Impudence

As great a success as *Olympus in a Muddle* was a failure, *Medea; or The Best of Mothers with a Brute of a Husband* was Brough's most spectacular hit. It opened in July 1856, with Frederick Robson in the title role, and cast the proud ancient princess as a heroine from the contemporary lower classes. 'Robson,' as Hall and Macintosh note, 'won more sympathy for Medea than any previous actor on the British stage.'⁵⁶ This was a Medea for the dispossessed. Evicted even from the workhouse, she came before the audience for the first time as a beggar:

Slow Music. – “*The Beggar’s Petition.*” Enter MEDEA with her two CHILDREN, one in her arms, the other by her side [...]. She then puts the child down, and they stand like street beggars: the smallest child having a placard on its neck inscribed –

<p>Φα θερλεσσ ORPHELINS ORFANI FATHERLESS</p>
--

The other has a little tin begging-box and wallet.

MEDEA. My Grecian friends, with deep humiliation
 I stand in this disgraceful situation.
 Though unaccustom'd publicly to speak,
 I have not tasted food since Tuesday week.
 Three sets of grinders out of work you see,
 Through the invention of machinery.
 A landlord, as inclement as the weather,
 Has seiz'd our flock bed – we were out of feather.
 Shoeless and footsore, I've through many lands
 Walked, with this pair of kids upon my hands.⁵⁷

Amplified to absurdity though her woe was, this Medea's low social status and precarious position were recognized by reviewers. *The Times* called her 'the moody virago of low life'⁵⁸ while the *Illustrated London News* remarked that 'Mr Robson was the Medea of vulgar

life'.⁵⁹ Medea was a woman who had been rendered destitute by her husband's abandonment of her and her family – a figure with powerful contemporary resonance.⁶⁰ Brough's Jason, cheerfully the villain of the piece, confesses to his desertion of Medea⁶¹ – and proceeds to take her children away from her:

JASON. Our ties are o'er.

MEDEA. O – oh! I was not aware.

JASON. Why, yes, of course;
Our separation equals a divorce. [...]
Of course 'twould never do for boys like those
Within whose veins the blood of princes flow,
To be brought up by (no offence) a vagrant,
Given to sorcery and crimes as flagrant.
You understand me?⁶²

Brough's *Medea* astonished London. The production was the talk of the city – and Londoners lined up outside the theatre, night after night, to applaud his ancient world. Revived time and again, the slight burlesque became something of a cultural touchstone – 'Robson's edition' of *Medea* even finds its way into Trollope's *Barchester Towers*.⁶³ Key to its triumph was Brough's remarkable leading actor, Frederick Robson, the sweet 'strange genius'⁶⁴ of the stage in 1850s London. Robson's style was always that of 'true passion, merely exaggerated by one premeditated step too far in the direction of the real (not mock) heroic.'⁶⁵ 'You saw capering about the stage, absurdly clad, now mouthing tumid bombast, now chanting some street song, a strange figure – one of the quaintest of buffoons. Nothing more? Of a sudden the actor would be in earnest; the eyes that had been winking with a knowing vulgarity all at once looked you full in the face, mastered you at a glance; there was a passionate cry, a taunting shout, or a wail of utter heartrending misery in the voice which had just been trolling a Cockney ditty; and then, ere your tears, so strangely surprised from you, were dry, the mime was again prancing.'⁶⁶ Robson was, for *The Times*, 'an artist who

has invented a school of acting totally distinct from anything with which we have been familiar [...]. His representation of the terrible heroine of Colchis [Medea] is a great creation, to be compared with those choruses of Aristophanes.⁶⁷

Brough's *Medea*, then, appears to be a triumphant appropriation of classics for the dispossessed – a radical claim on the ancient world with a notable impact. But had the classics truly been claimed for the Victorian lower classes? Closely examined, the story of Brough's *Medea* reverses: it becomes one of how political ambitions – no matter how passionately held – were often stifled and frustrated; a story of the space between sincere belief and its successful articulation, of the quicksilver nature of radical classics.

In the manuscript of *Medea* which Brough submitted for approval by the Lord Chamberlain's office – necessary to obtain a license for performance – traces can be seen of an angrier, more unsettling story. In one song, crossed through before the manuscript reached the Lord Chamberlain, society is heavily complicit in Medea's abandonment: the police stand ready to run her off, and 'a cast-off wife,' as she puts it, 'is a cast-off slave.'

MEDEA: Of all the pretty scoundrels bold
 With faces cast in brazen mould,
 The biggest's he who just has told
 He's going to marry Creusa. [...]
 A cast-off wife is a cast-off slave. [...]

JASON: Take my advice, be calm and go.
 Policeman Three
 Of Division B
 Has his eye on folks disliked by me.⁶⁸

In the final version of the burlesque, Medea is decidedly less strident or threatening – speaking, instead, of her 'tenderness.'⁶⁹ This early draft shows Brough working to reduce the threat posed by his Medea. And his small changes start to add up: 'Making a bauble of her murderous blade' becomes 'Making a bauble of Medea's blade.'⁷⁰ Most tellingly, while the final lines of *Olympus in a Muddle* twisted the knife in Brough's aristocratic targets, the final

lines of *Medea* reduce the author's voice to that of an insignificant 'gadfly' – and his radical politics to 'harmless impudence'. Ultimately, the threat of *Medea* is defused by Brough himself:

FINALE.
MEDEA AND THE CHARACTERS.
"One horse Shay."

There was a little man,
And he made a little fun
Of a very great woman 'bove his head, head, head [...].
And he trusts you'll carry hence
Of his harmless impudence
No impression to your supper or your bed, bed, bed,
Save the merry chirping sound,
Of a gadfly buzzing round
The wreath upon a noble statue's head, head, head.⁷¹

As *Medea* herself laments: 'My plot destroyed – my damages made good, / They'd change my very nature if they could.'⁷²

Heading to their 'supper' and their 'bed', the audience at the Olympic Theatre laughed off the evening's entertainment, just as Brough invited them to. None of the reviews of *Medea* suggest that it was a dangerous or incendiary text; no-one expected the theatregoers to march out, like those 'ungovernable youths' of Heidelberg, full of revolutionary zeal. (The Lord Chamberlain's office, likewise, was magnificently unruffled by *Medea*: no changes were demanded to Brough's text before it was licensed for performance.)⁷³ Given the makeup of the Olympic's audience, that is hardly surprising: in 1856, the theatre had 'become one of the most favourite resorts of the British aristocracy'⁷⁴ – far from a hotbed of radicalism. Alfred Wigan, the theatre's manager, 'had hopes of attracting the fashionable world [...]. Wigan [was] one of the only gentlemen of the stage, and he was tenacious of his gentility.'⁷⁵ While, of course, many different social classes were strongly represented in the audience at the Olympic, there is no doubt that Wigan cultivated the aristocracy assiduously, and had no wish

to alienate them: ‘Court patronage meant so much to Wigan.’⁷⁶ Brough’s *Medea* was staged as a piece of ‘harmless impudence’ to delight the ‘governing classes’, as its author well knew.

Wigan permitted the semblance, but not the substance, of radicalism. On Boxing Day 1855, at one of the lowest points of the Crimean campaign, *The Discreet Princess* played at the Olympic. It seemed, like Brough’s *Medea*, to have an incendiary side: ‘There are topical allusions to the Crimean War, including King Gander’s excuse that he was ‘coming home on urgent private business’, a phrase rather too often used by officers asking for home leave.’ But in the audience, far from squirming, those same officers hooted with laughter: ‘Lord Clyde in the audience took this in good part.’⁷⁷ So it was in *Medea*: Robert Brough’s radical classics had turned into little more than a punch line. How, in the space of a year, could so much have changed?

For alms we humbly sue

Radical claims on the classical past – and those who staked those claims – were rarely pure or simple. The voice of the outsider echoes throughout Brough’s work – but he himself was not the outsider he championed. He spoke, it is true, of his time in ‘a kind of back-slum suburb to the cities of literature and art’;⁷⁸ his furious politics did keep him out of some of the time’s most prominent journals.⁷⁹ Yet there is another side to the coin: Brough was connected to many of the leading writers and artists of the time. He was one of the founders of the Savage Club, which still endures in London. He called Dickens and Dante Gabriel Rossetti his friends. His reputation frequently preceded him – ‘the Broughs and the Romers,’ wrote a friend, ‘were the greatest Bohemians we knew’⁸⁰ – and though his wish to champion a more egalitarian world was unwavering, his own social positioning was complex; oscillating between insider and outsider, imprisoned debtor and brilliant friend – nothing quite so simple as an abandoned writer, waiting like his greatest heroine at the workhouse gates. One friend

of his, indeed, lamented not that Brough had remained unknown, but rather that he had found fame too swiftly:

The “Brothers Brough,” to Robert's misfortune, attained immediate popularity, and, in theatrical circles, celebrity. [...] He had the run of the green-rooms and the literary circles, when it would have done him much more good to have had the run of a decent library, or even of a garret, a book-stall, or a coffee-shop, with some back numbers of the *Quarterly Review* on its shelves. Then he speedily found that Christmas and Easter will not come a dozen times a year, and that he could not earn a livelihood by burlesque writing.⁸¹

Poverty was, indeed, Brough's most dependable companion. How, he wondered in his novel *Marston Lynch*, was it possible to work when ‘the coalman knocks at the door three times an hour, and the baker bullies you from his cart up to the first-floor window, and the green-grocer forces his way up-stairs, and takes a seat with his back against the door?’⁸² By 1860, his health was in terminal decline. ‘I hear,’ wrote George Augustus Sala, a friend and colleague, ‘poor Bob Brough is in an awful state dying and hard [up].’⁸³ As his condition spiralled down, his friends tried to do what they could for his wife and children: ‘With regard to poor Bob Brough, of whom I am afraid there is no hope, Shirley Brooks is trying the Literary Fund. If that fails we must try a private subscription. I have already given Mrs Brough four guineas I collected and what I could do, temporarily, myself.’⁸⁴ Both sides of Brough are on display in this letter – the threadbare circumstances of the outsider, but also the insider's dense network of friends, who stood ready to help. Brough's life, and his political positioning, was veined with such ironies and contradictions, countless small moments of accommodation – and of surrender. In 1856, blunt economic reality forced him to put his radicalism aside. He had to stop writing so stridently about victims of economic oppression, because he had become one himself. In *Medea* he can be seen weighing carefully how each word of his would play (and pay) with the ‘governing classes’ in Wigan's audience.

Once last time, with his health slipping away, Brough tried to make his radical classics heard. In 1859, he gave a reading at the Marylebone Intuition – and ‘his address to the

audience was not, as might have been expected, comic, but serious'.⁸⁵ He read extracts from his poetry, and from *Medea* – and those few who were in the audience found him a revelation:

Well do we remember one evening when, in the lecture room of the Marylebone Institution, Robert Brough read a collection of his poems to an audience so scanty, as to dispel all intentions of repeating the experiment. But singular were the beauty and force of the poems themselves – some of them wildly passionate and exquisitely pathetic; – some sportively fantastic [...]. But all were marked by a thorough mastery of language and of metre, and by a stern earnestness of purpose [...]. If ever there was a genuine poet it was Robert Brough, as he stood before that scanty audience at the Marylebone Institution. He appeared in a new character, but that character was evidently his own.⁸⁶

His *Medea* stood revealed as it might once have been – a work 'in a new character' entirely. Even *The Times* was to remark that 'in another age, he [Brough] might have taken a high position as a writer of even serious verse'.⁸⁷ 'In another age,' that is to say, *The Times* might have taken Robert Brough seriously. But other than on that day, few ever saw the 'serious' edge hidden behind Brough's burlesque. Frederick Robson took over management of the Olympic Theatre from Wigan in 1857, and in the years which followed, he produced *Medea* several times, to the delight of London.⁸⁸ But Brough's 'moody virago' was tamed still more effectively by these later revivals: in a rehearsal copy of *Medea*, dating from Robson's period as manager of the Olympic (the front cover is marked 'Please return to Mr. J. Robson'),⁸⁹ much of the remaining radicalism is edited out of the script. Jason is no longer very much to blame for deserting his wife: his song about abandoning Medea is drastically shortened (Figure 1), and the lines which make him most culpable are cut. The bitter fury of the abandoned wife likewise fades away: where Medea, enraged and plotting against Jason's new bride, sang 'Guerra! Guerra!' in the original edition, the song is changed to another character singing 'Spare her! Spare her!' (Figure 2). Medea's anger, and its cause, are made safe. 'My plot destroyed,' indeed.

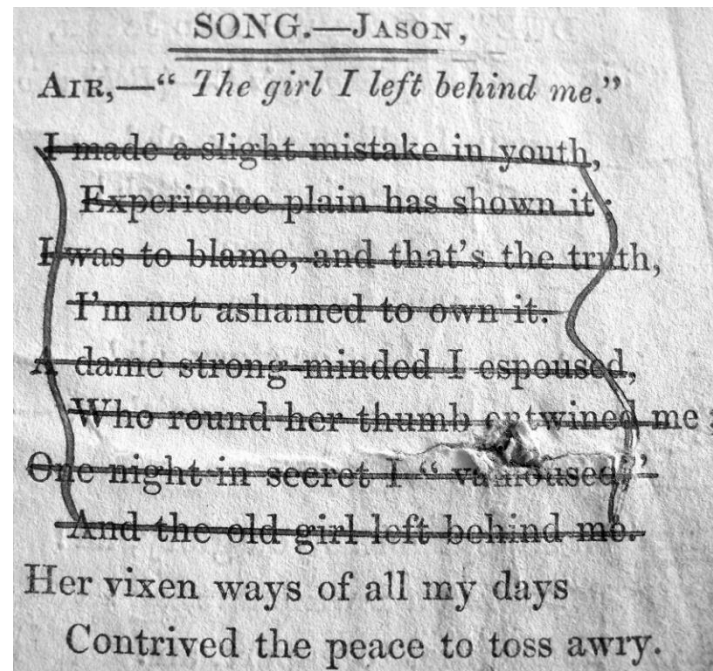


Figure 1: Where radical classics used to be: Jason, softened.⁹⁰

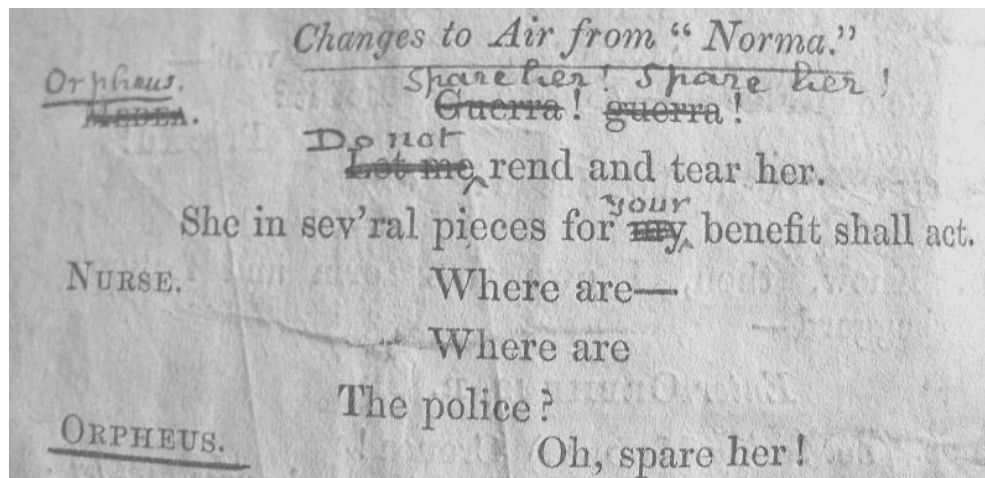


Figure 2: Where radical classics used to be: Medea, diluted.⁹¹

It is, of course, far from uncommon for the political agenda of a text to become lost in performance. Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* was written as a searing indictment of bourgeois capitalism – yet bourgeois capitalists flocked to it, and cheered its condemnation of all they stood for.⁹² But something more than this is at work in Brough’s *Medea*. The Olympic’s management, the censor’s lurking presence, the demands of his audience – but most of all,

the need to feed his family and himself – led Robert Brough to defuse the threat posed by his working-class classics. Far from a call for reform – ‘the right man in the right place’ – *Medea* became an evening of ‘harmless impudence’. The ‘governing classes’ jostled in the streets to see it: ‘On four or five nights in every week during the season, Drury Lane is rendered well nigh impassable by splendid equipages which have conveyed dukes and marquises and members of Parliament to the Olympic.’⁹³ Their laughter drowned out all else. However greatly he may have wished to silence them, Brough did little to disturb their sleep.

‘Lowlife’ classics does not necessarily translate into classics for the working classes. A ragged *Medea* may have little comfort for those in rags themselves. Few works on the nineteenth-century stage could afford to target one social class above all – or to create an uncompromising working-class classics: theatres were too difficult to fill, productions too expensive, and the likelihood of being taken seriously too slim. Critics were inclined to write not of the politics of the burlesque-stage, but to feature it – on a semi-annual basis – in articles on ‘the “Decline of the Drama” [...] [which] happens to be in fashion for the moment – just as were General Tom Thumb, the Hippopotamus, and the Talking Fish’.⁹⁴ A theatre manager might commission a burlesque from Brough after he ‘had tried in succession elephants, jugglers, “real water,” and cavalry spectacles, but had reaped little by such experiments beyond harvests of abuse in the newspapers’.⁹⁵ The fickleness of theatre management and public taste – what Brough called ‘the Big Baby Society’⁹⁶ – drove works into obscurity as easily as into prominence; even when established as a writer, Brough never knew when he might next find success. On stage, business often trumped belief; radicalism yielded to pseudo-radicalism.

Of course, as this volume explores, the ancient world played a key part in many texts created for the working classes. However, ‘lowlife’ classics could also be, and often was, a pose – a fraying, harlequin history, created to delight ‘sharp little boys’ who knew their Latin,

not hungry little boys who swept the streets. So it was in Francis Burnand's drawing-room burlesque, *Harlequin Julius Caesar*:

SCHOOLMASTER (*astonished*). *Quis? quae? quod?* (*Sharp little boys among the audience may correct the schoolmaster's mistake, and ask their papa for a bottle of champagne as a reward. We wish they may get it.*)

CLOWN (*to Pantaloon*). Why don't you answer him?

PANTALOOON (*vacantly*). I'd rather not.

SCHOOLMASTER (*eyeing Pantaloon majestically*). *Amo, amas.*

CLOWN (*cutting in cheerfully*). You love a lass. I know, Governor; but you're getting rather old for that. [...]

Clown and Pantaloon seize Schoolmaster, and insert him, feet foremost, in the sack. Schoolmaster struggles and cries for help. They drag him to the window and lift him up.

CLOWN (*shouting as if to someone below*). Hi! you, down there! Do you want something nice to eat?

VOICE FROM OUTSIDE. No.

CLOWN. Well, then, take this. (*Lifts him up, carries him to the side-scenes, struggling and shouting all the time, then pretends to throw him out. If there's a false window, he may put him through it: noise heard as of fall, and shout –*) "There's some education for the lower classes."⁹⁷

'Education for the lower classes' is a punch-line: like the 'Cockney'⁹⁸ who presumes to rewrite Euripides, it is a joke Burnand's readers are invited to share (for surely, the text assumes, you readers who know your Latin could not be from 'the lower classes'?).

Many in Victorian Britain used classics to talk about class – Robert Brough's voice is simply one of the loudest and the most passionate. But how many were able to use classics to do something about class? Did working-class classics ever truly drive political reform – or present a serious threat to the established elite? In 1856, the choice which Brough had to make was a stark one: write incendiary verses which would sit unsold, or watch the 'governing classes' of Britain laugh at his 'harmless impudence'. He chose to make his 'betters' laugh. How many more did the same? How many times was seemingly-radical

classics anything other than ‘harmless impudence’? Despite Brough’s passionate beliefs, this question must now be an open one.

Brough’s chaotic lifestyle – and his confinement in the debtors’ prison – did his health no good;⁹⁹ ‘indeed, for a long period, those nearest and dearest to him had known that the most that could be done for him was to soothe and cherish him to the end.’¹⁰⁰ He died very young, in 1860, at the age of 32. ‘It will be long before we meet with so brilliant a genius and so unhappy a man,’ wrote the *New York Times*. ‘With a wife and family to support and his constant illness to contend with, he had been unable to make much fight in his great battle of life, and he died almost penniless. His friends have taken up the cause of those left behind him, and have organized a public subscription and a dramatic and musical entertainment in their behalf.’¹⁰¹ On 25 July 1860, ‘at Drury-lane Theatre, for the benefit of the widow and children’¹⁰² of Robert Brough, this performance took place.

At the end of the evening, Sala, Brough’s friend and colleague, delivered his tribute from the stage – a poem written for the occasion. Infused with the ancient world, it was a strange and bitter epitaph: Sala’s Brough was no triumphant ‘Caesar’, but an anonymous soldier, who fought and was forgotten. ‘His valour help’d to swell / The glorious triumphs Caesar bears so well. / Now his cold corpse in some dark trench is laid.’¹⁰³ The classical analogy, far from granting Brough power and remembrance, took them away from him. But for that ‘ardent hater’ who never saw an aristocrat he did not yearn to topple, Sala’s final lines would have been the deepest betrayal. Desperate to provide for Brough’s widow and children, Sala looked out to the wealthy audience, took a deep breath, and begged:

He [Brough] never crav’d the bounty of my lord.
 We crave it now. For alms we humbly sue;
 We hinge the knee, we bow the head, to you.
 We ask your charity.¹⁰⁴

After all the hope, all the anger, all the plans, all the defeats, after Medea and Jason, Nero and Coriolanus, and all the gods of Olympus, it had come to this. Robert Brough was remembered through the ancient world – as helpless subject for ‘the bounty of my lord’. Here at the end of his radicalism, with an old friend sweeping away the last of his revolutionary self, Brough should have the last word – for few have known so deeply as he the illusory power of antiquity:

For freedom oft I pray’d;
Invoking Rome’s and Athens’ names [...].
O, set your mind at ease, my love;
I’ll speak of them no more.¹⁰⁵

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1 Brough (1855): 9. Hall's account (Hall (1999)) of Brough and his highly political engagements with the ancient world has in many ways been instrumental to the shaping of this chapter.

2 Brough (1855): 95.

3 see Hawtrey (1868) for an account of one exception – St. Mark's school, founded in 'an attempt to give a liberal [classical] education to children of the working classes.'

4 This was Brough's favourite term for the contemporary elite. See Brough (1855), *passim*.

5 Brough (1855): 102.

6 Brough (1860): vi-vii (posthumous Memoir of the Author, by George Augustus Sala).

7 *New York Times*, 18 August 1860.

8 *Musical World*, 13 October 1860: 657.

9 Quoted in Friswell (1906): 27.

10 For Brough and Hannay, and the Robert Brough-Bob Marston identification, see Espinasse (1893): 324-5.

11 *The Cornhill Magazine*, XI: 2 (February 1865):252-3.

12 Brough (1858b): xiii.

13 *The Saturday Review*, 10 July 1858: 42.

14 *The Saturday Review*, 18 June 1859: 749.

15 *The Saturday Review*, 10 July 1858: 42. For Brough and *The Saturday Review*, see Cross (1988): 98.

16 *The Times*, 15 July 1856: 12.

17 See *The Welcome Guest, A Magazine of Recreative Reading for All* (London), Vol.1 (1860): 239-40.

18 Yates (1894): 60.

19 *Ibid*.

20 *The Draper and Clothier*, vol. 2 (1860): 72.

21 Friswell (1906): 28-9.

22 Yates (1885): 215.

23 Brough (1855): 60-2.

24 see Thirlwall (1936): 42: 'Before Niebuhr's researches the legends preserved by Livy, Polybius and Plutarch fell like ninepins, amid the wails of lovers of dear, dead things'.

25 Niebuhr (1828).

26 Before attacking Niebuhr in translation, the *Quarterly Review* had published Dr. Arnold's highly favourable review of the German original, apparently in blissful ignorance of its contents, in June, 1825' (Thirlwall (1936): 43-4).

27 *The Quarterly Review*, January 1829: 8.

28 see Thirlwall (1936): 43: 'The translators, in their effort to be painfully exact, failed to straighten many of Niebuhr's torturous passages. Macaulay, for one, desired a translation of the translation.'

29 This is, indeed, the account of Brough which I have previously given (Richardson (2013)); this chapter aims to complicate that picture.

30 *The Draper and Clothier*, vol. 2 (1860): 72.

31 See Richardson (2013).

32 *The Times*, 12 December 1854: 9.

33 Quoted in Brough (1855): 87.

34 *Ibid.*: xi. The Preface is dated June 27, 1855. In later editions, the following footnote was appended to this passage: 'This had reference to the War in the Crimea.'

35 *Ibid.*: 67.

36 Sachs remarks that 'Hazlitt even suggested that Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* could be a more effective vehicle for political debate than works by Burke or Paine' (Sachs (2010): 181).

37 Brough (1855): 60-2.

38 Friswell (1906): 29.

39 Brough (1855): 89.

40 *Daily News*, 24 August 1855: 2.

41 *Olympus in a Muddle* was never published, and the manuscript is unsigned – however it is attributed to 'the Brothers Brough' in *The Morning Chronicle*, 24 August 1855: 2.

42 *Daily News*, 24 August 1855: 2.

43 *The York Herald*, 16 June 1855: 7.

44 Brough, R.B. & Brough, W. (1855): 23-5.

45 *The Bradford Observer*, 16 August 1855: 4.

46 Brough, R.B. & Brough, W. (1855): 31.

47 Lord Chamberlain's office Day Books, 1852-1865, British Library Add MS 53703: 213.

48 *The Racing Times*, 28 August 1855.

49 *Daily News*, 24 August 1855: 2.

50 *Theatrical Journal*, 20 August 1855: 275.

51 Brough (1855): ix-x.

52 Yates (1885): 216.

53 *Daily News*, 24 August 1855: 2.

54 *The Morning Chronicle* 24 August 1855: 4.

55 Miles (ed.) (1897): 300-1.

56 Hall and Macintosh (2005): 413; see also Hall (1997).

57 Brough (1856): 11.

58 *The Times*, 15 July 1856: 12.

59 *Illustrated London News*, 19 July 1856: 65.

60 See Hall and Macintosh (2005).

61 Brough (1856): 9: 'JASON: I was to blame and that's the truth, / I'm not ashamed to own it. [...] / One night in secret I "vamoosed," / And the old girl left behind me.'

62 *Ibid.*: 22-3.

63 See Trollope (1859), vol. 2: 94 (Chapter XXXIII): ‘Medea, when she describes the customs of her native country (I am quoting from Robson’s edition), assures her astonished auditor that in her land captives, when taken, are eaten.’

64 Sala (1864): 24.

65 *Illustrated London News*, 19 July 1856: 65.

66 Sala (1864): 25.

67 *The Times*, 15 July 1856: 12.

68 ‘Medea, or, The best of mothers with a brute of a husband,’ burlesque in one act by R. B. Brough. British Library Add MS 52960 K: 31. The entire page is crossed through, in the manuscript.

69 ‘I have done for this man, / All that tenderness can, / I have followed him half the world through, sir’ (Brough (1856): 24).

70 British Library Add MS 52960 K: 48. The first line is crossed through, in the manuscript, with the second one written in around it.

71 Brough (1856): 35.

72 *Ibid.*: 34.

73 Lord Chamberlain’s office Day Books, 1852-1865. British Library Add MS 53703: 185. The British Library catalogue for Add MS 52960 K suggests that some cuts were demanded – but this is in fact mistaken; the Day Books note cuts made to Mark Lemon’s competing burlesque of *Medea*.

74 Sala (1864): 32.

75 Sands (1979): 55.

76 *Ibid.*: 83.

77 *Ibid.*: 73.

78 *Every Saturday. A Journal of Curious Reading*. Vol.1, 3 November 1866: 535.

79 see *The Odd-Fellows’ Magazine*, II:xvi (October 1860): 459. Brough’s acid candour did not help his cause. He caricatured, for instance, William Hepworth Dixon, editor of the *Athenaeum*, as ‘the flea’, who secured his post through ingratiating: the elite, ‘finding that the creature could eat toads, fed him bounteously.’ (Brough (1860): 240).

80 Friswell (1906): 28.

81 Brough (1860): vii (Sala’s Memoir).

82 *Ibid.*: 351.

83 Sala (ed. McKenzie) (1993): 41. Letter dated Tuesday 27 March 1860.

84 *Ibid.*: 83 (original emphasis). Letter dated Friday 4 May 1860.

85 *Illustrated London News*, 25 June 1859.

86 *Musical World*, 7 July 1860: 428-9.

87 *The Times*, 29 June 1860: 11.

88 Sala (1864): 56.

89 Annotated copy of Robert Brough, *Medea; or The Best of Mothers with a Brute of a Husband* (London, Lacey’s Acting Edition of Plays), private collection.

90 *Ibid.*: 9.

91 See *Ibid.*: 16.

92 See Garde (2007): 223.

93 Sala (1864): 29.

94 *The Welcome Guest, A Magazine of Recreative Reading for All* (London, Houlston & Wright), Vol.1 (1860): 211.

95 Brough & Bennett (1860): 109.

96 *ibid.*: 34.

97 Burnand (1866?): 5-6.

98 *The Times*, 15 July 1856: 12.

99 see Brough (1860): vi (Sala's Memoir): 'He never looked well. Each successive time I saw him until a few weeks since he was in some degree or manner worse.'

100 *The Odd-Fellows' Magazine*, II:xvi (October 1860): 457.

101 *New York Times*, 18 August 1860.

102 *The Welcome Guest, A Magazine of Recreative Reading for All* (London, Houlston & Wright), Vol.2 (1861): 370.

103 *Ibid.*

104 *Ibid.*

105 Brough (1856b): 65.