

Mr. Wopsle and Pip

Takao Saijo

Great Expectations is a multi-plot novel in which Pip and Mr. Wopsle, among other characters, weave their several plots under the common theme of expectations well lost. While Pip's way to becoming a gentleman is frequently discussed, not much attention is paid to the theatre-stricken clerk at church.

When Mr. Wopsle is first introduced in the novel, he is delineated as a brazen and supercilious person: "it was understood among his acquaintance that if you could only give him his head, he would read the clergyman into fits; he himself confessed that if the Church was 'thrown open', meaning to competition, he would not despair of making his mark in it...and when he gave out the psalm—always giving the whole verse—he looked all round the congregation first, as much as to say, 'You have heard our friend overhead; oblige me with your opinion of this style!'" (Ch. 4)

What is remarkable about him is a deep-seated resentment against society, and it is ready to flare out at any moment. He criticizes his fellow clergyman's preaching, hinting that he could give a better sermon than the incumbent. A rise in rank being denied him, he often expresses his resentment, in a way peculiar to him, in theatrical elocutions or performances. Antonio's funeral speech, for example, is delivered skilfully by him to the day scholars at his aunt's school, but it is always followed by lines of "revenge" taken from Collins's "Passions." His deliberate choice of "revenge" out of many "passions" and his fearful impersonation of Fury in delivering those lines show the extent to which he is dissatisfied within the closed society where, as he believes, his talent is buried and not recognized.

Soon after arriving in London, Pip receives a visit from Joe Gargery, who tells him that Mr. Wopsle has quit his clerkship and entered the world of theatre; that he will soon come up to London to perform plays. According to a playbill Joe shows to Pip, Mr. Wopsle is introduced as a renowned amateur actor named "Roscius." But when Pip is informed how his performance has been and how the audience has responded, it is difficult for him to take the former clerk as a celebrated actor; he may be performing in a minor theatre, not in a legitimate one. At any rate, Pip visits a playhouse whose façade is illustrated "architectooralooral" (Ch. 27) on a red playbill, and watches *Hamlet*, played by Waldengarver *alias* Mr. Wopsle. He finds to his disappointment that the celebrated Roscius plays *Hamlet* on a poorly-set stage, with miserable actors to play with, in rented costume and to a vulgar audience. At best he may have paid to play it.

As Dickens usually has a particular model in mind for writing his fiction, it is naturally surmised that an actor named "Roscius" may have existed in those days. The name "Roscius" immediately reminds us of William Henry Betty (1791-1874), who was so famous to be called "Infant Garrick," "Infant Roscius," or "young Roscius."¹ As provincial actor he played *Hamlet* at Covent Garden Theatre during the season of 1803-4, with

Richard Swett (1758-1805) and Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837) as grave diggers. More impressively, the Prime Minister Pitt adjourned Parliament in March 1805, and went with his ministers to see him play *Hamlet*.

This Betty is, to all appearance, too spectacular to be the model of Mr. Wopsle, who at his peak, is still a struggling actor. Just when a search for his original seems nearly at a deadlock, it turns out that Betty has a son named Henry Thomas Betty (1819-1897). Betty junior was printed on a playbill as the “English Roscius” when he played *Pizaro* at Richmond in 1839. And Dickens himself once added his name to the list of patrons subscribing for seats.² Betty spent a long time touring in the countryside, but he longed to score a success some day in London. The opportunity came in 1844 when he was invited to play *Hamlet* at Covent Garden Theatre. The delighted Betty, however, was doomed to be haunted by misfortune: the other characters he played with were too poor for him to achieve success. He went back to the countryside again, and without much success retired from theatrical life. He was at his peak in 1844, and then in a decline, never to rise again.

V. C. Clinton-Baddeley guesses the date of Mr. Wopsle’s acting, in Chapter 31, of *Hamlet* by carefully examining the mourning hat, the dusting of fingers on a kerchief, the red playbill, and the tradition of the disordered stocking, and gives 1844 for it.³ The coincidence is welcome, as Mr. Wopsle’s theatrical life reaches its apex at the time when he plays *Hamlet* in London, and then afterwards he is in a rapid decline. The next time when we see Mr. Wopsle on the stage, he is no longer a leading character in a legitimate drama, but is given over to a variety of roles, in nautical drama and pantomime.

Mr. Wopsle’s acting of *Hamlet* takes place in the nineteenth of the total 36 weekly installments—just halfway through the novel. He is performing in London, and looks satisfied with his theatrical life. But Pip commiserates with him for his poor reception and thinks of inviting him to his house to cheer him up. Ironically enough, Pip does not think that the same fate will soon befall him, and thwart his great expectations. Before long he realizes who his benefactor is, and his dream of becoming a gentleman is utterly shattered. In this way, the Wopsle scene prepares what will happen to Pip, and thus contributes to the central scheme of the novel.

Pip is so obsessed with the idea of becoming a gentleman for the purpose of possessing Estella, that he is blinded to truth, becomes ungrateful to kind people, and finally loses every foothold in life. From the very beginning of the novel he is haunted by the shadows of crime. Even when he first comes up to London, black shadows of Newgate block his prospect. It may be that his dream of becoming a gentleman is treated by the author as a kind of crime. After so many disappointments, he realizes what a fraudulent life he has lived, and parting with vanities, goes back to his birthplace, where he begins life anew.

Mr. Wopsle, after having heard of Pip’s success story, perceives that he, too, may succeed in life, and quits his job at church. But every time the word “expectations”

appears in the novel, totally different scenes rise up to thwart the expectations. Mr. Wopsle meets with a similar fate. Up to a certain point he has progressed successfully, it is true, but he has to make do by playing a variety of roles in minor theatres. Expectations or dreams are so very ephemeral; they are almost one with disappointments or disillusionments. The last few words of the novel are taken from *Paradise Lost*: those awakened to real knowledge after having committed a sin, are stepping out into the wilderness. We human beings, once having stepped out of paradise, come to realize what a loss we have experienced and have to accept a more sombre way of life. It is not until they are made sport of by dreams and expectations, that Pip and Mr. Wopsle realize the true meaning of life and set their firm foothold upon the actuality of life.

Notes:

1. John Doran, *Their Majesties' Servants* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1865), pp.387-392; Cecil F. Armstrong, *A Century of Great Actors 1750-1850* (London: Mills and Boon, 1912), pp.316-326.
2. Malcolm Morley, "Dickens Goes to the Theatre," *Dickensian*, 59 (1963): 168-9.
3. V. C. Clinton-Baddeley, "Wopsle," *Dickensian*, 57 (1961):150-159.

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