
Performance and politics in popular drama

*Aspects of popular entertainment
in theatre, film and television
1800–1976*

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Was Jerrold's Black Ey'd Susan more popular than Wordsworth's Lucy?

Louis James

Melodrama, that once ragged waif, has been brought in from the cold. A decade ago, 'melodramatic' was a term of critical abuse: now 'Melodrama' has its volume in Methuen's 'Critical Idiom' series,¹ along with 'Romanticism' and 'The Epic'. She has been washed, given clean clothes, and warmed by academic fires. There are murmurs about aristocratic parentage. Shakespeare? Bernard Shaw wrote that if melodrama was good enough, 'why, then one has *Lear* or *Macbeth*'.² Sophocles? Eric Bentley pointed out that the key emotions of melodrama, 'Pity' and 'Fear', were also those Aristotle prescribed for tragedy.³ Robert W. Heilman, in *Tragedy and Melodrama* (Seattle, 1969), argued against melodrama's status as tragedy, but gave it the dignity of academic investigation; in 1976 Peter Brooks in the most penetrating study of the genre to date, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, applied the concept to Balzac and Henry James. Will Melodrama prove to be *the* contemporary heroine and Muse? Eisenstein traced the film concept of montage back, through Dickens, to melodrama,⁴ and today melodrama dominates cinema and television screens for reasons other than those of Russian cinematic technique.

Or has there been a melodramatic twist to our story? Look again at the now clean and bespectacled young lady with all those new books. Has there been a switch somewhere in the plot? How remote are considerations of 'the melodramatic imagination' from the drawled, heavily mannered speech, the acrobatically stylised gestures, the crudely emotional audience reaction at the Surrey or the Britannia melodrama of the 1840s? Is the real Melodrama still out there somewhere in the snow? There is nothing wrong in the intellectualisation of 'popular' cultural traditions: it would, I think, be possible to prove that there has been an element of this in every major turn of English literary history, not only in Wordsworth's use of the ballad tradition which has given me my title,⁵ although, as I will suggest, the parallel between the impact of melodrama and the significance of Wordsworth's

Spectacle, performance and audience in nineteenth-century theatre

Lyrical Ballads (1798) is particularly interesting. The status of this paper makes it yet another attempt to 'academicise' a popular genre. But we should be aware of what we are doing. I also wish to suggest ways of approaching melodrama which may come nearer to the original form than do some other current views.

Theories about melodrama

To start with Bernard Shaw. One would have expected Shaw, with his hate of the 'theatrical and hysterical'⁶ tendency of English audiences, to have attacked melodrama. But he separated melodrama from late-nineteenth-century theatre in general, and noted that when he introduced all the conventions of melodrama into *The Devil's Disciple* in 1897, the play was praised for its *originality*.⁷ Shaw liked melodrama for the same reasons that made him admire Bunyan: he considered it philosophical, democratic and well crafted. It is 'a simple and sincere drama of action and feeling', in its range of experience accessible both to philosopher and labourer. 'One has to go straight to the core of humanity to get it.' In its form it reflects the variety of life, depending upon contrasts between 'types of youth and age, sympathy and selfishness, the masculine and the feminine, the serious and the ridiculous and so on'. It is philosophical because it must 'represent conduct as producing swiftly and creating in the individual the results which in actual life it only produces in the race in the course of many centuries'.⁸ While *The Devil's Disciple* turned melodramatic principles on their head, he directed that it should be acted for the effects of serious melodrama;⁹ a burlesque production, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1976 presentation, changes the play's meaning and impact.

In 1948, Wylie Sypher described melodrama as the key modality of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Each era, he argued, has its mental framework through which it explains and orders its experience. In the eighteenth century the dominant concern with order and balance gave us Newtonian physics, the rhyming couplet, and the landscape gardening of Capability Brown. In the modern age we think in terms of relativity, the organising principle of Einstein's theory, the novel sequences of Faulkner, or a progression of paintings by Picasso. In the nineteenth century the modality was that of melodrama, the dialectic of two absolute forces in conflict towards a resolution – the 'good' heroine against the 'bad' villain, Malthus's struggle of population against the laws of subsistence, the class conflict of

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Worker against Capitalist of Marx and Engels, or Darwin's natural selection of species.

To whatever extent this theory is valid, most academic critics have agreed that melodrama itself is an inadequate artistic form, crude in its emotions and simplistic in its morals. It may arouse sensations of terror, wonder or pathos in the audience, but these feelings are aroused for their own sake, rather than emerging from a significant situation. Unlike tragedy, it does not move through sensation to awe at the human condition. Tragedy, Heilman has argued, is more profound because it explores the crisis of inner personality; melodrama presents only 'types'.¹¹

But is this not making a comparative value judgement about different dimensions of dramatic experience? For Eric Bentley, the 'unreality' is functional. 'Melodrama sometimes uses the "irrational" type of fear in a more direct form such as that of Frankenstein's monster or Dracula. More often it lets irrational fear masquerade as the rational: we are given reasons to fear the villain, but the fear actually aroused goes beyond the reason given.'¹² In this it is expressing an aspect of our psychological experience. Similarly, the improbabilities of melodramatic plot may from one angle appear absurd, while from another they image the experience of living in an absurd universe. For, writes Bentley, the power of melodrama comes from its ability to affect the irrational but profound levels of the human psyche: 'melodramatic vision is paranoid'. Even the acting style of melodrama contributes to this. 'That we are all ham actors in our dreams means that melodramatic acting, with its large gestures and grimaces and its declamatory style of speech, is not an exaggeration of our dreams but a duplication of them. In that respect, melodrama is the Naturalism of the dream life.'¹³ While Bentley does not note this as an example, it is illuminating to compare basic melodrama with German expressionist theatre and film, and even with a surrealist film such as Cocteau's *Orphée*.

By another argument, melodrama is essentially dramatic because it takes to its extreme the element of play within drama itself. The spectator expects, say, the hero to marry the heroine at the end, not because we are experiencing reality, but because we go to the theatre to enter voluntarily into a game where certain expectations are set up and fulfilled. In the clichés of melodrama, then, this element of 'game' is completely realised: there is no pretence that we are *not* enjoying plot and character played by rules. Such an approach brings us to the central and perhaps ultimately unpassable gap at the centre

of our appreciation of melodrama. Melodrama is hard to rediscover because it is, to modify R. A. Foakes's definition of Romantic poetry, the drama of *assertion*,¹⁴ not one of questioning, and the significance of this assertion is an experiential one that can only be measured in terms of a communal theatrical interaction of actors and audience. As J. L. Styan has pointed out, the key to the popularity of melodrama is in the audience response:¹⁵ the early-nineteenth-century theatre-goer was able to enter into the experience both believing and not believing in a way that we, in a different age, cannot recover. All we can do is to attempt to assess the intellectual and emotional perspectives the original audience might have brought to a melodrama performance. While this will be essentially inadequate, some aspects are available, and may appear surprising.

Psychological theories of the passions and the acting tradition

One door opens onto another. Consideration of the physical expression of moral and emotional states goes back to medieval theories of the Humours and even Theophrastus's *Characters*, which remained surprisingly popular throughout Europe right into the nineteenth century, when an English illustrated version was published in 1836. But a convenient and central starting point is Charles le Brun's *Conférence . . . sur l'expression générale et particulière* (1698) which was constantly translated, expanded and adapted: one popular early English translation by J. Smith was published in 1701. This influential little work analysed the passions from the basic extremes, such as 'Extreme Anger', to the subtler expressions such as 'Admiration', 'Esteem' and 'Veneration'. Of particular importance was the accompanying series of striking illustrations, showing how the face appeared under each emotion. Le Brun also considered bodily gesture, but in little detail. Smith's translation included a brief supplement on Le Brun's theory of physiognomy. Johann Caspar Lavater, in his *Essays on Physiognomy* (1798), again vividly illustrated, followed Le Brun's theories through with much greater detail and complexity. He became influential not only through translations and adaptations – the British Museum notes three English translations, which were apparently published within four years of their publication in France – but through the popular Victorian science of phrenology, which his work initiated. The line of investigation continues to Darwin's *Expression of Emotions* (1872) which was illustrated with photographs; it was considered

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by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890),¹⁶ and, if it seemed to be exploded by Jung's and Freud's concern with the unconscious, is experiencing a new revival with interest in 'body language'.

The way in which this interest in the physical expression of emotion has developed hand in hand with the history of art lies outside the scope of this short paper. Le Brun was himself an artist, and when William Hogarth was commissioned to paint Garrick as Richard III (1746) he turned in part for his inspiration to Le Brun's *Family of Darius before Alexander the Great*, and Le Brun's illustration of 'Fear'.¹⁷ Hogarth's work shows an expert interest in the expression of the passions, and this enabled him in his picture series to bring together psychological and socio-moral concerns. They are also dramatic tableaux: 'my picture was my Stage', he wrote, 'and men and women my actors who were, by means of certain Actions and expressions, to Exhibit a dumb show'.¹⁸ Continuously popular into the nineteenth century, they made the natural bases for theatre: *Industry and Idleness* (1747), for instance, was made into at least two melodramas a hundred years after its first appearance. Further, Hogarth helped to establish the line of Victorian genre and narrative painting which likewise told a story, and told it in dramatic terms. Melodrama is related to the 'picture' in many ways. One of them was in its direct links with Victorian narrative art. A series like Cruikshank's *The Bottle* (1847) or Wilkie's *The Rent Day* and *Distraint for Rent* were immediately and naturally made into plays.¹⁹

The science of the expression of the passions also directly affected dramatic theory. Michael Booth quotes the theatrical periodical *The Prompter* of as early as 1735: 'every passion has its peculiar and appropriate look, and every look its adopted and particular gesture'.²⁰ In 1785–6 J. J. Engel published his *Ideen zu einer Mimic*, a popular work adapted into English by Henry Siddons as *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gestures* (1822). Strongly influenced by Le Brun, but also drawing on a wide range of examples from literature, art, and philosophy, Engel explored the social and psychological bases for theatrical action, and illustrated them with illustrative prints enlarged and made more sensationally vivid by Siddons. Engel stresses that theatrical gestures must be simultaneously *expressive* and *picturesque*, but significantly sees no conflict between the two concerns. *Practical Illustrations* was an expensive and theoretical work, but Le Brun's influence extends to actors' handbooks, primarily

concerned with the practical side of the profession, like Leman Thomas Rede's compact *The Road to the Stage* (1827). Rede appended a 'celebrated analytic review of the effect of various emotions on the human frame' which, if not made a substitute for the actual passion, 'will not be regarded with indifference by those really studying the stage'.²¹ The review is roughly based on Le Brun.

Theories of the physical expression of emotion help us to see why melodramatic acting was not, as is conceived today, a set of unreal clichés, but to some extent an attempt at psychological realism. As William James indicated,²² psychological theories were remarkably close to melodramatic acting styles. In Rede's 'analytic review', for instance, as in Le Brun, '*Grief*, sudden and violent, expresses itself by beating the head or forehead, tearing the hair, and catching the breath, as if choking; also by screaming, weeping, stamping with the feet, lifting the eyes from time to time to heaven, and hurrying backwards and forwards.'²³

This helped to confirm theatre in its concern with the portrayal



Gestures of melodrama, from Skelt's *Characters in Othello*.

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of passion. But, paradoxically, it also shaped melodrama's concern with types. Lavater in particular was interested in the way physical genres were linked to moral classifications, and it is not too far a step from the typology of 'Affection' or 'Hatred' to the types of the hero, the heroine, or the comic man. Again, the conventions of melodramatic characters must be seen against an age in which phrenology was a popular science, and in which the interest in classifying 'types' ranged from such popular series as Kenny Meadow's *Heads of the People* (1848) to Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851–64) and the beginnings of sociology.

Romanticism sets the scene

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated.

The dialogue is 'natural and characteristic . . . There is no extravagance of idea – no elaborate research after simile and metaphor, no display of pomp and inflated expression: the thought seems to arise from the moment, and the words appear to be suggested by the circumstances which pass under the eye of the spectator.' The first quotation is from Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), the second from the *Times* review of the first English play to be called a 'melodrama', Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* (1802).²⁴

The emergence of the Romantic movement and melodrama in England were contemporary and connected in many ways. To find the appropriate expression for direct and powerful emotions, Wordsworth turned to rustic and to simple folk, including children, simple heroines, silent outcasts such as the Leech Gatherer and the Cumberland Beggar; even, to the delight of hostile critics, an idiot boy. Melodramas relied on similar foci for the emotions, innocent heroines, children, dumb figures – *A Tale of Mystery* concerns Francisco, a dumb man.²⁵ They went further and used animals – the dog of Pixérécourt's *The Hound of Montargis*, the extraordinarily trained horses of Astley and Ducrow. Yet even here, as Arthur Saxon has pointed out, there was a crudely Romantic attitude. 'Darwinism and the theory of the indifferent universe was still some fifty years in

the future; nature was viewed, with childlike simplicity, as being sympathetic to man.²⁶

The same is true for the setting. Wordsworth's fascination with

Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side,
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light

(*Prelude*, Bk VI, lines 631–5)

was given stage expression in a melodrama such as *A Tale of Mystery*, with its evocation of 'the wild mountainous country called the Nant of Arpennaz; with pines and massy rocks . . . The increasing storm of lightning, thunder, hail, and rain becomes terrible.'²⁷ The attraction to the strange and the wonderful that inspired Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) was felt by audiences at spectacle and gothic melodramas. Most important, the wild and strange setting in some Romantic poems and certain types of melodrama was used both to give a sense of the wonderful, and to highlight the passions of the characters – whether Holcroft's Romaldi, who emerges in the storm 'pursued, as it were, by heaven and earth',²⁸ or Coleridge's exiled, tormented Mariner.

Of specific importance to melodrama was the Romantic attitude to music. The first work designated by the author as a '*mélodrame*' was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1774), a monologue with action scored against violin music, and written with Rousseau's concept of the connection between music and human emotion in mind. Engel and Siddons wrote specifically about the relation of different kinds of music to dramatic gesture, and theorised about how music directly reflected emotional states in a way which pre-figured the stage directions in *A Tale of Mystery* – 'music to express chattering contention', 'threatening music', 'joyful music' and the like. Romantic theory of music and of the 'simple' character is illustrated in a pantomimic section Milner added to Mary Shelley's story in the melodrama *Frankenstein*, where the Monster is interestingly made more sympathetic than in the original. Trapped among mountainous rocks, Emmeline saves the Child from the Monster by pulling from her dress a small flageolet, and playing, the Monster becoming 'powerfully affected'.

As the air proceeds his feelings become more powerfully excited – he is moved to tears: afterwards, on the music assuming a lively character, he is worked up

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to a paroxysm of delight – and on its again becoming mournful, is quite subdued, till he lays down exhausted at the foot of the rock to which Emmeline is attached. ²⁹

Enter the acrobats

Such a scene is essentially both Romantic and melodramatic, but theatrically one need not look to these specific sources of inspiration. The action is one from popular dumb-show and 'serious pantomime', rooted in popular entertainment going back much earlier. Pixérécourt and the English translations or rough adaptations of his melodramas appearing from the turn of the century were popular and influential, but both English and French melodrama drew on common popular traditions of mime to music which enabled Holcroft, while writing the first named English melodrama, to demand elaborate miming, and to expect both actors and audience to be able to interpret it. As Rede noted, *distinguishing* this from 'melo-drame', 'Kean and Young have both considered music essential – the latter gentleman is an excellent *pianiste*; and the late John Kemble, whenever he had music at his exits, was as particular in his observance of it as any serio-pantomimic performer.'³⁰ When he does write about 'melo-drame', which he takes as a separate genre, Rede couples it with 'serious pantomime', 'where a certain number of things are to be done upon the stage during the execution of so many bars of music; the cues too for entrances and exits are frequently only the changes of the air, and unless the ear is cultivated (if naturally bad) the performer will be led into error'.³¹

In understanding this we are hindered by a lack of the detailed information about travelling fairground and other barnstorming entertainments in the eighteenth century that is now becoming available for the nineteenth century. For as Marian Hannah Winter points out for France,³² the catalyst that transformed the theory of writers like Engel into what we know as melodrama was the theatre's contact with the popular tradition of entertainment, dumb-show, magic and illusion, and in particular, acrobatics. Melodramas were usually done in a mixed programme, including such arts as comic dancing and acrobatics, and, equally important, the same actors 'doubled up' in both. For melodramatic acting is essentially a physical, indeed a violently physical, style, dominated by athletic figures such as the ex-sailor T. P. Cooke, and O. Smith. Part of the related revolution in 'legitimate' acting styles was led by Edmund Kean, acrobatically trained in Richardson's travelling theatre and other

troupes. Even death on the stage was, for the melodramatic actor, energetic; 'exhibited by violent distortion, groaning, gasping for breath, stretching the body, raising, and then letting it fall';³³ or in the perilous rigid 'prat fall'. There is at least one account of a death so powerful that the actor was asked for – and gave – an encore.³⁴

For the acrobatic tradition of extreme controlled movement allowed melodrama to bring together two disparate dimensions: the concern with passion and movement, and the demand for the romantic and the picturesque. The style is essentially balletic and operatic – writers on the acting profession such as Rede indicate the importance of dancing and singing for training the actor. The actor must study even the ways of moving gracefully on and off the stage. The gestures themselves are large and precise: Boucicault demanded that they be 'distinct and deliberate. When you look at a person you do not turn your eye, but you turn your whole head. If you want to point, do *that* (*with the arm straight out from the shoulder*) – the action must go from the shoulder.'³⁵ The action creates a picture and moves into tableau. 'Another thing is, do not let your gesture be too short . . . You do not know how long you can rest upon a good one. It tires you, but it will not tire the spectator.'³⁶

Yet the nature of the gestures gives the acting a constant sense of *energy*. This is related constantly to the emotive inner structure of each scene, and to the other characters. The actors in melodrama react to each other with the direct intensity of a magnetic field. Engel illustrates this with a picture of a character reacting backwards and forwards from a snake, and in Siddons's translation declares, 'the rule which subsists with respect to the desire which carries us towards an agreeable object agrees equally well with that which removes us from an unpleasant one'.³⁷ Equally important, the tendency of melodrama to flow into the significant static tableau is energised by the basic effect of violent destruction of this tableau, of alternation of mood and scene. Eisenstein rightly identified this as a key effect of melodrama, and, as 'montage', took it over as the basis of his cinematic technique. It is the 'dynamic' effect of 'parallel action' that can 'mill the extraordinary, the unusual, the fantastic, from boring, prosaic and everyday existence'.³⁸

This 'montage' of mood and gesture, which can be found built into any good melodrama writing, was achieved by rapid scene changing, using sliding 'flats'. But it exists even within a single character in a scene or speech. As Boucicault also wrote, the personality exists on

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three planes – the 'inner man, as when he is alone'; the 'domestic man, as he is to his family', and the 'man as he stands before the world . . . they are all in the one man, and the dramatist does not know his business unless he puts them into the one character'.³⁹

An example of this can be seen in J. B. Buckstone's *Luke the Labourer: or the Lost Son* (1826), usually taken as the first fully anglicised melodrama, and a good early example of the way in which the 'heroic' style of Pixérécourt becomes transferred into a domestic situation. Luke, when an unemployed labourer, had been refused help from Farmer Wakefield, and had to watch his wife die of starvation. In Act I, Scene 2, Luke in revenge has contrived to have Wakefield arrested for debts, and he enters the cottage to confront the farmer's family, unaware that Wakefield has been released and is sitting, in a domestic tableau, reunited with his wife and daughter. As he strides through the door he is a confident individual, his 'private' self. He reaches the front-of-stage before Wakefield calls out, 'Well, sir, your business here?' and Luke crumples. He is again the labourer in front of his master, his 'public' self. 'I ha noa business in particular, I ha noa – only a – how came you out o' gaol?' As the dialogue develops between Luke and Wakefield, memories of his past injuries overwhelm Luke. He talks to Wakefield, but also to himself – he becomes his 'middle self': 'I were out o' work week after week, until I had not a penny in the world, nor a bit o' bread to put into mine nor my wife's mouth. I then had a wife, but she sickened and died – yes, died – all – all along o' you.' Finally he passes into reverie, his 'private' self, ignoring the listeners as he relives his agony of distress. 'I sat thinking, wi' my wife in my arms – she were ill, very ill.' He is only woken back to his 'middle self' by the impact of Wakefield's daughter throwing herself at his feet, begging him to save her father from more confrontation. Luke cries, '[my eyes] are dry as dust again', and he grapples with Wakefield. The actor must be able to convey these shifts in self-awareness within the total emotional flow of the scene, which has an almost balletic structuring. In performance, however, the characters have the essential help of the music, which underlines the phases of the action and works alongside the strong rhythmic patterns of the prose. Without music, the scene has only a vestige of its potential impact.

Such stylisation relates melodrama, I would argue, more closely to popular traditions than Wordsworth was able to come in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth took the lyric simplicity of the ballad, but did not have the critical vocabulary to explain its dramatic

formulation of experience into basic and universal themes of love and death, fear and joy. Aware that ballads were not naturalistic, he fell back on his inadequate definition of his own poetry as 'selecting from the real language of men'⁴⁰ (my italics). But melodrama, while for many of its early critics it achieved Wordsworth's aims of expressing the elementary passions of mankind, was also in the direct tradition of thematic ritualisation that gave those passions an appropriate form. As John Cawelti has written of popular literature, melodrama, in addition to narrative, possesses the structure of 'collective ritual, game and dream'.⁴¹ Melodrama contains within itself the basic ballad pattern. It also includes to a significant degree popular dance and song: *Black Ey'd Susan* was not only inspired by Gay's song, it used throughout nautical airs and embodied both sea and rural dances.

Melodrama and the two traditions

There are two common misconceptions about melodrama. The first is that it is synonymous with Victorian nineteenth-century theatre. This was of course a complex pattern of genres, including different varieties of tragedy and comedy, farce, 'serious' and 'comic' pantomime, burletta, ballet, and burlesque. The second is that it was a simple and 'popular' form. The reality is more complicated. For the first four decades of the century, melodrama was watched and enjoyed by a wide range of social classes.⁴² By the mid century, partly because of changing patterns of theatre-going, but also because of wider changes in attitudes to emotion and intellect, melodrama began to split into two streams. Even with a production such as that by Charles Kean of Dion Boucicault's *The Corsican Brothers* (Princess Theatre, 1852), we find a refinement of theme and treatment addressed to a 'respectable' audience.

The universal themes of joy and terror implicit in early melodrama become consciously examined – even the telepathy of the Corsican brothers is at one remove from the simple guilt and innocence of *A Tale of Mystery*. By the time Irving produced Leopold Lewis's *The Bells* to a dress-suited Lyceum audience in 1871, guilt has become subtly internalised: Mathias is sentenced and strangled by nothing but his own conscience. The genre of melodrama had become available for the complexities of fiction – Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886); Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) or Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898).