

melodrama

From "The Cambridge Guide to Theatre"

Like [farce](#), melodrama is a popular form of theatre which has been denigrated by critics, so that it is associated with sensationalism and implausibility. These features make for lively theatre, however, and they sustain the mass media today.

The word 'melodrama' (*melos*, Greek, means 'a song') comes from France, where [Rousseau](#) coined it for his *Pygmalion* (1766) in which music served as background for dialogue (in contrast to [opera](#), where music is joined to dialogue). Since the [Comédie-Française](#) had a monopoly on plays with spoken dialogue, the new genre in many variants was seized upon by other theatres along the Boulevard du Temple, and became the staple fare of the appropriately named Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique (see [boulevard](#)). There, at the convenient date of 1800, *Coelina* by [Guilbert De Pixérécourt](#) was performed, in which innocent young lovers suffer at the separation engineered by a scheming villain. All ends well, with assistance from a tell-tale scar, a conspiracy overheard and a helpful comic. Within two years, in that pre-**copyright** age, the play crossed the Channel as *A Tale of Mystery* by [Thomas Holcroft](#), the first English play to be labelled 'melodrama'. In the rapidly industrializing capitals of London, Paris and Berlin, melodrama played triumphantly in large theatres to illiterate audiences. Necessarily, it was a *large* genre with spectacular settings, large casts gesturing broadly, and loud music to accompany the predictable emotions.

Each of the major European capitals sported its playwright of melodrama - Pixérécourt in Paris, [Kotzebue](#) in Berlin and [Boucicault](#) in London (and New York). These three men led such melodramatic (adventure-filled) lives that they may well have thought they were inventing realism in their plays, were it not that they so often stole their action-filled plots, usually from novels. By mid-century, the genre was less formulaic: crime was popular on both sides of the Channel, so that the Paris theatre row was called Boulevard du Crime; patriotism was exhibited in battles on stage; social protest took the harmless form of equating poverty with nobility and virtue; the dastardly villain (the choice role) persecutes the defenceless heroine, who is rescued by an intrepid hero aided by a benevolent and colloquial comic, against increasingly spectacular dangers. *Coelina* had merely to survive a raging storm, but her progeny gasped through near-drowning, burning, devouring by wild beasts - all thrillingly palpable in the large theatres packed with thousands of spectators. Boucicault, especially, had a gift for 'sensation scenes' - designing prison escapes, avalanches, explosions - but his colleagues soon introduced icebergs, air balloons and speeding trains. With technical sophistication came more sophisticated plots; innocence does not triumph in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and virtue is tainted in *East Lynne*.

By the turn of the 20th century melodrama had merged into [realism](#) in England and France, but American melodrama was revitalized by [David Belasco](#), who insisted on careful writing for a basic plot of poor heroine facing assorted calamities, plus weak hero, resourceful comic who was the star of the show, and a sequence of heavies who kept the plot speeding along. After the First World War [agit-prop](#) plays adopted the structure, but no longer the settings, of melodrama.

Historians of melodrama stress its democratic and humanitarian substratum. [Eric Bentley](#) in *The Life of the Drama* (1964) and Robert Heilman in *The Iceman, the Arsonist, and the Troubled Agent* have both defended melodrama as a different genre from [tragedy](#), which should be evaluated by its own attributes. Bentley finds melodramatic elements in most great tragedies of the anglophone tradition, and he dubs **O'Neill** a successful melodramatist rather than tragic playwright. Heilman distinguishes between the divided protagonist of tragedy and the whole protagonist of melodrama; the first contributes to his own undoing, whereas the second is crushed by external forces. This necessitates reclassifying some classical tragedies as melodramas - *Romeo and Juliet*, *the Duchess of Malfi*. On the other hand, the righteous-victim-triumphant of socialist realism and of Chinese opera (revised to support the Revolution) abjure the name of melodrama but adopt its all-or-nothing ethic. [RC](#)



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