

Sensation Drama, 1860-1880 An Anthology, edited by Joanna Hofer-Robinson and Beth Palmer, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019. 386 pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-4744-3953-4

On the 6th of December 1859 *The Octoroon*, a play by the Irish actor and playwright Dion Boucicault, opened at The Winter Garden Theatre, in New York City. Boucicault had adapted the play from the novel *The Quadroon* (1856) by his compatriot Thomas Mayne Reid, whose novelistic exploits were otherwise of a brand of male-bravado-adventures set in the American West, and enjoyed by an eclectic group of fans including Vladimir Nabokov, Arthur Conan Doyle and Theodore Roosevelt. Based on Mayne Reid's plot and featuring a figure increasingly familiar to American audiences—the 'tragic mulatta'—the play caused a sensation, appealing to abolitionists overtly but drawing criticism for what was perceived as a portrayal of slavery as a benevolent institution.¹

Three months later Boucicault's dramatic adaptation of another of his countrymen's novels, Gerald Griffin's *The Collegians* (1829)—titled by Boucicault as *The Colleen Bawn*—opened, also in New York, with the theatre company of the first woman producer in the United States, Laura Keene. The two plays then ran concurrently at Laura Keene's Theatre to great success and Boucicault made his return to British theatres with them at the Adelphi Theatre in London, opening *The Colleen Bawn* on the 10th of September 1860 and *The Octoroon* on the 18th of November 1861 respectively.

It is intriguing to contemplate the American and British audiences' reception of *The Octoroon* and *The Colleen Bawn* as companion pieces, as they were from the 9th of December in London: one concerning the residents of the Louisiana plantation Terrebonne, dealing with themes of interracial relationships, and the abolition of slavery; the other, set in and around the

¹ The 'tragic mulatta' as defined by Sterling Brown in 1937 in his book *The Negro in American Fiction*. See also Boucicault, *The Octoroon* (2014).

lakes of Killarney, County Kerry, a tale of class consciousness, Irish nationalism, and attempted murder. Both plays were sensational in their own way: the former because of its overt abolitionist politics, and deftly constructed publicity stunt which saw Boucicault alter the play's ending for British audiences one week into its performance; the latter, because of its adherence to the tropes of the emerging genre of sensation literature.² They share, as so much sensation literature shares, a focus on documents as pivotal points of discovery, and, the mortgage of a property as the way in for each drama's villain. As well, they share transatlantic beginnings, as another play in this collection does: *Under the Gaslight*, by Augustin Daly (1867), who would go on to own Daly's Theatre in New York (1879) and Daly's Theatre in London (1893).

The adaptation history of Boucicault's two plays, stretching back to Griffin's 1829 novel and before, attests, as the editors of this collection, *Sensation Drama, 1860-1880*, acknowledge too, 1860 is not an impermeable date, as with many identifiable cultural movements. But Joanne Hofer-Robinson and Beth Palmer explain that it is the case that by 1860 a set of common features had developed sufficiently so that what we call sensation drama had become a recognisably distinct genre in its own right. The editors discuss the features of this genre in their introduction, beginning with the types of thrilling special-effects known to scholars of the nineteenth century as one of the salient features of sensation drama, such as death-defying leaps, and bodies tied to railway lines. As well as including spectacular and sometimes dangerous stunts and special effects, these plays also share a focus on crime, mystery and violence as their novelistic counterparts did.

We have long needed such a volume as Hofer-Robinson and Palmer's anthology of some of the nineteenth century's most popular plays, collected here under the organising principle of their participation in the genre of sensation commonly associated with the novels of Wilkie Collins, Ellen Price Wood, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. It will help us to study and teach a

² For more on Boucicault's alteration of the play's ending for the British audience see: Meer, "Boucicault's Misdirections," (2009).

wider range of Victorian theatre, beyond the androcentric canon often represented on introductory nineteenth-century literature courses by the works of Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, and George Bernard Shaw. The volume joins John Franceschina's 2000 anthology *Sisters of Gore*, which collects Gothic melodramas by British women from 1790-1843, in its corrective work to introduce more theatre by women authors into critical circulation, as *Miss Chester*, a collaboration between Florence Marryat and Sir Charles Young (1872), and *The Missing Witness*, by Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1874), both feature. Using reviews from the *St. James's Magazine*, and the *London Review*, the editors of *Sensation Drama* demonstrate the positive and negative connections contemporary reviewers made between sensation drama, melodrama, and earlier works of Gothic literature such as *Frankenstein* and Monk Lewis's stage romance *Castle Spectre*, and to those we might add the plays collected in Franceschina's anthology.

Hofer-Robinson and Palmer have contributed a significant service to the field of nineteenth-century studies in producing this carefully annotated collection which also includes *Never Too Late to Mend*, by C. H. Hazlewood (1859) adapted from Charles Reade's novel *It is Never Too Late to Mend* and the aforementioned *The Colleen Bawn*, by Dion Boucicault (1860). In curating this selection of plays for us, with thorough and informative explanations and clarifications, the editors painstakingly delineate differences between different adaptations of *Never Too Late to Mend* such as those by Charles Reade himself, George Conquest, and another, but substantially different, adaptation by Hazlewood. Similarly with Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*, variants by Hazlewood, William Brough and Andrew Halliday, M. Henry Young, and H. J. Byron are discussed. The illuminating nature of these notes, highlighting the complexities of copyright issues during the period, are given supplementary emphasis in the introduction, which reminds readers of the important role dramatists had to play in advocating for enhanced copyright protections for authors of 'original' works.

As well as providing this intricate detail relating to different adaptations, the volume presents a set of richly instructive footnotes that gloss: technical features such as 'grooves' (a

mechanism for changing scenery quickly); terminology relating to the penal system like ‘tickets of leave’ (parole documents); and relevant historical dates that enhance understanding of lines that might otherwise require knowledge of the exact contemporary moment in which they were delivered and audience awareness of certain ‘hot’ topics. The balance of information, comparative consideration of script variants, and other helpful features such as the glossary of Irish terms used in *The Colleen Bawn*, makes this anthology a necessary volume for students and scholars alike, and is a valuable feat of even-handed research and selection.

Bibliography

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