

Melodrama and its Criticism: An Essay in Memory of Sally Ledger

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For a century, melodrama was virtually ignored by literary criticism. Its popular cultural status was anathema to the Arnoldian tradition dominating approaches to 'Literature' from Arnold's day to that of his disciple, F. R. Leavis. Since the 1960s, however, the rise of Cultural Studies and the reaction against the humanist approach to literary study associated with Leavis has resulted in an increasing critical attention to melodrama. Indeed, such has been the upsurge of interest in the genre that a search of the MLA Bibliography for the term currently returns 1,151 entries. Having recently compiled the melodrama entry for the planned *Oxford Online Bibliography of Victorian Literature*, I am acutely aware of the prolific expansion in melodrama studies that has taken place in the last decade alone. Before commencing work on the annotated melodrama bibliography, I was uncertain whether melodrama had yet yielded a rich enough critical field to qualify it as a 'Level A' 'overview' entry in OUP's bibliographical schema, alongside topics like Realism or Darwinism; in the end, the main challenge was to limit the entry to the 7,000 words specified for Level A entries and to select, as the series format requires, the most important work in the field. One of the automatic entries was the late Sally Ledger's *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (2007), which both established Dickens's debt to the popular radical tradition of Regency writers like William Cobbett and William Hone, and reinforced the importance to that tradition of melodramatic aesthetics and politics. Sally was committed to reinscribing the importance of melodrama to our cultural and political map of the nineteenth century, and to that end, before her tragic and sudden death in January of this year, she had agreed to contribute a survey essay on melodrama to the current issue of **19**. In the wake of her death, I was honoured to provide a substitute essay and to take the opportunity to pay tribute to Sally and her work.

I

What is perhaps most surprising about the evolution of melodrama criticism is not the enormous recent growth in academic interest, but the relative silence of the previous century. This silence is particularly strange because melodrama was the most popular kind of theatrical entertainment for much of the nineteenth century and 'more people went to the theatre during the nineteenth century than at any time in history'.¹ Melodrama

audiences were socially mixed and often, in illegitimate theatres, predominantly drawn from the traditional working classes and the constituency Ledger calls the ‘literate non-elite’.² Melodrama evolved with an uneducated audience in mind, thus offering an ideal aesthetic template through which to reach those often excluded from serious literature. The word itself, literally meaning ‘music-drama’ or ‘song-drama’, derives from Greek, but reached Britain by way of French. The first recorded use of ‘le mélodrame’ was in 1772 and Rousseau applied it to his *Pygmalion* (1775). The self-styled, generally proclaimed ‘father of le mélodrame’ was Guilbert de Pixérécourt, who borrowed the term, the dumb show and the music from *Pygmalion* and applied them to create melodramas about the French Revolution – albeit with the anti-revolutionary intention of reinforcing the social order. If Pixérécourt was politically conservative, however, in cultural terms he was in many ways revolutionary, declaring openly, ‘I am writing for those who cannot read’.³ In consequence, he developed ‘a melodramatic artistry aimed entirely at an unlettered populace’.⁴

In Britain, this association between melodrama and the uneducated was reinforced by the law. The Licensing Act of 1737 which remained in force until the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 outlawed the acting of ‘legitimate’ plays (those involving the spoken word) outside the City of Westminster, effectively allowing only Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres to present drama of the spoken word. The Licensing Act also introduced full-scale censorship to the theatre, declaring that all playscripts had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for pre-production approval. The sheer stupidity of the legislation was farcically emphasised in 1789, when the actor John Palmer was called a ‘rogue and vagrant’ for speaking prose in a performance at the Royal Circus and sent to prison.⁵ The Theatre Regulation Act restricted the powers of the Lord Chamberlain (specifically his ‘Examiner of Plays’) so that plays could only be prohibited if they threatened ‘good manners, decorum or [...] the public peace’ and local authorities were also given additional powers to license theatres, hence breaking the patent theatres’ monopoly. The system by which all plays had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office remained in force, however, until the Theatres Act of 1968.

Melodrama was well equipped to thrive even within the aesthetic limits imposed by the Licensing Act; as ‘music drama’ aimed at ‘those who cannot read’ it had never privileged the spoken word in order to communicate with audiences. Indeed, melodrama proved so successful in Britain that eventually the ‘legitimate’ theatres had to appropriate

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its techniques in order to survive. In *A London Companion to the Theatres*, Horace Foote recorded that *Richard III*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* were the most popular ‘legitimate’ dramas, for the simple reason that they were ‘the most melodramatic’.⁶ The insatiable appetite of Victorian audiences for melodrama is demonstrated by a London costermonger, who claimed that ‘*Macbeth* would be better liked, if it was only the witches and the fighting’.⁷ Indeed, its cross-class appeal was evident from its first importation to Britain: Thomas Holcroft’s *A Tale of Mystery*, an adaptation of Pixérécourt’s *Coelina* (1800) was the first British play to call itself ‘a New Melo-Drama’ and was first performed at the ‘legitimate’ Covent Garden on 13 November 1802. As Dickens argues in his seminal essay, ‘The Amusements of the People’ (1850), melodrama resembles ‘the Italian Opera’ in that it speaks through ‘conventional passion’: ‘So do extremes meet’, Dickens writes, ‘and so there is some hopeful congeniality between what will excite MR. WHELKS, and what will rouse a Duchess’.⁸

Melodrama proved popular with audiences at the dawn of an era which witnessed the expansion of cultural as well as political access because it offered an inclusive, populist aesthetics. Various subgenres of melodrama emerged during the nineteenth century – for example, the Gothic, the romantic, the domestic (including factory melodrama) and crime melodrama – and some theatres chose to specialise in particular subgenres (most memorably, Astley’s specialised in equestrian melodrama). While some subgenres were more topical, political and ‘realist’ in subject matter than others, all drew on a basic aesthetic template which proved portable to other genres and periods (the novel and film, for example). Most melodrama fulfils the infamous definition of fiction supplied by Miss Prism – ‘The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means’ – but even those few plays that do not end happily tend to deploy fantastic, stylised modes of representation.⁹ Melodrama presents what Michael R. Booth describes as ‘an allegory of human experience dramatically ordered’, even when that allegory is welded to what David Mayer calls ‘immediate social circumstances and concerns’.¹⁰ It depends on an externalised aesthetics which simplifies and externalises that which is normally invisible or hidden. Character, for example, is transparent and one-dimensional. Good people look good and bad people look bad (and often ugly). Techniques like tableaux and *tableaux vivants*, whereby actors freeze in symbolically significant poses reminiscent of framed narrative art, typify its language of the visual. At its best, melodrama can effect what Peter Brooks calls ‘the expressionism of the moral

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imagination'.¹¹ Dialogue is functional at best and characters communicate as much through physiognomy, gesture, music and the body as they do through language. Melodrama is, as Dickens highlights, an intensely emotional genre, in which a passion felt is a passion expressed.

The premium placed by melodrama on a language of emotion that is often either non-verbal or simplistically verbal made it, for many years, a difficult object of study for an academy that had not developed an adequate language for the academic study of emotion, and was indeed ambivalent about whether emotion, with its seemingly humanist baggage, was a fitting object of academic study at all. It is crucial that the rapidly growing academic interest in 'affect' and emotion today takes into account the centrality of melodrama to nineteenth-century structures of feeling. It is not emotion alone that has acted as a barrier to academic enquiry into melodrama, however: the aesthetic simplicity of melodrama, its 'non-elite' audiences, its demonstrative rather than analytical mode, and its devaluation of both spoken and written language meant that it was fundamentally threatening to Victorian and early twentieth-century notions of Literature and Culture, on which academic study of the Arts was based.

II

Critical orthodoxy positions the publication of Peter Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976) as the initiating moment in the 'serious' study of melodrama. Brooks' central thesis was that 'the melodramatic mode' is a means of 'uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era'.¹² His use of tools like psychoanalysis and expressionism to analyse the melodramatic 'mode' (rather than genre), as it manifested itself in the novels of canonical writers like Balzac and Henry James, was groundbreaking. However, in many ways, Brooks makes melodrama acceptable to literary studies rather than rethinking literary studies via melodrama; he removes melodrama from its original ideological and theatrical contexts and, in framing characters as 'psychic signs', buries the cultural politics of melodrama's lack of interest in the psyche.¹³

Brooks' work is perhaps atypical of studies of melodrama, however, which can perhaps most helpfully (though heuristically and not exclusively) be seen via three different threads: 'theatrical' studies which focus on theatre as theatre, and/or theatre

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history; genre studies, which include, but extend beyond, a significant body of work on the cultural politics of the genre (*as genre*); and contextualised studies which involve an assessment of melodrama in a larger analysis of cultural practices or politics. Even before Brooks' seminal work, for example, critics like Michael R. Booth, Maurice Willson Disher, Frank Rahill, George Rowell and Allardyce Nicoll had begun to examine stage melodrama on its own (theatrical) terms, familiarising readers with the history of nineteenth-century melodrama.¹⁴ Likewise, significant work on melodrama as genre – for example, Robert Heilman's *Tragedy and Melodrama* (1968) and Eric Bentley's chapter on melodrama in *The Life of the Drama* (1964) – predated *The Melodramatic Imagination*.¹⁵

The sea-change in the critical fortunes of melodrama occurred in the wake of the rise of Cultural Studies, with its leftist interest in popular culture. Since the advent of Cultural Studies, genre studies have become heavily inflected by an interest in the politics of popular culture. Although studies of this kind are numerous and varied, influential edited collections of essays have encompassed the diversity of theoretical and politicised readings of melodrama, whilst projecting a definite vision of the genre.¹⁶ In their collection, *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (1996), for example, Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopolou argue against Peter Brooks and 'aesthetic' metanarratives of melodrama and for specific, historical interpretations of the genre. The nineteenth-century context is important for the 'subversive' model of the genre they construct. *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* (1994), edited by Jacky Bratton et al. takes as its premise that nineteenth-century melodrama was 'an agent of modernity'.¹⁷ Elaine Hadley's monograph *Melodramatic Tactics* (1995) adapts genre theory to examine how the melodramatic mode was adopted as a form of 'theatricalized dissent' through which protestors objected to the rise of economic class and market forces, while my own *Dickens's Villains* (2001) aims to demonstrate the ways in which the cultural politics of melodrama can be used to reassess the work of a major Victorian author.¹⁸ Increasingly, though an interest in the cultural politics of genre persists, there has perhaps been a tendency to include an assessment of melodrama within an analysis of larger cultural or theatrical practices and/or politics. Katherine Newey's *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (2005), for example, looks at genre but often as a demonstration of industrial practices in the theatre profession, while *Reflecting the Audience* (2001) by Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow is a groundbreaking empirical study of theatre (including melodrama) audiences.¹⁹

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It is perhaps in this area of historicist, empirical theatre research that the most pioneering work is taking place and in which most work needs to take place. For what is remarkable is that there is still so much about the nineteenth-century theatre that we do not know. Because it has been persistently seen as outside of the canon, nineteenth-century theatre has been routinely omitted from syllabi, publication lists and research agendas, thus reinforcing this status. Electronic resources and the determined energies of a new generation are rapidly transforming this situation: new journals like *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film* (Manchester University Press), new series like *Redefining British Theatre History* (Palgrave Macmillan), the inclusion of designated nineteenth-century theatre volumes in the prestigious Cambridge Companion series, and the increasing visibility of the theatre on nineteenth-century MA programmes and websites are testimony to the success of these scholars in enlarging the knowledge base on which we can all work.²⁰

A fundamental problem for the student of melodrama has always been that of accessing primary material. Reimagining original performances brings its own problems, but the hurdle for the prospective student is even more basic: that of locating print copies of nineteenth-century plays. In the nineteenth century, many melodramas were performed from handwritten playscripts that never reached print. While many of these scripts may not have survived, others such as those subject to the scrutiny of the Lord Chamberlain have until recently only been available in rare special collections such as the Lord Chamberlain's Collection housed at the British Library. Those plays that did reach print usually found their place in one of the series available during the period – for example, *The Acting National Drama*, edited by B. N. Webster (1837–50), *Cumberland's British Theatre* (1829–60), *Cumberland's Minor Theatre* (1828–40), *Dicks' Standard Plays* (1880s), *Duncombe's Edition of Plays* (pre-1850), *Lacy's Acting Edition* (c. 1850–60), *French's Acting Edition* (a continuation of *Lacy's*) and *Richardson's New Minor Drama* (1928–31). Again, while these editions are more widely available than unique special collections of hand-written plays, they do not feature prominently, if at all, in the holdings of many university libraries.

For fifty years, students have relied on the relatively few anthologies of nineteenth-century plays for access to printed versions of melodramas, of which Booth's *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century* (5 vols. 1969–76) is probably the most widely available and easy to locate.²¹ Library provision of these is patchy, however, and most of the

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anthologies are out-of-print. In recent years, technology has revolutionised the study of melodrama. For example, the University of Worcester's *Victorian Plays Project*, led by Richard Pearson, a digital archive of selected plays from T. H. Lacy's Acting Editions (1848–1875), is a superb resource which includes e-texts of 350 plays, many of which are melodramas.²² The site contains a volume-by-volume catalogue of the contents of the complete run of Lacy's plays held by Birmingham Central Reference Library, from which the selection of e-texts is taken. It is eminently searchable and thirty encoded plays enable searches for stage directions and textual references. Another prominent example of the electronic widening of access to theatrical texts and materials is the Royal Holloway/British Library project *Buried Treasures*, led by Jacky Bratton, which is making available e-texts of Lord Chamberlain's Plays submitted between 1852 and 1863.²³ This hugely significant resource includes a detailed, searchable online index of more than 2,000 British plays submitted for licensing to the Lord Chamberlain and makes available scholarly editions of a representative selection of plays from different genres, including melodrama. Both projects were funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) which in grants made here and elsewhere is proving its commitment to collaborative theatre research, partnerships beyond the academy and furthering understanding of the role of the arts in public life.²⁴

The internet is not simply broadening access to the play as print object but also to theatrical 'ephemera' – not in fact ephemeral to scholars' interest in the material conditions and cultural production of nineteenth-century melodrama. Thus, the *East London Theatre Archive* contains programmes and playbills relating to various East End theatres and productions.²⁵ *The Adelphi Theatre Project*, based on the theatre's calendar of performances, gives a detailed account of each yearly season at the theatre, including a daily calendar and information of theatre management and functionaries, authors, performers, pieces performed, genre, music and composers.²⁶ *The Adelphi Theatre Project* grew out of *The London Stage Project: A Documentary Record and Calendar of Performances*, a growing compilation of information on the London stage edited by Joseph Donohue and James Ellis.²⁷ In the current absence of a full and authoritative melodrama bibliography, students can often find the most up-to-date information on reliable websites, for example, sites hosted by universities and libraries specialising in theatre studies – the best of which is probably Indiana University's *Guide to Drama*, an

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annotated bibliography which details indexes, reference sources, databases, internet resources and other bibliographies.²⁸

What we could call new theatre history inhabits page as well as screen, of course. It combines an empirical base with a sophisticated sense of its relevance to larger theoretical debates – whether about identity politics, aesthetics, discipline or indeed modernity. Thus Jim Davis’s work, for example, uses new knowledge to impart both nuance and substance to the somewhat abstract and unproductive debates that once attended discussions about whether melodrama is conservative or radical. His essay, ‘The Gospel of Rags: Melodrama at the Britannia 1863–74’, goes to manuscript sources rather than the more respectable print sources to uncover a more radical repertoire than previous authorities had assumed.²⁹ With Tracy C. Davis, his essay on the Britannia Theatre brings a factual base to the vexed question, for Dickensians and others, of who exactly constituted ‘the people’ of this Hackney theatre frequented by Dickens, while his major work (with Victor Emeljanow), *Reflecting the Audience*, does the same for the understanding of theatre audiences across London.³⁰

Jim Davis’s work on audience, like Sally Ledger’s work on melodrama, is inflected by Marxist theory, just as the work of Kate Newey on women and the theatre is steeped in feminism and Jacky Bratton’s and Hazel Waters’s work on Empire, race and national identity is part of a postcolonial critical dialogue.³¹ Scholars of melodrama and nineteenth-century theatre have always had to defend their academic interests in terms and paradigms not of their own making, so it is not surprising that much melodrama criticism is multilingual in terms of the theoretical languages it speaks. Although identity politics has always been a core interest for melodrama studies, the best work in the field crosses, and indeed moves, boundaries. Thus Anna Clark’s influential essay, ‘The Politics of Seduction in English Popular Culture, 1748–1848’ emphasises the links between melodrama and the radical political writing of the eighteenth century and the Romantic period, yet also explores the fact that melodramatic seducers can be working class.³² Her historicised analysis of the class and gender politics of melodrama undermines the binary terms in which identity politics can sometimes be debated.³³ Kristen Leaver’s ‘Victorian Melodrama and the Performance of Poverty’ brings class politics to bear on questions of representation and subjectivity to counter the tendency of modern revisionist readings of Victorian privacy to assume that all Victorians’ relations to ideological formations mirror those of the middle class.³⁴

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Leaver follows Martha Vicinus's influential essay 'Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama' in the sense that it takes a seemingly specialised focus (in Leaver's case the popular crime melodrama *Maria Marten; or, The Murder in the Red Barn*) to transform our sense of nineteenth-century political, affective and cultural formations.³⁵ As Jacky Bratton has forcefully demonstrated in recent times, the nineteenth century looks different when you know about its theatre; Bratton's *New Readings in Theatre History* (2003) offers a revisionist historiography which argues for a more organic, less judgemental and hierarchical view of the British stage.³⁶ Current historiography, she argues, has its roots in the 1830s and by focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Bratton subverts conventional notions of periodicity to explore the historic differences between the terms 'the drama' and 'the stage'. Jane Moody's *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (2000) likewise works to shift familiar historical and cultural paradigms.³⁷

III

Where melodrama has the potential to transform our understanding of the nineteenth century, as well as to reshape major contemporary debates, is in two key areas: melodrama is crucial, as I have mentioned, to anyone with an interest in 'affect' or the question of feeling; and it should also rightly be pivotal to the history and theory of modernity. Even before Henry James lamented that melodrama audiences attended the theatre 'to look and listen, to laugh and cry—not to think', the centrality of emotion both to melodrama and responses to melodrama has been obvious.³⁸ In *The Life of the Drama*, Eric Bentley lands a critical wallop for those who enjoy melodramatic emotion and indeed contends that emotion is what gives melodrama its value:

The tears shed by the audience at a Victorian melodrama [...] might be called the poor man's catharsis, and as such have a better claim to be the main objective of popular melodrama than its notorious moral pretensions. [...]

Once we have seen that the modern antagonism to self-pity and sentiment goes far beyond the rational objections that may be found to them, we realise that even the rational objections are in some measure mere rationalization. Attacks on false emotion often mask a fear of emotion as such. Ours is, after all, a thin-lipped, thin-blooded culture.³⁹

There have been few better defences of the centrality of emotion to popular art, not simply because Bentley's own words are impassioned, but because they convey an astute sense of

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the political as well as aesthetic and personal value of the melodramatic experience of feeling. Even on the left, among those who want to value the ‘tears shed’ by those outside the cultural elite, there has been a marked tendency to suspect emotional responses to mass culture as false consciousness. Although the sophistication of Marxist readings of popular culture in general means that this is changing, melodrama critics have always been forced by their object of study to think about emotion in complex ways, even before the rise of ‘affect’ up the critical agenda. Thus Jane Shattuc’s essay, “‘Having a Good Cry over *The Color Purple*’” is a groundbreaking analysis of the relationship between ‘affect’ and agency in melodrama whose usefulness extends beyond the text, genre and theories under discussion.⁴⁰ Shattuc argues brilliantly that ‘all melodramas produce a double hermeneutic: a positive one which draws on the emotional power of authentic liberatory aspirations [...] and a negative one which recuperates the Utopian impulse in complicity with an oppressive ideology’.⁴¹ Whether or not we agree that the negative hermeneutic outweighs the positive, the idea of doubleness offers critics of feeling and popular culture a way out of the impasse which the familiar oppositional terms of debate (containment vs. resistance) precludes. Likewise Simon Shepherd’s ‘Pauses of Mutual Agitation’ is an astute questioning of ‘the assumed simplicity of melodrama’s ethical emotions and fantasy solutions’, which queries in particular the common critical assumption that melodramatic endings capture the conservative ideology of the whole.⁴² Shepherd argues that ‘points of arrival are not necessarily points of achieved stability’.⁴³ Shepherd’s essay again has far broader potential, enabling critics instinctively opposed to the idea that happy endings necessarily signify conservatism a way out of the logic of pessimism that so often frames academic discussion of the politics of emotion, despite the availability of more optimistic political voices (Gramsci, Bakhtin, Althusser).

The reality may be that we can learn more from melodramatic emotion if we reassess our own academic templates through its lens than if we interpellate it into a prevailing academic discourse by which it is reconstituted and contained. There are signs that this is happening. In 2000, Rohan McWilliam demonstrated the way in which melodrama is reshaping not only our understanding of the map of the nineteenth century but the discipline of history itself.⁴⁴ In ‘Melodrama and the Historians’, McWilliam describes the ‘melodramatic turn’ amongst historians who have increasingly employed melodrama as a device for understanding Victorian discourse and structures of feeling. McWilliam further explores and critiques the uses of melodrama as a way of

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understanding current trends in the interdisciplinary relationship between Victorian Literature and History.

Melodrama has, of course, outlived the historical moment of its birth, permeating many post-Victorian cultural forms, and further, shaping both public and private emotional expression in many nations. The primary material means by which melodrama has travelled is the screen. Early silent cinema was largely dependent on adaptations of both the work of Victorian novelists and stage melodramas. Melodrama's mass appeal, its play with binary oppositions, its origins as music drama and its populist, expressionistic aesthetics made it the natural feeding ground for early black-and-white filmmakers. The Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein sought to establish Dickens as the prime ancestor of film in the 1940s, the same decade that Leavis left Dickens out of his *Great Tradition* (1948).⁴⁵ For Eisenstein, Dickens is the most important figure in bequeathing cinema 'an ancestry and a pedigree, a past and traditions, or a rich cultural history from earlier epochs'.⁴⁶ Though Eisenstein's motivation for elevating Dickens's importance to the evolution of film above that of stage melodrama is partly, as Rick Altman argues, strategic, Eisenstein is open that it is the melodramatic aesthetics of Dickens's novels that offer film a template.⁴⁷ Eisenstein sees Dickens as the pioneer of the film technique of 'montage' or dialectical parallelism, a technique explained by Eisenstein through detailed analysis of *Oliver Twist* and quotation of Dickens's famous 'streaky, well-cured bacon' passage (*Oliver Twist*, Chapter 17). Eisenstein sees Dickens's justification of his aesthetic reliance on dramatic alternation between tragic and comic scenes with recourse not to Shakespeare, but to 'good, murderous melodramas', as offering a blueprint for montage.

There is an unusual consensus among critics about the importance of the influence of nineteenth-century melodrama on film. In his influential essay on the roots of the Hollywood family melodrama of the mid-twentieth century, for example, Thomas Elsaesser traces its ancestry to nineteenth-century melodrama, yet expands this to include a discussion of ideological and aesthetic features of melodrama in Europe and America across different periods.⁴⁸ Elsaesser sees melodrama as an ideologically flexible form and links its evolution to class struggle (particularly the ascendancy of the middle class over the aristocracy). Laura Mulvey's essay, "It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession": The Melodrama's Role in the Development of Film Theory' accounts for the ability of this originally Romantic genre to continue to appeal by offering a strong defence of melodrama's ability to offer a history of the present.⁴⁹ Mulvey counters readings of

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melodrama as escapist but her essay also, like the influential anthology of which it forms a part (Bratton, Cook and Gledhill, *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*), provides an historically aware account of the capacity of melodrama to escape from its historical moment.⁵⁰ Ben Singer's *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts* (2001) is an ambitious exploration of the specific roots of early film in nineteenth-century melodrama and the processes of industrial modernisation, as well as the relationship between the concepts of melodrama and modernity more broadly.⁵¹

It is undeniable that the screen has enabled the survival of the melodramatic mode in post-Victorian mass culture, but the continued appeal of melodrama in different media – for example, film, television, print and broadcast journalism, the popular novel, opera, sport – suggests that there is something about the melodramatic mode that goes beyond particular media and resonates in fundamental ways in the industrial and post-industrial eras. If we choose to associate the idea of modernity with the post-French Revolution period, then the concepts of melodrama and modernity become mutually constitutive.⁵² In this sense, Peter Brooks was right to argue that we must 'recognize melodrama as a central fact of the modern sensibility'.⁵³ For Brooks, melodrama attempts to impart meaning to a post-sacred world:

modern art has typically felt itself to be constructed on, and over, the void, postulating meanings and symbolic systems which have no certain justification because they are backed by no theology and no universally accepted code. [...] There is a desperate effort to renew contact with the scattered ethical and psychic fragments of the Sacred through the representation of fallen reality, insisting that behind reality, hidden by it yet indicated within it, there is a realm where large forces are operative [...]. The melodramatic mode can be seen as an intensified, primary, and exemplary version of what the most ambitious art, since the beginnings of Romanticism, has been about.⁵⁴

It is in fact more common for melodrama to be seen as an antidote to 'the modern sensibility' than as its 'central fact' and to position high cultural movements like Romanticism as central to the post-sacred sensibility. Though melodrama and high Romanticism exist in a dialectical relationship to each other, Romanticism is more usually seen as the dominant cultural and aesthetic force because it effected the 'turn inwards' privileged in post-Romantic constructions of the individual and high art before postmodernism. To remind ourselves that melodrama, with its externalised aesthetics, has traditionally been seen as an antidote to modernity rather than its 'central fact' is to illuminate the cultural subordination of the melodramatic mode. Melodrama is only

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infrequently seen as contributing to the ‘desperate effort’, the *process* of questioning the post-sacred ‘void’. The activity of searching for answers – the idea of progress, indeed – is commonly attributed to high art modes like Romanticism. Melodrama, by contrast, even today is often seen as offering a static, artificial model of the sacred which fosters intellectual and emotional stagnation. Melodrama has been seen as the quick fix of modernity – necessary, endemic, yet despised and marginalised.

Two of the most memorable historical moments of recent times in Anglo-American culture would seem to suggest that the melodramatic mode is indeed central to the modern sensibility. The funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales and the inauguration of President Obama occasioned mass shows of emotion on an unprecedented scale. To those moved to tears or joy by these respective occasions, they were deeply meaningful on a personal level, and positive signs of community. Most people who joined the mass demonstration of feeling did not know the protagonists, yet experienced a kind of catharsis through externalised expressions of empathy and/or ecstasy. What was notable, however, particularly in the case of Diana’s funeral, was firstly that the degree and visibility of public feeling were unexpected, even by the media who had helped to stoke them, and secondly, that there was an unease among broadcasters and commentators about how to report on them. The veteran BBC reporter David Dimbleby’s patent bewilderment and incredulity at the popular outpouring of emotion on Diana’s death is particularly memorable; it was as if the people he was interviewing were speaking a foreign language. His lack of comprehension brings to mind a more offensive incident when, in 2004, the then editor of the *Spectator* (and now Mayor of London) Boris Johnson, caused huge offence to the people of Liverpool by accusing them of wallowing in ‘disproportionate’ grief in their public displays of fellow feeling for Kenneth Bigley, the Liverpool man tortured and killed in Iraq, and urging them to temper their ‘outpouring of sentimentality’ for the victims of the 1989 Hillsborough football disaster in which ninety-six Liverpool fans were killed.⁵⁵ While the response to Diana and Obama is doubtless not unrelated to celebrity culture, this does not negate the significance of the ‘melodramatic’ ways in which group emotion so often expresses itself. What public displays of grief seem to demonstrate is that ‘we’ do not live in a ‘thin-lipped, thin-blooded culture’, but that there is sometimes a failing – intellectual and emotional – to understand externalised, ‘melodramatic’ displays of mass emotion and to find ways to analyse them constructively.

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These examples show both the ways in which our languages of feeling are heavily mediated by class and cultural formations and the ways in which they can cut across them. While melodrama, with its ongoing associations with popular art, may have been repeatedly framed as ‘Other’ by the cultural elite, the melodramatic mode has been central to the experience of modernity for people across classes. As Dickens puts it in his defence of melodramatic feeling in *Oliver Twist*:

The transitions in real life from well-spread boards to death-beds, and from mourning weeds to holiday garments, are not a whit less startling [than those in stage melodrama]; only, there, we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on; which makes a vast difference. The actors in the mimic life of the theatre, are blind to violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion or feeling which, presented before the eyes of mere spectators, are at once condemned as outrageous and preposterous. (Chapter 17)

The rational way to analyse melodramatic emotion – whether in art or in life – may be to associate it with false consciousness; but such analyses are what Bentley calls ‘mere rationalization’. It is in fact far more difficult to try to account for the power of melodrama and melodramatic feeling in modern culture in ways that recognise both the experience of feeling and the larger formations of which this feeling is a part, than to assert, in the face of all evidence, that melodramatic emotion must be ‘false emotion’.

Post-Script to Sally

Sally Ledger’s work on melodrama recognised both the ways in which melodrama offered people a real voice and the place of that voice in the broader cultural and political dynamics of nineteenth-century Britain. Like her next planned major project, an exploration of why the idea of sentimentality has become a term of abuse, Sally’s work on melodrama respected and sought to understand languages of emotion on their own terms as well as on her own. This is perhaps what Jon Mee meant when he described *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* as offering a ‘generous’ reading of Dickens.⁵⁶ The generosity of Sally’s work on melodrama sprung from a political groundedness, optimism and confidence. She was from a solid Labour Party background which informed what Roger Luckhurst has called her ‘no-nonsense, straight-forward sense of dealing with people, institutions and literary history’.⁵⁷ It was a great relief to me when Sally began working on Dickens and melodrama because her impeccable left-wing credentials lent

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weight to the idea that Dickens was, in Sally's words, 'able to negotiate and frequently to transcend the boundaries between popular and radical culture in a way that no other mid-nineteenth century writer was able to do' and that melodrama was key to the ways in which he did so.⁵⁸ Though Sally had a sophisticated theoretical understanding of the more fashionable and pessimistic counter-arguments, her generous reading of Dickens was in the end guided by political belief and common sense. For Sally, Dickens's radical sympathies and progressive intentions were genuine, and both Dickens's writing and nineteenth-century melodrama did give 'the people' a voice. Though Sally was more aware than most of the fraught sociological and political debates surrounding the term 'the people' – particularly in Dickens studies, because of Dickens's notoriously slippery use of the term – in the end, she opted for the inclusive definition of 'the people' used by a Dickensian from the past, Arnold Kettle:

Dickens then, sees the People not as a vague or all-inclusive term – an indiscriminate everybody – but as a specific force in contradistinction to those who rule [...]. A popular tradition in literature implies, then, a literature which looks at life from the point of view of the People.⁵⁹

All of Sally's work 'looks at life from the point of view of the People', in Kettle's sense. Reflecting back on her career, it does not seem surprising that Sally was attracted to melodrama: melodrama's affiliation with the non-elite, its optimistic view of community and its modernity would all have appealed to Sally. It took a brave and confident intellectual leap to tackle Dickens studies, however, when her previous work had focused on the *fin de siècle* and women's literature. What unifies Sally's written work – whether on Dickens, popular radicalism, New Woman literature, melodrama, or latterly sentimentality – is her drive to include the disempowered in our narratives of the nineteenth century, to incorporate in academic debate a sense of 'real' world concerns and emotions, and to build a fairer and better world through academic endeavour. Moreover, Sally practised what she preached. Her personal and intellectual generosity, to younger as well as established colleagues, together with her impulse to facilitate, collaborate and support the work of others have been widely commented upon. For me, she was an intellectual friend who shared my interests, advised and helped me, and buoyed my flagging spirits when tasks seemed insurmountable. Without Sally's support and encouragement, I do not know whether I would ever have finished a book that had been a

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long time in the making. She played a similar role for so many others – never territorial, always enabling.

Many of Sally's friends and colleagues in the field of Victorian studies had heard the terrible news of her death within twenty-four hours of its happening. Many, like myself, had built friendships with Sally through shared academic interests and conference trips, through regular e-mail conversations and confidences, rather than the more traditional milestones of friendship. And many from all over the world who did not know Sally intimately have displayed and experienced an overwhelming grief at her loss. The emotion that we have felt is not false emotion but a testimony to Sally's generous communications with others and her unique place in a global community of Victorianists. Sally and I were in the middle of e-mail conversations about both Dickens and melodrama when she died. One of Sally's colleagues and close friends recently wrote to me that she was sure that there were many of us who were still having conversations with Sally in our heads. The melodrama conversation is one of many to which Sally was committed; nineteenth-century scholars should keep it going.

This essay draws on an earlier monograph, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and on my melodrama entry for the planned *Oxford Online Bibliography of Victorian Literature*.

¹ Gabrielle Hyslop, 'Researching the Acting of French Melodrama, 1800–1830', *Nineteenth Century Theatre*, 15 (1987), 85–114 (p. 85).

² Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 250.

³ Quoted by W. D. Howarth, 'Word and Image in Pixérécourt's Melodramas: The Dramaturgy of the Strip Cartoon', in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama; Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film and Television, 1800–1976*, ed. by David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 17–32 (p. 17).

⁴ Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Jenkins, 1965), pp. 44–45.

⁵ Joseph Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), p. 49.

⁶ Horace Foote, *A London Companion to the Theatres; and, A Manual of the British Drama* (London: Marsh & Miller, 1829), III; quoted by Donohue, p. 49.

⁷ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, and Those That Will Not Work*, 3 vols. (London: Morning Chronicle, 1851), I, p. 15.

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⁸ [Charles Dickens], 'The Amusements of the People', *Household Words*, 1 (20 March 1850), 13–15 and 1 (13 April 1850), 57–60 (p. 60).

⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* [1895], in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 357–419 (p. 376).

¹⁰ Booth, *English Melodrama*, p. 14; David Mayer, 'Encountering Melodrama', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 145–63 (p. 146).

¹¹ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 55.

¹² Brooks, p. 15.

¹³ Brooks, p. 35.

¹⁴ Booth, *English Melodrama*, Maurice Willson Disher, *Blood and Thunder: Mid-Victorian Melodrama and its Origins* (London: Muller, 1949), Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre, 1792–1914: A Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Early Nineteenth-Century Drama, 1800–1850*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) [vol. 4 of Nicoll's *A History of English Drama*, 2nd edn., 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952–59)].

¹⁵ Robert Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1964).

¹⁶ For example, Daniel Gerould (ed.), *Melodrama*, *New York Literary Forum*, 7 (1980), Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopolou (eds.), *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) and Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (eds.), *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* (London: British Film Institute, 1994).

¹⁷ Bratton, Cook and Gledhill, p. 1.

¹⁸ Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Katherine Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840–1880* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001).

²⁰ See Kerry Powell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²¹ Michael Booth, *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969–76). Volume I, 'Dramas: 1800–1850' and Volume II, 'Dramas: 1850–1900' have most relevance to scholars of melodrama. See also Leonard R. N. Ashley (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century British Drama: An Anthology of Representative Plays* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1967), James Osler Bailey (ed.), *British Plays of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology to Illustrate The Evolution of the Drama* (New York: Odyssey Press,

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1966), Michael Booth (ed.), *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), John Franceschina (ed.), *Sisters of Gore: Seven Gothic Melodramas by British Women, 1790–1843* (New York: Routledge, 2000), George Rowell (ed.), *Nineteenth Century Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), James L. Smith (ed.), *Victorian Melodramas: Seven English, French and American Melodrama* (London: J. M. Dent, 1976), and Stephen Wischhusen (ed.), *The Hour of One: Six Gothic Melodramas* (London: Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1975).

²² <<http://victorian.worc.ac.uk/modx/>> [accessed 6 April 2009].

²³ <<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/drama/Research/Chamberlains-plays/index.html>> [accessed 6 April 2009].

²⁴ The AHRC has also funded ‘Ruskinian Theatre: the Aesthetics of the Late Nineteenth-Century Popular Stage’, led by Kate Newey, Jeffrey Richards and Anselm Heinrich, and a recent collaborative doctoral award won by Kate Newey of the University of Birmingham on ‘A Cultural History of British Pantomime’ – <<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/history/research/ruskiniantheatre.htm>> [accessed 6 April 2009] and <<http://www.drama.bham.ac.uk/pg/pantomime-application.doc>> [accessed 6 April 2009].

²⁵ <<http://www.elta-project.org/home.html>> [accessed 6 April 2009]. The East London Theatre Archive is the culmination of a two-year digitisation project funded by Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). The project was led by a team based at the University of East London with electronic support from the Centre for E-Research at King’s College London.

²⁶ <http://www.emich.edu/public/english/adelphi_calendar/> [accessed 6 April 2009]. The Adelphi Theatre Project is edited by Alfred L. Nelson and Gilbert B. Cross and is hosted by Eastern Michigan University.

²⁷ <<http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~a0fs000/lsp.html>> [accessed 6 April 2009].

²⁸ <<http://www.libraries.iub.edu/index.php?pageId=5497>> [accessed 6 April 2009].

²⁹ Jim Davis, ‘The Gospel of Rags: Melodrama at the Britannia 1863–74’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 7 (1991), 369–89.

³⁰ Jim Davis and Tracy C. Davis, ‘The People of the “People’s Theatre”: The Social Demography of the Britannia Theatre (Hoxton)’, *Theatre Survey*, 32 (1991), 137–65. *Reflecting the Audience* examines seven representative theatres from four areas: the Surrey Theatre and the Royal Victoria to the south, the Whitechapel Pavilion and the Britannia Theatre to the east, Sadler’s Wells and the Queen’s (later the Prince of Wales’s) to the north and Drury Lane to the west.

³¹ See J. S. Bratton, Richard Allen Cave, Breandan Gregory, Heidi J. Holder and Michael Pickering, *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), J. S. Bratton, ‘Theatre of War: The Crimean on the London Stage, 1854–5’, in Bradby, James and Sharratt, pp. 119–38, Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³² Anna Clark, ‘The Politics of Seduction in English Popular Culture, 1748–1848’, in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. by Jean Radford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 47–70.

³³ Gabrielle Hyslop’s ‘Deviant and Dangerous Behaviour: Women in Melodrama’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 19 (1985), 65–77 is an earlier example of this kind of oppositional approach. Although in many

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ways a helpful article on women in melodrama and melodrama more generally, it emphasises the conservative and reassuring function of melodrama. By contrast, Daniel Duffy's 'Heroic Mothers and Militant Lovers: Representations of Lower-Class Women in Melodramas of the 1830s and 1840s', *Nineteenth Century Theatre*, 27 (1999), 41–65 argues that women played a 'genuinely subversive role' in the 'lower-class insurgence' of the early nineteenth century and explores this subversion as it was represented through the heroines of domestic melodrama and the anti-heroines of romantic melodrama (p. 41).

³⁴ Kristen Leaver, 'Victorian Melodrama and the Performance of Poverty', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 443–56.

³⁵ Martha Vicinus, 'Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama', *New Literary History*, 13 (1981), 127–43. Vicinus's is a provocative, politicised defence of domestic melodrama which argues for 'its importance as a psychological touchstone for the powerless' (p. 128).

³⁶ Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁷ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³⁸ [Henry James], 'Some Notes on the Theatre', *Nation* (11 March 1875); repr. in *The American Theatre as Seen by its Critics, 1752–1934*, ed. by Montrose J. Moses and John Mason Brown (New York: Norton, 1934), pp. 122–26.

³⁹ Bentley, p. 198.

⁴⁰ Jane Shattuc, "'Having a Good Cry over *The Color Purple*": The Problem of Affect and Imperialism in Feminist Theory', in Bratton, Cook and Gledhill, pp. 147–56.

⁴¹ Bratton, Cook and Gledhill, p. 6.

⁴² Simon Shepherd, 'Pauses of Mutual Agitation', in Bratton, Cook and Gledhill, pp. 25–37. Quote from Bratton, Cook and Gledhill, p. 2.

⁴³ Shepherd, p. 34.

⁴⁴ Rohan McWilliam, 'Melodrama and the Historians', *Radical History Review*, 78 (2000), 57–84.

⁴⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, 'Dickens, Griffith, and Ourselves' [1942], in *Selected Works*, ed. by Richard Taylor and William Powell, 4 vols. (London: British Film Institute, 1996), III, 193–238; F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948).

⁴⁶ Eisenstein, p. 222.

⁴⁷ Rick Altman, 'Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today', in *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, ed. by Jane Gaines (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 9–47. Altman argues that the influence of nineteenth-century stage melodrama on film has been strategically relegated by film theorists following the lead of Eisenstein beneath that of the more culturally prestigious genre of 'the classical novel'.

⁴⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', *Monogram*, 4 (1972), 2–15.

⁴⁹ Laura Mulvey, "'It Will Be a Magnificent Obsession": The Melodrama's Role in the Development of Film Theory', in Bratton, Cook and Gledhill, pp. 121–33.

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⁵⁰ Michael Booth's *English Melodrama* is an example of a reading which has emphasised the escapist tendencies of melodrama.

⁵¹ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁵² See, for example, Matthew Buckley, 'Sensations of Celebrity: *Jack Sheppard* and the Mass Audience', *Victorian Studies*, 44 (2002), 423–63. Buckley identifies a shift in the 1830s from 'political to perceptual modernity' (p. 426) and a corresponding split in melodrama criticism which associates melodrama with one or other version of modernity.

⁵³ Brooks, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Brooks, pp. 21–22.

⁵⁵ "'Sorry" Johnson Sent to Liverpool', BBC News (16 October 2004), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3749548.stm> [accessed 9 April 2009]. See also Rod Liddle, 'The Response to Jade's Death Reminded Me How Puzzled I Was by Diana Mania', *Spectator* (25 March 2009) <<http://www.spectator.co.uk/archive/features/3473516/the-response-to-jades-death-reminded-me-how-puzzled-i-was-by-diana-mania.html>> [accessed 9 April 2009].

⁵⁶ Jon Mee, Review of Sally Ledger's *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 14 (2009), 141–45 (p. 145).

⁵⁷ Roger Luckhurst, 'Obituary: Sally Ledger', *Independent*, 7 February 2009. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/sally-ledger-victorian-scholar-who-advanced-the-study-of-women-writers-and-recast-views-of-dickens-1570729.html>> [accessed 23 March 2009] (para. 2 of 8).

⁵⁸ Ledger, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Arnold Kettle, 'Dickens and the Popular Tradition', in *Marxists on Literature: An Anthology*, ed. by David Craig (1975; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 214–44 (pp. 227–29); quoted by Ledger, p. 4.