

# Tableaux and Melodramatic Realism

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**Abstract** If in many ways its aims are comparable to those of novelistic realism (a focus on ordinary characters and contemporary social issues), melodrama exhibits a form of realism all its own. This essay focuses on several elements of that form, especially on the workings of the tableau. At the moment of tableau, acting bodies suddenly freeze to make a silent and still stage picture whose significance can be interpreted. Though the critical history of the tableau is tightly related to genre painting, its formal operations within melodrama are more complex than the aim to offer verisimilitude in the depiction of ordinary life. Tableaux establish the melodramatic narrative form characterised by intermittent pictorialization. They interrupt the dramatic action, summing up the plot so far and adumbrating action to come; they form 'points' on which the suspense of dramatic unfolding might hang; and these sudden moments of silence and stasis carry affective and intellectual points as well. Using exemplary readings of melodramas across the English 19th century, this essay demonstrates the formal potentialities of the tableau, including the metatheatrical self-consciousness of its role in constructing melodramatic realism.

**Keywords** Melodrama. Realism. Tableau. Genre painting. Serial discontinuity. Metatheatricality. Douglas Jerrold. Dion Boucicault. Leopold Lewis.

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## 1 Introduction

“Why did realism come late to the English stage?” This critical question (and the assumptions it reveals) has long been outdated, not least because it takes the novel for its only standard and ignores forms of melodramatic realism. There are many persuasive ways to argue for melodramatic realism. One centres in the fact that, like the novel, melodrama concentrates on representing commonplace, ordinary characters who speak in prose. Unlike the novel, the characters of melodrama are typified rather than individualised, but they are arrayed in a schematic form that models society through the figure of the family (Williams 2018, 214). In the history of drama, the aim to extend sympathy to groups of people in the lower ranks of society overlaps almost exactly with the period of melodrama’s rise; indeed, in this respect bourgeois sentimental drama predates and conditions the rise of melodrama. As Mayer (2004) and Buckley (2009) among others have shown, we can also argue for melodramatic realism due to its almost journalistic attention to social problems of the day, whether specific (naval conscription, alcoholism, the plight of prisoners after release) or general (post-Revolutionary social chaos, empire, the class system itself). In this respect, melodrama provides its audiences with a way to think about real-world issues and events; the messy middle of a melodrama engages these issues in complex ways, even if the happy endings may seem to gloss over the very complexity that has been engaged in the middle.

Yet another way to argue for melodramatic realism focuses on its form, for it is through its formal artifice that melodrama generates its realism. Even the music of melodrama, which might from one point of view be considered its most artificial convention, from another point of view can be regarded as a crucial part of its realism; like film scores today, the music immerses and forcibly engages spectators in the sympathies or horrors that they are meant to feel (Pisani 2014, 42, 171; Williams 2018, 217). But the other primary element of the genre’s form, the tableau, provides us with the most direct and conclusive way to argue for melodramatic realism.

As histories of the English novel (Watt 1957; McKeon 1987) have shown, the novel generates its realism in part through parodically engaging with other genres that it presumes to be less realistic than itself. In the eighteenth century, those ‘others’ of novelistic realism tended to be allegory or romance; but for the nineteenth century, melodrama becomes realism’s most important other genre (Jameson). Fully to imagine melodrama as realism’s dialectical opposite, however, we must think of it not only as internalised within novelistic realism, but also as its having a realism of its own.

For example: Charles Dickens creates the Crummles acting troupe in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) most obviously in order to parody melodrama

in its several sub-genres, its acting style, and its modes of production. But Dickens's elaborate parody also curiously highlights the realism that the Crummleses attempt in their representations. For example, Mr. Crummles identifies Smike as someone who could "make such an actor for the starved business" (Dickens [1838] 1999, 275). But of course that is what Smike 'really' is, outside Mr. Crummles's imagined use of him, in the novel's main plot. Or, for example, Mr. Crummles boasts that the troupe's next performance will display "a real pump" on stage. He instructs Nicholas, whom he has commissioned to write the new piece: "you must manage to introduce a real pump and two washing tubs". "I bought 'em cheap, at a sale the other day", he explains. "That's the London plan. They look up some [...] properties, and have a piece written to fit them" (278). In this humorous detail, we can see a parodic critique of the strain toward visual verisimilitude in the melodramatic stage set. It is meant to seem both naïve and silly; but Dickens himself, an avid theatre-goer, would have known that productions of melodrama in London had already achieved complex visual verisimilitude, far beyond Crummles's "real pump".

Later on, by the mid-1860s, when T.W. Robertson, with his 'cup and saucer' realism, eschewed the melodramatic acting style, substituting tiny gestural by-play and an understated manner of speech, his style of realism was credited as an innovation. But Robertson's middle-class domestic settings make it clear that his realism only depicted one slice of society. Meanwhile, the mid-1860s also saw other developments of stage realism in the elaborate 'sensation scenes' of melodrama, which used a battery of new stage technologies to shock and impress audiences into feeling that they were experiencing a real railway train headed directly at them, or a real tenement building burning to the ground. In other words, creating a realistic stage picture was a serious work of creativity across the nineteenth century, and it evolved in many forms.

The important larger point here is that the dramaturgy of the English nineteenth century was fundamentally pictorial in every respect (Meisel 1983, 1994). Our current understanding of 'the theatrical' (as opposed to 'the dramatic' or 'the performative') implies this frontal, planar orientation of the stage, with a clear line of separation between the spectacle and its spectators. The term 'stage picture' can refer in a general sense simply to the scene setting in its entirety; but over the course of the English nineteenth century, the stage picture was increasingly and explicitly imagined as a painting, framed by the proscenium arch. Thus, the development of what we now call the 'fourth wall' increases across the period, reaching its formal apotheosis in the gilt picture frame that extended on all four sides of the proscenium of the Haymarket Theatre in 1879-80. The melodramatic tableau is an important part of this history, for it expresses this overall pictorial dramaturgy in microcosmic form.

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## 2 The Tableau

When acting bodies suddenly freeze and compose themselves into a still picture, they form a tableau. These occur at the end of almost every act of a melodrama, and sometimes in the middle of an act. Often called simply 'Picture' in the play texts of the period, the tableau was only the most obvious element of a formal system that also included brief poses of acting bodies in what were called 'attitudes'. For good reason, this pictorial dramaturgy has been called a 'pointed style', for sweeping melodramatic gestures come to rest momentarily in the attitudes, which were also called 'points', while the plot comes to its points in complex entanglements that were called 'situations' (Meisel 1983, 38-51, 351-2, 354-5). The dramatic action comes to its points in the stillness of the tableaux. Punctuating the dramatic action, the tableaux both interrupt and momentarily sum up the action at that point. These punctual and serial moments of pictorialisation also make their intellectual points, first moving their spectators to smiles or tears, screams of shock or terror, and then pausing long enough to let them think about what they see.

Peter Brooks discusses the tableau in his account of the "muteness" of melodrama, which includes the mute figure as well as the formal pauses, silent and still, brought about by the tableau (Brooks 1995, 47-8, 56, 59, 61). While Holmström (1967) and Fried (1980) have given us excellent accounts of other forms of the tableau than the theatrical, Martin Meisel has done more than anyone to develop the important idea of narrative form in nineteenth-century theatre. In *Realizations* (1983), he explores the pictorial dramaturgy of the nineteenth-century stage in relation to illustrated novels and narrative paintings, all examples of intermittent pictorialisation as a narrative form. He calls that narrative form 'serial discontinuity', a term we will frequently employ in this essay (Meisel 1983, 38).

Tableaux could be used for many purposes. A sentimental tableau would render the moment of pathos in a domestic or amorous plot, whereas a 'vision' tableau would disclose, in a sudden visual spectacle, supernatural or psychological phenomena that are by definition not visible at all. The recognition tableau, a staple convention of melodrama, depicts the moment in which two characters 'start back' when they see each other for the first time; they freeze briefly into an attitude of fixation, staring at one another and clearly indicating that their relation to one another will sooner or later be revealed (Shepherd 1994). The tableau 'realisation' would imitate a well-known painting or print onstage (Meisel 1983, 91-5, 11, 115, 132, 285-6, 405, 438). And here we have a seeming paradox: the realism of the theatrical representation seems to be secured by reference to another artform altogether.

The most famous realisations in the history of melodrama are undoubtedly those staged for Douglas Jerrold's *The Rent Day* (1832),

which realises well-known paintings by David Wilkie, *The Rent Day* (1807) and *Distraint for Rent* (1815), at the beginning and end of Act I (respectively). The tableau realisation depends for its force on audience recognition, so it is of great interest in understanding the aptitudes of melodramatic audiences to know that these paintings would have been recognised. In the realisation, the staged illusion of verisimilitude derives from the reproduction not of reality itself, but of another work of art. The particular realism of David Wilkie's new style of genre painting (Meisel 1983, 143-5) is momentarily imported to certify the realism of the action on stage; meanwhile, of course, audience members know full well that the stage picture is composed of living bodies, and that they refer to an inter-art relation outside the theatre. In other words, the tableau realisation represents a moment of metatheatrical self-consciousness and an acknowledgment that melodramatic realism is not immediate and transparent, but mediated and constructed. Meanwhile the tradition of stage verisimilitude continued, not only with the sensation scenes of the 1860s and after, but also with realisations of recognisable scenes from real life. By 1881, for example, when George R. Sims produced *The Lights O'London*, the detailed scene of the Borough Market in Southwark on a Saturday night that opened Act 5 was said by the drama critic Clement Scott to have been an example of "realism out-realised" (cited in Booth 1995, xxiv).

The operations of the tableau had been theorised in the eighteenth century by Denis Diderot, who wrote about tableaux in the context both of painting and drama. He pointed out that the painter must choose a particularly telling moment for his tableau, a moment of dramatic condensation in which both the past and the future might be implied in the represented present. Thus, the suspense that the tableau can create within the context of melodrama had been envisioned by Diderot's comments on painting. Diderot was especially interested in genre paintings of ordinary people in the suspended moments of their everyday lives. He also believed that the tableau worked by fixating the spectator's attention. The successful tableau should call out to the beholder (*appeler*), arrest (*arrêter*) and then enthrall or entrance the beholder (*attacher*) (Fried 1980, 92). Writing of drama, Diderot formulates a critical distinction between the *coup de théâtre* (a sudden change in the plot) and the tableau, in favor of the latter: "One is almost like a children's game," he writes, while "the other is a stroke of genius" (Diderot 1759, cited in Bremner 1994, 15). Elsewhere I discuss the implications of Diderot's theories of the tableau at greater length (Williams 2004, 111-13). To summarise my argument here: at each moment of sudden arrest and stillness, the register of representation shifts, suddenly appealing to spectators for interpretation even while those same spectators might also be reacting with bodily shock, shrieks, or tears. In other words, bodily

enthralment can also lead to acts of interpretation when, during the still and silent pauses, spectators have time to 'read' the picture for its pointed significance. Accordingly, spectatorship in melodrama exists in an ambiguous realm between affect and contemplation, seeing and knowing. As Ankhi Mukherjee has put it: "In the world of melodrama [...] we are invited to understand with our eyes, see with our heart, and cogitate with our nervous system" (Mukherjee 2007, 33).

When George Eliot theorises her own novelistic realism in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* (1859), she too relies on an analogy to genre painting, focusing specifically on "Dutch paintings" of ordinary people in their everyday actions. While she does not use the term 'tableau,' she does emphasise in the chapter's title, "In Which the Story Pauses a Little", the necessity that the forward motion of narrative must stop briefly while we are guided to think about the mode of representation. Within the context of the present essay, we can see that Eliot participates in a long commentary tradition that begins with Diderot. She too refuses to think of her realism as a direct, transparent, or immediate representation of reality. Like Jerrold with his realisations of Wilkie's genre paintings, Eliot uses one realist genre to inform her own. Most important, she acknowledges her own role as mediator of a realism that has been re-created both from other realisms and from her own memory; she claims to give "a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind" (Eliot [1859] 2008, 193). This example suggests the obvious advantages of novelistic realism, for the narrator can offer commentary (and elsewhere can operate free indirect discourse). But melodramatic realism has an array of resources of its own. The nineteenth-century realists, whether novelistic or melodramatic, were never naïve enough to think that their representations were transparent or unmediated (Levine 1983; Williams 2018, 209).

This essay will aim to show not only the various effects that the tableau can achieve, but also the ways they can demonstrate the melodrama's metatheatrical self-consciousness, its awareness of how its realism is constructed. Throughout, we will also follow some of the ways the narrative form of serial discontinuity works, creating its own particular rhythms, which oscillate between discontinuity or interruption and fluidity or continuity. Very simply put: the music starts and stops, marking out passages of dramatic action, while the dramatic action also starts and stops, interrupted and punctuated by the still pictures, the tableaux. Ellen Lockhart describes melodrama's "new syntax [...] a newly fractured kind of time", a "temporality [...] unique to its genre". She argues that it is "perhaps most clearly manifest in those attitudes, which made early and golden-age melodrama alike unfold in a kind of stop-and-go metimeter: a constant stutter in the diegesis" (Lockhart 2018, 39). Hers is perhaps the most extreme view, the view that most emphatically stresses the

stoppages or discontinuities in the temporal unfolding of melodrama's serial discontinuity.

But it is equally important to emphasise the fluidity of the form, for the moments of poised stasis in the attitudes can be very brief indeed, and the sweeping gestures flow into one another with balletic precision, something like the dissolving views of the magic lantern. As David Mayer and Helen Day-Mayer have explained, the attitudes should be understood as “the full extent of a gesture”, and these brief poses are what we would see depicted in the acting manuals. But “a stage gesture is not an isolated moment, unless the end of a scene or a key moment in that scene has been intentionally selected to form a momentary ‘picture’ (the theatrical term for *tableau*)” (Mayer, Day-Mayer 2018, 109). In other words, to do the acting style justice, we must imagine brief still pictures within a general sense of fluid motion. But the tableau marks a definitive moment of stillness and interruption.

Over the years of melodrama's rehabilitation as a topic for serious study (since the 1960s), we have paid more attention to the affect, to the shrieks and the tears, than we have to the form of melodrama. But the form is crucially important, for of course the form orchestrates the affect in the first place. The significant pauses effected by the tableau provide a sudden moment of stimulation, and they are usually strategically supported by the music. Furthermore, we have not been inclined to trust the melodramatic spectator's ability to interpret the tableaux for their significance. Instead, I would like to imagine an audience of spectators who are as curious, intelligent, and able to read the pictures for their significance as any readers of this essay might be. I hope, therefore, by discussing a few melodramatic tableaux across the nineteenth century, to persuade my readers of their intellectual and political force, and of their crucial role in the construction of melodramatic realism.

## 2.1 Social Realism: *Black-Ey'd Susan*; or, “All in the Downs” by Douglas Jerrold

A uniquely English subgenre, nautical melodrama helped to mediate the chaotic after-effects of the Napoleonic Wars. By far the best-known of these, *Black-Ey'd Susan* (Surrey Theatre, London, 1829) condensed and combined various postwar concerns: the damaged fabric of social relations; the economic and sexual vulnerability of women left at home without protection; the vulnerability of men to naval conscription and the masculine self-division that results, for the common sailor was torn between his public role as servant of the state and his private role as husband; and the rigidity of the law, which can lead to gross miscarriages of justice. The play's tableaux focus attention on these social issues.

The tableau that falls in the middle of Act II, scene 2, provides a great example of melodrama's interruptive form. Accompanied by music, our sailor-hero William fights with the chief villain, a smuggler, while other members of the smuggler's gang stand by, watching. During their combat, a Lieutenant appears with two other Marines. Everyone freezes, while spectators are given time to understand what is happening. The Lieutenant breaks the silence with an order: "Smugglers surrender! [...] you have cheated the king long enough, you shall now serve him - the fleet wants hands, and you shall aboard" (Jerrold 1829, 23). His boisterous bonhomie does not disguise the fact that he is taking prisoners. In other words, and in formal terms, the tableau marks the moment of their arrest - and the moment of their social transformation from outlaws to servants of the state. The double sense of the word 'arrest' is indeed activated in this scene, for the formally arrested stasis of the tableau has been used brilliantly to depict the smugglers' seizure by the law. Thus, this scene mirrors (and reverses) what had happened to William; in the first scene we learn that he had been lured away, conscripted or press-ganged into national service; villainy had made him "turn [...] sailor" (Jerrold 1829, 5). Therefore, this tableau in Act II might be seen as a dramatic form of retribution for what had happened to William before the play began. Buried in the middle of the play, this scene serves also to prefigure the play's conclusion, when William will be released from his own arrest.

But before we can understand that conclusion, a brief plot summary would be helpful: Susan has been left at home while her husband William is away at sea. The quintessentially melodramatic heroine, she is beset from all sides. The chief villain, the smuggler, wants to 'marry' her and 'have' her for his own (a melodramatic euphemism, the desire to 'have' a woman clearly equates sexual predation with property ownership; correlatively, a woman's virtue represents her self-possession). To make matters worse, Susan's uncle, who is also her landlord, threatens to evict her for non-payment of rent unless she submits to the smuggler's desire. In other words, the woman is threatened from within the family as well as from without. Thus, through the figure of the beset woman, villainy within the family is made analogous to villainy against the nation-state and its borders.

This is quite a thematic pile-up. Melodramatic plots are famously overdetermined in this way; and this form of overloaded plot construction emphasises political significance while at the same time obscuring it. By giving so many reasons for Susan's social oppression, the play can foreground first one issue and then another, declining to construct a coherent argument about their relation, yet at the same time creating a sense of overwhelming social oppression.

Into this already complex situation, William comes home on shore leave. He overhears the smuggler propositioning his wife. Not long



afterward, he sees another man attempting to molest her. This man, too, would 'have' Susan for his own. His drunken cries are utterly conventional: "you shall be mine! [...] Your cries are vain! Resistance useless!" (Jerrold 1829, 29-30). William strikes this rapacious drunkard, whose back has been turned. But alas, as spectators know, he is Captain Crosstree, the Captain of William's own ship, who falls. For this tableau the stage direction reads: "*William turns away horror struck - Susan falls on her knees, the Sailors bend over the Captain*" (30). Thus, Act II ends in a sentimental tableau of mourning; yet this is also a moment of terrible suspense, even horror. What if the Captain has been killed?

The tableau concluding Act II is carefully choreographed in relation to the music, so that it unfolds in stages. At first the music (*allegro*) reflects William's heroic attempt to rescue his wife; then an *adagio* ensues to accompany the touching picture of the Captain's body, cradled in the sailors' arms. The music for this second static moment cites Charles Dibdin's "The Sailor's Return" in a key bespeaking "manly vigor" (Pisani 2014, 100-1). Here the music conveys pathos and dignity, as William silently accepts the consequences of his action. In other words, the carefully orchestrated stages of the tableau separate and draw out its several aspects of significance as well as the several phases of feeling inspired by it, while showing that one tableau can, within its own unfolding, incorporate the overall narrative form of serial discontinuity.

At the beginning of Act III, we learn that Captain Crosstree has survived. But the 22nd article of war mandates the execution of any sailor who strikes his superior officer, so William is condemned to death. In the Court Martial scene, he pleads with the court to acknowledge his state-imposed self-division: "your honours, whilst it is your duty to condemn the sailor, may [...] respect the husband" (Jerrold 1829, 37). The stage picture represents the State in all its power, with the Union Jack flying over the proceedings. The Admiral and the other judges do acknowledge and sympathise with William's double bind. But the law must be interpreted strictly, for "a necessary discipline" must be upheld in order to avoid setting a "dangerous precedent" (35). The sentencing of William directly follows: he shall be "hanged at the fore-yard-arm of this his Majesty's ship" (37). William kneels again, as he did at the end of Act II, in response to this pronouncement, once more accepting his fate in a tableau of manly submission to the State.

The play ends with a quick series of tableaux that again enact melodrama's overall form of serial discontinuity, poised between stage picture and dramatic action, interruption and fluidity. A jerky procession toward the gallows halts in a tableau of prayer, then moves forward again before the final scene, which takes place on a platform. In other words, William stands upon a stage-on-the-stage, with

spectators from the full range of naval hierarchy there as witnesses to his execution. Thus, the play makes it clear that William quite specifically *performs* the act of submission to the State (emphasis mine). Music swells. At the *fortissimo* eruption from the orchestra of “True Courage,” whose invocation and defence of manly tears the audience members would have known well, many audience members did indeed burst into tears (Pisani 2014, 102).

The pageantry of the procession culminates in the final tableau, for of course William is saved at the last minute. A document has been discovered on the body of the villain, whose corpse has been pulled up from under the sea. Captain Crosstree rushes on stage with the exonerating document, which certifies that William had been officially discharged from naval service. Captain Crosstree had requested his discharge long before, and thus the papers are “dated back”. In other words, William had already been discharged from the Navy when he struck Captain Crosstree, who explains: “When William struck me he was not the king’s sailor - I was not his officer” (Jerrold 1829, 43). William’s social identity had already changed, and was simply awaiting the revelation of its official writ of transformation to be recognised.

The play quickly concludes with another complex tableau that unfolds in several stages, framed by music. The Admiral proclaims: “He is free!” and *the seamen give three cheers*; then William leaps down from the platform where he had been prepared to hang. Finally, the Captain brings Susan on stage and gives her to William (Jerrold 1829, 43). No longer drunk, the Captain too has been socially transformed. The sudden feeling of relief engendered by this quick and tricky resolution to the plot perhaps obscures its compressed political significance, for the concluding tableau simultaneously represents William’s release from subjection to the State and the restoration of his marriage, itself explicitly mediated by an agent of the State (since the Captain physically hands Susan back to William). Another way to put this would be to say: William’s masculine self-division has been resolved - his duties no longer conflict - and he is returned to his status as a private, domestic citizen. This social transformation is expressed in the final tableau, which shows us exactly how the transition back to civilian life must be performed; it must be officially mediated by the State’s agent, and by an official document. If in the end the Captain is redeemed and William is free, the play’s messy and frightening middle shows that justice easily might not have been done. The pat, sudden, tricky endings of melodrama often work this way, and the stately pausing of the unfolding tableaux allows spectators to feel relief while also pausing to recall the class- and gender-based social dangers that have suddenly been resolved; and yet, the naval hierarchy has been shown to be drunkenly erratic, and the law has been shown to be rigidly unjust.

### 3 Social Realism: The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana by Dion Boucicault

*The Octoroon*, first performed in New York (Winter Garden Theater, 1859), was presciently critical of the notion that ‘race’ could be visually registered and recognised. The plot depends on the visual, pictorial conventions of melodrama in order to pursue its critique, and the play’s tableaux should be understood within this context. The central tableau, the famous sensation scene that realistically depicts a slave auction during which the body of the Octoroon is spectacularly displayed for sale, had become generically familiar during this decade, ever since Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) as well as its many theatrical adaptations and parodies. Later in the play, the villain is exposed by a photograph, which serves as an embedded tableau. In other words, this play proposes the still picture as a form of documentary evidence, the new technology of photography updating the older technology of the tableau realisation. The play explicitly considers what kind of realism photography might secure.

A brief introduction to the plot: Zoe, the Octoroon, has been raised as part of the Peyton family, the owners of Plantation Terrebonne. Everyone knows that her father was the late Judge Peyton and her mother was his quadroon slave. Thus, Zoe was born a slave. But neither Zoe’s speech nor her physical appearance suggests that she is anything but the daughter of the house, whom Mrs. Peyton accepts and loves. In this way, the play revisits melodrama’s perennial interest in illegitimacy within the family, but now, dangerously, the issue is raised under the aegis of slavery. George Peyton, the Judge’s nephew, visits Louisiana from Paris and soon falls in love with Zoe. He cannot discern her mixed-race status by any visible means; nor would he be able to understand Louisiana’s anti-miscegenation laws, coming as he does from a European metropolis where such laws would have been inconceivable. This is the logic of his character: to be the cultured outsider who does not know, cannot perceive, and must be told of Zoe’s status. She does eventually confess to him that she is “an unclean thing – forbidden by the laws [...] an Octoroon!” He had not noticed nor could he have interpreted the very slight visible sign that she points out, the “blueish tinge” in her fingernails and eyes (Boucicault [1859] 2014, 42-3).

Her melodramatic revelation of identity does not naturalise “racial distinctions”, as Sarah Meer has claimed (Meer 2009, 88). Rather, it does the opposite, positing blatant racial distinctions and simultaneously denying them, since the audience would see that a cultured outsider finds them inconceivable. Zoe’s language registers her internalised acceptance of the situation, which clearly reaches the point of self-loathing, but her point of view does not represent the point of view of the play as a whole. After all, melodrama as a genre

is devoted to revealing injustice and social oppression, especially injustices brought about by the law itself. And in this case, one visual convention of the genre, physiognomic legibility (the principle that social identity can be discerned immediately by sight) is subjected to harsh critique as a way of challenging the notion that 'race' exists in the register of the visible. Since George cannot interpret Zoe's physiognomic characteristics, the very idea of 'race' is destabilised through this metageneric critique of a melodramatic convention.

The late Judge Peyton represents melodrama's conventionally absent, corrupt, or incompetent authority figure, for, in addition to his sexually transgressive past, he has been financially reckless, driving Terrebonne into debt with the result that the villainous ex-overseer M'Closky now owns a large part of it. Worse, Judge Peyton had intended to free his daughter Zoe, but her "free papers" turn out to be null and void because of the mortgage on the plantation. Zoe's social identity is suddenly transformed by the failure of a document; against everyone's expectations, she reverts to the status of a slave. When the slaves must be auctioned to pay the debt on the plantation, she must be sold as well. Again, as in *Black Ey'd Susan*, a forceful analogy develops between the land and the woman's body as two forms of property; but that analogy is shockingly intensified here within the explicit context of property in persons. Thus, the villain's conventional intent - "Fair or foul, I'll have her [...] she's mine! [...] if I sink every dollar I'm worth in her purchase, I'll own that Octoroon" - represents a horrible literalisation of melodramatic sexual predation (Boucicault [1859] 2014, 37).

In the Act III tableau sensation scene at the centre of the play, the slave auction, Zoe's body is spectacularly posed on a table and she is sold to M'Closky for twenty-five thousand dollars. As in the concluding tableau of *Black Ey'd Susan*, this scene adopts the structure of a play-within-a-play, with Zoe posed upon a stage-upon-the-stage for other slaves and potential buyers alike to see, the audience within the play standing as surrogate for the audience within the theatre. The tableau visually frames the moment of her social transformation from daughter of the house to slave (and sex slave). This tableau of injustice shockingly represents a sensational reality that most audience members would not otherwise have seen. Joseph Roach, writing of "Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons" positions this slave auction scene within its immediate historical context (Roach 1996, 211-14).

The trial scene that follows in Act IV resolves another plot thread: the murder of Paul, a slave boy who had been loved by all, and the only friend to Wahnotee, the native American character. When he was murdered, Paul had been sitting on a mail bag that contained an eagerly-awaited letter from a Liverpool bank, a document that would relieve the debt on Terrebonne. The villain M'Closky killed Paul in

order to seize that letter, preventing it from saving the plantation and, by extension, preventing it from freeing Zoe so that he can buy her. During the trial scene, M'Closky tries to pin the murder on Wahnotee, nearly provoking a scene of mob violence. Out of this lawless scene emerges the exonerating document: a photograph of the crime itself, taken by a camera that had been on the spot and equipped with "a self-developing liquid" when Paul was murdered (Boucicault [1859] 2014, 38). (Photography was still new enough that this premise could be believed.) Paul had been alone, posing for his photograph while sitting on the mail bag, when the camera recorded M'Closky in the very act of killing him. While a tableau grouping of characters look at this photographic tableau in amazement, the attempt to frame the Native American can now be seen for what it was: a racist attempt at scapegoating.

Let us pause to think about the use of a photograph as an embedded formal representation of the melodramatic tableau. Just as the stage-within-a-stage disposition of the slave auction scene in Act III enacts metatheatrical self-consciousness, so, too, this scene presents a meta-generic meditation on the melodramatic technique of interrupting the narrative with a still picture. Since Paul had been posing in stillness for his photograph to be taken, the photograph can be seen as a later tableau of the same scene, a commentary on the serial pictorialisation of melodrama's narrative form. When the photograph is revealed, spectators would remember the tableau of Paul posing for that photograph earlier in the play, a scene now re-presented in documentary form, certifying what had happened in the 'real life' of Act II. Here the sense of realism is underlined retroactively, through visual reiteration. The important role of documentary evidence in melodrama is well-known; and here we have the new idea that a still picture might be technologically recorded, in order to preserve a moment from the past that took place in the absence of human witnesses. Observing the photograph as a new form of still picture reminds us that this convention already existed as one of melodrama's aesthetic techniques; the traditional tableau momentarily sums up the dramatic action as it unfolds, revealing something that cannot be easily discerned during the onward rush of narrative time. This photograph performs that same function in a new key.

At the interface of technology and art, the photograph in *The Octoroon* shows that the melodramatic tableau has developed from its original allusion to painting toward other pictorial technologies. What in the twenty-first century would seem a naïve belief that "the apparatus can't lie" serves in this play to expresses a residual Providentialism, for the explanation given is that "the eye of the Eternal [...] the blessed sun in heaven" struck "upon this plate the image of the deed" (Boucicault [1859] 2014, 65). At the same time, the photograph is shown to M'Closky with language that shows the play's

formal self-consciousness of its pictorial dramaturgy: “Your accuser is that *pictor* of the crime – let that speak”, and: “Here you are, in the very *attitude* of your crime!” (66, 65, italics added). Indeed, this play wittily casts the camera as a *deus ex machina*, between Providence and artifice, with the emphasis more on ‘machine’ than on ‘god’. Documentary evidence now takes the form of a recorded picture, a work of mechanical reproduction in the age of art.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, I would say that Boucicault attempts to separate the issue of slavery (on which this play is ambivalent) from its clear critique of ‘race’ as a system of visual markers, and to pursue the latter. The concluding tableau of *The Octoroon* dwells on this political point in the American version of the play. Zoe poisons herself and dies in her lover’s arms, a tragic outcome that realistically focuses attention on the legal prohibition of their marriage in Louisiana at that time. The familiar tableau of mourning closes the American version of the play as Zoe dies: “(*George lowers her head gently. Kneels. Others form picture*)”. Then the flats draw apart to reveal Paul’s grave in the backstage, with M’Closky lying dead upon it and Wahnotee “*standing triumphantly over him*” (Boucicault [1859] 2014, 75). This double tableau represents retributive, vigilante justice for the murder of Paul in the background, but no justice at all for the lovers in the foreground, only the terrible injustice of the contemporary American law.

However, in London, where slavery had been abolished many years before, audiences protested (Adelphi Theatre, 1861). They found the American tragic ending unacceptable, and Boucicault was forced to provide a properly melodramatic happy ending instead. “The Octoroon dies no more!” exulted the reviewer for *The Times* (cited in Boucicault 1859, 94), while Boucicault claimed that the new ending was “composed by the Public, and [merely] edited by the Author” (Playbill for Adelphi Theatre 1861, cited in Boucicault [1859] 2014, 93). In one English version of the concluding tableau, “*George enters, bearing Zoe in his arms – all the [other] Characters rush on*”, forming an array of American races and ethnicities, while, with “*noise increasing*”, a steamship explodes in the background (116). Thus, Boucicault answered his English critics with an over-the-top sensational “*grand Tableau*” in the tradition of the grand allegorical tableaux of earlier stage genres. What is allegorised here is a political point. In view of the play’s original opening date in 1859, four days after John Brown had been executed for his leadership of the anti-slavery raid on Harper’s Ferry, and more or less on the eve of the American Civil War, we might say that Boucicault represents the

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<sup>1</sup> My quick allusion to Benjamin’s famous essay is meant to make a serious point about the historical succession in technologies of representation: painting, theatrical tableaux, photography, and film.

political feeling of his precise historical moment, a vision (or fantasy) of cultural democracy in the foreground that is threatened by violence in the background. By 1861, when the play was performed in London, America would have been even further along on this eruptive, violent, and disillusioning historical trajectory.

#### 4 Psychological Realism: *The Bells* by Leopold Lewis

In our discussion of *Black Ey'd Susan*, we have seen one tableau unfolding through several phases, choreographed and orchestrated to the music and mirroring within itself the serial discontinuity of melodrama's overall narrative form; and in our discussion of *The Octoroon*, we have seen the concluding double tableau using forestage and backstage to represent two different and ironically juxtaposed political points. At a late moment in the history of melodrama as a stage genre, *The Bells* (Lyceum Theatre, London, 1871) employs both of these formal techniques in order to express psychological realism – an important dimension of novelistic realism, to say the least, but one that melodrama, too, can depict. Specifically, in the 'vision scene' that concludes Act I, the interaction of forestage and backstage visually represents an intrusion, within present consciousness, of guilty secrets from the past. Those secrets are suddenly disclosed in a tableau – in order to make the point that traumatic memories can appear suddenly, unbidden, and that they have realistic force in the external, material world, even though they are presumed invisible. Since externalised revelation in general is part of the logic of melodramatic form, the notion that the genre would develop ways to visualise psychological interiority makes a good deal of sense, especially since, as Brooks reminds us, melodrama is "the drama of recognition," close in its aims to the psychoanalytic understanding of "the dynamics of repression and the return of the repressed" (Brooks 1995, 201-2). But there is a historical point in the development of the genre to be made here as well, for this technique of representing the invisible derives from Gothic melodrama, a sub-genre in which ghosts and spectres had been realised since the late eighteenth century; in *The Bells* those ghosts and spectres have been succeeded by psychic phenomena, for these are two forms of 'haunting' within a historical process of secularisation and internalisation.

*The Bells*, an English adaptation of *Le Juif Polonais* (The Polish Jew), a play by Émile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian (Théâtre Cluny, Paris, 1867), starred the young Henry Irving in his first star turn. A bit of plot summary would be helpful before we move directly to the magnificent concluding tableau of Act I. The main character Mathias struggles with a haunting sense of guilt for a crime he committed precisely fifteen years before the action of the play begins.



He murdered a Polish Jew in order to steal the Jew's money, and his wealthy burgomaster's life has been founded on that secret crime. Over the course of Act I, his memory of the crime frequently returns, represented in the music, which imitates the sound of the bells from the murdered Jew's sleigh. Spectators understand that the bells are meant to be understood as a psychological effect, because none of the other characters on stage can hear them. At the end of Act I, alone in his residence, Mathias attempts to stop the sound of the bells, while noting (in true Gothic fashion) that it is "the very night, the very hour" on which he had murdered the Jew fifteen years before (Mayer 1980, 49).

He paces nervously in the forestage, while a tableau in the backstage opens, revealing the scene of the murder and thus externalising Mathias's guilty memory. In the backstage tableau, Mathias in the past (played by a body double) stalks the Jew in his sleigh. At first, Mathias in the present, who is facing the audience, does not see the tableau behind him, but then he turns toward the backstage and is suddenly confronted by a vision of his crime. At first, the tableau he sees is utterly still. But then it suddenly moves, when the Jew turns his head to fix his gaze directly upon Mathias. It is as if the Jew had suddenly come back to life, the return of the repressed figured as the reanimation of the dead. As Mathias gazes inward – both inward toward the backstage and inward in the psychological sense – he arches backward, cries out, and falls, to the crescendo of the bells. The curtain, too, falls as silence descends.

His body in the forestage reflected by the body double playing his past self in the backstage, Mathias experiences his self-division. Thus, in addition to representing interiority, this tableau realises something else that cannot be visually represented: the split subject. When the Jew turns toward Mathias, they enact the melodramatic recognition tableau, fixatedly staring at one another. But importantly, Mathias recognises himself; in the psychological sense as well as the visual, he sees and 'realises' what he has done. The tableau explicitly suggests the relation of sight to understanding, even the relation of vision to Vision. This is a beautiful, mature example of tableau effects in melodrama, with its meaningful use of forestage and backstage; with its unfolding through phases of stillness, movement, and stillness once again, a perfect illustration in miniature of the serial discontinuity of melodrama overall; with the balletic turning of the single figure inward toward the interior of the stage, where his own interiority has been projected; and with the orchestrated correlation between the music of the bells and the revelation of the tableau.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This tableau, I believe, could be usefully compared to the workings of free indirect discourse in the novel, but that would be material for another essay.



Mathias's body, poised to fall just inside the curtain, takes a position at the liminal edge of the stage, precisely where the proscenium arch marks the fourth wall. His body, in other words, marks the boundary between spectacle and spectators, so that he functions as a surrogate for the audience's gaze; audience members look at and through Mathias looking at the picture of himself in the past. Thus, spectators are fixed into his subject position, not only by virtue of his bodily position at the edge of the stage, but also, and more importantly, by virtue of the music of the bells that fills the ambient space of the theatre, enjoining spectators to hear what only Mathias can hear, and to feel his guilt and rising anxiety. The by now conventional boundary of the fourth wall becomes in this scene a highly permeable membrane, a membrane through which the music can easily pass.

This is self-division represented from the inside out – not, as in *Black Ey'd Susan* or *The Octoroon*, self-division imposed from without, by a socially-determined role thwarting private inclinations, but instead, self-division imposed from within, in the effort to act the part of the upstanding citizen while hiding a criminal past. Crucially, in *The Bells* the same character plays the roles both of hero and villain. A sub-plot about mesmerism functions in the play to emphasise Mathias's fear of losing control, for he fears that the mesmerist will trick him into betraying his guilty secret. Another sub-plot focuses the issue of his attempt to evade the law, for Mathias plans for his daughter Annette to marry Christian, a Quartermaster of the Gendarmes, and this plan is explicitly represented as an attempt to internalise the law within his family, including his presumption that Christian would defend him, should the secret ever come out (Mayer 1980, 60-1, 66, 70-1, 74-5). However, Christian instead attempts to solve the crime and thus becomes a threatening external figure. As Christian comes close to figuring out the secret, Mathias bursts out with a "*laugh of hysteria*" at the idea that he might be suspected, and Act II ends with his "*hysterical shriek*" as he dances madly to the music of the bells (Mayer 1980, 58).

In a scene that clearly shows metatheatrical awareness of the tableau's power to externalise the truth, toward the end of Act II Sozel, the serving maid, tells the story of a book she is reading, in which a band of robbers had been implicated by a piece of forensic evidence long after their crime had been committed. "Look, Burgomaster, there's the *picture*", says Sozel (Mayer 1980, 55; emphasis added), as she holds the book illustration up for him to see – an allusion to the tableau that functions here very much as the photograph does in *The Octoroon*. Mathias knocks the book out of her hands, refusing to look at the picture, refusing to see or understand. In other words, in Act II the deductions made by an agent of law enforcement, the hypothetical power of forensic evidence and visual illustration, the

idea of mesmerism, and Mathias's own hysterical outbursts join to show that the fabric of his self-control is unravelling.

The dream sequence in Act III, another trial scene, makes these issues clear, and serves as the conclusion to the melodrama. Again, the forestage, Mathias's present-day bedroom, is carefully distinguished from the backstage, where the dream sequence and the trial will take place. Mathias withdraws into his alcove bed-chamber, drawing its curtains and thus enacting his turn inward; once inside his curtained bed, unobserved by spectators, he can use a passageway in the back of the alcove that allows him suddenly to re-appear in the backstage, dressed as he was in the past. A black back-cloth that had served as the back wall of his bedroom is raised, revealing a vision of the courtroom in the backstage behind a gauze, which makes the scene seem eerie and dreamlike.<sup>3</sup> In Mathias's dream, the Mesmerist forces him to re-enact his crime. Using the present tense, Mathias describes the murder. Then, still dreaming, he is freed from the Mesmerist's influence and forced to read a document on which the Court Clerk had recorded his coerced confession. Since spectators had already seen, in the Act I tableau, what they have now seen Mathias act out during the time of the trial, we can see that the secret comes out more and more explicitly over the course of the play - first as tableau, then as dramatic action, then as a documentary written record of confession. At the end of the dream, Mathias is sentenced to hang. He returns to present-day reality, emerging from his curtained alcove in the forestage, his "*eyes [...] fixed, and his appearance deathly and haggard*", for he is still feeling the effects of his dream. "Take the rope from my neck!" he gasps, and though the audience can see that there is no rope around his neck, nevertheless he "*struggles and dies*" - at which point the other characters kneel around him, forming the conventional tableau of mourning (Mayer 1980, 76).

Trial scenes have figured prominently in all three melodramas examined in this essay. In this one, the self-divided protagonist has punished himself, psychologically speaking; his harrowing experience of guilt ends by killing him. Speaking formally, however, we could say that he has been punished by the tableau and the music - the melodramatic formal conventions that have externalised his interiority, forcing him to see, hear, realise, and understand. Justice has been administered through the powerful coordination of melodramatic content and form.

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**3** For details of the stagecraft that made this scene possible, see Mayer 1980, 62, 67, 92.

## 5 Coda

*The Melodramatic Imagination* by Peter Brooks (1976) brought melodrama to our attention in several bold new ways. The study of English melodrama had already begun, with important work by Michael Booth (1965), Frank Rahill (1967), and others. Nevertheless, Brooks's study marked a breakthrough. First, he emphasised the post-Revolutionary process of secularisation as the general context within which melodrama should be understood. Melodrama becomes, he argued, "the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era" (Brooks 1995, 15). Furthermore, the semiotic system of melodrama - which he analysed under critical headings that still resonate today, 'the poetics of astonishment', 'the text of muteness', 'the moral occult', 'the mode of excess' - provides the foundation for both psychoanalysis and early film.

Second, Brooks's ultimate aim was to expose the workings of melodrama in realist fiction, especially that of Balzac and James. That is why his title focuses our attention on 'the melodramatic imagination' rather than on 'melodrama': because, though it begins with the stage genre, it moves outward toward historical extensions of melodrama into other modes and genres. In Brooks's view, the realist novels of Balzac and James use melodrama's 'mode of excess' as a resource to accomplish effects that cannot be accomplished in a strictly realist modality. Balzac and James import into the novel a metaphysical drama of good and evil that uses melodramatic conventions to reach beyond language itself in the search for the secularised 'moral occult'. I follow Brooks in seeing melodrama as the "central poetry" of modernity even today (Brooks 1995, 200), though, I fear, very few people these days could still sustain a belief in the occulted moral universe that supposedly - in the view of nineteenth-century melodrama, at least - undergirded civil society as it grew further and further away from the pre-Revolutionary, pre-Enlightenment dependence on absolutism and Providence.

After Brooks, many scholars have undertaken to explore the relation between melodrama and the realist novel, and they have done so in vastly different ways. I will mention briefly only a few. Works by David Marshall (1985), Joseph Litvak (1992), and Emily Allen (2003) focus on how logics and scenes of theatre and theatricality are represented figurally within the novel. J. Jeffrey Franklin (1999) considers the nineteenth-century novel and the popular theatre as competing cultural forms, with the novel rising as theatre is seen to decline; whereas David Kurnick argues for the positive role of the theatre in novels by Thackeray, Eliot, James, and Joyce, all writers who had aspired to write for the theatre and had failed. The realist novel is not so much about interiority as we have thought, Kurnick argues, but

instead is about dissatisfactions with interiority, and about the desire for a collective sociality represented by the theatre. Fredric Jameson, in *The Antinomies of Realism*, examines the relation of melodrama specifically (not of theatricality in general) to novelistic realism in ways that I find impressive, admirable, and congenial, even though his focus is different from mine. His dialectical reasoning brings the two modes of representation together, each as the internalised 'other' of the other. I too see melodrama and the novel developing side by side, and intertwined, two titanic bourgeois genres sharing aims, yet differing in forms, over the course of the nineteenth century. My focus has been on the form of melodrama.

But I do hope that in this essay I have shown something of their shared aims. Melodrama, like the novel, is dedicated to the non-idealised, 'lower' world of common folk who speak in prose. On the most general level, I have illustrated the fact that melodrama has its own ways of representing social history as well as psychological interiority. In the operation of integrating these two different orientations of realism - the social and the psychological - I have suggested the complex differences between dramatic presentation and representation by a narrator. The switch points between outward and inward views are operated in the novel by free indirect discourse, and in melodrama by the tableaux. In both cases, readers or spectators are asked to feel and understand that their orientation to the representation has shifted - subtly in the case of free indirect discourse and flagrantly in the case of melodramatic tableaux. This intriguing idea awaits another occasion for fuller development.

Similarly, the construction of common and middle-class characters should receive further comment as an element of form (and for that, see Williams 2018, 212-5). Melodramatic characters are typified, while characters in the realist novel are individualised; but they are always individualised against the background assumption of the type, whether that type be construed as social class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality (or any other category). Thus, novel and melodrama work together to think through modern sociological categories and the problem of representing a sociological understanding of relations between the individual and social groups. Realism in the eighteenth-century English novel worked against type-formations of allegory and romance, whereas for the nineteenth century, I would argue, melodrama provides the salient types.

As for forms of plot, the two genres share a wide range of interests, which might broadly be called domestic: generational inheritance, marriage, hopes of rising or threats of falling in the social scale, revelations of identity that had hitherto remained hidden or untold, relations between the nation and its internal and external others. While the melodramatic happy ending might seem to offend against realism's principle of probability, it can be defended on several

grounds. I would say that the sense of social urgency represented in melodrama, especially early, is so great that the sudden, contrived happy ending was meant to afford relief from a plot that forcibly showed how impossible it might be to achieve justice in the modern world. Then, too, what might be seen as 'probable' was always changing: orphans, refugees, and other displaced persons abounded after the Napoleonic Wars (Buckley 2009); the hope for justice or the belief in something like Brooks's "essential moral universe" (Brooks 1995, 15) was faltering; and social relations were changing, as the system of status gradually gave way to the system of class. Thus, the novel and melodrama both obsess about who is a 'real' gentleman or lady, and both genres work hard to explore the ways that education, speech patterns, and manners – all forms of 'acting' in the social sense of that word – could determine class position. Through the working of these two genres, nobility becomes a matter of morals and behavior, not a matter of inherited status. The novel and melodrama both reflect and help to create this new social organisation.

The present essay has focused on melodramatic form, and especially on the workings of the tableau. It is of interest in this respect to understand that many of the greatest nineteenth-century English realists made use of the tableau – often, though not always, within situations that any reader would recognise as melodramatic. The novels of Dickens, whose work some scholars would see as merely proto-realist, shows us very clearly the nineteenth-century novel thoroughly absorbed in and separating itself from melodrama. His early novels adhere quite closely to melodramatic form, including typed characters, melodramatic plots, and tableaux. Eliot, too, despite her manifest aversion to melodrama, used its conventions in every one of her novels, frequently deploying the tableau for brilliant suspenseful effects (see Williams 2004). Within ongoing narration, the pause wrought by a tableau can achieve many of the same effects as it does in stage melodrama. This differential between narration and tableau is decidedly different from the narratological distinction between 'narration' and 'description', most famously adumbrated by Georg Lukács (Lukács [1936] 1971). While Lukács reasonably privileges narration as the key to the integrated totality of the realist novel, my point has been that formal elements of melodrama are part of that integration.

Focusing on the tableau can help us to see that melodramatic realism and melodramatic form have influenced a great many other genres and media up to the present time. For example, the narrative form of intermittent pictorialisation continues well after stage melodrama has been supplanted by film. Early film adopts the gestural acting style, the live music, and many of the familiar plots directly from stage melodrama. But the film strip also adopts the form of serial discontinuity, composed as it is of individual still shots

(tableaux), arranged in a sequence, which yield the illusion of motion when projected at a carefully-calibrated speed against a light source. Brooks has suggested that the title cards of silent film replace the tableau moments of stage melodrama, while Flitterman-Lewis has suggested that close ups of a female face fill that function (Brooks 1995, 63; Flitterman-Lewis 1994, 10). In later film, continuity editing obscures the interruptive effect of serial discontinuity, but viewers may be reminded of its history whenever the ‘flicker’ of projected film is represented, or whenever a moving picture freezes the frame (in an imitation of the photographic moment, for example).

Strip books, comic books, and graphic novels participate in this narrative form as well, all relying on pictures arranged in a sequence and separated from one another. Even digital recording, with its pause button, preserves the capacity to stop the dramatic action with a still picture. In other words, media shift notwithstanding, many of our current forms of narrative hark back to the tableau freeze-frames of serial discontinuity, offering readers and viewers the opportunity to pause and observe the construction of melodramatic realism in action.

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