

**Born too early or too late?  
James Sheridan Knowles and the Nineteenth-Century Literary  
Marketplace**

**Susanne Ramadan and Mahmoud Shra'ah\***

**Abstract**

The following study presents the Victorian playwright and actor James Sheridan Knowles (1784 - 1862), who was one of the most well-known dramatists of the nineteenth century. Late in his lifetime, Knowles converted to the Baptist faith and gave up his career as playwright and actor. Sources on Knowles and his age have to this point maintained that Knowles became an ordained Baptist minister and abandoned the stage entirely because of his change of faith. This research will prove otherwise. It will expose the actual factors that drove Knowles to give up playwriting and it will refute previous assumptions about Knowles's desertion of the stage during the last years of his life.

James Sheridan Knowles, the famous nineteenth century playwright, had long been neglected by scholars. Only less than a handful of scholarly studies on Knowles are available and all have maintained that Knowles abandoned the stage in favor of the pulpit due to his conversion to the Baptist faith in 1845. His son, Richard B. Knowles published a biography on his father, *The Life of James Sheridan Knowles*, in 1872 he asserts that his father retired from the stage because of his new faith. Leslie H. Meeks's specialized study on Knowles reaffirms Richard B. Knowles's claim that Sheridan Knowles gave up his literary career in favor of his new faith. Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, and resources on Victorian theatre all confirm this assumption<sup>(1)</sup>. This study will shed new light on Knowles's late career change delving into the actual motives behind the playwright's decision to retire from the stage during the last seventeen years of his life.

Knowles's contributions to the Victorian stage were highly regarded then. He was an actor and a playwright and most of his performances and plays were received well. He always dreamed of exceptional success which he achieved neither in Ireland nor in England. Nevertheless, in September 1833, he was elected honorary member of the Cambridge Garrick Club<sup>(2)</sup>. Perhaps the most

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\* English Department, Faculty of Arts, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan.

eloquent testimony to the English public's respect of Knowles as a playwright is the fact that, in 1850, he was nominated to succeed William Wordsworth as poet laureate of England. Even though Knowles had tried his hands at poetry in his youth<sup>(3)</sup>, he was no match for Alfred, Lord Tennyson whose elegy *In Memoriam* was highly praised by many English readers including Prince Albert. Tennyson was finally chosen by Queen Victoria.

Since his youth, Knowles's dream was to become a successful playwright who would achieve fame and fortune. In order to gain the experience needed for playwriting and to discover the secrets of the profession, Knowles became a member in a company of amateur actors. There he met his future wife whom he married in 1809. After his marriage, he joined another company only to meet Edmund Kean, then an unknown player. A friendship developed which would lead to the writing of a number of important and successful plays such as *Virginius*. Kean was a great inspiration for Knowles, but the time was not right for Knowles who attempted to promote powerful and thought-provoking drama. Serious drama had witnessed a decline during the end of the eighteenth century and it would stay in a phase of recession until the late nineteenth century.

A number of lean years followed for serious dramatists like Knowles. His acting in Belfast in 1811 did not bring him the hoped-for fame and fortune and Knowles, for the first time, experienced the yoke of financial difficulties – a yoke he would have to shoulder as a playwright-actor all his lifetime. His depleted finances forced him to accept a teaching position which he continued to hold until 1820. In 1815 his tragedy *Caius Graccus*<sup>(4)</sup> brought him moderate success. After the success of his second tragedy, *Virginius*<sup>(5)</sup>, in 1820, Knowles decided to become a professional playwright. He left his teaching position at Glasgow and established a Whig newspaper, *The Free Press*, which should bring Knowles a stable income and would allow him to dedicate more time to the theatre. The newspaper lasted only for three years<sup>(6)</sup>. Upon seeing a successful reproduction of his play *Caius Gracchus* five years later in 1823, Knowles was encouraged to broaden his readings in literature. There he started to dream of being a writer for the London stage. In 1825 Knowles was rescued from his difficult financial situation by the success of his historical drama *William Tell*<sup>(7)</sup>. But his success did not last long. Soon after, in 1828, his first comedy *The Beggar's Daughter of Bethnal Green*<sup>(8)</sup> was a failure. To solve his resulting financial situation, he resorted to lecturing publicly on poetry, drama, and elocution. In the following years Knowles increased his acting roles both in his own dramas and in productions of Shakespeare's plays to support his meager income as playwright. He continued to perform and manage his own plays until 1846. By 1847, Knowles was an ordained Baptist minister.

Knowles's retirement from the stage has been justified as a natural consequence of "certain character traits that he had always possessed"<sup>(9)</sup>. His love for oratory and elocution in addition to his interest in the ministry in his early twenties, before he had decided to become a professional playwright, were considered the driving forces behind his conversion from the boards to the pulpit. Scholarship on Knowles has never looked beyond these assumptions. This research will try to prove that Knowles's abandonment of his career as playwright was not a mere product of a spiritual calling, but rather a direct outcome of the marketplace conditions of his time. This research will first shed light on the socio-political conditions of the Victorian Age which had a direct effect on both audiences and the quality of productions presented at theatres. The paper will then proceed to explore the factors that restricted dramatic productions and discouraged James S. Knowles to continue in his profession as dramatist. These are the low tastes of the new audience, governmental regulations, strict financial policies, and the Dramatic Copyright Act.

The new audience was a product of both economic and social changes. The nineteenth century was characterized by the Napoleonic wars at the beginning of the century, the industrial revolution, and colonization. Brander calls back into our historical memory that the dawn of the nineteenth century was filled with the "reverberating cannonade of the Napoleonic conquests"<sup>(10)</sup>. Bonaparte's wars exhausted Great Britain financially and politically as Britain was subjected to an embargo by France and its allies. Some critics maintain that the circumstances of life during Napoleon's time were the reason for the poor quality of stage productions during the first quarter of the nineteenth century<sup>(11)</sup>. Due to the political situation in Europe, people did not desire to see serious drama and they despised tragedies. This situation continued until Napoleon's defeat in 1815. The end of the wars had a direct effect on the manners and desires of the populace in England. People who were previously pre-occupied with Bonaparte's political and military victories were now relieved of much anxiety and were, once again, seeking entertainment and refinement in drama<sup>(12)</sup>. A new audience started to be interested in stage productions. Hitherto, the theatre had been the target for the aristocracy and the high middle class, now the working classes flooded into theatres seeking amusement and excitement. This social sector, opposed to the more sophisticated social strata, did not look for high quality tragedy or fine comedy.

Additionally, the unprecedented wealth achieved by the industrial revolution, the exploitation of the colonies, and by slave trade triggered vast social change. Urban growth brought many changes to England especially London and its surrounding areas. By 1800, London's population had reached

the million line<sup>(13)</sup>. Trades and industries multiplied and the balance of power in the largely agrarian society shifted to cities and the middle class prospered. The privilege of theatre-going, once only enjoyed by the aristocracy, was now also enjoyed by the middle class who was, however, unable to cultivate the same elevated tastes of the nobility. The influx of the populace into theatres during the nineteenth century and their lack of taste for good quality drama led to a demand for passion, terror, fun, and scenery.

This new audience sought something less artistically refined and less intellectually demanding. The educated, higher ranks of society who would have been more interested in the kind of drama Knowles propagated, ceased to attend the theatre. If tragic productions were staged, they had to be full of excitement and sensational scenes to pass the taste of the contemporary audience. Plays which lacked proper emotional stimulation failed sadly. Voskuil explores how audiences merely looked for excitement, sensational performances, high-flown language, and, at times, violence<sup>(14)</sup>. She explains that the new technology used in staging techniques produced spectacular displays and sensation scenes that appealed to working class audiences. Melodrama and farce became the norm since the new audience looked for sensual rather than intellectual involvement. Mayer investigates how the new technology had transformed the stage: "The scene-painter, the model-builder, and the full effects of machinery of the Victorian stage" gave stage drama a special flavor and excited large numbers of theatre goers. The Victorian stage became "a machine with which to exhibit and deceive—to create illusions of fire, height, water, and, above all, speed and machine-power"<sup>(15)</sup>. Producers and managers became greatly concerned with meeting the high expectations of the audiences. Spectacles, scene paintings, extravagant costumes and the exploration of contemporary issues attracted flocks of people to theatres. These new conditions created an even harder situation for serious dramatists like James S. Knowles who wanted to restore drama to its old dignity.

Dramatists were long believed to have had the responsibility to produce drama that both teaches and delights. Aristotle's name was used frequently to lend weight to this demand for a kind of literature that entertains and educates simultaneously. Edification, however, was no longer a real concern for many playgoers in the nineteenth century mainly due to the vast changes in Victorian society. Consequently, the English stage experienced a gradual withdrawal of the intellectual classes from theatres and a rapid influx of the middle-class bourgeoisie and the working classes. Playwrights had no easy time addressing the varying tastes of their new audiences and meeting the ever-increasing demands of the marketplace. Since entertainment and social critique were

prioritized as goals in Victorian drama, two concepts of power and authority assumed importance and started to control stage productions: the audience on the one hand and the national government on the other.

The question of how valuable, beneficial, and interesting a play was came largely to be the responsibility of the audience. They indirectly determined the content of plays and playwrights were quick to respond to their demands. Content was tailored to please the audience and to attract the largest number of theatre goers to a play. Just how important a role the audience plays is underscored by Findlater: "The drama is unique among the arts in its dependence upon the immediate reactions of a large audience .... Every dramatist in a secular society must compromise with the demands of the mummery and the tastes of the crowd"<sup>(16)</sup>. Audiences had the privilege to approve or disapprove of a play or player by using signs of approval or disapproval as long as these were expressed on an occasional basis. The new possession of power by the people was a matter most serious. Hughes explains that this authority that had been granted to a people could both be used and abused. Its abuse could be dangerous and could affect the state of art and the marketplace simultaneously<sup>(17)</sup>. Indeed, since the taste for drama was no longer of the same quality as in Elizabethan times and the elite ceased to attend theatres, good quality drama was no attraction for the public. Drama became popular amusement for the populace instead of a prestige art for the educated, high-rank members of society.

Caring nothing for good poetry and subtle meaning, audiences expected excitement and memorable scenes. Knowles tried to meet the demands of his audience without compromising the quality of the drama he produced. In 1828, Knowles produced a comedy entitled *The Beggar's Daughter of Bethnal Green* which, to his surprise, failed because the success of *Virginius* had raised high expectations of his comedy and the working class playgoers wanted to enjoy the plays emotionally and not intellectually. In Wright's account, the spontaneous, individualistic responses of theatre-goers were a valid criterion for the success of a play. Their "flushed cheeks" and "sparkling eyes" were signs of the spectators' total emotional immersion in the play<sup>(18)</sup>. This was never achieved with Knowles's comedy. The five-act comedy was produced at Drury Lane and did not even receive a fair hearing. The opposition of the viewers started in the middle of the second act and rose to such a climax in the third that the stage manager had to entreat the audience to calm down. The piece barely made it to the close. *The Morning Chronicle* gave an account of its reception:

Hisses, cat-calls, and cries of 'Off,' 'Off,' were ... heard at intervals .... After the curtain fell, Cooper[the stage manager] long stood in various supplicatory attitudes before he was allowed to be heard, and when he

at last put it to the audience whether they would consent that 'The Beggar's Daughter of Bethnal Green' should be repeated on Tuesday, the 'Noes' were certainly a very considerable body<sup>(19)</sup>.

Knowles's comedy failed not necessarily because it was inferior in quality to his tragedy or because it lacked an interesting plot or good poetry. He had the disadvantage of having an audience not easily pleased and having a relatively low-quality production due to the financial difficulties theatres faced at the time. The *Morning Post* underscored that "there was little, if any, new scenery, although we were gratified with another sight of Mr. Stanfield's fine picture of the 'Old London Bridge'"<sup>(20)</sup>. The essential prerequisite for a successful performance was absent: the sensation scene. The play failed despite its merits. Robert Bell, a contemporary critic, addresses the poetic merit of the comedy. He emphasizes that "its poetry is the poetry of truth, that it is addressed to one's feelings rather than to one's passions, and appeals only to the gentle parts of our nature." Such refinement, naturally, was not enjoyed by the working-class audiences. Undeniably, Knowles's genius was "essentially disposed to the pathetic; he ha[d] no coarse humor or frivolous wit at command"<sup>(21)</sup>. Knowles refused to compromise his principles to achieve quick success and fame.

In addition to the power the Victorian spectators exercised during stage productions, they also brought about the introduction of working-class characters with whom they could identify. These characters became chief protagonists in melodramatic plays at "minor theatres" rather than the patent theatres. A significant amount of dramatic productions was largely addressed to working-class and lower-middle-class audiences who frequented the minor theatres. The most successful dramas of this period were those which featured heroes from the rural working class such as John Baldwin Buckstone's *Luke the Labourer* (1826) in which both villain and hero are from the rural working-class. Also Douglas Jerrold's *Black-Ey'd Susan* (1829) in which the hero-victim is in the naval-service. The stage became a means for exploring questions of authority, class division, and political rights aside from entertainment. Knowles himself contributed to this type of drama with his play *William Tell* (1825) starring Macready as the central character. Despite all the efforts to preserve good quality drama and much to the disappointment and disapproval of many bright dramatists like Knowles, drama steadily declined. Macready, a famous contemporary actor-manager and a close friend and colleague of Knowles, commented on the playwright's efforts:

His aspiration was less to revolutionize theatre than to restore Covent Garden (which he managed from 1837-1839) and Drury Lane (which

he managed from (1841 to 1843) to a mythical grandeur, founded on the conscientious staging of great plays, ancient and modern<sup>(22)</sup>.

Knowles's efforts were, sadly enough, spent at a time when the more educated social classes had divorced theatres. It wasn't until the mid-1830s that, very gradually, a more cultured class found its way back into the theatre and that mainly because of the fame of some great actor such as Macready or Kemble. Their fame did not only draw the audiences, but actually influenced the production of drama.

Macready encouraged Knowles to keep dedicating his efforts to the British stage. For twenty-five years, Macready exerted direct influence on the writings and productions of Knowles's plays. In 1823, Knowles rewrote *Caius Gracchus* with suggestions from Macready. At Drury Lane, it enjoyed only moderate success running for seven nights. At Glasgow, on the other hand, it became more successful. A successful performance, however, did not mean financial success. Knowles's son asserts that "successful runs ... meant little to an author financially before the passage of the copyright law"<sup>(23)</sup>. *William Tell* (1825) was more successful than *Caius Gracchus*, but did not secure Knowles financially. According to Richard Brinsley Knowles, the management and the publisher never paid his father due to bankruptcy. By the 1830s, Knowles seemed to have realized then that as a dramatist achieving commercial success or at least financial stability was a difficult matter. Knowles initially planned to give up lecturing, but since audiences were not easy to please and circumstances were not in favor of playwrights and, especially after the failure of his comedy in 1828, he realized that lecturing was, nevertheless, a source of a stable income. Until the end of his life, lecturing would remain an additional source of income in years of need. As a professional playwright, Knowles was forced to look for a second source of income since his sole reliance on the theatrical profession would not win him enough bread to survive.

Contemporaries of Knowles were also concerned with the dire state of contemporary drama. Renowned poets of the time like Byron, Scott, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge, among others, attempted to write verse plays with little success. Coleridge's *Osorio* (1797) was produced at Drury Lane in 1813, and Lord Byron's *Marino Faliero* in 1821, Wordsworth's *The Borderers* (1797), Keat's *Otho the Great* (1819) and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cenci* (1819) remained unperformed. Hazlitt declared in the *London Magazine* for April 1820 that good tragedy was rare even though Imperial Britain at the time was at its climax. As had happened during the Elizabethan Age, one would expect that the country's wealth during Queen Victoria's reign would have led to the celebration of heroic achievement, as can be found in tragedies, and the

furtherance of dramatists with potential. It is surprising, therefore, to find that the first half of the nineteenth century was one of the most difficult times for dramatists since the Renaissance and Restoration. Some blamed the dire state of the theatre on dramatists claiming that playwrights could not "recapture the brilliance of English drama"<sup>(24)</sup> but a close consideration of the age and the obstacles dramatists faced, convince us otherwise.

Writing drama in Victorian times was not as easy as would be imagined. Dramatists had to conform to strict guidelines to escape the Lord Chamberlain's censorship and, simultaneously, had to have a feel for what pleased their audiences. Knowles was certainly not spared by the censors. The playwright was forced to rewrite his tragedy *Caius Gracchus* in order to obtain a license from the Lord Chamberlain. The play's "liberal sentiments" had to be reconsidered before it would be granted the permission to be produced at Drury Lane in 1823<sup>(25)</sup>. Then again, not all productions faced such difficulties. With his tragedy *Virginius*, Knowles had a positive experience with both his audience and critics after it passed the Lord Chamberlain's examination committee. It was hailed as "a genuine tragedy" even though Knowles had drawn on Roman history for its story. In a newspaper excerpt quoted by Knowles's son, the *raison d'être* for its lasting success become apparent. Even though the tragedy did not offer "abundant materials" it was "so simple, yet so complete." The audience was kept from feeling bored by the length of the play -- five acts, as Knowles believed all serious drama should have -- "by filling the earlier parts of the play with beautiful domestic scenes" which gave the spectators "a living and personal interest in the characters." The denouement in the last act exhibited highly sentimental scenes which set off the emotional response of the viewers. The newspaper passage also emphasizes that in the play there was "no startling paradox, no metaphysical subtlety, no strange blending of virtues and vices ... no florid extravagance, no 'pomp of words.'" In other words, the audience liked plays to be simple and exciting. In particular, the part of the heroine thrilled the spectators: Her role was "the most exquisite of all: it is almost too lovely to criticize .... The Virginia of Mr. Knowles is a gentle maiden on the verge of womanhood, unconsciously lovely and loving. The beauty of her character is that which can never be out of date"<sup>(26)</sup>. Pathetic roles, sentimental characters, and sensation scenes encouraged the uneducated masses to flock to theatres by the thousands.

The increasing number of theatre-goers during the nineteenth century led to the growth of playhouses in England with the exception of London where their growth was curbed by the Licensing Act of 1737. The Licensing Act gave the Lord Chamberlain the power to uphold the monopoly of two patent theatres,



Covent Garden and Drury Lane, and restricted the market for nonmusical plays to these theatres until 1843, discouraging dramatic productions from being staged elsewhere. Any performance of drama for money needed to be submitted two weeks prior to performance for approval. Disregard for this bill would result in a £ 50 fine and loss of authority to perform<sup>(27)</sup>. The law authorized the Prime Minister to ban any plays which would undermine the government's authority or violate the public code of manners. Religious and political issues were also to be avoided for fear that the stage should undermine the authority of the government. The brief revival of satire the stage had witnessed toward the end of the eighteenth-century ended prematurely with the strict censorship laws.

The censorship laws had, without doubt, a negative influence on the development of drama and the revenues for playwrights. On the one hand, until mid-nineteenth century, few authors were concerned with the production of serious drama since the majority felt that drama had been weaned from fundamental interests in life. On the other, the Licensing Act made it impossible for playwrights to earn a respectable living since competition among theatres had lessened so dramatists were forced to turn out plays in great numbers to survive. The censorship provisions, therefore, not only restricted the creativity of artists and lowered the quality of dramatic productions significantly, but they also curbed the free development of drama well into the twentieth century.

A few determined playwrights, nevertheless, continued to present their subversive political opinions and social commentary in their stage productions. Since plays were undergoing censorship by the contemporary government, playwrights like Knowles, who were greatly influenced by Victor Hugo's French historical drama, used historical settings to camouflage the exploration of contemporary issues. Knowles's *Virginius* (1820), which was very popular from the beginning, uses Roman history to "speak against hereditary privilege and to advocate political liberty and greater suffrage"<sup>(28)</sup>. His play *William Tell* also uses a foreign historical setting to explore oppressive authority and rightful rebellion against cruelty and tyranny. On the one hand, playwrights started to look for ways to avoid prohibition and escape censorship; on the other, they suffered from theatrical conditions.

Since the theatre was still under the control of the court, the two patent houses had to be enlarged to accommodate the demands of the increasing numbers of theatre-goers. Covent Garden was enlarged so as to accommodate about 3000 spectators and Drury Lane was rebuilt on a large scale in 1794 so as to provide seating for 3600 people<sup>(29)</sup>. This action was a direct response to the demands of the marketplace, but it unfortunately did not consider the impact of such enlargement on the quality of dramatic performances. The theatre was

enlarged to an extent that the audience could no longer hear or see the performances. Hence, oversized playhouses started to depend largely on spectacle as a means of impressing the spectators and keeping the attention of the back rows. Since at that time the regular patrons of theatres were the working class audiences, they responded more readily to action and scenery on stage rather than to philosophical appeal or psychological subtlety. As the novel gained more popularity, the more refined social classes gradually divorced themselves almost entirely from the theatre and nothing but the French opera or some famous actor could intrigue them to attend performances.

Since there was great demand for drama among the working classes, and the legitimate theatres were no longer enough to entertain the ever-increasing numbers, illegitimate theatres sprang into existence. Theatre managers of illegitimate playhouses had a nose for business and took advantage of the great demand by staging low quality performances. In order to escape censorship, plays had to be interspersed with dancing acts, musical performances, visual appeal, and pantomime to escape bowdlerization and to survive until they were legalized by the Theatre Regulation Act in 1843. That year the Patent Act was dropped, but the Lord Chamberlain's authority of censorship remained until 1968. The poorer sector of London's population attended the so called penny-theatres of which over eighty existed in London in the 1830s<sup>(30)</sup>. Those who were anxious to support and preserve good quality drama, placed much hope in James Sheridan Knowles. Stephens concedes that "[s]ince William Hazlitt had heaped praise on him in *The Spirit of the Age* in 1825, Knowles was universally seen as the upholder of all that was strongest and most valuable in the tradition"<sup>(31)</sup>. He, nevertheless, became victim of financial policies which gave much control to managers.

Such policies were another cause for the decline of the drama during Victorian times. Knowles believed in serious drama and would not lend his genius to commercialization. He refused to feed the illegitimate playhouses with cheap plays at low pay. In view of the fact that melodrama, spectacle, and opera were more profitable on the whole than legitimate drama, profits for playwrights like Knowles became extremely limited. Fischler explains the situation by comparing the nineteenth-century to the previous: In the eighteenth century authors had been compensated through the "benefit" system whereby they received a portion of the box-office receipts for the third, sixth, and ninth nights on which their plays were performed"<sup>(32)</sup>. This indicates that authors received respectable income from their writings; some must have even prospered. By the turn of the nineteenth century this system had given way to other practices. Managers started buying plays in addition to their copyright. They benefited

greatly from the duration of some successful plays which would sometimes last for more than sixty nights. Playwrights, however, often did not receive their dues after performances as was the case with Knowles's *William Tell*. This was mainly due to the financial crisis which plagued England and the English theatres until the 1840s. On the one hand, the country was in a financial crisis as a result of the Napoleonic wars. On the other, theatres had unexpected hardships to endure. Covent Garden was destroyed by a fire in 1808 and reopened in 1809 after it was rebuilt at great expense. Drury Lane also burned in 1809 and did not reopen until 1812. Philip Kemble, then manager of Drury Lane, attempted to recover costs by raising entrance fees. His actions resulted in the "Old Price" riots that continued until Kemble capitulated. Most theatres suffered from bankruptcy between 1817-1843. Brockett documents the financial losses theatres suffered from 1812-1835:

The rapid decrease in income can be seen at Drury Lane, where receipts diminished from £ 80,000 in 1812-1813 to £ 43,000 in 1817-1818. Nevertheless, the owners of theatres were slow to lower their rental charges. At Drury Lane between 1819 and 1827, Robert Elliston paid £ 10,000 annually for his lease, and it was only in 1832, after Elliston and several of his successors had failed, that the rent was lowered [sic] to £ 6,000. Pressure on the managers was reduced somewhat by a decline in other expenses. At Covent Garden, nightly expenses fell from £ 300 in 1809 to £ 154 in 1836<sup>(33)</sup>.

These theatrical conditions had a direct effect on the income of playwrights. In 1831, for example, Covent Garden's finances were so bad that the management paid the salaries of performers but did not pay the authors<sup>(34)</sup>. Managers' and author-managers' profits plummeted so managers started investing their capital in scenery and star actors instead of investing in good writing hoping to fill their playhouses with interested audiences. Authors were left to complain about their meager income. Douglas Jarrold made only a total of £ 60 for *Black-Ey'd Susan* (1829) despite its popularity. The play ran for four hundred nights during the first year of its production. He complained bitterly: "I received altogether as much as Mr. T. P. Cooke ... received for six nights' acting" as star actor<sup>(35)</sup>.

Knowles was aware of the financial difficulties of the major playhouses. According to George Bartley, stage manager at Covent Garden, Knowles sent the unfinished manuscript of *The Hunchback* (1832) to both patent theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, in an attempt to raise the price by competition: "He is said to have asked £ 500 for the play; but what he actually received was £ 400"<sup>(36)</sup>. The play was staged on April 5, 1832 at Covent Garden Theatre. In a

letter to Charles Kemble, manager of Covent Garden from 1817-1832, on June 19, 1832, Knowles expresses his unhappiness with the pay (£10 per week) and laments what he calls "the disastrous state of the theatre ... that no new play, however, meritorious, could produce an improvement of that state"<sup>(37)</sup>. Knowles, at the time, had ten children to provide for in addition to his wife and a retired actress he had taken into their house. In the same year, Knowles presented a petition to the Parliament seeking greater protection for authors' rights through a copyright bill. This enterprise failed.

Nevertheless, Knowles continued with his writing in the hope of gaining acceptance and fame, but without much success. Upon his return to Ireland in April 1834, he dreamed of theatrical success in his birthplace that he failed to achieve elsewhere. Unfortunately, it resulted in deep disappointment. After the playwright's return to England, R. Shelton Mackenzie, a friend of his, asked him about his success in Ireland expecting that Knowles surely must have had success in his birthplace Cork. Knowles's pain and his sadness at his failure are evident in his response:

"What success? That which an Irishman meets with on his own ungrateful soil. Sir, in Cork, my birthplace, in what they miscall the Athens of Ireland, my benefit amounted to ninety pounds, two pounds less than a fortnight before they had given to a black man ... the 'African Roscius'. My plays are too liberal for the aristocratic illiberals of Ireland"<sup>(38)</sup>.

The commercial success Knowles sought was not only hindered by the audiences, the licensing act, and the financial condition of theatres, but was also directly linked to copyrights. Copyright came to mean the right of printing, publishing, and selling. Even though the right was given to authors, its practice was entirely in the hands of booksellers and authors were left with no control over the matter. The copyright act of 1814 set the term at twenty-eight years or the author's life if he was still alive at the end of the set term. In 1833, a new copyright act was issued which made playwrights not only helpless victims in the hands of booksellers, but also in the hands of managers. The new copyright "protected only those plays that remained in manuscript: once published, they were fair game for any manager"<sup>(39)</sup>. Theoretically, the act seemed to protect the playwrights, but put into practice it limited their income. Published editions would not throw off much for authors and booksellers had complete control over the material. Additionally, after plays were published they could be performed without the permission of authors and theatres would not pay any royalties to playwrights. As a result, playwrights were forced to turn out plays in great

numbers at the expense of originality and quality and live off the small fees paid for the selling of the copyrights of plays.

Since professional playwrights would have had to starve producing authentic, interesting, and high quality drama, authors plagiarized French and German drama. Knowles himself relied on historical figures and legends as sources for his plays. Novelty or authenticity was rare, if not totally absent. Fitzball acknowledges that in 1859 British drama was "nearly almost all composed of translations"<sup>(40)</sup>. French plays were the favorite target of translators since French drama avoided "violence of action and of speech" and any "breaches of decorum"<sup>(41)</sup> which was much in line with the Licensing Act in England. Translating from a variety of foreign sources without any interference by a copyright law became the preferable way to produce commercial drama for quick money.

The marketplace pressures at the time did not invite Knowles to continue in his struggle to attract and entertain audiences who were not interested in traditional plays of the old school. A quick look at the profits clarifies the matter. James Sheridan Knowles, who was the most celebrated artist of the 1820s and 1830s, earned only the sum of £ 4600 from writing for the stage<sup>(42)</sup>. Richard Knowles concedes that his father earned less than £ 100 annually in the twelve years between 1820 and 1832 and ca. £ 300 a year in the eleven years between 1832 and 1843<sup>(43)</sup>. By that time, the heyday of Victorian theatre had ended. Evangelical preaching increased and emphasized the sinfulness of art<sup>(44)</sup>. Drama would now face a new obstacle: religion. In 1843, Knowles published his last play, *The Rose of Aragon*. The same year he started preaching. Approaching his sixtieth birthday, Knowles must have decided that laboring further in the theatrical profession in an attempt to restore drama to its past dignity was futile. His plays would also no longer bring him enough income to cover his living expenses.

Becoming a Baptist preacher was not as much a spiritual calling for Knowles as it was a professional decision. Even though his son Richard claims that this unexpected change of profession was "rather a development of what he was already than the substitution of something new"<sup>(45)</sup>, the real reasons for his becoming a Baptist preacher were his commercial failure and the age factor. He never distinguished himself as an actor and his income as playwright had been unsatisfactory. As an ordained Baptist minister, Knowles would at least not have to starve since the church has always been a wealthy institution. The annual income of the church of England during the second half of Queen Victoria's reign approximated £ 5, 000, 000. The bishop of London earned no less than £ 10, 000, while the average income of other bishops was between £ 4, 000 and £

5, 000<sup>(46)</sup>. An agricultural laborer made £ 20 annually whereas a young pastor earned five to ten times as much. In Victorian England, the church imposed a tax on its people, called the tithe. Until 1840, this mandatory payment was paid to the clergy in form of goods; after 1840 it was paid with money. According to Pool, "for a farmer, the tithe was one tenth of the value of a year's harvest"<sup>(47)</sup>. Knowles's average yearly income from his plays was around £200; a meager income for his popular work; as Baptist minister, he would certainly not receive less than that<sup>(48)</sup>.

The ministry would not only protect Knowles from starving during his old age, but would also be the proper outlet for his lecturing skills. Simultaneously, he would be able to enjoy the admiration of large audiences, though as preacher rather than actor or playwright. He would also not forsake writing completely. During his ministry, Knowles produced *The Rock of Rome: Or, The Arch Heresy*, 1849, *The Idol Demolished by Its Own Priest*, 1851, and *The Gospel Attributed to Matthew* in 1855. At the age of 64, in 1848, he was able to secure for himself a pension of £ 200 for his long years of civil service as dramatist<sup>(49)</sup>. The citizens of Glasgow and Leeds, some clergymen, magistrates and professors had petitioned to the minister on his behalf. Knowles, it was believed, should live comfortably in his old age.

Knowles's good reputation he had achieved from a lifetime of dedication to the English stage and from his endless struggles to restore drama its dignity did not bring him the long yearned for prosperity. Knowles was a playwright with great potential, but, unfortunately, one who had to witness helplessly how legitimate drama performed at patent theatres became undesirable. It wasn't until the 1860s that the situation for playwrights and lovers of drama took a positive turn. By then, Knowles had already stopped being productive as playwright. Had Knowles been born during the first half of the eighteenth century or the second half of the nineteenth century when audiences were more appreciative of serious drama, Knowles's career as dramatist would have surely been more commercially successful. He would have encountered a more profitable marketplace and an audience more seriously interested in good quality drama. Thus, his retirement from the stage was not because of his conversion to a strict form of evangelism which considered art sinful, but was primarily the result of a relentless nineteenth-century marketplace. Knowles's attempts at reviving quality drama were out of season with the theatrical spirit of the time. Had he been born earlier or later, he would have been more successful in his endeavors.

## مولود في غير أوانة؟

### جيمس شريدان نولز وعالم السوق الأدبية في القرن التاسع عشر

سوزان رمضان ومحمود الشرعه، قسم اللغة الانجليزية، جامعة اليرموك، إربد، الأردن.

#### ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة الكاتب المسرحي جيمس شريدان نولز (1784-1862)، الذي ذاع صيته بين ادباء عصره في بريطانيا خلال القرن التاسع عشر. وقد أعتقد ان نولز قد توقف عن الإنتاج الدرامي في سنوات حياته الاخيرة، بسبب انتقاله للكنيسة المعمدانية التي ترفض الفن والأدب كلياً.

وجاءت هذه الدراسة، لتبين الأسباب الحقيقية التي كانت وراء تخلي نولز عن كتابة المسرح، وتتمثل باربعة اسباب رئيسة؛ منها المراقبة الحكومية وقانون الترخيص الدرامي الصارم. وفندت الدراسة الاعتقاد السائد الذي كان يؤكد على أن إيمانه الجديد كان وراء تخليه عن المسرح.

\* The paper was received on Sep. 17, 2008 and accepted for publication on April 30, 2009.

#### Endnotes

- (1) See for example *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *The Shorter New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, *The Dictionary of National Biography*, *Who is Who in America?*
- (2) Michael McCully, "James Sheridan Knowles" *Critical Survey of Drama* (Salem: Salem Press, 2003), pp.1870-1875.
- (3) Knowles wrote a popular ballad, *The Welsh Harper* in 1796 and *Fugitive Pieces* in 1810.
- (4) A verse tragedy in five acts. Gaius Gracchus was a Roman politician of the 2nd century B.C. The political agenda he pursued finally ended in his untimely death. See *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* by Plutarch.
- (5) A tragedy in five acts. Virginius is a Roman knight who has a daughter named Virginia. One day a judge named Appius sees her and is impressed by her beauty. He decides to have her by deceit. When Virginius realizes that he must give up his daughter to live in lechery with the judge, he kills her.
- (6) Leslie Howard Meeks, *Sheridan Knowles and the Theatre of His Time* (Bloomington: The Principia Press, 1933), p. 34.

- (7) A play in five acts based on the Swiss myth of William Tell. The national hero Tell is remembered for killing Hermann Gessler and freeing the Swiss cantons of his tyranny.
- (8) A comedy in five acts which was later revised as *The Beggar of Bethnal Green* in 1834 in three acts. It is based on a medieval legend of the son of the Earl of Leicester who, fearing that his rank and title might be discovered, disguised himself as a beggar and lived at Bethnal Green. See Dominic Head ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- (9) McCully, p. 1872.
- (10) Matthew Brander, *The Development of the Drama* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 312.
- (11) John Warrack, *Carl Maria von Weber: Writings on Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 202.
- (12) Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theater* (Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), p. 352.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p. 352.
- (14) Lynn M. Voskuil, "Feeling Public: Sensation Theater, Commodity Culture, and the Victorian Public Sphere" *Victorian Studies* 44,2 (2002): 245-274.
- (15) David Mayer, "Encountering Melodrama" *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, Kerry Powell ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 158.
- (16) Richard Findlater, *The Unholy Trade* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1952), p. 18.
- (17) Leo Hughes, *The Drama's Patrons* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 10-14.
- (18) Thomas Wright, *Some Habits and Customs of Working Classes by a Journeyman Engineer: 1867* (New York: August M. Kelley, 1967), p. 178.
- (19) Richard B. Knowles, *The Life of James Sheridan Knowles* (London: Chiswick Press, 1872), pp. 72-73.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 73
- (21) *Ibid.*, p. 74
- (22) Peter Thomson, *The Cambridge Introduction to English Theatre 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 212.
- (23) Meeks, p. 35.
- (24) Brockett, p. 246.
- (25) Richard B. Knowles, p. 70.
- (26) *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- (27) Vincent J. Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).



- (28) David Mayer, "Encountering Melodrama" *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, Kerry Powell ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 157.
- (29) Brockett, p. 352.
- (30) *Ibid.*, p. 361.
- (31) John Russel Stephens, *The Profession of the Playwright: British Theatre 1800-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 44.
- (32) Alan Fischler, "Guano and Poetry: Payment for Playwriting in Victorian England" *Modern Language Quarterly* 62,1 (2001): 44.
- (33) Brockett, p. 356.
- (34) Stephens, p. 40.
- (35) Fischler, p. 45.
- (36) Stephens, p. 44.
- (37) Meeks, p. 41.
- (38) R. Shelton Mackenzie, *"Memoir of James Sheridan Knowles" Selected Dramatic Works of James Sheridan Knowles* (Baltimore: Edward J. Coale, 1835), p. vii.
- (39) Fischler, p. 46.
- (40) Allardyce Nicoll. *A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), p. 76.
- (41) Matthew Brander. *The Development of the Drama* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 264.
- (42) Michael R. Booth. *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 143.
- (43) Richard B. Knowles, pp. 99-100.
- (44) Strict Evangelicals frowned on creative imagination and considered any product of such as wicked. It was feared that the enjoyment of art would lead to the neglect of prayer and worship. The only exception to this rule was religious writing. See D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Sanford: Sanford University Press, 1992); A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1956), pp. 119-39, 153-59, 163-65, 185-88, 202-11, 153-47.
- (45) Richard B. Knowles, p. 141.
- (46) Helen Merrell Lynd, *England in the Eighteen-eighties* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 1984), p. 310.
- (47) Daniel Pool. *What Jane Austin Ate and Charles Dickens Knew* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 88.
- (48) No known source on Knowles documents his income as minister.
- (49) Richard B. Knowles, p. 134.

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