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Refugee Theatre: Melodrama and Modernity's Loss

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Melodrama has never been given its proper place; its birth dates from *Coelina*.
—Charles Nodier (1843)¹

Melodrama seems from the start to have been a genre bound intimately to exile. Its heroes and heroines, its suffering children, lost mothers, and despairing fathers, even its monstrous villains, are all exiles—actors somehow swept away from their proper place, their right and natural home and family. I began with a desire to speak to this foundational obsession—to look more closely at how and why melodrama so firmly attached itself to experiences of dislocation and displacement, loss and fracture, and to think about what this refugee theatre might tell us of the formation of modern drama, and of the broader history of drama in modernity.

However, as I pursued the topic, my attention was drawn to an even more striking phenomenon than that of melodrama's fixation on exile: namely, the exile of melodrama itself from the history of modern drama and, in large part, from the history of modern culture. That exile was remarkably swift and violent, charged with emotion, prolonged long after any conceivable justification for it had been exhausted—no less

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¹ Charles Nodier, introduction to *Théâtre Choisi*, by Guilbert de Pixérécourt (1843; reprint, Geneva: Slatkin Reprints, 1971), 1:ii. For convenience, I quote from Daniel Gerould's useful translation of Nodier's seminal text, which appears, with translations of additional commentaries by Pixérécourt, in Daniel Gerould and Marvin Carlson, eds., *Pixérécourt: Four Melodramas* (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Collection Publications, 2002).

astonishing in its way than any melodramatic exile. If, like most, we follow Nodier's ardent cue and take Guilbert de Pixérécourt's staunchly moralistic *Coelina*—a sensational success of 1800—to be the foundational model of the form, there seems little reason for legitimate culture to have done anything but embrace melodrama, and at first that is just what seems to have happened. As Nodier and Pixérécourt both argued, the new genre aimed not to derogate the drama but to elevate and restore it as an art that would instill virtue and decency in a population reeling from the bloodshed of the French Revolution, and the new form's essential conservatism and commitment to order and morality were recognized immediately by Pixérécourt's critics.² Yet within ten years, critical evaluation of the genre had become marked by an extraordinary level of hostility, and within twenty—at the very moment when its popularity made it into a dominant form—melodrama had become Exhibit A in the degenerate decline of the drama. By the 1830s, this first new genre of the century, despite its breathtaking success, was deemed a vulgarity fit only for the ignorant and illiterate. Pixérécourt himself, writing in 1843 at the end of his career, indicted the romantic melodrama that stood as his drama's obvious progeny as a "filthy and obscene genre," "evil, dangerous, and immoral," "devoid of interest or truth."³ For almost the next century and a half the form was, as Allardyce Nicoll aptly put it, "despised and neglected" by critics and scholars of the drama, a genre worthy of notice only as the idiotic foil to modern drama's development of a new, legitimate art.⁴

Melodramatic Redemption

In the last few decades that evaluation has been dramatically reversed, as critical interest in popular and mass culture has turned to melodrama as a central element of modern narrative culture, finding in it an essential mode of consciousness in the post-sacred world; a core rhetoric of emergent mass discourses of community and identity; a foundational aesthetic in the development of the novel, film, and television; a dominant language in the modern conduct of public life and politics; and a shaping force in the creation of modern conceptions of family, gender, race, and nation. No longer exiled from cultural history, melodrama seems now central to it, an essential thread in the warp and weave of global modernity.⁵

²Nodier, introduction, i-xvi; Guilbert de Pixérécourt, "Melodrama" (1832) and "Final Reflections on Melodrama" (1843), trans. Daniel Gerould, in Gerould and Carlson, *Pixérécourt*, 310–18, esp. 313–14. For critical reactions to *Coelina*, see Pixérécourt, *Théâtre Choisi*, 9–11.

³Pixérécourt, "Final Reflections," 318.

⁴Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama, 1660–1900*, 2nd ed., vol. 4: *Early Nineteenth-Century Drama, 1800–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 100. On the trajectory and contexts of this derogation and expulsion, see Jane Moody, "The Disintegration of Legitimate Theatre," in *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 48–78; and Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History, Theatre and Performance Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁵I cannot offer a comprehensive bibliography of scholarship that illustrates these general perspectives and the trend they define, but it is possible to point out some landmarks and examples. For the most influential description of melodrama as a post-sacred mode of consciousness, see Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). For treatment of it as a core rhetoric of community and identity in early mass culture, see Elaine Hadley's excellent *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), as well as the now substantial body of work on melodrama and American popular culture, especially David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theatre and Culture, 1800–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Jeffrey D. Mason, *Melo-*

Yet, if the process of melodrama's exile and redemption seems astonishing, the questions implied by this revised view are unsettling. If melodrama has informed the modern imagination in such pervasive and fundamental ways, then how far does its influence extend, and to what effect? To what degree have we been conditioned—are we still conditioned—by its peculiar way of seeing, enmeshed in its imaginary view of the world? Perhaps more importantly, how and why did it gain such influence, and why has it taken so long for scholars to recognize its role? The potential extent of the problem is evident not least in the way recent scholarship has come to melodramatize the story of melodrama itself. As Ben Singer has noted, melodrama's critical history now resembles "the scenario of a classic melodrama, [in which] the long-abused victim finally experience[s] a sudden, unexpected twist of fate." Such a characterization fits well the general tenor of revisionist studies, which, even as they argue persuasively for a stronger recognition of melodrama's influence on the cultural imagination, present the form's recuperation as the rightful restoration of an innocent drama sheltered in the homes of the poor, exiled to the margins by an evil band of elitist villains.⁶

drama and the Myth of America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); and Bruce McConachie's exemplary *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870*, *Studies in Theatre History and Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992). For representative studies of melodrama's role in the aesthetic development of the novel, film, and television, a field now very well-developed, see, in addition to Brooks, Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama in the Women's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987); Marcia Landy, ed., *Imitations of Life: A Reader in Film and Television Melodrama* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991); and Ben Singer's outstanding *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). For melodrama's role as a language of public and political life, see, in addition to Hadley, Mason, and McConachie, Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). For exemplary studies of melodrama as a shaping force in the ideologies of family, gender, race, and nation, see, in addition to Mason, McConachie, and Williams, Martha Vicinus's influential "Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama," *New Literary History* 13 (1981): 127–43; and Gabrielle Hyslop's equally important "Deviant and Dangerous Behaviour: Women in Melodrama," *Journal of Popular Culture* 19 (1985): 65–77. For interesting examples of scholarship exploring melodrama in global contexts, see Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger, *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); and Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann, *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005). On the topic of melodrama and modernity, see Singer, who provides both an excellent review and discussion of modern melodrama scholarship, a fuller bibliography of the extensive scholarship on film melodrama, and a groundbreaking theorization of melodrama and its place in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity. A number of recent collections of essays explore multiple facets of these perspectives and provide a good sense of the impressive growth and development of the field, including Jacky Bratton and Jim Cook, eds., *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* (London: British Film Institute, 1994); Michael Hays and Anatasia Nikolopoulou, eds., *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (London: Macmillan, 1999); and John Mercer and Martin Shingler, eds., *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004). I have not included studies of melodrama that are not in English nor those primarily concerned with topics other than melodrama itself, but a few especially significant contributions that bear on the early history of melodrama that I discuss here include Bratton's invaluable *New Readings*; Tracy Davis's essential study of *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Martin Meisel's now immensely influential *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Moody's paradigmatic *Illegitimate Theatre*; and Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶ Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 3. Like Singer, I do not intend to suggest that these recuperative projects are unwarranted or unpersuasive. Such revisionist accounts, it is worth pointing out,

The distortions involved in such a perspective are evident not least in the manner by which scholarship seems to cling to melodramatic illusions about melodrama itself—in the multitude of ways in which the genre’s cultural history is still naturalized, its formal development still obscured and displaced, its social character and impact presented so as to fit the needs of a defensive criticism. Such tendencies are apparent in the way some scholars continue to assume that melodrama’s basic aesthetic emerged fully formed and remained essentially static; that its narrative structures, characters, devices, and techniques were merely innocent and obvious conventions—neutral, interchangeable templates through which popular consciousness found varied articulation; that its individual works form an undifferentiated mass of ephemera expressive of nothing more significant than the faddish, commodified interests of a voracious and distracted mass audience. Such assumptions underlie the marked critical proclivities to treat melodrama not as a specific historical genre but as a transitive modern mode; to focus not on melodrama’s primary existence as a theatrical form but its secondary existence in novels, film, television, and cultural discourses; and to interrogate melodrama’s later history and limits rather than its origins and formative dynamic.⁷ It is a telling, incredible thing to note that four decades after Peter Brooks’s persuasive case for melodrama’s centrality in the modern cultural imagination, the best formal history of the theatrical melodrama remains, as Jane Moody has pointed out, Michael Booth’s *English Melodrama*—a work published half a century ago.⁸

The problem with such tendencies is not simply a question of focus: rather, they bespeak what seems a widespread disinclination to confront directly melodrama’s historical particularity, contingency, and impact, reinforcing instead a misleading sense of its givenness as a modern way of thinking and representing, of its epiphenomenal neutrality as a natural reflection of modern culture—and of the genre itself as a product and mimetic imitation of modern consciousness rather than an active and powerful force upon it.⁹ If we are to understand melodrama in history, and not

participate in larger efforts to contest and revise Romantic and modernist constructions of literary and cultural history, and the tendency to present melodrama’s critical history in such polarized terms is due not least to the oppositional tensions that have until very recently characterized those efforts. One distortion involved in such tendencies (though not noted) is a consequent derogation of earlier critical evaluation to that position of reductive revilement into which such work placed melodrama itself. For a useful example of the problem, see Bratton’s discussion of “The Melodramatic ‘Decline of the Drama,’” in *New Readings*, 12–16.

⁷The latter two tendencies are illustrated best by the development of the field and indicated by the works cited in footnote 5. The tendency to treat melodrama as a mode goes back at least to Brooks, though it emerges logically from Robert Heilman’s *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968) and Eric Bentley’s *Life of the Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), and becomes more marked in the ensuing decades. Hadley (*Melodramatic Tactics*) and Williams (*Playing the Race Card*) adopt similar perspectives, and Singer (*Melodrama and Modernity*, 6) draws attention to the extremity such views could reach by quoting Russell Merritt’s claim that “melodrama as a coherent dramatic category never existed.” See Merritt, “Melodrama: Post-Mortem for a Phantom Genre,” *Wide Angle* 5, no. 3 (1983): 24–31. Yet even Singer, despite arguing that “it is important for us to try to delineate melodrama as a genre” if we are to understand “its specific historical manifestations and variations, and so that our conception of melodrama lines up, at least roughly, with that assumed in historical discourses that we wish to analyze,” falls back for his own analysis on a “middle-ground” conception of melodrama as a “cluster concept [that involves] different combinations of . . . key constitutive elements” (*Melodrama and Modernity*, 7).

⁸Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 8n18.

⁹Even Singer, whose work pursues so well melodrama’s deep imbrication in modern experience, opens his study by “situating melodrama . . . as a product and a reflection of modernity—of modernity’s

merely re-imagine history as melodrama, it seems necessary to resist and even reverse these inclinations: to interrogate how melodrama came into being, how it functioned and gained aesthetic force, and how it engaged with, and shaped, the production of modern culture and consciousness.

Critical treatments of melodrama's initial development often emphasize the indeterminacy of its early formal history, variously noting its many continuities with gothic drama, with the popular drama of the boulevard, and the spectacular theatre of late eighteenth-century Britain; calling attention to Rousseau's original use of the term decades before Pixérécourt; and suggesting that the latter's foundational work may be recognized less as a striking novelty than as a skillful combination of pre-existing elements.¹⁰ Yet, if the formal conditions for melodrama seem to have been in place by the 1790s at the latest, the cultural conditions for its creation and sudden growth were realized, as Nodier argued from the outset, only by the specific, sustained experience of the French revolutionary decade, and it is in the context of that experience that the particular historical logic of melodramatic form, and the specific manner in which it participated in the formation of modern consciousness, first become evident.

Revolution and Trauma

Many scholars of melodrama, following the lead of Peter Brooks, have drawn attention to one basic attribute of the French revolutionary decade's shared experience: namely, its violent disenchantment with the world and its inauguration of a post-sacred sense of the order and structure of reality. However, the revolutionary experience was distinguished not merely by the enormous, terrifying magnitude of that crisis and collapse of belief, but also by its horrifying shape and character and its astonishing development over time. Rather than taking place as one great and awful cataclysm, the Revolution unfolded in real time—and over a very long time—as an almost unbearable series of unexpected and uncontrollable political and social conflicts, each seeming to mark a logical endpoint, each leading, within months, weeks, or even days, to a previously unthinkable collapse, the whole tracing a grinding, slipping, irresistible movement from scandal and crisis to conflict, collapse, violence, war, and finally terror. Rather than bringing into being its proffered vision of utopian political community, the Revolution followed, for contemporaries, a relentless, agonizing, accelerating course of disenchantment, undercutting with increasing, inexorable force a whole sequence of efforts, each a bit more desperate, a bit more absolute, to re-imagine and re-establish national and communal identity, and consuming in the process the force and legitimacy of virtually all prior and traditional models of collective unity. The Revolution's fatalities and dislocations were shocking, to be sure, but more frightening and horrific were the ways revolutionary events unexpectedly and relentlessly undermined, seemingly dissolved, the very bases of social structure: fracturing kinship systems, rendering obsolete the performative rituals of civil society, and engendering, finally, a widespread loss of belief in the efficacy of language itself as an instrument of truth. Its aftermath was marked by political disillusionment on all sides, and it produced, most directly, not a widespread sense of newfound freedom, but a terrible sense of loss and widely

experiential qualities, its ideological fluctuations, its cultural anxieties, its intertextual cross-currents, its social demographics, and its commercial practices"; see Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 1.

¹⁰ The best concise version of this familiar narrative is still that offered by Michael Booth in *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 40–47.

shared, complicated feelings of anger, guilt, and complicity. This extended trauma was not experienced equally everywhere, but it was certainly felt with unprecedented immediacy by all—its force magnified by immensely expanded powers of communication, spectacular display, and martial violence, its actions rendered all the more vivid by their invocation of theatrical and dramatic models of representation.¹¹ Like the events of September 11, the cataclysms of the Revolution were broadcast to a rapt audience drawn ever closer by the increasingly dramatic progression of events, and haunted afterward by the guilt of having witnessed, helplessly, the devolution of noble struggle into a seemingly unstoppable wave of retributive violence and mass execution.

Such a close description of the Revolution is useful not only because it reminds us of the traumatized condition of melodrama's first audiences, but also because it makes more evident the degree to which the melodramas of the nineteenth century's first decades invoked and played upon the particular patterns, typical events, and exemplary situations of this extended traumatic experience. The archetypal characters of those early works—the orphan, the mute witness to crime, the dispossessed heir, the exiled aristocratic villain, the suffering young woman seeking the solace of a lost world of domestic stability—become more visible as both figural and exemplary, not merely types resonant with a vague post-sacred condition of modernity, but figures typical of the real dislocations and the more specific sorts of disillusionment and loss of the time. Similarly, the narrative structure of those early dramas gains clarity in this light as a pattern grounded in the specific history of revolutionary crisis: from the inexplicable corruption of patriarchal authority and the intrusion of unexpected threats of murderous violence, to the exilic fracture of domestic community and the devolution of social conflict into a contest of martial strength, early melodrama enacted a pattern of events that corresponds recognizably with the crises of revolutionary experience. Indeed, Pixérécourt's *Coelina* hews so closely to this historical structure as to be legible as an allegory of the decade it closes.

Recognition of early melodrama's historical figuration makes more evident, in turn, the ways in which the genre refigured the traumatic history it rehearsed, and these reveal something of the manner in which the new form gained aesthetic force, psychological impact, and ideological effect. The most obvious of these is melodrama's conservative moral vision, the way the form framed its narratives of trauma from the start within closing fantasies of redemptive justice and restored community. Nodier viewed such moral framing as Pixérécourt's finest achievement and the genre's distinguishing and most redeeming feature, pointing out that

[a]t the birth of melodrama, Christianity did not exist any more than if it had never existed. The confessional was shut, the pulpit was empty, the political rostrum resounded only with dangerous paradoxes. . . . Where would human beings go to imbibe instructions able to guide them . . . if it were not to melodrama?¹²

Equally significant if less obvious, however, is what happened within that frame, for early melodrama didn't merely bracket its reenactment of historical trauma; it also compressed and condensed that history, refiguring its extended action into a sphere

¹¹ For more on the topic of the French Revolution and its relation to theatrical and dramatic representation, see Matthew S. Buckley, *Tragedy Walks the Streets: The French Revolution in the Making of Modern Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

¹² Nodier, introduction, xv.

and scale of much greater immediacy, accelerating and paring down the development of its successive forms of crisis, reinscribing social and political conflict into the more intensively theatrical dynamics of personal and domestic relations. The aim of these tactics was not moral didacticism, but emotional force and intensity of effect, and their development was driven not by didactic intent, but by dramatic necessity. As Nodier again points out, early melodrama's spectators "had just enacted in the streets and on the public squares the greatest drama of history. . . . These solemn spectators required emotions comparable to those they had been deprived of by the return to order."¹³ To meet those *sensational* requirements—to produce emotional effect through spectacular force—the new drama had to project not merely a reimagined experience, but a heightened, concentrated reality, and it did so by bringing into a single, rapid movement the extended comic and tragic actions of recent history, adopting the periphrastic language of extreme emotion and peeling away all but the most intense and wrenching elements of that prolonged trauma's successive series of conflicts, shocks, and surprises.

Nodier's evaluation draws attention to Pixérécourt's foundational contributions to these much more complicated formal innovations as well, but he presents them, tellingly, in apologetic, even cautionary tones, as methodological achievements secondary to the new genre's framing moralism and noteworthy, if at all, as evidence of Pixérécourt's technical skill.¹⁴ His discomfort is understandable, but it also marks one of the formative moves in melodrama's critical exile, for by 1843, well into the age of criminal melodrama, of Robert Macaire and Jack Sheppard, it was all too apparent that it had been precisely these sensational elements of melodramatic form—and not its lofty moralism—that had gained the most influence, received the most intensive development by early producers of melodramatic theatre, and proven the most enduring elements of a genre that was by then indefensible in Nodier's redemptive terms. Indeed, Thomas Holcroft's enormously popular and influential *The Tale of Mystery*, an 1802 adaptation of *Coelina* to the British stage in which the politics and moral absolutism of the French original were significantly muted even as its sensational qualities were heightened, may well be understood as a calculated, systematic effort to push such secondary qualities to the fore. Contemporary critical responses to the adaptation suggest that Holcroft's changes were effective; while they neglect entirely the question of the play's morality, they laud its extraordinary achievement of emotional effect and affective force—its forcible depiction of "passion and action," of "hurry and perturbation." What such emphases suggest is that critical tendencies to view early melodrama especially as a form distinguished largely by its redemptive social vision may obscure what seems to have been a primary basis of the genre's appeal and a shaping imperative of its formal development almost from the start: namely, its capability to produce affective and emotional sensations of great intensity, or, as one admiring critic of *The Tale of Mystery* put it, the new form's remarkable "influence over the human mind."¹⁵

Determining the nature of that influence, once we recognize the aims and imperatives of early melodrama's sensational emphases and their close historical relation to the traumatized sensibility of contemporary audiences, is not particularly difficult, but it depends crucially on some recognition of the specific manner in which the genre's sensational and emotional solicitations were organized into a coherent aesthetic tech-

¹³ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xv–xvi, xviii–xix.

¹⁵ *Times* (London), 15 November 1802.

nique. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of such early formal development, signaled by Pixérécourt's first plays though clearly evident in Holcroft and developed most forcefully on the more spectacular stages of London, is the rapid abstraction of the Revolution's historical figuration of action—a particular and contained trajectory of crises—into a systematic, serial aesthetic guided by a successive logic of intensification and acceleration of traumatic shock. Such abstraction yielded a dynamic pattern, infinitely extendable, capable of much greater compression and dilation, adaptable to more diverse narratives and contexts, and organized, even early on it seems, by what Carolyn Williams, in a discussion of Victorian melodrama, has described as an oscillating movement between absorptive, introverted moments of sympathetic identification and highly spectacular, extroverted scenes of shocking violence.¹⁶

The development of this aesthetic, which may be understood as an essential marker of melodrama's modern formal character, reached its probable moment of greatest intensity in the 1820s, when the genre pulled closer to domestic and popular life and rescaled its effects and construction to the rhythms and pace of the industrial urban world. However, its emergence is evident much earlier, even in the formation of melodrama's basic narrative and theatrical conventions, from its quickly predominating reliance upon breathtaking opening tableaux of idealized community and initial actions of intrusive violence, to its soon-typical adherence to an accelerating, rhythmic alternation between scenes of fracture and reconciliation, flight and refuge, horror and comedic relief, and exilic loss and restorative justice. Its formation is evident as well in the early evolution of melodramatic character, and of villainy especially, in which the presentation of socially typical but referentially charged character types, more allegorical than symbolic, yields to the creation of increasingly abstracted, polarized, intensified figures of sympathetic pathos and recoiling antipathy—figures that synthesize the most diverse range of affective prompts for such reactions. These transformative advances were driven and defined both incrementally and by innovative single works, and, though there exists no adequate formal history of early melodrama, it takes but a glance at theatre history to locate some of the most influential and innovative plays and productions. In these, one finds a rich though still largely unrecognized history of melodrama's gradual consolidation of action, its development of ever-increasing capabilities for compressive shock and intensive absorptive display, and its increasingly forceful and systematic exploitation of the unsettled emotional states that such techniques produced. One such work, William Barrymore's *The Blood Red Knight!* of 1810, offers an especially good example of what had been achieved in these areas in the first full decade of melodrama's rise.

William Barrymore's *The Blood Red Knight!*

The first great spectacular melodrama of Astley's equestrian theatre, Barrymore's onslaught of a play ran for an unprecedented 175 nights, bringing its producers, by one account, £18,000. It was in some ways predictably conventional, with a plot derived in equal parts from Schiller's *Die Rauber* and *Measure for Measure* and a frame adapted to melodrama's focus on fractured domesticity and romantic peril, telling the story of the evil Sir Rowland's sinister efforts to force himself upon the Lady Isabella, wife

¹⁶Carolyn Williams, "Moving Pictures: George Eliot and Melodrama," in Lauren Berlant, ed. *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 110, 113.

of Rowland's virtuous elder brother, the rightful duke Alphonso, who had been long away on crusade (but now returned—and disguised!). Although energized throughout by the atmosphere of unease that pervaded its moment of production—at the height of Bonaparte's ascendancy, when fears and fantasies of French invasion and the violence of popular chaos were not merely active but intensified,¹⁷ and thus a moment when fears and fantasies of illegitimate seizure, forced marriage, and rape in the absence of husbands and fathers, of all honorable soldiers and men, were quite real—*The Blood Red Knight!* was more than a topically resonant success. It was also very clearly a formal and theatrical tour de force, a work that exploited the spectacular capabilities of Astley's stage and arena to produce—in a manner distinctly resonant with the period's development of spectacular war—a sensational drama of unprecedented force, speed, and intensity. Revived and remembered well into the following half-century, and long after recalled as the inaugural moment of Astley's most glorious days of popular ascendancy, the work remained for decades the very exemplar of early melodrama's realization of the form's enormous capacity to thrill and excite. Even in 1830, George Daniel would introduce his Cumberland edition of H. M. Milner's *Masaniello*, a landmark character melodrama that marked a firm departure from the form's first period of development, by recalling with evident nostalgia—if only to abjure—the “youthful days” when an eager public “pass'd at Astley's the long sultry night, / And gap'd with wonder at *The Blood-red Knight*.”¹⁸

The dramatic method that produced such reactions is not hard to discern, for Barrymore's work is in many ways an extreme, even stark work of drama, and its mechanisms of force are mobilized fully from the start. The curtain rises to reveal a woody glen and, within it, a tableau of pastoral longing suited to its age: a mother in mourning robes sits upon a rustic bench beneath a withered oak, sadly stringing garlands round the head of her son. Beside them a young maid, immersed in an ardent billet-doux. “Sweet pledge of love,” laments the mother to the boy in the opening line, “accept a mother's kiss! Alas, it is all she has left to bestow.” *In medias in extremis*, one might say, and an image of pitiable pull with obvious appeal to an audience threatened by invasion, its men gone away, but an image also shattered the very next instant by alarm—by, in fact, the intrusion of precisely the fear most imagined: “Hark!” the mother cries, “What mean these martial sounds? Away, dear Emma, and let me know the worst that fate decrees!”

Emma's return is almost instant, impelled by terror and haste: “Away, away, dear lady—safety is not here. Far on the hills a troop of horse appear. The Blood-Red Knight approaches our retreat!” The mother “is almost distracted at this intelligence,

¹⁷By the spring of 1810, Napoleon had established control over the greater part of the continent; the conflict in Spain (in which the British were deeply involved) was reaching a moment of great intensity, its outcome still undecided but its violence and atrocities well-known; and reports of preparations in French ports for an invasion of England were beginning to arrive. By the play's premiere, such reports had started to become a regular item, and in the first warm summer months of its run, the London newspapers were carrying frequent reports derived from French papers of Bonaparte's extended, ostensibly civic tours of all his Atlantic ports, as well as occasional rumors derived from French sources that his attentions were focused during those visits on military inspections of his fleets and supplies. For a sense of the public development of these events and their entanglement with the success of *The Blood Red Knight!* one need only browse the London *Times* between March and August of that year; the theatrical advertisements appear immediately above news from France.

¹⁸H. M. Milner, *Masaniello; or, the Dumb Girl of Portici* (London: J. Cumberland, c. 1830), 5.

and, snatching her child to her bosom, rushes off, followed by Emma," a retreat followed directly by the rapid appearance in the hills of masses of soldiers on horse and foot, by the sudden arrival on stage of a swelling crowd of frightened peasants, and by the entrance of the soldiers in serried array. As the music swells up, the peasants crowd downstage as the troops muster up behind, and the great villain himself, Sir Rowland, dressed all in blood red, "dashes across the mountains on horseback full speed," approaching suddenly to take center stage while the peasants lift their voices in a hymn of awed fealty to his fame and might.¹⁹ In a moment he sets them to chase, with a "thousand marks" to those who find and bring back Lady Isabella and her son; although they sense the injustice, they quickly obey, singing in chorus while departing: "For so says the great Sir Rowland. / And who then dare say nay?"²⁰

The scene is remarkable in itself for its extreme speed and force, moving in just a few moments from an absorptive elicitation of reflections, feelings, and anxieties, to a startling, then shocking realization in spectacular action of nightmares and half-thought-out fears. To us it might seem a hackneyed progression; to its own audiences, however, it must have carried a deeply resonant force, drawing out and then wrenching very real thoughts of their present and of what might well come.

This radical consolidation of action, however, is only the start of a three-scene-long sequence that repeats and intensifies the rapidly swinging dynamic of the first: in scene 2, a "Thick Wood", we find Isabella clutching her son, once more in a captivating pastoral (if more primal) tableau, and now not in sadness and love but in frantic, distracted despair: "Oh my child!" she cries. "Whither shall we fly?" The child reassures her, his innocent mind still more clear, his voice a now more poignant register of pitiable fear: "[Into] the Cavern, dear mamma," where "my cruel uncle" will not think to look. And on the very heels of his words enters Emma, again in alarm, but from a threat much closer, and unseen: "Away, away, dear lady! We are pursued. Hark—I hear footsteps—away, away!" Renewed flight ensues, a letter—a vow of love by the nearest friend and rival of her avowed beau—is dropped, and this time the intruders are Oliver and Charles, Emma's lovers, potential heroes who in a moment find the letter, claim wrongs and rights, and then, in a disappointing, fear-inducing act of jealous hatred and ignoble diminution, leave their love to her peril to square off and fight. In a moment, the third scene opens in the cavern with another, still more primal natural tableau of Isabella and her son, seated at the center and so struck with terror that "they can hardly support themselves." On a sidepiece of rock an inscription memorializes their plight in advance: "In this wretched retreat the wife and child of Alphonso sought refuge from the persecution of the Blood Red Knight." The mother, now pressing her child to her bosom in utter and hopeless dismay, "bedews its face with tears" and "the infant looks piteously in her face," comforting her with the naiveté of grace: "Don't cry, dear Mamma! Heaven will not let my cruel uncle hurt us." "Sweet innocent," she replies, "there rests our only hope. Almighty power! Who knows our every wish, grant mine to see Alphonso once again!"²¹

¹⁹ William Barrymore, *The Blood Red Knight! Or, The Fatal Bridge! A Melo Dramatic Romance in Two Acts* (London: Duncomb & Co., 1810), 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

Her prayer is broken directly, not now by Emma's alarm, but by the sounds of clashing swords, and Isabella, young Henry, and Emma together flee in horror to their last possible refuge, a small, unseen "inner cave." The sounds are of the swords of the rivals, who enter still fighting, until Charles, Emma's avowed love, is disarmed and retreats, flying into the cave, only to emerge seconds later with the discovered refugees. In a last, harshly sudden blow at hope, the two men think nothing of rescue, agreeing in a moment that, as Oliver puts it, "Interest is our god, and this our golden chance." The curtain falls as the two potential saviors drag off together, each for a mere 500 marks, their love, her beloved mistress, and her helpless young son—the heir to their absent but still-living lord.²²

Three quick scenes in succession, each swinging violently—oscillating steadily—between absorptive appeal and shock, fear, and flight, the whole combining to delineate an extended retreat in fear, a successive collapse of potential communities of sympathy and sources of aid, the devolution of a peaceful world into scenes of savage self-interest. Its seriality is pronounced, with its three opening, absorptive tableaux fitting together into what amounts to an extended meditation on the fear of invasion and its three ensuing actions combining to form an almost continuous spectacle, carried out with unprecedented power, force, and skill, of what such an event might be like. Such an opening would almost certainly have induced gaping wonder, not least because it seems to dramatize a world in which the violence, brutality, and self-interest of war run roughshod over melodrama's customarily intermittent reassurances of morality's force. By scene 4, Barrymore is ready to introduce some solace in the form of a little comic relief by Edgar, a motley-hued loyal knight and an opportunity for retrospective exposition.

The break, however, is brief, and the play then repeats similarly vicious cycles of wrenching pathos, moral failure, and spectacular violence over and over again to the end, setting the gradual, uncertain progress of Alphonso's return and resistance against Sir Rowland's increasingly bloody and successful use of force. By scene 7, we gape in wonder and disillusioned shock as Rowland kills the comic Edgar in a brutal violation of the genre's presumed limits, this just after we find Alphonso himself savagely driving a sword through his guard's chest in the darkness of a cell in a hasty, even sordid bid for survival.

Over and over again, the struggles of virtue devolve here into frantic and desperate acts of violence and horror, so that by the climax of the first act's dramatic action, we find Isabella overcome by the sight of Alphonso, disguised as a servant of Rowland, holding to the throat of their child a dagger dripping with what she thinks to be her husband's lifeblood. Even Alphonso's unveiling—the symbolic reassertion of recognized power that in this genre should bring some partial restoration of order—here brings none at all, inaugurating only the play's final internecine confrontation and the action's devolution into an immense, chaotic battle. Fire consumes the castle itself as the Blood Red Knight and Alphonso meet finally in a "furious combat" that, in a final bit of horror and surprise, leaves the hero disarmed and the villain "about to cleave him down with his sword." Only then does something like moral justice win out, but its victory comes in a bizarre, almost nightmarish form: "Isabella enters, [and]

²² *Ibid.*, 7–8.

seeing Alphonso's danger she shoots Sir Rowland."²³ The final instrument of heaven's power and justice, the agent of virtue's restoration and innocence's defense in a world of chivalric struggle gone awry, is an outraged wife and mother wielding not words but a gun, without mercy or pause: the figure of matriarchal virtue and suffering that has served as the focal point of all the play's greatest and most sentimental pathos is transformed into a cold, unflinching figure of justice, the bearer of a much more impersonal instrument of murder who stands at the center of its final and most savage spectacle of war.

The gunshot that ends *The Blood Red Knight!* must have jolted its audience in some sense back to their present, for a gun among swords makes knights seem a dream, but it must also have gained in result much more force, for in its implication is a disturbing challenge: Who among you could do this? Who feels this way? Here, at least, in the most successful melodrama of its day, is not moral redemption and the restoration of sentimental domestic structure, but affective redemption and the legitimation of violence as right. Among the more significant elements of this structure, which would rapidly come to characterize the most thrilling new works of the genre, is thus its implicit reinforcement of an ideology of terror. In sharp contrast to the redemptive moral framework that informs Pixérécourt's work, the dramatic action of Barrymore's play presents a world in which moral virtue is safeguarded only by the unhesitating use of murderous force—in which, to take up the terms of the play's contextual moment, the safety of the home is guaranteed only by unremitting acts of war. This shift, which differentiates in stark terms the adaptation of melodrama from a conservative, primarily didactic genre of social restoration to a militant, primarily sensationalist genre of imperial power, would open the door for decades of jingoistic, xenophobic works, all enlisting similar fears of a binary world of love, honor, and order surrounded and threatened by irrational hatred, cruelty, and chaos.

Affective Conditioning

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this oscillating aesthetic structure, however, is not its implied ideology nor its polarized structure of action and struggle, but the psychological dynamic it enjoined, reinforced, and produced—a profoundly unstable process of affective immersion and distantiation that alternately invites sympathetic attachment and then stimulates defensive rejection and withdrawal. As Barrymore's work makes evident, emotional intensification is achieved within this structure not simply by the temporal compression of pathetic and traumatic effects—that is, the speed and force with which effects are presented—but by the degree to which the play is able to prompt rapid pendulum swings from one extreme to the other, from absorptive immersion to repudiating horror. In more directly psychological terms, what one finds is an aesthetic that systematically prompts a concentrated, intensified alternation between what Teresa Brennan has described as transmissions of positive and negative affect—the former entailing the passive, absorptive discernment of idealized figures of kindness or love, and the latter the defensive adoption of hostile or oppositional emotions and judgments, the foreclosure and repression of sympathetic feeling as negative affects such as hatred or fear are projected or “dumped” outward, most easily upon some clear other, through angry and often violent action—the repetition of

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

the whole producing a powerful effect of entrainment, or the sympathetic alignment of the audience's sensational and emotional response.²⁴

This affective dynamic is noteworthy, in part because it bears such a close relation to the distinctly traumatic structure of historical experience during the period, repeating and intensifying the swinging movements between sympathetic, imaginative absorption and antipathetic, recoiling horror that characterized the most violent experiences of the French Revolution and the opening decade of Napoleonic war, both on the grand scale and the most intimate. Melodrama's audiences may not have undergone such experiences themselves, but by 1810 a great many had, and most must have feared that they might. Such consonance does much to explain the almost bizarrely intense reactions of contemporary audiences to what seem today the absurdly fantastic narrative and improbably extreme swings of early melodrama. More interesting for my purposes, however, is the manner in which the reiteration of this pattern and its repeated consumption over time must have changed and affected, shaped and transformed its audience—how it conditioned and altered, and not only echoed, their feelings, behaviors, and minds. Alternately and repeatedly drawing its spectators into positions of imaginative sympathy and then shocking them into recoiling postures of projected retributory violence, catalyzing and re-catalyzing extreme emotion through the concentration and intensification of these affective stimuli, melodrama must almost certainly have reinforced and exacerbated, and even produced among those who did not yet possess them, the unstable, post-traumatic emotional structures upon which it played.²⁵ In a sense, this sensational economy may be seen to have functioned as a sort of addictive psychological drug, soliciting, stimulating, and reinforcing adherence to the crudified, unstable emotional responsiveness produced by trauma, legitimating through its polarized moral fantasies the psychological disorder such experiences produced, and producing, over time, a reflexive desire, even a psychological need, for the simplified, heightened emotional experience that it offered.²⁶ One needn't look far for contemporary evidence to support such a view; as scholars have often noted, the rapid spread of melodrama and its remarkable suffusion of culture were consistently described by contemporaries in terms that invoke directly this sort of addictive dependence and adverse effect, from the earliest outcries against the "madness" and irrational "mania" for melodramatic theatre to the flood of nineteenth- and twentieth-century condemnations of its popularity as a degenerative mental disease.²⁷

Such a reading turns many conventional assumptions about melodrama on their head. Perhaps most evidently, it suggests that the notions—still commonplace today—of melodrama as an emotionally superficial, patently unrealistic drama, populated by

²⁴ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), esp. chapters 1, 3, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 139. In Brennan's terms, this sort of conditioning would logically produce a hardening or thickening of the affects that would impede discernment, feeling, and living attention.

²⁶ Brennan makes a similar argument when she links this sort of affective process to her proposal that "humans slow down natural, energetic time by inertia, or the construction of an artificial time of fantasies and fixed commodities" (*ibid.*, 141). From this vantage, melodrama may be viewed as one mode of inertia. For a full discussion of this proposal, see Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000), esp. chapter 4.

²⁷ Even a glance at contemporary accounts makes plain the ubiquity of such perceptions. For helpful samplings of early reactions of this sort, see Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, esp. chapter 2; of later reactions, see Bratton, *New Readings*, 12–14, and Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 2–3.

characters lacking in psychological interest, characterized by hackneyed, laughable convention, and credible only to the naive and illiterate constitute a serious misconception. To the contrary, the form appears in this light closer to sensational expressionism, an emotionally harrowing, psychologically incisive drama, populated by characters whose flatness marks them out as figures of emotional projection, structured by conventions that correspond to, and help to create and reinforce, deep-seated patterns of affective response, and credible most to those whose experiences of violence and dislocation were most intensive and sustained. Eric Bentley and Michael Booth were right to describe the form as a “naturalism of the dream life,” but their characterizations miss the mark in suggesting that melodrama’s dream world is a “better world” offering solace or “compensatory faith” and fostering visions of restored moral community to those victimized by a hostile modern reality.²⁸ To the contrary, as many critics noted by the 1830s, it is melodrama’s moral frame that appears to have been the form’s most superficial element, its claims easily outweighed and overwhelmed by the genre’s tendency to produce and appeal to a nightmarish vision of a world characterized by helpless passivity and catastrophic loss, ruled by violence and manipulated most effectively by those who discard naive reliance on community in the relentless pursuit of selfish gain.²⁹ If its moral structure appears to offer a consoling vision, its affective structure fosters instead quite the opposite perspective, encouraging and reinforcing infantile processes of defensive withdrawal and violent projection, attenuating the ability to form affective relations of intimacy in less charged situations, strengthening and legitimating feelings of alienation and victimization, and substituting the passive consumption of sensational fantasy for the more complex and demanding performance of collective identification and communal action and identity.³⁰

Melodrama’s Hold on Mass Consciousness

Such a reading overturns as well conventional notions of the genre’s formal and social history, in which the successive development of gothic, romantic, domestic, social, psychological, sensational, and cinematic melodrama is viewed as a gradual move toward realism as the genre’s fantastical character weakened its hold on the popular mind. If we take seriously the notion that melodrama functioned as an addictive form of affective conditioning, its production and consumption gradually shaping the sensibilities and sentiments of its audiences, this generic trajectory can be viewed instead—in a manner much more in keeping with the genre’s almost epidemiological expansion and suffusion of modern culture—as a gradual intensification and con-

²⁸ Bentley, *Life of the Drama*, 205; Booth, *English Melodrama*, 13–14.

²⁹ See Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 133–39, for a similar recognition. As Singer puts it: “The ameliorative aspect of melodrama often seems grossly overshadowed by its anxious or paranoid dimension. Moral legibility is evident throughout, but punishment and reward only appear at the very end of the play” (137).

³⁰ It is worth noting, as Bruce McConachie has suggested, that one needn’t think of melodrama’s moral frame as an element at odds with, or overwhelmed by, the genre’s affective economy, though he notes that apocalyptic melodramas popular with workers in the 1840s mostly abandoned any moral frame to revel in revenge; rather, it may be more accurate to approach that frame, a structure best described to date by McConachie’s own discussions of melodrama’s “popular neoplatonism” (see his *Melodramatic Formations*, esp. 42–46), as a balancing, dialectical element of this subgenre’s construction. Such a possibility reveals well the degree to which the view I offer here may well constitute yet another serious distortion of the genre.

solidation of melodrama's hold, of its increasingly deep and pervasive penetration of mass consciousness. Rather than marking a shift toward greater realism, the rise of domestic melodrama may be viewed as a penetration of the form into the closer realm of everyday life and interpersonal relations, that of psychological melodrama as the internalization of its structures in the conception and negotiation of personal and private identity, and that of sensational and cinematic melodrama as a reflection of the form's domination, by the turn of the twentieth century, of perceptual modes of apprehension.

Rather than suggesting a gradual disentanglement from melodrama, such a view implies a giving over of ever greater portions of the modern imagination to its influence, as the effect of its affective conditioning becomes increasingly ingrained and the need for its sensational effects becomes more continual, more localized, more closely linked to the moment-to-moment negotiation of lived experience. Rather than suggesting a weakening of the genre over time, this view indicates an incorporation of melodrama into consciousness, and with it a gradual melodramatization of psychological and social reality as its affective structure becomes a normative form of feeling and thought. With such a view in mind, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the long history of critical neglect of the melodrama, and in a related sense the formation of a romantic conception of literary culture that banished melodrama from legitimate critical regard, is due less to an inability to perceive the form's impact than to a fearful unwillingness, rather like the unwillingness of an addict to recognize a growing dependency, to acknowledge the extent of the problem. Ironically enough, evidence for such an outcome is perhaps most directly apparent in the first stirrings of melodrama's modern critical reevaluation: those efforts by Robert Heilman and Eric Bentley to present melodrama not merely as a central mode of modern consciousness, but as a quintessential dramatic mode, a timeless "version of experience," and hence implying its organic, natural presence in culture and thought.³¹

While one may object to the characterization I have offered here as melodramatically extreme, it seems less so if we realize some of the secondary and long-term implications of the genre's influence on popular consciousness, many of which have been noted already by recent scholars. In addition to its direct effect on affective structures, over time melodrama contributed intimately to what we now see as the distorted social and historical vision of modern culture, including its radical polarization of gender and race, its repressive culture of domesticity and its infantilizing conception of parent-child relations, its tendency to embrace catastrophic models of historical change and morally polarized conceptions of nation and community, and its insistent desire to translate the messy realities of historical action and event into the conventional forms of commodified spectacle. Similarly, melodrama may be seen to have fostered, to a degree that seems largely unappreciated, the modern tendency to envision temporal existence as a process dominated by absolute models of rupture and reunion and of history as a cycle of victimization and retributive violence. It is in no small part to melodrama, for example, that we owe the formation of popular modern myths of redemptive revolution and of moral war, both grounded on melodrama's crudification of moral authority and its inculcation of belief in the sublimity of spectacular violence and the nobility of passive suffering.

³¹ Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama*; Bentley, *Life of the Drama*.

My perspective here has been deliberately polemical, but it is not to be taken as an indictment or an argument to embrace once again traditional scorn or disregard of the genre. To the contrary, it is an effort to suggest the necessity of interrogating, in clear and unsentimental terms, the pervasive manner in which melodrama has shaped modern culture. In that regard, it is also an effort to unsettle the field of modern drama scholarship, for despite the great surge of interest in melodrama, it remains a form situated at the very margins of that field, barely registering in efforts to understand modern drama's early history. Instead, drama scholarship has continued to look to Ibsen and realism or to Büchner and the avant-garde as its originary and formative traditions, thus implicitly defining modern drama as that which is not melodrama. Certainly, it is from these realist and avant-garde strains that much twentieth-century drama developed, but by any objective measure these traditions have had less impact on modern culture than the melodrama that they, and we, have attempted to escape, repudiate, or repress. By continuing to define the field in such terms, we do more than distort the history of modern drama: we also distort—and, I would argue, disown and deny—the role that the drama has played, for better or worse, in modernity.