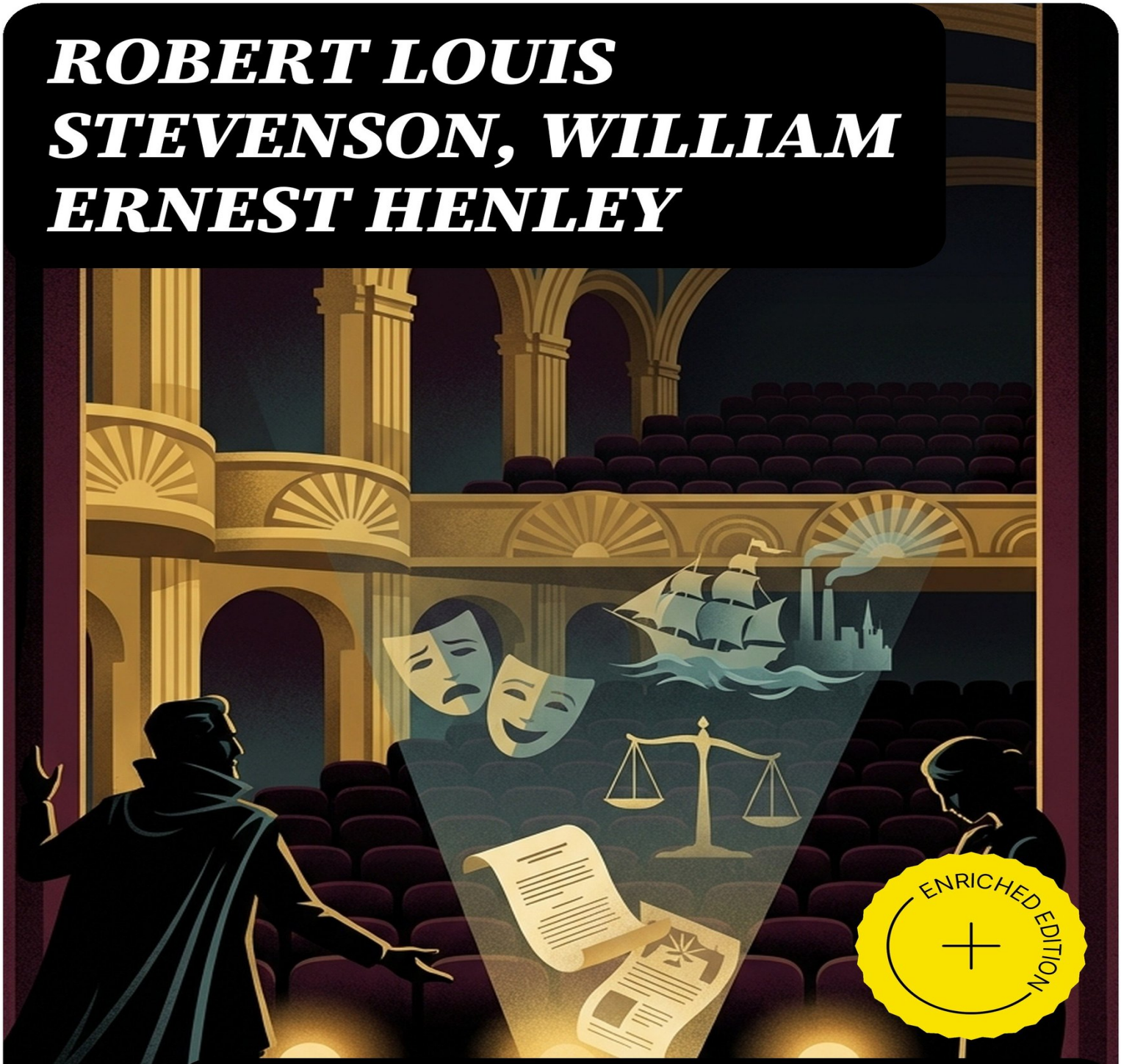
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY



THE PLAYS OF W. E. HENLEY AND R. L. STEVENSON

Robert Louis Stevenson, William Ernest Henley

The Plays of W. E. Henley and R. L. Stevenson

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Annabelle Mercer

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Introduction

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The Plays of W. E. Henley and R. L. Stevenson gathers four dramatic collaborations—Deacon Brodie or The Double Life, Beau Austin, Admiral Guinea, and Macaire: A Melodramatic Farce in Three Acts—into a coherent dramatic portrait. Across these titles, the authors pursue a single question: how character is tested when identity becomes a performance. Written as melodrama or farce and organized into clearly marked acts, these works concentrate attention on emblematic figures whose names title the play and whose choices ripple through a surrounding society. The collection’s unity lies in this shared fascination with persona, spectacle, and the ethical pressure of public scrutiny.

Read together, the plays converse in motifs of duplicity, poise, and authority. Deacon Brodie announces “The Double Life,” placing inner conflict at center. Beau Austin suggests polished manners and the social theater of reputation. Admiral Guinea invokes command and hard discipline, while Macaire, a melodramatic farce, foregrounds the improvisations of a trickster. The dialogue among them is productive: moral gravity in melodrama is counterpoised by the liberating wit of farce, and resolve encounters the dictates of community. This ongoing exchange tests how masks are worn, discarded, or refashioned when convention collides with desire.

Form is part of that conversation. One play carries “Five Acts and Eight Tableaux,” another is a farce in three acts;

elsewhere, a Prologue appears, and all provide “Persons Represented” or a synopsis of unfolding scenes. Such scaffolding exhibits practical stage sense and narrative architecture. Tableaux promise pictorial emphasis; act divisions manage tempo, escalation, and release. The formal clarity strengthens character study by framing decisive entrances, reversals, and reckonings. Variety of structure is not mere ornament; it is an argument about how different theatrical engines—melodramatic rise-and-fall or farcical acceleration—shape what audiences can know about motive, consequence, and the limits of control.

Although the plays differ in register, each orbits dilemmas of standing and self-command. Titles that name a person imply lives read and misread by others. Public distinction—be it moral gravitas, cultivated charm, or nautical rank—meets the private negotiations that such distinction conceals. The repertory of choices implied by these titles suggests contestation between law and appetite, duty and improvisation, steadfastness and evasion. By staging these tensions through varying frames, the collection asks how character is formed among spectators, allies, and rivals, and how a figure’s chosen role either fortifies integrity or erodes it under the gaze of the crowd.

Contrast is a principal means of coherence. Melodrama’s earnestness throws farce’s quicksilver energies into relief, and the farce, in turn, exposes the constructedness that melodrama treats as fateful. Deacon Brodie emphasizes doubleness explicitly; Beau Austin hints at elegance tested by circumstance; Admiral Guinea centers the burden and

allure of command; Macaire makes agility itself a theme. The shift from five-act breadth to three-act concentration sharpens these differences while maintaining shared preoccupations. Through tonal alternation, the plays illuminate one another: what appears fixed in one frame seems malleable in another, and responsibility is weighed against charm, cunning, and resolve.

These concerns resonate in contemporary culture, where identity is curated, visibility is constant, and reputations are assembled, threatened, and remade in public. The plays’ attention to self-fashioning anticipates debates about authenticity and the pressures of role-playing in civic and professional life. Their formal fluency models how art navigates competing imperatives: to entertain, to question, and to diagnose. Melodrama’s moral clarity and farce’s subversive laughter remain potent tools for examining institutions, loyalty, and opportunism. The collection thus offers not nostalgia but equipment: a compact grammar for thinking about agency, spectacle, and the ethics of choosing under watchful eyes.

Finally, the collection demonstrates how collaboration intensifies theatrical invention. Henley and Stevenson bring complementary instincts to the stage: an ear for cadence, an eye for action, and a shared taste for emblematic figures whose names promise collision with fate or chance. The acts, prologue, and tableaux offer pathways for performance while rewarding reflective reading. Taken together, these plays form a portfolio of strategies for dramatizing conscience, charm, and cunning. They invite audiences to consider how roles liberate and constrain, and they confirm

the stage as a place where the human impulse to appear meets the stubborn demand to be.

Historical Context

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Socio-Political Landscape

Composed and staged amid late-Victorian Britain, these plays mirror a society negotiating urban growth, moral regulation, and contested identities within the Union. Deacon Brodie, though set in eighteenth-century Edinburgh, refracts contemporary anxieties about surveillance and respectable public personae masking illicit economies. Guild power, burgh authority, and the expanding apparatus of policing shape the pressures on citizens and criminals alike. The Prince’s Theatre billing underscores metropolitan tastes for historical crime tales that also interrogate current municipal corruption fears and class mobility. Henley and Stevenson position institutions—magistracy, church, tavern, and household—as rival jurisdictions, dramatizing the political theatre of order, punishment, and reputation.

Beau Austin stages the brittle economy of manners governing late-Georgian and Victorian retrospection alike, where social rank, credit, and female reputation are adjudicated in drawing rooms as surely as in courts. Its Haymarket Theatre context signals London’s fascination with elegant scandal as a microcosm of governance: influence circulates through invitations, hotel registers, and whispered verdicts. Henley and Stevenson map how politeness becomes a technology of power, disciplining desire while enabling strategic self-reinvention. The drama’s attention to etiquette, breach of promise anxieties, and

provincial versus metropolitan standards tracks the period’s debates over class permeability, gentlemanly authority, and emergent middle-class moral policing.

In Admiral Guinea and Macaire the authors scrutinize economies at the empire’s edges—ports, roads, and inns where law, faith, and profit collide. Admiral Guinea turns on maritime wealth and repentance, echoing Britain’s uneasy reckoning with fortunes made at sea and the evangelical idiom that sought to cleanse them. Macaire, styled as a melodramatic farce, charts mobile adventurers exploiting loopholes in authority, testing passports of character rather than state. Both plays expose the fragility of respectability outside metropolitan oversight. Montreal notices and touring prospects remind us that such themes connected imperial audiences, who recognized commerce’s temptations and the tenuous legitimacy of power.

Intellectual & Aesthetic Currents

Across the anthology Henley and Stevenson wield melodrama’s architecture—prologues, set-piece confrontations, and emphatic tableaux—while tempering it with psychological shading. Deacon Brodie’s five acts and eight tableaux rely on arresting stage pictures to externalize duplicity; Beau Austin folds brittle comedy into sentimental self-scrutiny; Macaire detonates expectation by letting criminal wit drive the action. Admiralty themes invite nautical vernacular and rhythmic dialogue, while the Haymarket framing cultivates urbane poise. The authors balance popular sensation with literate irony, trusting swift reversals, musical underscoring, and precisely engineered

scenes. The result bridges commercial theatre’s demand for clarity with an incipient modern appetite for ambiguity and motive.

Intellectually the plays refract Scottish moral psychology and British empiricism through theatrical craft. Deacon Brodie’s fascination with conscience and reputation converses with Calvinist notions of election and public witness, while grounding choice in observable behavior. Beau Austin makes performance itself a theme: gesture, costume, and accent become experiments in identity, anticipating sociological readings of role-play. Admiral Guinea pits evangelical rhetoric against worldly calculation, testing sincerity in ordeal. Macaire savors sceptical wit, treating morality as a negotiation among circumstances. Linguistically the scripts mix Scots-inflected cadences, Regency polish, and patter-song agility, revealing a collaborative method that prizes ear, idiom, and quicksilver shifts of tone.

Writing under the Lord Chamberlain’s licensing regime, the authors stage vice vividly yet steer outcomes toward recognizably moral horizons, a compromise that sharpens craft rather than blunting critique. Their dramaturgy depends on exact timing, visible props with ethical charge—keys, letters, purses—and spatial codes that separate parlors from back rooms. The Prince’s Theatre and Haymarket resources encouraged fluid scene changes and pictorial groupings, enabling “living pictures” to punctuate argument. Henley’s structural vigor and Stevenson’s narrative irony converge in the manipulation of concealment and revelation, translating prose suspense into stage

mechanics. The plays thus test how spectacle can carry thought without relinquishing momentum.

Legacy & Reassessment Across Time

Reception at first often tracked the fault line between popular expectation and literary ambition: some spectators prized sensation, others sought psychological coherence. Deacon Brodie’s historical setting secured periodic revivals in Scotland and London, where civic memory and theatrical tradition intertwined. Beau Austin has drawn notice for its poised language and its critique of gallantry; recent productions emphasize the agency of women negotiating reputation. Admiral Guinea’s moral reckoning invites contemporary staging choices that confront maritime wealth, while Macaire’s elastic farce adapts nimbly to ensemble styles. Touring and Montreal associations attest to a transatlantic appetite for these hybrid entertainments and their ethical provocations.

Scholarly reassessment increasingly centers on collaboration as method and message. Manuscript and performance histories suggest a fluid division of labor, with Henley’s theatrical pragmatism and Stevenson’s narrative finesse interlacing rather than competing. Critics now read Deacon Brodie, Beau Austin, Admiral Guinea, and Macaire as a coherent inquiry into respectability, crime, and redemption staged through shifting genres. Debates persist over their status within the canon—melodrama versus “high” drama—but performance-oriented studies highlight durability in rehearsal rooms. Contemporary directors mine the texts’ precision, while editors recover variants from

London and provincial mountings, illuminating how venue, cast, and audience recalibrate tone and meaning.

Synopsis (Selection)

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DEACON BRODIE OR THE DOUBLE LIFE A MELODRAMA IN FIVE ACTS AND EIGHT TABLEAUX

A respected Edinburgh tradesman conceals a perilous nocturnal career, turning civic virtue and private vice into a single, split existence. Its brooding melodrama anchors the volume’s fascination with masks and moral fracture, later refracted in the social finery of Beau Austin, the stern conscience of Admiral Guinea, and the satiric rogueries of Macaire.

BEAU AUSTIN

In a world of polished manners and glittering reputations, a celebrated dandy faces the price of charm when past choices test present honor. Treating identity as performance, it contrasts the criminal secrecy of Deacon Brodie, aligns with Macaire’s theatrical imposture, and softens the moral severity evident in Admiral Guinea.

ADMIRAL GUINEA

A devout ex-seafarer’s home life is unsettled by dangers from the wider world and the pull of old sins, bringing faith, fear, and duty into taut balance. Its grave moral climate amplifies the ethical stakes posed in Deacon Brodie while

offering a sober counterweight to the wit of Beau Austin and the exuberant cynicism of Macaire.

MACAIRE A MELODRAMATIC FARCE IN THREE ACTS

A flamboyant trickster and his resourceful accomplice spin audacious schemes in a brisk, satirical romp that lampoons respectability and fortune’s whims. By turning deception into comedy, it mirrors and inverts the darker duplicities of Deacon Brodie, needles the proprieties prized in Beau Austin, and punctures the moral absolutism that steadies Admiral Guinea.

The Plays of W. E. Henley and R. L. Stevenson

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ACT III

DEACON BRODIE
OR THE DOUBLE LIFE
A MELODRAMA IN FIVE ACTS
AND EIGHT TABLEAUX

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PERSONS REPRESENTED

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William Brodie, Deacon of the Wrights, Housebreaker and Master Carpenter.

Old Brodie, the Deacon's Father.

William Lawson, Procurator-Fiscal, the Deacon's Uncle.

Andrew Ainslie, Humphrey Moore, George Smith, Robbers in the Deacon's gang.

Captain Rivers, an English Highwayman.

Hunt, a Bow Street Runner.

A Doctor.

Walter Leslie.

Mary Brodie, the Deacon's Sister.

Jean Watt, the Deacon's Mistress.

Vagabonds, Officers of the Watch, Men-servants.

The Scene is laid in Edinburgh. The Time is towards the close of the Eighteenth Century. The Action, some fifty hours long, begins at eight p.m. on Saturday and ends before midnight on Monday.

Note.—*Passages suggested for omission in representation are enclosed in square brackets, thus* [ ].

SYNOPSIS OF ACTS AND TABLEAUX

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LONDON: PRINCE’S THEATRE

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2*d July* 1884

DEACON BRODIE, Mr. E. J. HENLEY.

Walter Leslie,	Mr. Charles Cartwright.
William Lawson,	Mr. John Maclean.
Andrew Ainslie,	Mr. Fred Desmond.
Humphrey Moore,	Mr. Edmund Grace.
George Smith,	Mr. Julian Cross.
Hunt,	Mr. Hubert Akhurst.
Old Brodie,	Mr. A. Knight.
Captain Rivers,	Mr. Brandon Thomas.
Mary Brodie,	Miss Lizzie Williams.
Jean Watt,	Miss Minnie Bell.

MONTREAL

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26*th September* 1887

Deacon Brodie,	Mr. E. J. Henley.
Walter Leslie,	Mr. Graham Stewart.
William Lawson,	Mr. Edmund Lyons.
Andrew Ainslie,	Mr. Fred Desmond.
Humphrey Moore,	Mr. Edmund Grace.

George smith,	Mr. Horatio Saker.
Hunt,	Mr. Henry Vernon.
Captain Rivers,	Mr. Bruce Philips.
Mary Brodie,	Miss Annie Robe.
Jean Watt,	Miss Carrie Coote.

ACT I.

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TABLEAU I.
The Double Life.

The Stage represents a room in the Deacon's house, furnished partly as a sitting-, partly as a bed-room, in the style of an easy burgess of about 1780. *C., a door; L. C., a second and smaller door; R. C., practicable window; L., alcove, supposed to contain bed; at the back, a clothes-press and a corner cupboard containing bottles, etc.* Mary Brodie *at needlework;* Old Brodie, *a paralytic, in wheeled chair, at the fireside, L.*

SCENE I

To these Leslie, *C.*

Leslie. May I come in, Mary?

Mary. Why not?

Leslie. I scarce knew where to find you.

MARY. The dad and I must have a corner, must we not? So when my brother's friends are in the parlour he allows us to sit in his room. 'Tis a great favour, I can tell you; the place is sacred.

LESLIE. Are you sure that 'sacred' is strong enough?

MARY. You are satirical!

LESLIE. I? And with regard to the Deacon? Believe me, I am not so ill-advised. You have trained me well, and I feel by him as solemnly as a true-born Brodie.

MARY. And now you are impertinent! Do you mean to go any further? We are a fighting race, we Brodies. Oh, you may laugh, sir! But 'tis no child's play to jest us on our Deacon, or, for that matter, on our Deacon's chamber either. It was his father's before him: he works in it by day and sleeps in it by night; and scarce anything it contains but is the labour of his hands. Do you see this table, Walter? He made it while he was yet a 'prentice. I remember how I used to sit and watch him at his work. It would be grand, I thought, to be able to do as he did, and handle edge-tools without cutting my fingers, and getting my ears pulled for a meddlesome minx! He used to give me his mallet to keep and his nails to hold; and didn't I fly when he called for them! and wasn't I proud to be ordered about with them! And then, you know, there is the tall cabinet yonder; that it was that proved him the first of Edinburgh joiners, and worthy to be their Deacon and their head. And the father's chair, and the sister's workbox, and the dear dead mother's footstool—what are they all but proofs of the Deacon's skill, and tokens of the Deacon's care for those about him?

LESLIE. I am all penitence. Forgive me this last time, and I promise you I never will again.

MARY. Candidly, now, do you think you deserve forgiveness?

LESLIE. Candidly, I do not.

MARY. Then I suppose you must have it. What have you done with Willie and my uncle?

LESLIE. I left them talking deeply. The dear old Procurator has not much thought just now for anything but those mysterious burglaries—

MARY. I know!—

LESLIE. Still, all of him that is not magistrate and official is politician and citizen; and he has been striving his hardest to undermine the Deacon's principles, and win the Deacon's vote and interest.

MARY. They are worth having, are they not?

LESLIE. The Procurator seems to think that having them makes the difference between winning and losing.

MARY. Did he say so? You may rely upon it that he knows. There are not many in Edinburgh who can match with our Will.

LESLIE. There shall be as many as you please, and not one more.

MARY. How I should like to have heard you! What did uncle say? Did he speak of the Town Council again? Did he tell Will what a wonderful Bailie he would make? O why did you come away?

LESLIE. I could not pretend to listen any longer. The election is months off yet; and if it were not—if it were tramping upstairs this moment—drums, flags, cockades,

guineas, candidates, and all!—how should I care for it? What are Whig and Tory to me?

MARY. O fie on you! It is for every man to concern himself in the common weal. Mr. Leslie—Leslie of the Craig!—should know that much at least.

LESLIE. And be a politician like the Deacon? All in good time, but not now. I hearkened while I could, and when I could no more I slipped out and followed my heart. I hoped I should be welcome.

MARY. I suppose you mean to be unkind.

LESLIE. Tit for tat. Did you not ask me why I came away? And is it usual for a young lady to say 'Mr.' to the man she means to marry?

MARY. That is for the young lady to decide, sir.

LESLIE. And against that judgment there shall be no appeal?

MARY. O, if you mean to argue!—

LESLIE. I do not mean to argue. I am content to love and be loved. I think I am the happiest man in the world.

MARY. That is as it should be; for I am the happiest girl.

LESLIE. Why not say the happiest wife? I have your word, and you have mine. Is not that enough?

MARY. Have you so soon forgotten? Did I not tell you how it must be as my brother wills? I can do only as he bids me.

LESLIE. Then you have not spoken as you promised?

MARY. I have been too happy to speak.

LESLIE. I am his friend. Precious as you are, he will trust you to me. He has but to know how I love you, Mary, and how your life is all in your love of me, to give us his blessing with a full heart.

MARY. I am sure of him. It is that which makes my happiness complete. Even to our marriage I should find it hard to say ‘Yes’ when he said ‘No.’

LESLIE. Your father is trying to speak. I’ll wager he echoes you.

MARY (*to* OLD BRODIE). My poor dearie! Do you want to say anything to me? No? Is it to Mr. Leslie, then?

LESLIE. I am listening, Mr. Brodie.

MARY. What is it, daddie?

OLD BRODIE. My son—the Deacon—Deacon Brodie—the first at school.

LESLIE. I know it, Mr. Brodie. Was I not the last in the same class? (*To* MARY.) But he seems to have forgotten us.

MARY. O yes! his mind is wellnigh gone. He will sit for hours as you see him, and never speak nor stir but at the touch of Will’s hand or the sound of Will’s name.

LESLIE. It is so good to sit beside you. By and by it will be always like this. You will not let me speak to the Deacon? You are fast set upon speaking yourself? I could be so eloquent, Mary—I would touch him. I cannot tell you how I fear to trust my happiness to any one else—even to you!

MARY. He must hear of my good fortune from none but me. And besides, you do not understand. We are not like families, we Brodies. We are so clannish, we hold so close together.

LESLIE. You Brodies, and your Deacon!

OLD BRODIE. Deacon of his craft, sir—Deacon of the Wrights—my son! If his mother—his mother—had but lived to see!

MARY. You hear how he runs on. A word about my brother and he catches it. 'Tis as if he were awake in his poor blind way to all the Deacon's care for him and all the Deacon's kindness to me. I believe he only lives in the thought of the Deacon. There, it is not so long since I was one with him. But indeed I think we are all Deacon-mad, we Brodies. Are we not, daddie dear?

BRODIE (*without, and entering*). You are a mighty magistrate, Procurator, but you seem to have met your match.

SCENE II

To these, BRODIE and LAWSON.

MARY (*curtseying*). So, uncle! you have honoured us at last.

LAWSON. *Quam primum*, my dear, *quam primum*.

BRODIE. Well, father, do you know me? (*He sits beside his father and takes his hand.*)

[OLD BRODIE. William—ay—Deacon. Greater man—than—his father.

BRODIE. You see, Procurator, the news is as fresh to him as it was five years ago. He was struck down before he got the Deaconship, and lives his lost life in mine.

LAWSON. Ay, I mind. He was aye ettling after a bit handle to his name. He was kind of hurt when first they made me Procurator.]

MARY. And what have you been talking of?

LAWSON. Just o' thae robberies, Mary. Baith as a burgher and a Crown offeecial, I tak' the maist absorbing interest in thae robberies.

whether polish clarifies character or merely delays the recognition of fault.

Two other collaborations widen the inquiry. In Macaire: A Melodramatic Farce, the eponymous adventurer’s eloquence and improvisatory charm rebrand self-interest as dash, turning deception into an attractive public style across its three acts. Admiral Guinea, by contrast, installs a seafaring patriarch whose reputation for piety and discipline anchors a coastal household. Yet even there, intrusions from a rougher maritime world press against that upright image. Together, the plays ask how a commendable front—be it grace, wit, or godliness—can conceal, rationalize, or be tested by desires that polite society would rather not see.

Question 2

What theatrical forms shape moral inquiry: melodrama, farce, or drawing-room comedy?

In Deacon Brodie; or, The Double Life, Stevenson and Henley embrace melodrama’s large-scale architecture—five acts and eight tableaux—to externalize a divided conscience. The rapidly shifting tableaux punctuate choices with visible consequence, underscoring suspense and civic stakes while allowing sudden reversals to register as public events. The genre’s appetite for contrast and heightened jeopardy proves apt for dramatizing duplicity; ethical conflict appears not as private rumination but as a sequence of urgent, staged confrontations whose rhythm and scale keep the audience attentive to how individual secrecy destabilizes a broader urban order.