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LA BATAILLE D'HERNANI

by
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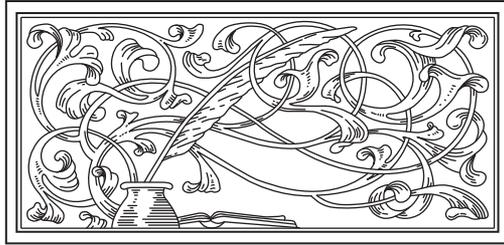
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The Battle of Hernani was one of the most famous events of nineteenth-century France. It was not a forgotten action from the Napoleonic Wars. It was not a skirmish in the Crimean War, either before or after the Charge of the Light Brigade. Nor was it a hostile naval encounter involving the Tonkin Expeditionary Force sent out in 1881 to Indochina—Cochinchine as the French then called it—today's Vietnam. It does not designate any ouadi or bled in Algeria or Morocco where the French Foreign Legion fought and established the French colonial empire in Africa.

No. Although hotly contested by both sides, this battle had no casualties. Nonetheless, it was the most important literary event of its time. Thanks to it, 1830 marks the moment when the Romantic movement triumphed over classicism, and the *Bataille d'Hernani* entered the literary annals as the premier theatrical happening of the century.

My purpose tonight is to describe what was at stake in this battle and to give a small idea of the raucous performances the play inspired.



The author of *Hernani*, Victor Hugo (1801–85), was the most famous novelist, poet, playwright, pamphleteer, dissident, and opposition politician

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of his time. He was a “public intellectual” long before that term was coined. By age twenty-eight he was already a successful poet. In addition, he had published two novels and written several plays.

Hugo’s play dominates the French Romantic stage. While no literary masterpiece (*pace* all you Hugo fans), *Hernani* did force the collision of two radically different mind-sets, two theatrical styles that were diametrically opposed to each other. In the words of one participant, Théophile Gautier, “deux systèmes, deux armées, deux civilisations même étaient en présence, se haissant cordialement” (two systems, two armies, even two civilizations met face-to-face, each one cordially detesting the other). (Gautier)

Parisian artistic circles had been thrilled starting in April 1827 by an extended visit of English actors performing Shakespeare. One of the most famous creative inspirations of this cross-cultural experience was Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830). Berlioz was mesmerized by the Irish actress Harriet Smithson playing Juliet and Ophelia. She was his muse for that symphony, which shocked Parisian audiences and revolutionized French nineteenth-century music.

Shakespeare’s impact on Hugo and French theater was equally significant. His plays were a revelation. They upset and scandalized Parisian audiences who had grown up on the classical productions of Corneille and Racine from the seventeenth century. Shakespeare’s mix of comedy and tragedy, of high and low, of the bawdy and the sublime was the antithesis of the French classical esthetic based on decorum, grave demeanor, stylized speech, and minimal movement. The young cheered while conservatives groaned. Victor Hugo found in Shakespeare an inspiration and a model for what he wanted to do on the French stage.

There was another, indigenous example for Hugo to exploit. By 1830 France was prosperous and at peace. The excesses of the revolution had ended. Napoleon’s wars, which had taken place on foreign soil and thus had not overly impacted the average Frenchman’s daily life, were also

over. The nation was experiencing domestic stability and a well-deserved breather. Simultaneously, French theater was undergoing a much-needed revival. Starting around 1800, a number of popular theaters began to spring up along the “boulevards” that delineated the Paris city limits. They produced sentimental, unsophisticated melodramas that appealed to lower-class tastes and pocketbooks. Grouped together in the same neighborhood, these theaters became known by metonymy as the “rue du crime” (crime street) because of the sensational topics they presented. They rejected the classical seventeenth-century ideal which dealt only with royalty or mythological personages. They preferred ordinary, contemporary characters and exciting if not entirely logical plots. Perhaps to conceal the paucity of their subject matter, they also developed elaborate stage sets, historically accurate costumes, and impressive special effects, none of which belonged in classical theater. Their audience was low-brow and low class, not at all the elite and upwardly mobile bourgeoisie that attended the *Comédie Française*, whose expensive seats the “popular audiences” could not afford. *Hernani* embraced the new esthetic of pop culture and then thrust it into the high-brow, official state theater.



Before continuing, let me summarize the play’s action. It takes place in 1519 in Spain. Hugo chose a relatively modern subject and placed it in a real historical setting, not in some mythological framework. He provides precise indications of the stage sets, especially for the fourth act. There, he describes in detail a monumental staircase that leads down into a dark crypt that holds a tomb inscribed KAROLVS MAGNVS. Hugo pushes his historical accuracy even to the point of specifying the Latin V for the usual U. He also demanded historically accurate costumes. Critics complained that he was bankrupting the theater since every actor had a different and elaborate costume for each act. Classical theater paid no mind to the need for set décor or costuming.

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Hugo subtitled act I “The King.” This is another innovation. Subtitles for individual acts were never used since they did not exist in performance, only in the later printed edition. The scene is in the bedchamber of Dona Sol in her uncle’s castle in Saragossa. The king of Spain, Don Carlos, enters stealthily and in disguise. He intends to seduce Dona Sol. But only her maid is there. When he hears Dona Sol approaching, Don Carlos hides in an *armoire*, variously translated as wardrobe or cupboard. Carlos himself calls it a broom closet. Dona Sol is expecting Hernani, whom she loves. He (Hernani) enters. Now Don Carlos exits the closet to confront his rival. Unexpectedly, Dona Sol’s guardian and uncle, Don Ruy Gomez de Silva, returns. He is planning to marry his niece, Dona Sol, and is quite angry when he finds two men in her bedroom. The king explains that the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire has just died, and that he was coming to inform Gomez of that fact.

Act II, subtitled “The Bandit,” takes place outside the castle, under Dona Sol’s window. Don Carlos is planning to abduct her. Hernani’s unexpected arrival thwarts those plans, however. The two men argue and are on the point of crossing swords when Hernani explains that he is a criminal. The night watch is heard approaching. The king flees with Hernani’s help. Dona Sol begs to elope with him, but he refuses, saying he can only offer her the fugitive life of a bandit, not the leisured life of an aristocrat that she deserves.

Act III, “The Old Man.” A strange pilgrim appears at another of Ruy Gomez’s castles, this one set in remote mountains, and asks for hospitality. Shortly thereafter the king arrives (does anybody notice a pattern here?), saying that he has tracked the bandit Hernani to the castle. He demands that Gomez surrender him. Gomez refuses. He had freely offered hospitality to the stranger he did not recognize and feels himself honor-bound to keep his word. Carlos is furious but Gomez remains adamant. He launches into a long, long monologue as he walks in front of a portrait gallery of his illustrious ancestors who never bowed to any authority. His

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family honor requires that he disobey the king and respect his personal code of duty. The king searches the castle unsuccessfully and leaves angry and frustrated. Hernani enters from behind the portrait where he was hiding. Gomez now recognizes him as his rival for Dona Sol's love, but still keeps his word to protect him. To thank Gomez for saving his life, Hernani gives him a horn. Whenever Gomez blows it, Hernani will be honor-bound to accept death at his hands.

Act IV, "The Tomb," takes place in Charlemagne's tomb in Aix-la-Chapelle. The council of various heads of state is meeting outside to elect the new emperor (slight correction here: the real election took place in Frankfort). Standing in front of Charlemagne's sarcophagus, Don Carlos contemplates what moral lessons Charlemagne might inspire in him. He delivers a long, long monologue about a king's duty. He hides in the shadows when thirteen masked conspirators enter. They plan to assassinate the new emperor. They draw straws to see who will wield the fatal sword. Hernani wins and enthusiastically accepts his mission. Gomez un.masks himself and demands that he be allowed to kill the emperor instead. Bells tolling outside announce that Carlos has been elected. Now Emperor Charles V (Charles Quint) of the Holy Roman Empire, Carlos steps out of the shadows and confronts the traitors. His soldiers appear immediately and are ready to arrest the thirteen before they can act. Hernani explains his animus against Carlos: the king's father had executed his father unjustly. He is in fact a grand seigneur and became a bandit only to avenge his father's death. Moved by his meditations on Charlemagne, Don Carlos pardons all the conspirators. He restores Hernani to his aristocratic status and gives him the hand of Dona Sol.

Act V, "The Wedding." Hernani and Dona Sol have been married. After many amorous declarations, they are about to repair to their nuptial chamber when Hernani hears the horn. He accepts that he must die. Dona Sol cannot convince him to live, even for her. His honor, his promise to Gomez is too important. Gomez enters and gives Hernani

poison. Dona Sol snatches it from his hands and drinks it before he can; he finishes off the flask. They die in each other's arms. Gomez stabs himself and dies in a pool of his own blood. Curtain.



Hugo's play is over the top, exaggerated, and filled with incredible situations. The conservative press condemned its "vulgarity, absurdity, and incoherence" (Porter, 41). The two overlong monologues mentioned above stall the dramatic action. They were eventually cut in performance but reinstated by Hugo for the printed edition. The characters themselves are more ciphers than real people. The plotline is contrived and based on impossible coincidences. Today we can only laugh at its excesses and tax it as being high camp. In its defense, we acknowledge that it is much more important as an event, as a "happening" rather than a literary work of art.

Hugo's ambition was to create a new theatrical genre, which he called drama. He wanted to add a new element to serious classical tragedy that he called the grotesque. Hugo's grotesque introduced characters and actions that were inappropriate on a classical stage. The grotesque was meant to jar spectators out of their routine expectations. It was disruptive, aggressive, and very much "in your face." Where classicism sought gravitas and sophistication, the grotesque wanted the low, the familiar, the common. Hugo's grotesque challenged—even insulted—the theatrical status quo with its transgressive attitude and its desire to irritate established taste. It was part of the Romantic credo, readily encapsulated in the celebrated slogan "épater les bourgeois" (shock the bourgeois). For us today, bourgeois means middle class: home in the suburbs, two cars, and an annual vacation with the family. For Hugo and the Romantics, bourgeois was a term of disdain. It designated the petty, self-contented philistine who did not appreciate art. The bourgeois was smug in his ignorance, retrograde in his political opinions, and incapable of any artistic appreciation.

Hugo's grotesque was a literary concept, but it also seconded his belief that literature was political and that it went hand in hand with liberty and freedom. Hugo's grotesque could not have found a more suitable enemy to attack than the French classical theater, which adhered to a strict code of social elitism, the acceptance of political privilege, and a hierarchical, top-down literary aesthetic.

The bedrock of classical theater was the authoritarian notion that to write a good tragedy the author had to observe some mandatory "rules." Failure to do so would automatically produce a flawed play. Such arbitrary compulsions flew in the face of Hugo's idea of literature as freedom.

The most important of these rules, derived by Renaissance scholars from Aristotle's *Poetics*, were the three unities of time, place, and action. Striving to illustrate his concept of freedom, Hugo purposely broke them all.

Hernani takes place in five separate locations, and not in the single locale of seventeenth-century tragedy. It is not restricted to a single day but spreads out over several months. Its plot is not simple and unified, but diffuse and multiple. The play amalgamates an amorous intrigue complicated by bizarre rivals, a double demonstration of an idiosyncratic notion of personal honor, and an encomium of a dissolute king who evolves into a magnanimous and clement emperor. The drama's action is overpacked, overweight, and overlong. It contrasts sharply with the lean classical tragedy that focuses intensely on a single plot line.

Hugo wrote *Hernani* rapidly in 1829. In October he proposed it for performance to the *Comédie Française*. The *Comédie* was the official state theater and the most prestigious stage in Paris. It was the bastion of good taste and the protector of the great classical tradition that harkened back to the glory days of Louis XIV. Its productions duplicated as much as possible the performance practices of the previous century and ignored the innovations of the popular theaters from the "rue du crime."

Before the *Comédie Française* agreed to perform any play, the actors would have a read-through at which everyone had a vote. They were

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a repertory company and so they all appeared in all the productions. Each actor of course wanted star billing and enough climactic scenes to show off his or her talent. They all had a recognized stage persona they had developed over years of acting, which they rarely modified. Consequently, they favored plays that fit their own shtick. The read-through and the rehearsals were part of a tricky negotiation between the author, who wanted his play presented as written, and the actors, who wanted changes made in their favor.

Unlike other authors of his time, Hugo was very interested in the actual performance of his play. In addition to managing rehearsals, he supervised the sets that were designed by the foremost practitioner of the time, Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri, especially the impressive mausoleum in the fourth act. He gave descriptions of the costumes he wanted. He is probably the first French playwright to function simultaneously as author, stage manager, director, and set designer.

Classical plays were performed like musical oratorios today. The actors faced the public frontally, usually standing in a straight line in front of the prompter's box. The entire cast was rarely more than six; *Hernani* had sixteen named roles in addition to supernumeraries. Classical actors interacted minimally and never touched each other. Gestures were rare and there was no "stage business." Traditionalists moaned audibly when Dona Sol died in Hernani's embrace: such bodily contact was unconventional and too sexually provocative, and therefore forbidden by the classical rules. They were equally shocked by Gomez's bloody suicide a moment later. Hernani and the king had crossed swords and prepared to duel onstage in the second act. This was another major infraction against classical decorum. First, a king would never dignify a commoner by fighting with him. Second, all forms of violence were banished from the stage. Duels, battles, fighting of any kind, and of course suicides had to take place in the wings, out of sight of the audience. Onstage, characters could describe such events but never enact them. Traditionalists voiced

their outrage in act I when Carlos climbed in and then out of that broom closet. Hugo's supporters hooted with glee at behavior so demeaning for a king. Furthermore, the bourgeois audience was shocked that a king and a bandit could even share the same stage (Porter, 34). The very word "bandit" provoked derisive laughter as being unseemly and undignified.

Classicists preferred formal diction, periphrases, and circumlocutions over colloquial language, familiar expressions, and concrete words. Royalty only spoke in sophisticated phrases. No ordinary words or expressions were allowed. Théophile Gautier, the floor-leader of Hugo's hippies, talks about classicism's "horror of the precise word." He gives the example of Don Carlos asking what time it is at the beginning of act II as he awaits under Dona Sol's window. Gautier and his friends found his question a marvelous put-down of royalty: "On le trouvait trivial, familier, inconvenient; un roi demande l'heure comme un bourgeois, on lui répond comme à un rustre" (Gautier). ("We found it trivial, ordinary, inconvenient; the king asks what time it is like any bourgeois, and they answer him as if he were a country hick.")

In contrast to the new enthusiasm for elaborate sets and special effects, classical tragedy always took place in an antiseptic "antechamber." This term, the only stage direction given, designated an open, empty space with no set or décor. It was a neutral, abstract, and undefined locus (the unity of place) that was situated nowhere in particular but that led to other, more important sites offstage. The purpose of the antechamber was to allow the actors to meet and talk.

Instead of costumes, classical actors wore everyday garments. Their clothes were elaborate and quite ornate but nonetheless contemporary. What the actors wore had no relation to the time of the play's action. It was not until the late eighteenth century that costumes began to reflect the historical period of the play. Two star actors, Lekain and later Talma, tried to introduce historically accurate costumes. *Hernani* continued their reforms. Nonetheless, it was a struggle. Despite Hugo's opposition, Mlle Mars, the

leading lady who played Dona Sol, insisted on wearing “a dress fashionable in 1830, choosing to complement it with a wide-brimmed, coolie-style hat with an enormous panache,” probably an ostrich feather (Halsall, 75). She wore the same costume in another Hugo play five years later, *Angolo*. To classical eyes a costume had no dramatic function whatsoever.

Another infraction of classical rules that Hugo exploited was the “dos anglais,” the English back. Hugo discovered this blocking technique in the performances of the English actors in 1827. A character onstage would turn away from the audience and show them his back. This broke the rules and therefore shocked the audience. Actors were supposed to move only when entering or exiting the stage. This blocking was nonetheless effective when one character had to wait immobile and silent for another to finish a long monologue. The alternative would be to stand there, motionless, facing the audience with nothing to do. At least in oratorios the soloists sit down when they are not singing.

Mlle Mars complained to Hugo that she had nothing to do—that is, nothing to say—during the long conversation between Carlos and Gomez in act I, scene 3. Registering a physical reaction to what others were saying was not part of her acting vocabulary. The classical theater was verbal and not physical. Talk was everything; like costume and décor, blocking and stage “business” were nothing.

Scene 3 puts all four actors onstage together and runs for 220 verses, which were twelve-syllable lines in rhyming couplets. Dona Sol has three short one- or two-word interjections in the beginning, and then two lines at the end. In between nothing to do but stand there mum. Hernani also has a pair of broken verses, no more than a word or two. At the end, he has a one-word answer to Dona Sol’s whispered question. All the other 220 verses are given to Carlos and Gomez.

In contrast to the immobile and silent Mlle Mars, Hernani turned his back to the audience when Carlos and Gomez were deep in conversation. He took himself out of the scene voluntarily so he could get back in

later. His return—literally turning around to face the audience some two hundred lines later—surprised the spectators who had lost sight of him. Reinserting himself in the action even for a single word was dramatically effective. Seconds later, after everyone else exited, Hernani remained and had the whole stage to himself. Disappearing from scene 3 by turning his back to the audience and his fellow actors, Hernani turns around in scene 4 to stand center stage and deliver his forty-five-line monologue.

When the play passed into rehearsals, other disagreements popped up. Mlle Mars, the female lead, questioned many of Hugo's verses just as she had his blocking. One line she objected to was "Vous êtes mon lion, superbe et généreux." Every day she stopped the rehearsal, walked downstage center, and asked Hugo, sitting in the front row, in a simpering voice whether he really wrote that line and did he really want her to deliver it as he wrote it. She thought the idea of comparing a man to a lion was too audacious. Every day Hugo told her most politely to play it as it was written. In performance sometimes she said Hugo's line; at other times, she delivered her own version "Vous êtes mon seigneur, vaillant et généreux." The rhyme and meter were preserved but Hugo's metaphor was lost. On the classical stage, a man could be a lord but not a lion.

Right from the get-go, the theatrical public knew what was happening. The actors leaked their accounts of the rehearsals to sympathetic journalists, many of whom were playwrights themselves and had no sympathy for a rival. The arbiters of good classical taste therefore knew in advance where they could jeer at Hugo's "mistakes." On the other hand, Hugo's disciples were meeting, often under cover of night, and preparing their own defense of the master. They claimed to know the play by heart and conspired about when and where to applaud.

The *Comédie Française* had a curious feature that touches on our subject here: the *claque*. Organized and run by the theater itself, the *claque* was a group of spectators hired to applaud the actor or actress who paid them. This widespread practice reminds us of the canned applause that

greeted the first entry of Kramer, George, or Elaine in TV sitcoms like *Seinfeld*. Hugo did not trust or did not want to pay for the professional claque. So he distributed the free tickets every author was given to his own rooting section. He recruited his supporters from the ranks of upstart artists, students, friends, and fellow writers. His roster included Alexander Dumas père, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Nodier, Prosper Mérimée, Eugène Delacroix, Alfred de Musset, Alfred de Vigny, Saint-Beuve, Alphonse de Lamartine, Hector Berlioz, and especially his right-hand man, Théophile Gautier. This is the A-team of artists, writers, and poets from around 1830.

Opening night was February 25, 1830. Hugo's claque was to be admitted into the theater at 3:00 p.m. for a 7:00 p.m. curtain. They showed up at 1:00 p.m. Instead of discreetly lining up at the stage door in the alley alongside the theater, they massed on the main street in front of the principal entrance. They were dressed in fantastical costumes that naturally attracted the attention of passersby who were scandalized by that motley crew. Author Enid Starkie describes the scene thus: Hugo's claque "was an extraordinary crowd dressed in every kind of fancy dress, some with Spanish cloaks, some in Robespierre waistcoats, some in medieval tunics, one with a Henri II hat and Gautier in his famous scarlet doublet. Many of the young men were unwashed and they looked like a pack of ragamuffins" (also in Halsall, 77–8). The police had been forewarned and were present to maintain order just in case something outrageous happened. Upset and angered by Hugo's flamboyant and disheveled partisans who made mocking gestures, the passersby began to throw at them the rotten fruit and vegetables they picked up in the street. Honoré de Balzac was hit in the face with a cabbage. Here was a minor skirmish before the main battle.

A number of terms were used to describe Hugo's partisans. They were called "Jeunes France" (Young France), an obvious allusion to their youth. They were also *chevelus* or "longhairs" because of their haircuts. Scholars

today compare them to hippies in appearance and attitude. Then as now a haircut could be a radical statement. The traditionalists were mocked as “perruques” because some of them still wore old-fashioned powdered wigs. Alternatively, the balding older generation was called “genoux” (knees), possibly because both knees and shiny bald pates lack hair. We might translate it as “knuckleheads,” since that captures the baldness and adds an appropriate vituperative insult.

When the police allowed the *claque* to enter the theater around 3:00 p.m., they found it pitch-black. The management refused to turn on the lights. Parisian theaters had been lit by gas since 1822. In the darkness, these pranksters began eating the odiferous meal they had brought along: garlic, onions, and spicy sausage. They also began drinking large quantities of wine. As the hours stretched on, they began to feel the call of nature. The privies were locked, however, and so they relieved themselves in corners and wherever else they pleased. The spectators who arrived for the 7:00 p.m. curtain were greeted by some very unwelcome odors.

Historians talk about the fog of war and how difficult it is to know exactly what happened. The *Bataille d'Hernani* is no exception (Ubersfeld). Even if some details are doubtful, no one can deny that a huge public reaction greeted the play. The behaviors we can document might not all have happened on opening night; some might have taken place at subsequent performances, of which there were thirty-nine, a very fine run for that time (Halsall, 81). The play was a huge financial bonanza; its box office take perhaps as much as five times the usual haul. Halsall (93) cites a high of five thousand francs on opening night, and no performance earned less than 2,350.

Hugo's wife, Adèle, claimed that, at the première, the first act of *Hernani* received “colossal applause.” One book publisher, it seems, was backstage on opening night. He offered five thousand francs (a very generous sum) to Hugo for publishing rights after the first act. He went up to six thousand after the second act. At each intermission, the offer increased.

The actor Joanny, who played Don Gomez, recorded information about the performances in his diary. According to him, on opening night, February 25, the play went well. On the twenty-seventh, it was vigorously attacked and vigorously defended; on March 3, an unrelenting cabal booed throughout the performance. On the fifth, he wrote, “[T]he house is full and the whistling continues twice as obstinately . . . if the play is bad, why do they come? If they are so keen to come, why do they whistle?” A few days later, on the tenth, the play was interrupted by fistfights. Pandemonium reigned all over the theater. Usual practice at this time was that the house lights were not dimmed during performances. It was as light and bright in the hall as on the stage, so all the spectators could easily see each other. Some spectators were yelling bravos, others heckling the actors and the play itself. Verbal altercations escalated to physical violence: pushing, punching, scuffling. The packed house turned into a tumultuous mob. The police were called in and made arrests.

March 15 saw another sellout crowd engage in rowdy behavior. The uproar continued and even increased on the twentieth. According to one scholar, “[S]candal and the whiff of something outrageous happening filled the house for every performance” (Starkie). By June 18, however, one of the last performances in the run, there were no outbreaks or interruptions. *Hernani* passed from an in-your-face, divisive provocation to public acceptance in thirty-nine performances, running from February 25 until late June 1830. It was performed approximately every third day in repertory fashion. It alternated with, yes!, the old war horses, the old-fashioned traditional classics like Racine’s *Andromaque*.

Many of Hugo’s supporters were in the *parterre*, the pit or the orchestra. Only men were allowed there and they had to stand. So there was much milling around and ample opportunity to shove and jostle other spectators. Yesterday’s cheap seats are today’s expensive ones. Affluent bourgeois sat in the *loges*, or first balcony overlooking the main floor. High

above everything was the gallery, where the seats were cheapest. The gallery was called “*paradise*,” or heaven, a reference to its distance from the stage.

Since the house lights never went down, the young radicals in the pit could easily see those above them in the loges, most especially the attractive bourgeois. The “longhairs” flirted with them, pointed at them, blew kisses, and remarked on their beauty in loud voices that were easily overheard. Such sophomoric shenanigans infuriated the respectable husbands who felt themselves to be guardians of their wives’ virtue as much as they were of the classical tradition. Literary commentary mixed with brash wolf whistles and not-too-subtle sexual innuendos.

The poet Théophile Gautier was the ringleader of the *Jeunes France*. He was wearing that bright scarlet or crimson waistcoat that Starkie mentioned above. Matched with lime-green pants, Gautier’s “gilet rouge” (the red or scarlet waistcoat) became famous as the symbol of the young upstarts and their assault on the classical Parnassus. A brilliant flash of color against the dull gray and black of the traditional bourgeois costume, Gautier circulated throughout the theater, cheering the play, yelling down the traditionalists, exhorting his claque to shout more and louder. Rules and decorum vanished, emotions and exaggeration ran wild. The play became a carnival, in Bakhtin’s sense, like the Brazilian Mardi Gras, a happening outside the usual restraints of polite society, a free-for-all that pitted everyone against everyone else.

A few confrontations were recorded in detail. Auguste Préault, a student, was irritated by a few old-timers near him who were vehemently denigrating the play. Overwhelmed by anger, he yelled out to them, “A la guillotine, vous genoux!” (“Off to the guillotine with you, knuckleheads!”). “Old-timers” in 1830 were still young enough to have experienced firsthand the Reign of Terror thirty-seven years before in 1793. Préault’s overheated and intemperate rhetoric was out of bounds of course, but it does reflect how high emotions were running.

According to one scholar (Goudon in Halsall, 79f), Victor Hugo himself attended an early March performance with a written copy of the play in hand. The text was published on March 9. He might have had an advance copy. He noted in the margins the audience's reactions. There were 148 audible interruptions of the performance, which is approximately one every twelve lines of text. That is faster than "a laugh a minute."

Hugo's marginal notes record four or six kinds of interruptions. There was "noise," sometimes "a lot of noise"; "laughter" and sometimes "derisive laughter"; "whistling"; and "agitation" (*mouvements*), probably stamping of feet or jumping up and down. It also might refer to pushing and shoving, actual fisticuffs, and other scuffles. There were ninety-six instances of plain or scornful, derisive laughter. Unfortunately neither Hugo nor Goudon explained why these interruptions took place, nor do they specify which side was responsible for each one. Suffice it to say that this was not a passive audience. Indeed, critics have remarked that there was probably less action on the stage than there was in the hall itself where spectators yelled at each other, whistled continuously, heckled the actors, applauded the lines they liked, and hissed those they did not.

Hugo's single most famous insult to the classical norm was the "hidden staircase." Like the broom closet where Carlos hides, this trivial bit of scenery would never have even been mentioned in a classical play. Generations of French lycée students have studied the uproar this "escalier dérobé" provoked even as some recent scholars consider the incident more fiction than fact.

In the third line of the first act (the play is in verse, rhymed couplets), Dona Sol's maid notices that Don Carlos has surreptitiously entered her bedchamber by an "escalier dérobé." Hugo audaciously splits this tight grammatical unit of noun + adjective into two parts. He places each word on a separate line, thus creating an *enjambement*. A run-on line is a dramatic device usually used to mark an important idea or to provoke a strong emotion. To "waste" it on such a trivial object shocked the

classically trained ear. The wigs booed this stylistic blunder while the longhairs cheered the mockery of traditional norms. The hidden staircase is *grotesque* because the *enjambement* broadcasts out loud the discrepancy between noble rhetoric and its pedestrian subject. By combining a bit of architectural inanity with a metrical misdemeanor, Hugo's drama boldly declares its distance from classical tragedy.

Much later in his life, Hugo wrote a sort of *mémoire* entitled *Choses Vues, 1830–1871 (Things Seen)*. In it he records significant days or events in his life. This entry covers the ruckus around the whole run of *Hernani* seen at four decades' distance.

March 7, 1830 — Midnight. They have been playing Hernani at the Théâtre Français since February 25th. Every day it grosses 5,000 francs at the box office. Every evening the audience whistles at all the lines: it is an unprecedented uproar, the parterre boos, the loges burst out laughing. The actors are baffled and hostile: most of them mock what they have to say. The press has been unanimous and continues every morning to make fun of the play and its author. If I go into a reading room, I cannot find one journal that doesn't say: "Absurd as Hernani! Monstrous like Hernani. Foolish, fake, overblown, pretentious, extravagant, and gibberish, just like Hernani." If I go to the theatre during a performance, everywhere, in whichever corridor I walk, spectators come out of their box seats and slam the door indignantly.

One amusing reaction to *Hernani* can be found in the parodies that appeared within days of its opening. There were at least seven that transformed Hugo's Spanish nobles into Parisian bourgeois and Don Gomez's palace into a tavern. According to Halsall (93), the best of them was Auguste de Lausanne's *Harnali or the Constraint by Horn*. In it Don Gomez de Silva (which can be pronounced in French with or without the final "z") became Dégommé Comilva (dismissed, off he goes) while Dona Sol was Quasifol (Half-crazy). In other parodies she was named

Parasol. Hugo's drama mocked tragedy just as these satirical reactions turned his grotesque back on him. In love and the theater, turnabout is fair play.

One more historical footnote, and a serious one. A month after *Hernani* closed on June 25, a political insurgency in Paris chased Charles X, the last Bourbon king, from the throne. These were the "Trois Glorieuses," July 27, 28, and 29. This uprising replaced Charles with Louis-Philippe d'Orléans from the younger branch of the royal family. The July Monarchy lasted eighteen years until the pan-European revolutions of 1848 dethroned the Citizen King, as Louis-Philippe was called, and inaugurated the Second Republic, which in turn was replaced by Napoléon III's Second Empire in 1852.

Hugo's play was revived in 1840, 42, and 45 without incident. What had been an audacious attack on the old guard became noncontroversial. A new literary taste had replaced the old one. Giuseppe Verdi used Hugo's play as the libretto of his rarely performed opera *Ernani* in 1844.

Hugo continued to be provocative on the stage. His *Le Roi s'amuse* (*The King's Delight*) was closed down by the government after its own tumultuous opening night in 1835. It replicated the scandal, outrage, and raucous behaviors of *Hernani's* opening five years earlier (Anfray). The play was condemned as "an outrage to public morals." It was banned by the censor and not performed again until 1882. Its political offense was to depict on a still classical stage the king as a debauched sexual predator and a misshapen, bilious courtier who attempts to kill him. Verdi somehow defused the polemic when he wrote the music for *Rigoletto* (1851).

Hernani was revived in 1867 by special permission from Napoléon III. All Hugo's plays had been banned from the stage starting in 1852. He himself was just returning from fifteen years of exile because of his political opposition to the Second Empire. The production was a resounding success. A new generation of writers experienced for themselves the excitement of the original performance. They knew that

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this was their founding gesture. *Hernani*, or more exactly, the *Bataille d'Hernani*, was the literary happening that marked the whole century and all its writers. What had begun as the equivalent of a midnight screening of the *Rocky Horror Show* became tame enough for a Saturday matinee at the Metropolitan Opera.

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