

**A STUDY OF
MELODRAMA IN
ENGLAND FROM
1800 TO 1840**

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A Study of Melodrama in England from 1800 to 1840

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of Philosophy of the University
of Pennsylvania in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

BY

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PREFACE

One of the manifestations of the Romantic Movement in England was the rise and great popularity of melodrama. Because of the paucity of literary attainments that accompanied melodrama, this type of play has been uniformly neglected or else passed over with slight comments. Although it is true that few melodramas deserve mention if style and high dramatic qualities are to be considered, nevertheless, inasmuch as the form has contributed largely to the art of the theatre, the neglect is hard to explain. This investigation of the dramatic and theatrical history of England between the years 1764 and 1840 has been made, therefore, in an attempt to supply some information about an almost unknown group of plays and playwrights.

The great variety of forms that melodrama assumed and the great number of methods employed in its manufacture, the many devices that were employed, consciously or unconsciously, to disguise it, have rendered the discovery of entirely satisfactory criteria for its determination, difficult. That difficulty is constantly emphasized by the great number of definitions that have been constructed to designate it. If these difficulties have not been altogether overcome in this study, it is because no one clear cut standard of melodrama existed in the period under consideration, as no single type of melodrama exists today.

Throughout the investigation, it was deemed wise to give weight to the statements of the men whose business it was to handle plays and players in the last decades of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth centuries. If Elliston, Colman, Jerrold, Boaden, or Macready looked upon a certain type of play as a melodrama, surely his judgment reflects the standard of his day as the declarations of Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, Mr. William Archer, or Mr. Owen Davis reflect the standard of ours.

A further explanation seems necessary in this foreword. Both the spelling of the word melodrama and the form which the word designated changed often in a few decades. What was true in England was equally true in France whence the English word was borrowed. In England, after 1802, the following changes in spelling may

be noted: melo-drame, melo-drama, melodrama. The changes in form and matter are the subject of this study. In France, says Dr. Mason in his monograph, "Melodrama in France from the Revolution to the Beginning of the Romantic Drama, 1791-1830," "With regard to the word melodrame, there were the following changes in meaning: when first introduced into France from Italy the word was used as a synonym for opera in general; in 1781, at Du-Bois' suggestion it acquired the meaning of scene lyrique and during the Revolution began to be applied to pantomime with dialogue" (p.34); and in his preface, he says that after 1800, popular tragedy "appeared in its definitive form under the name melodrama."

In general, the same kinds of play, with other variations which resulted from legal restrictions, occur in the melodrama in England. The development, too, of the English type, which, it should be added, was in no small degree influenced by the French product, was similar to that of its French cousin, as was the date of its emergence into Bulwer Lytton's romantic drama.

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November, 1919.

CHAPTER I

On November 13, 1802, Thomas Holcroft's "melo-drame," "A Tale of Mystery," was performed at Covent Garden. Because this play has usually been considered the first of the melodramas in England,* as it is the first to be definitely so called there, it has been chosen as the point of departure for this study. The statements made in this connection may be accepted as true, however, only in so far as the word "melo-drame" is concerned, for it is hardly true, as is sometimes asserted, that this play was the first of its kind in England; and it is absolutely certain that among English speaking peoples Holcroft's play was not the first to be rightly designated for, in 1799, appeared a play by John E. Turnbull, called "Rudolph; or, the Robbers of Calabria, a melodrama in Three Acts, as performed at the Boston Theatre, Boston, 1799." (Oscar Wegelin, "Early American Plays, 1714-1830" a bibliography). Other examples of plays which had the same characteristics as Holcroft's play will be mentioned later.

Inasmuch as "A Tale of Mystery" has been selected as a point of departure, it may be well at the outset to make some examination of its plot and form in order to point out some of the differences which exist between it and other forms of drama. The play, which is an alteration of "Seline, ou, L'Enfant Mystere," which Holcroft had witnessed in Paris and had brought back to London, tells of two brothers, Romaldi and Francisco, and the daughter of the latter. The plot is concerned with attempts made on the life of Francisco and on the reputation of his daughter by Romaldi in order that he may secure their money and position. Found out in his treachery, however, he is pursued, captured, and finally forgiven, while father and daughter, their wrongs righted, are restored to each other's arms.

An analysis of the melodrama discloses the following

* "A Tale of Mystery" "was remarkable, not only for its great and merited success, but for the circumstances of its being the first entertainment acted on the English Stage under the description of melo-drame." (Dibdin, "Reminiscences", I: p. 337. See also Genest, VII: p. 578; Thorndike, "Tragedy", p. 334; Dunlap, "American Drama", p. 314; and elsewhere.

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characteristics: 1—dumb show, with incidental music descriptive of the action to come or of that in progress; 2—songs, not always happily introduced; 3—situation, and not characterization, the mainspring of the interest—here the situation provides for the inevitable struggle between right and wrong in the persons of the sons of Romaldi and Bonamo, as representatives of the opinions and desires of their fathers; 4—the heroine, Selina, a prize over whom the conflict in the play is waged; 5—types, rather than real men and women, as characters: the persecuted father and daughter, victims of a plot; the subtle, unscrupulous villain; the champion of the oppressed; the true friend who, at the proper moment—and there is always the proper moment in melodrama—makes the necessary explanations; and the persons who provide the comic relief; 6—exaggerated appeals to the emotions, the tearing of fine passion to tatters; 7—thrilling moments—here an attempted murder, a remarkable rescue and other periods of suspense and surprise made into an improbable plot; 8—spectacular scenic effects—here, a thunder storm in the climactic scene; and 9—a happy ending.

It is to be remembered, however, that none of these qualities were new to the English stage. Any one of them may easily be traced back to earlier forms of the drama, and often, combinations of them have been so marked in certain plays that the critics of the older drama have used the terms "melodrama" and "melodramatic" to set them apart from the more dignified comedy and tragedy. These older plays may have been called in their day tragedy, tragic-comedy, opera, or even pantomime, but, in the minds of the critics, general exaggeration and lack of high poetic passion have differentiated them from the typical examples of their several species. These plays, nevertheless, are not really melodramas in the nineteenth century understanding of the term, but since the term is often used to designate them and other plays, it is necessary to point out briefly the various ways in which "melodrama" and its derived adjective have been employed.

The use of the word in England is threefold; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say twofold, for two of the uses may, for the purpose of classification, be grouped under one. First, we have the original sense in which the term was used when it came into the language; and se-

condly, the sense, a derived one, by which we designate two other types of play: the popular play of today, and a popular, exaggerated type of tragedy existant before the opening of the nineteenth century. It is not hard to conceive, therefore, that under these conditions, it is possible to have at least three types of play, all of them having something in common, that may be called melodrama. It would be, therefore, as unfair to assert that because a play of the nineteenth century or of the twentieth, did not conform to the type of "The Atheist's Tragedy" that the later day play is not a melodrama, as it would be unreasonable to affirm that because Dibdin's "The Lady of the Lake," is unlike Owen Davis's "Lighthouse by the Sea," that the one or the other is not a melodrama. Each age has had its own melodrama, and it is the purpose of this paper to suggest the development of this type of dramatic production from the old form to the type that approximates the type in use at the present time, for, between the years 1800 and 1840, that development was practically completed, although the roots of the form may be found farther back in English dramatic history.*

Part of the difficulty that besets this subject may be obviated by setting down these differences in usages and by attempting to arrive at some statement of the characteristics of melodrama as the term is employed in the three senses mentioned above.

The use of the terms "melodrama" and "melodramatic" by our contemporary critics to distinguish a certain type of play existant before the words themselves came into the language is fairly well determined and may be summed up in a few words. An excess of bombast, terror, horror, lust, and blood, not sufficiently motivated, in the minds of critics, sets certain plays apart definitely from pure tragedy and causes them to be called melodramas. Examples that are most frequently mentioned are "Tamburlaine", "The Jew of Malta", "The Spanish Tragedy", "Titus Andronicus", "Richard the Third", "The Atheist's Tragedy", "Lust's Dominion", "Antonio and Mellida", together with many other Elizabethan and Restoration plays ordinarily named tragedies. (See Baker, G. P., "Development of Shakespeare as Dramatist", p. 133; Bfooke, Tucker, "The Tu-

*As the characteristics of the type became fixed, so did the name that was applied to it. After 1802, the spellings of the word were successively, melo-drame, melo-drama, and melodrama.