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Introduction

Frank Rahill gave a good definition of melodrama fifty years ago:

> Melodrama is a form of dramatic composition in prose partaking of the nature of tragedy, comedy, pantomime, and spectacle, and intended for a popular audience. Primarily concerned with situation and plot, it calls upon mimed action extensively and employs a more or less fixed complement of stock characters, the most important of which are a suffering heroine or hero, a persecuting villain, and a benevolent comic. It is conventionally moral and humanitarian in point of view and sentimental and optimistic in temper, concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished. Characteristically it offers elaborate scenic accessories and miscellaneous divertissements and introduces music freely, typically to underscore dramatic effect.[1]

As a stage genre, melodrama developed from the 1770s onward all over Europe, in a welter of hybridization that includes musical, spectacular, theatrical, and dramatic genres. Good new work on this early history has been and is being done, some of which emphasizes melodrama's continuity with earlier genres rather than disruption, innovation, and generic change.[2] Most scholars, however, agree on the French Revolution as the catalyst of disruption and change that precipitated the form of melodrama best represented in the works of Charles Renée de Pixérécourt. The 'first' English melodrama is still usually said to be Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery*, his sleek and powerful adaptation of Pixérécourt's *Coelina; ou l'enfant du mystère* (1800), presented as an afterpiece at Covent Garden in 1802. Though technically not the very first English melodrama, Holcroft's play does conveniently mark a historical epoch in English drama, as, in the subsequent decades, French melodrama was grafted onto native English stock. English melodrama became the dominant form of the genre – and began to spread. As Matthew Buckley puts it in the first essay of this volume, 'If melodrama arrived in England from France, it was from England, and through the forms developed there in its first four decades of growth, that it reached the world.'[3]

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Not only was French melodrama grafted onto English stock during the first decades of the nineteenth century, but also during the eighteenth century, French melodrama had itself drawn on English sources in drama, theatre, and literature.[4] Thus the prehistory of English melodrama is complex and multidirectional, involving exchanges among German, French, and Italian sources that were themselves, to varying degrees and in different ways, inspired by or developed in relation to English models – such as English ballad opera, English forms of pantomime, bourgeois sentimental drama (and sentimentalism in general), and Gothic stories and drama.

What This *Companion* Provides

This volume of essays opens with new work on the history of melodrama in England, where the genre reached its high-water mark in the nineteenth century. The first section of the volume, 'Histories of English Melodrama', explores the early history of English melodrama and then traces its evolution as a genre through its important early subgenres (Gothic, nautical, domestic), ending with a consideration of the theatres and audiences associated with melodrama. It is important to stress that these chapters overlap in important ways, for the unfolding history of English melodrama is not by any means as strictly sequential as the arrangement of these chapters might at first glance suggest. Matthew Buckley explains in the opening essay that the story of early English melodrama is expansive rather than sequential; each subgenre is not replaced by the next, but survives and changes along with new forms as they emerge.

Part II, 'Melodramatic Technique', focuses on form – on melodramatic music, melodramatic acting, and melodramatic spectacle. These techniques guided audiences to experience the rhythm of melodrama, whose temporality might be described as periods of suspenseful absorption pierced by suddenly intensified moments of shock, terror, or sentiment. There are reasons to believe that melodrama's rhythmic patterning of affective response is a particularly modern phenomenon. In his essay on *Jack Sheppard*, for example, Matthew Buckley explains that melodramatic shock derives from the 'political modernity' of the French Revolution and develops toward the 'perceptual modernity' of cinema and other mass media; and in 'Refugee Theatre' he argues that the repeated traumatic violence experienced in the wake of the French Revolution yielded a melodramatic form that 'rehearsed, reinforced, and catalyzed the continual trauma and psychological dislocation of modern life'. In this view – with which I agree – melodrama is characterized by a serial aesthetic of affective sensation and spectacular shock.[5] Other scholars and critics, too, have noticed that melodrama 'oscillates' between

absorption and sudden shock (represented aesthetically by shifts in specta-
torial attention), and that its 'emotional economy' is 'best figured as a series
of waves'.[6]

Part III of this volume examines melodrama in relation to cultural
discourses of gender, class, empire, and race. The most important point
to grasp in Part III is that melodrama does not simply reflect but actively
contributes to the emergence and development of these modern categories
of social and cultural analysis. Important works by Elaine Hadley and
Bruce A. McConachie have approached the effort to describe this relation
historically and theoretically. Not only the titles of their studies,
Melodramatic Tactics and *Melodramatic Formations*, but even the term
'melodramatic' (as opposed to 'melodrama') signals the fact that their
interest moves beyond the stage genre toward cultural extensions and
other expressions of it. To put this point another way: they historicize
the genre by seeing it within a larger cultural context. But both works show
the complexity of this relation. For McConachie, 'reading formation' means
reading without imagining that text and context are separable entities.[7] Like
Hadley and McConachie, Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou set out
not only to place the emergence of the genre within its cultural context, but
also to insist that, in general, 'melodrama played an important role in the
cultural dynamics of the nineteenth century'.[8] Moreover, the categories of
cultural analysis treated here – gender, class, race, empire – are separable
from one another only heuristically; so these essays – like the essays in
Parts I and II – go together as an overlapping set.

Think briefly of gender as an example. With the rise of companionate
marriage – which predates melodrama – women felt more independent from
their families than before, but at the same time were less protected by family
constraints than they had been in the past; therefore, they were more subject
to certain dangers. Seduction melodrama attempts to think through this
social problem, and one can clearly see in these plays gender norms in the
long process of their formation. These plays look at the problem from
various angles, many blaming the woman for her moral and sexual lapse,
while others seem to defend the heroine against what is clearly a sexual
double standard. This ideological disparity in attitudes can exist within the
same play, leading some critics to argue that melodrama not only reinforces
gender conventions but also points the way toward greater freedom
from them.[9] Often the seducer is of a higher class – though 'class' is not
precisely the correct term, especially early on, since the language of class
and class-consciousness is itself in the process of formation. This is meant
simply as a very brief example to show the inextricable intersection of
these dimensions of social experience and analysis, a phenomenon amply

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illustrated in the essays themselves. Melodrama portrays both femininity and masculinity in flux and under pressure from a changing world; in melodrama we can see these pressures writ large, even in the contradictions articulated in and between individual plays.

Finally, the volume expands – as melodrama itself does – in Part IV, which focuses on 'Extensions of Melodrama' into other genres, media, discourses, and social practices. The vast extension of melodrama begins near its very beginnings as a genre and continues today – in novels, films and other forms of moving pictures, in the musical, in psychoanalysis, and in forms of contemporary mass culture (including sport and reality TV). This is why Peter Brooks's famous formulation still holds true: melodrama is a 'central poetry' of modernity.[10] At this point, 'melodrama has been a dominant shaping force of modernity for over two hundred and fifty years. We live, still, within its aesthetic regime in the twenty-first century.'[11] Though focused specifically on English melodrama, then, the variety of perspectives represented in this volume will demonstrate why and how melodrama is still a 'central poetry' of modern life, along with how and why the term 'melodramatic' has come to mean so many different things in current usage. Melodrama is both a genre and a mode. This volume begins firmly with the genre and then moves toward various ways of conceiving the mode.

Thus, the organization of *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama* forms a large part of its argument. It aims to trace the historical development of the stage genre – along with a detailed examination of its formal techniques – and then to explore both its influence on cultural formations and categories of cultural analysis and also its extensions in, to, and as other genres and discourses.

Scholarship on Melodrama: A Brief Overview

The turn to melodrama as a serious topic of study began about fifty years ago. Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976) attracted a great deal of attention and is still highly (and rightly) influential today, not only for its argument that melodrama is 'the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era' but also for its discussions of melodrama's central role in realist fiction and psychoanalysis.[12] But Brooks's study concentrates mainly on French melodrama.

And in any case, by the time Brooks had published his seminal work, foundational work specifically on English melodrama had already been

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published by Michael Booth, whose *English Melodrama* (1965) has never yet been properly appreciated or digested. Nor has Frank Rahill's *The World of Melodrama* (1967) been given as much critical attention as it deserves. Both are still extremely useful.[13] In addition, Martin Meisel's *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (1983), which focuses on intermittent pictorial narration – as a narrative form – and analyzes formal links between melodrama, narrative painting, and illustrated novels, has become an indispensable work on English melodrama and its consideration as a stage genre.[14]

On melodrama more broadly construed, film theorists – and especially feminist film theorists – were publishing great work at least by the 1980s. Christine Gledhill's edition of essays, *Home is Where the Heart Is: Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (1987), with its broad representation of issues and its powerful introduction, might be taken as an exemplary collection. Historians of film and television have unquestionably continued to be a driving force in the development of work on melodrama – now extending to melodrama all over the world. The description and critique of melodrama that emerged in film studies has caused scholars of stage melodrama to see the nineteenth-century stage genre anew; to place melodrama at the centre rather than the margins of nineteenth-century culture; and to attend to a long view, not only of the origins of melodrama but also of what it later becomes. Essays by David Mayer and Jane M. Gaines in this volume show that early cinema offers the best body of evidence today for what melodramatic practice was like on the nineteenth-century stage. But the relationship has also been reciprocal, as film studies continues to profit from the study of stage melodrama too.[15]

Many important books on melodrama have been published recently; in fact it might well be said that the field has been exploding with good work. Two edited volumes of essays are exemplary for work in the 1990s: Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill's *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* (1994); and Hays and Nikolopoulou's *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (1996). The former regards melodrama as 'an agent of modernity', while the latter emphasizes the genre's historical specificity at the time of its emergence.[16] We might pause to note that in the first case, the emphasis falls on melodrama in its extensive sense and depends on the assumption that the definition of melodrama encompasses stage, picture, and screen. Peter Brooks's study also favours this extensive sense, as do the works of Bruce McConachie and Elaine Hadley, already mentioned, though their 'extensions' of melodrama are not limited to other genres and media, but involve melodrama's expression in other historical discourses: for Brooks, realist fiction and psychoanalysis; for McConachie, the rhetorics embodying 'the decline of one type of cultural hegemony and the gradual rise

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of another'; and for Hadley, social modes of 'theatricalized dissent'.[17] All of these approaches are as rigorously historical as the essays collected by Hays and Nicolopoulou, but in very different ways. What we can see is a developing understanding of the range of differences and overlaps between considering 'melodrama' (as a genre) and 'the melodramatic' (as a mode of expression in other genres, discourses, and practices).

Other important studies have positioned melodrama in relation to historical developments of other kinds. Jane Moody's *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (2000), for example, helps us to see melodrama within the sprawling development of theatrical performances conditioned by the Licensing Act of 1737, which had restricted 'spoken drama' to the Patent Houses (Covent Garden and Drury Lane, and, later, the Haymarket). That Act had had the effect of relegating all other theatrical performances to an 'illegitimate' cultural realm which, however, expanded to become highly productive and innovative, developing many genres – including melodrama – that evaded the Act by incorporating dance, pantomime, banners and signs, song, and orchestral music in order to fly under the radar of the restrictions on 'spoken drama'. Moody's study aptly shows that the relaxation of these strictures in 1843 did as much harm as good to this burgeoning 'illegitimate' theatre culture, for it exposed all plays to the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays.[18] Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow's *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840–1880* (2001) focuses in detail on the composition of audiences for seven representative theatres in four different areas of London, while Kate Newey's work on women playwrights – importantly focused, as melodrama was, on gender – expands our sense of who created melodramatic plays.[19]

Historical methodology in theatre research has been developing too. Important statements on methodology by Jacky Bratton and Tracy C. Davis tend to agree in recommending that melodrama should be seen within a larger catchment of performance histories in the period. Both emphasize the complexity of the context within which any interpretation of a play must emerge, including performance conventions and their histories; repetitions and revisions of common figures and tropes; and social forces outside the theatre. Bratton's *New Readings in Theatre History* (2003), for example, advocates approaching the field through the concept of 'intertheatricality', that 'web of mutual understanding between potential audiences and their players . . . that spans a lifetime or more' and includes all sorts of sources of knowledge and knowingness. She proposes an 'intertheatrical reading' of the historical record.[20] Davis's emphasis on 'repertoire' likewise cuts across genre difference in order to take account of 'processes of iteration, revision, citation, and incorporation' that link one

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play with another.[21] Like Bratton's, her method would situate melodrama within a larger body of performances while also giving due credit to the forms and pleasures found specifically in the repetitive, citational, and 'generic' element of these plays.

Most recently, digital projects have exponentially improved our access to source materials. Spearheaded by Richard Pearson, the University of Worcester's *Victorian Plays Project* provides an archive of play texts from T. H. Lacy's *Acting Editions*, while the Royal Holloway project *Buried Treasures* – led by Jacky Bratton in collaboration with the British Library – provides over 2,000 plays submitted to the Lord Chamberlain between 1852 and 1863.[22] In 2003, Matthew Buckley at Rutgers University launched the Melodrama Research Consortium (MRC), with the aim of providing a platform for research networks, working groups, and a comprehensive database of nineteenth-century melodramas.[23]

Meanwhile important special issues of journals, as well as new books devoted to melodrama continue to emerge apace.[24]

The writers of the essays in this volume have been central to these developments in the study of melodrama. Therefore, this volume provides not only a wide-ranging introduction to the topic but also a good indication of the ongoing progress and future directions of research in the field – future directions in which the historical, the aesthetic, the formal, and the theoretical are productively intertwined.

Notes

1. Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), xiv.
2. See Matthew Buckley, 'The Formation of Melodrama', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre 1737–1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 457–75.
3. Matthew Buckley, 'Early English Melodrama', 15.
4. See Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (*passim*) for a good introduction to these interactions; and see Carolyn Williams, 'Melodrama', in *The New Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 195–8.
5. Matthew Buckley, 'Sensations of Celebrity: *Jack Sheppard* and the Mass Audience', *Victorian Studies*, 44 (2002): 423–63; 'Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity's Loss', *Theatre Journal*, 61.2 (2009): 175–190, quoted passage on 355. See also Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
6. Carolyn Williams, 'Moving Pictures: George Eliot and Melodrama', in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York: Routledge, 2004), 113; Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31.

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7. Bruce A. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), xi; Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

8. Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou (eds.), *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), viii.

9. For example, see Léon Metayer, 'What the Heroine Taught, 1830–1870', in *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*, eds. Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 235–44.

10. Peter Brooks, 'Melodrama: A Central Poetry', in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995 [1976]), 200. Brooks borrows 'central poetry' from Wallace Stevens.

11. Williams, 'Melodrama', 193.

12. Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 15.

13. Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965); Rahill, *The World of Melodrama*. Other important work before Brooks includes George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre, 1792–1914: A Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956) and Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Early Nineteenth-Century Drama, 1800–1850*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) [vol. 4 of Nicoll's *A History of English Drama*, second edition, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952–59)].

14. Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

15. Laura Mulvey, '"It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession": The Melodrama's Role in the Development of Contemporary Film Theory', in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, eds. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 121–33; David Mayer, *Stagestruck Filmmaker: D. W. Griffith and the American Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).

16. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (eds.), *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, 1; Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou (eds.), *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*.

17. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, xii.

18. Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

19. Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840–1880* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001); Katherine Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); see also Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin (eds.), *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

20. Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37–8.

21. Tracy C. Davis, 'Nineteenth-Century Repertoire', *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film*, 36 (2009): 7; and her Introduction to *The Broadview Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Performance*, ed. Tracy C. Davis (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012), 13–26.

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22. Juliet John, 'Melodrama and its Criticism: An Essay in Memory of Sally Ledger', *19*: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 8 (2009), http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.496.
23. See https://melodramaresearchconsortium.org.
24. Matthew Buckley (ed.), *Modern Drama*, 55 (2012), special issue on melodrama; Marcie Frank (ed.), *Criticism*, 35 (2013), special issue on melodrama; Janice Norwood (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film*, 42 (2015), special issue on 'Adaptation and the Stage in the Nineteenth Century'. Jonathan Goldberg, *Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); *Melodrama Unbound*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); and *The Melodramatic Moment, 1790–1820*, eds. Katherine Hambridge and Jonathan Hicks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).