

THE SCHOOL
OF REFORM:
A CONVICT AT
COVENT GARDEN



The School of Reform: a convict at Covent Garden.

First performed: Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, 15 January 1805.

First published: Thomas Morton, *The School of Reform* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, 1805). 16mo. 90 pp. (last blank).

MR. EMERY AS TYKE

in the School of Reform

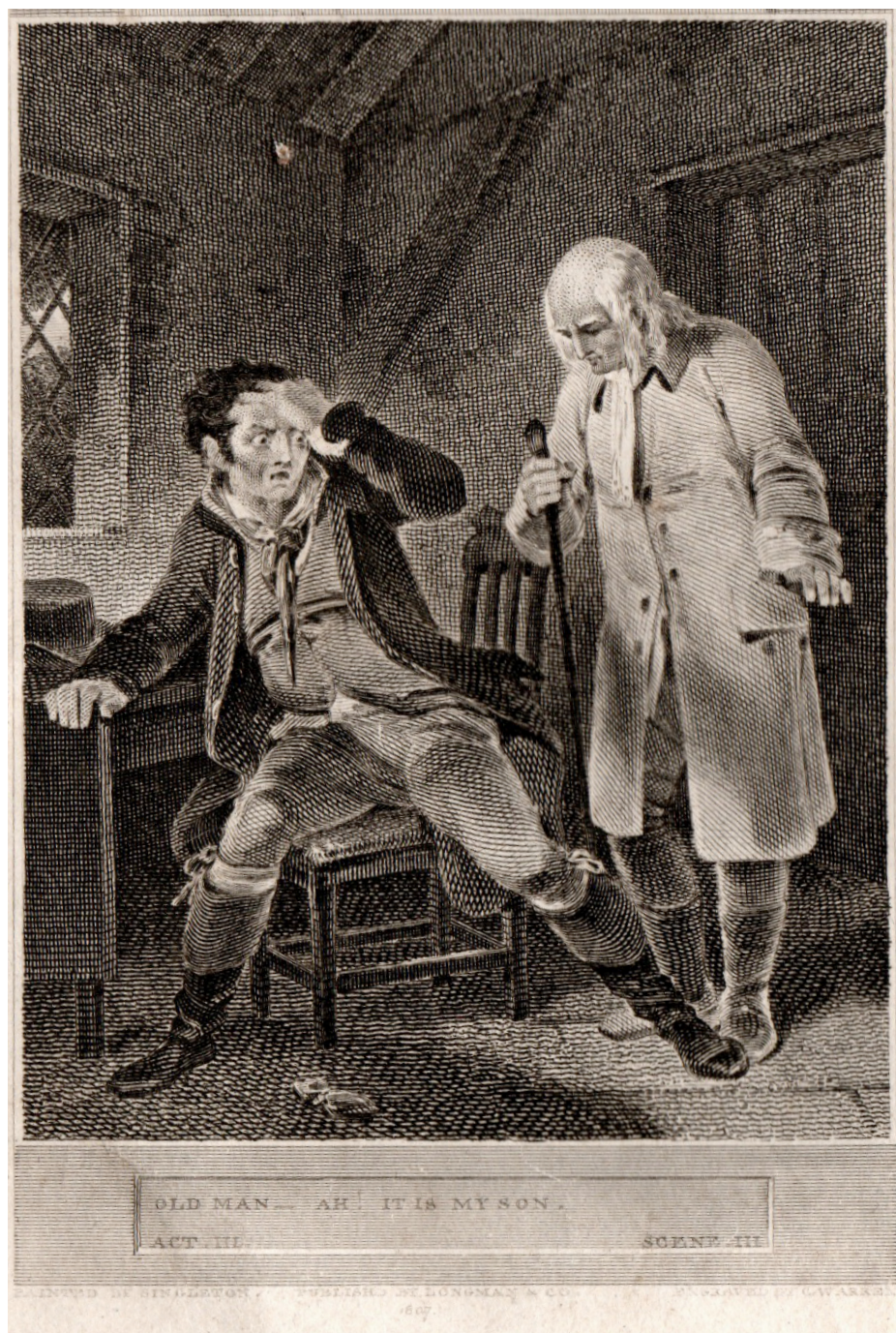


Fig. 2. Frontispiece to the Inchbald edition of Morton's play: the moment of recognition. Engraved by C. Warren, after Singleton, 1807. Private collection.

On 15 January 1805, a new play called *The School of Reform* debuted at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. The play was written by Thomas Morton (1764—1838), one of the best-known playwrights of the age, but in 1805 coming off a bit of a lean spell. Much to Morton's delight, the play had a triumphant opening, running for the following ten nights and being regularly reprised for years. Most contemporary critics felt compelled to comment on the rather "failed" arrangement – the blatantly unconvincing plot – but there was wide praise for the exciting set-pieces and, particularly, for the star turn by the famous actor John Emery as 'Tyke,' an old lag newly returned from a 14-year stint in Botany Bay.

Although the rowdy Royal Circus, south of Blackfriars Bridge, had earlier had some success with both a little-known "opera" (1787) and then an "entr'acte dance" (1789) depicting Botany Bay, Morton's play seems to have been the first major success of the formal London stage to have featured a convict who had been transported to New South Wales. More remarkably, Tyke was not merely a walk-on but rather a major character who was widely accepted to be the emotional centre of the entire show, by turns witty, sardonic and tragic, and whose droll dialogue included several passages which made knowing jokes playing on words like trial, voyage and transports, all of which were greatly admired.

The play has one of those plots which are almost impossible to summarise succinctly: the contemporary reviewer, Thomas Holcroft, frankly struggled to keep a handle on it all, despairing at making sense of the chaotic series of coincidences on which it hinges, but nonetheless commenting that the whole improbable farce "produced continual and strong effects on the passions, and was justly received with enthusiastic applause."

In short, it is a classic comedy of misapprehension featuring long-lost wives and children, in which Tyke plays the one-time tenant of my Lord Avondale, having been paid a large sum of money by the (mostly) disreputable peer to take charge of an (unacknowledged) son after the (apparent) death of his wife. Tyke promptly spends the lot on a racehorse, takes enormous losses and turns to card sharpening only to find himself being tried at the "sizes." He had felt that the trial was going nicely in his favour, one of his sallies being greatly appreciated, but was condemned to death, reprieved to fourteen years at Botany Bay.

Given the rollicking plot features orphans grown to maturity and fourteen years in exile, Morton must have been aware of the fact that he was on a tight timeline to make the offstage events fit for a January 1805 premiere – that is, Tyke is implied to have been one of the earliest transportees, likely a

First, or at a squeeze, Second Fleeter, to have had time to go on his spree, be condemned, serve his fourteen year stint and be safely back in England.

The role of Tyke was played by John Emery (1777—1822). Remarkably, the character is not written as merely a comic foil, but anchors the whole farce with moments of heartfelt pain and anguish, not least his recollection of leaving the orphan child and his own father at the docks as they prepared to sail to Botany Bay. As the signal gun fired, he recalls, “I felt a kind of dizziness; my eyes flashed fire, the blood gushed out of my mouth – I saw no more.” Little wonder that Emery is said to have “astonished the town by a display of feeling and passion, nearly approaching to the most thrilling tragedy... His archness, his villainy, his presumption, his agony, and his repentance, were all finely given.” (Highfill).

Such was the enthusiasm for Emery’s part that his affecting performance was frequently figured in contemporary prints, none better than one in the little illustrated edition of the play printed by Longman’s for Mrs. Inchbald’s *British Theatre* (fig. 2) – this little scene, far less-finished than the grand mezzotint by Charles Turner (fig. 1), captures the incredible moment at which Tyke is reunited with his aged father.

The popularity of the play means that there can be little doubt that Emery’s performance became a baseline for convicts depicted on the British stage. In particular, there can be no question that Tyke’s knowing flash language was the delight of contemporary audiences, as is superbly figured in a dialogue in which he is politely quizzed about his grand tour abroad. In a long series of double entendres, Tyke ironically alludes to his conviction with jokes about not caring to “swing” and his hands being “tied.” Innocently asked whether he had attended a third character’s last speech he replies “No; I don’t myself much fancy last speeches.”

The scene concludes with a quick interplay about his travels:

Mr. F. Oh, I know it in a moment – ill health?

Tyke. Why, I certainly should have died if I had stayed.

Mr. F. Indeed! Oh my dear sir, in this world we must all have our trials, and you have had yours.

Tyke. I have.

Mr. F. Suffer much confinement?

Tyke. A good deal.

Mr. F. You of course were properly attended; had good judges of your case?

Tyke. They were reckoned so; I did not much fancy them myself.

Mr. F. And they said a voyage would save you?

Tyke. To a certainty.

Mr. F. You must have been transported at the news.

Tyke. I was.

Mr. F. Has it cured you? (*Offering a pinch of snuff*).

Tyke. I don’t know, I think I feel some of the old symptoms...

And so on, as the old convict neatly pockets the offered snuff box, albeit with one small jerk of anxiety when he misunderstands the phrase “I apprehend you.” The characterisation is so memorable that it is hard not to wonder if Tyke – funny, violent, self-assured – might not be a distant ancestor of Dickens’s Magwitch in *Great Expectations*, the greatest returned convict part in Victorian literature. Dickens certainly knew and loved Morton’s work, particularly his *A Cure for the Heartache* (1797) and, if nothing else, did make a knowing joke about the play in a speech he gave at the Theatre Royal in 1855 attacking Lord Palmerston.

April 2024

References: Davis, ‘Dickens and the Evolution of Caricature’ (1940); Dickens, *Speech of Charles Dickens, Esq. ... Administrative Reform Association* (1855); Freeman, ‘On the Art of Dramatic Probability: Elizabeth Inchbald’s Remarks for The British Theatre’ (2021); Highfill, Burnim & Langans (eds), *A biographical dictionary of actors, actresses, musicians, dancers, managers & other stage personnel in London, 1660—1800*, vol. V; Holcombe, *The Theatrical Recorder* (1805), vol. I:2, pp. 127—133; Morton, *The School of Reform* (1805); ODNB.

Even in its first (unillustrated) edition of 1805 the work is not particularly uncommon; nor is its second issue, newly adorned with an engraved frontispiece of Tyke, by Warren after Singleton, as part of Mrs. Inchbald’s famous illustrated series of the *British Theatre* (vol. XXV). The series was published by Longman’s starting in 1806, originally separately at the rate of about one per week and then, once the full edition of 125 separate plays were published, as a 25-volume set. The press-work was, Inchbald recalled, arduous and unrelenting (Freeman). Undated on the title-page, the engraved frontispiece for the *School of Reform* (fig. 2) is dated 1807.



SYDNEY | LANTERNE ROUGE PRESS | 2024

Occasional Essay, no. 3

© Matthew Fishburn & Lanterne Rouge Press