

# Melodramatic Imperial Writing

*From the Sepoy Rebellion to Cecil Rhodes*

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## introduction

### “At Last!” and “Too Late!”

**A**T LAST! TOO LATE! THESE DESIGNATIONS OF TEMPORALITY appeared in two successive issues of *Punch* as captions for cartoons in February 1885. By serving as both opposing utterances and successive labels in a series, they tell two stories. First, they bear witness to the British army's failed attempt to rescue famed imperial hero Major General Charles “Chinese” Gordon from the siege of Khartoum. Yet they also chronicle a failed effort to capture the truth of historical events. The followers of the Sudanese religious and military leader the Mahdi had beheaded Gordon on January 26, 1885, before British forces, dispatched belatedly by Prime Minister William Gladstone, would reach Khartoum on February 5. Given the tardiness of the British forces and the restrictions of the *Punch* publication schedule, John Tenniel's first illustration (dated February 7) appeared just as Gordon's death was being announced. Accompanied by the caption “At Last!” this cartoon depicts a fantasy in which Gordon greets Lord Wolseley, head of the rescue force. John Tenniel's parallel image from the following week illustrates the terrible belated truth behind the fantasy: a woeful Britannia, set against a backdrop of African warriors with one arm covering her face, bemoans that forces were “Too Late!” in rescuing Gordon.

These two captions and the loss of an imperial hero that they record, however, demonstrate a powerful example of this book's central idea: the convergence of the melodramatic mode and representations

of late-Victorian British imperialism. The imagined, fantastic rescue of the first caption gives the crisis in the Sudan a melodramatic conclusion, a moment of great relief in which Britain not only overthrows the Mahdi but also, just as importantly, rescues its heroic general. The humble satisfaction of the reunited Wolseley and Gordon, in this case, is mirrored by the reader, who experiences the successive anticipation and satisfaction that critic Linda Williams sees in the temporality of melodrama: “Melodrama is thus an expression of feeling toward a time that passes too fast. This may be why the spectacular essence of melodrama seems to rest in those moments of temporal prolongation when ‘in the nick of time’ defies ‘too late.’”<sup>1</sup> Yet, as the initial consumers of the “At Last!” image might have known, melodrama was in this case false consolation that distracted them from the reality of military failure, political miscalculation, and Gordon’s death. The British had not arrived in the “nick of time,” and “At Last!” distracts from the terrible truth of “Too Late!” Yet just as “At Last!” consoles, so does “Too Late!” The latter caption and cartoon, though they acknowledge imperial failure, magnify this failure via the power of a national allegory that is itself an example of melodrama. Instead of displaying Gordon’s last stand or the rescuing forces’ discovery of Gordon’s death, Tenniel focuses on the sorrow of Britannia herself as she covers her face with an extravagant gesture of grief. The prolonged temporality of melodrama does not culminate in the happy ending it anticipates, but arrives instead at a compensatory climax of grand allegorical pathos and mourning. Gordon is dead, but Tenniel’s image renders Gordon’s death dramatic in its very essence. In the months following the publication of the *Punch* cartoons, the siege of Khartoum was to become itself a topic for stage melodrama, as Edward Ziter discusses in relation to two melodramatic plays of the period, *Khartoum!* and *Human Nature*, performed at Sanger’s Amphitheatre and Drury Lane, respectively, in 1885.<sup>2</sup> Both plays fall under the spell of the “At Last!” caption, since both reimagine actual events so that Khartoum remained in British possession,<sup>3</sup> though, as Heidi Holder relates, *Khartoum!* titled its final scene “Too Late!” in reference to (or in contradiction of) the caption.<sup>4</sup>

Melodrama was not simply present in the initial reception of such imperial events—as in *Punch*—but also proliferated after the fact. This book examines in detail this proliferation of melodrama throughout late-Victorian imperial writing. It follows the melodramatic mode via

its circuits of influence beyond the stage in a variety of works. Though many critics have highlighted the importance of the gothic novel, the romance, and the adventure tale in literary representations of British imperialism, they tend to underestimate the importance of melodrama. Beyond the frequent reliance on the term *melodramatic* to dismiss works that refuse rationality and restraint, what Eric Bentley calls the genre’s “bad reputation,”<sup>5</sup> melodrama appears too reductive and too easily reconciled with the jingoism of the late Victorian period. While writing about plays written in response to the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion, in which Indian soldiers in the British army rebelled because of many causes (including pay and religious reasons), Patrick Brantlinger is correct in noting melodrama’s frequent reliance on “the white/black patterns of racist fantasy.”<sup>6</sup> Yet his contention that the genre’s moral polarities “readily lend themselves” to such patterns deserves a more nuanced treatment.<sup>7</sup> J. S. Bratton’s work in theater history is exemplary in this regard: she explores the intersection of heroism, melodrama, and the figure of Jack Tar to show how different late-Victorian melodramas support *and* interrogate violent patriotic discourse and racist saber-rattling.<sup>8</sup>

Melodrama’s fraught ideological position in relation to violent imperialism stems in part from accounts that emphasize its frequent ties to colonial and national propaganda. In *Propaganda and Empire*, John MacKenzie claims that “the empire had become its own melodrama” by the 1880s.<sup>9</sup> Yet melodrama demonstrates a set of diverse negotiations with late-Victorian imperial propaganda. As the *Punch* example illustrates, melodrama proved particularly useful in managing information during moments of imperial crisis, as it provided a coherent and engaging narrative amidst the various disjunctions around the siege of Khartoum, whether Gladstone’s lateness in ordering Gordon’s rescue, Gordon’s inability to follow his mission to evacuate Khartoum, Wolseley’s late arrival in the Sudan, or even *Punch*’s mistimed release of “At Last!” around the moment when other media sources announced Gordon’s demise. The British Empire of the late nineteenth century was, like other empires in history, one that frequently exceeded comprehension on a personal level. For its daily functioning and administration, the British Empire required a combination of technological advances, personal agency, military calculations, economic transactions, and political decisions, all happening simultaneously.

Melodrama provided writers with a shorthand for these complexities. Through its vividness and ability to reimagine complexities via readily accessible binaries and concepts, melodrama made the British Empire appear unified and comprehensible. It was one of the central fictions through which another fiction—that of the British Empire—might be understood.<sup>10</sup>

Yet melodrama's shorthand was not solely reactionary or supportive of the imperial project. Though melodrama did, as Brantlinger proposes, depict social complexities through binary and racist patterns, such depictions proved reversible, as in the case of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, which motivated a sympathetic response to its wronged Indian characters and posed larger questions about the writing of imperial history in the face of the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion. Melodrama also showed the capability of turning characters thought to be heroes into villains. It fostered shifting and uneven sympathies in readers and created tension with other generic components in works. With its providential outcomes and quests for justice, the melodramatic mode proved equally operative in stories of imperial crime and legitimate resistance as it did in poems describing imperial triumph and domination.

By discussing ties among melodrama, literary writings, and imperial propaganda, this book stresses the melodramatic mode's complex function within late-Victorian works depicting the British Empire. That melodrama was used in imperial propaganda is undeniable, but this association with propaganda frequently proved enabling rather than disabling for writers of the period who were suspicious of aspects of the imperial project. Through the melodramatic mode, Robert Louis Stevenson and Olive Schreiner grappled with the British Empire's representations, validations, and justifications of itself and rethought imperialism's function and rationale. Points of connection between melodrama and propaganda permitted writers of romances, ballads, detective stories, and folktales to question the assumptions of imperial discourse. For example, Schreiner interrogated the siege narrative common in British depictions of its military crises overseas—familiar both in depictions of the 1857 relief of Lucknow and in those of Gordon's death at Khartoum—in her melodramatic short story "Dream Life and Real Life."<sup>11</sup> Via melodrama's obsession with moral turpitude and poetic justice, writers such as Schreiner and Collins

exposed the injustices of British imperialism. Through the melodramatic mode, some writers did not merely excuse British atrocities but condemned them.

This book focuses on three specific features of melodrama in late-Victorian writing that made the British Empire understandable: its plotting, its emotionality, and its vision of community. This is not to say that these are the three main features of melodrama or that other features of the genre did not prove influential during the nineteenth century. Rather, these three aspects of the melodramatic mode provide the most fascinating examples of how British writers imagined and reimagined the empire as a melodrama. The chapters of this study are grouped in relation to these features: chapters 1 and 2 focus on melodrama’s providential plotting in Charles Dickens’s and Wilkie Collins’s reactions to the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion as well as H. Rider Haggard’s and Marie Corelli’s engagements with the imperial romance; chapters 3 and 4 consider melodramatic renderings of emotion in the poetry of W. E. Henley and Rudyard Kipling as well as Robert Louis Stevenson’s writings in Hawaii; chapter 5 focuses on Olive Schreiner’s exploration of melodrama and its vision of community in relation to South Africa. Though the chapters are divided according to these different features of melodrama, there is significant overlap between the different categories. For example, questions about melodramatic plotting emerge in the discussion of Robert Louis Stevenson, while Olive Schreiner’s fiction frequently relies on depictions of intense emotion to examine forms of British belonging. At points, the chapter groupings may limit the direct treatment of other fruitful connections, such as the South African ties between Schreiner and Haggard, or the frequent stylistic commonalities between Dickens and Kipling. The chapter groupings are meant to highlight certain features of melodrama, and where possible, I keep such necessary divisions from obscuring other relations between different melodramatic imperial writings.

Despite such divisions, these writings all reacted to British imperialism in the late nineteenth century, a period when the melodramatic mode saturated late-Victorian British imperialist discourse. From the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion onward, late-Victorian culture evinced ardent imperialism that gave rise to new jingoist expressions of military confidence, increased emphasis on racial science in the understanding of human diversity, and competition with other European powers—France

and Germany—for geopolitical influence. Such attitudes, whether coming from music halls, lecture halls, or international conferences, had a galvanizing and often aggrandizing influence on the writing of the period. They motivated individual writers such as W. E. Henley and Rudyard Kipling to take extreme and hyperbolic positions. As the already established contrast between “At Last!” and “Too Late!” attests, Britons depicted the empire as having a fate, and such a fate could itself transform from one week to the next, with pugnacious proclamations of national and imperial destiny crashing down into bathetic laments of perpetual failure.

Such peripeties characterized this period of “high imperialism” that lasted from the outbreak of the 1857 Rebellion through the discussions of Cecil Rhodes’s threatening and heroic presence in South Africa in the late 1890s. During this period, representations of Britain’s relation to its territories overseas inundated nearly all areas of British culture. Historical crises and media events posed a series of ethical and political questions about how Great Britain should interact with its empire. Such events provoked Britons to reevaluate their country’s military, religious, educational, legal, and bureaucratic roles in its often-tenuous imperium. Whether conflicts or celebrations, numerous events in the later nineteenth century prompted repeated examination of the ties between the British Empire and British national culture: the violent massacres and reprisals of the Sepoy Rebellion, the controversy surrounding General Eyre and the 1865 Morant Bay Uprising in Jamaica, Victoria’s accession to Empress of India in 1876, the loss of Gordon at Khartoum in 1885, the combined spectacle of the Golden and Diamond Jubilees, and multiple British military campaigns in the Sudan and the Transvaal at the end of the century.

The saturation of national culture with imperial ideology was enabled in part by the increasing number of elaborate national and public rituals during the period. Though the late Victorian period was certainly a time during which imperial drama was successfully performed on the London stage, it was also a time when public ceremonials became more pronounced and more overtly theatrical.<sup>12</sup> Both stage productions and public ceremonials of the period were notable for their melodrama. Just as colonial melodramas from the 1850s onward tried “to educate an English public in the business of Empire,”<sup>13</sup> the increasing prevalence of melodramatic depictions of empire motivated writers

of the period to harness imperial melodrama for their own writings (as did H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling) or to rely on the melodramatic mode to interrogate British imperialism (as did Olive Schreiner).

*Melodrama and Late-Victorian Imperialism*

The melodramatic mode occupied a unique aesthetic position in the imperialist cultural texts, literary texts, and public ceremonials of the period.<sup>14</sup> Beyond the multiple examples of actual imperial melodramas performed on stage during the later half of the nineteenth century, the melodramatic mode shared key features—notably its rendering of emotion—with the period’s increasingly grandiose imperialist rhetoric. Characters in melodrama display heightened emotionality and speak with exaggeration and passion.<sup>15</sup> Such emotionality manifests in the grandiose utterances many prominent figures made about the destiny of the British Empire in this period. Such utterances are equally at home in a romance by Marie Corelli, a toast by Joseph Chamberlain, a poem by William Watson, or an article by W. T. Stead. As chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate, the emotionality of melodrama informed the way that poets Henley and Kipling crafted violent and provocative imperialist verse as a response to the aesthetic movement, while Robert Louis Stevenson drew on melodrama’s intensity of feeling to criticize and ultimately reimagine the forms of pathos and sympathy he observed in the South Seas.

Melodrama also informed late-Victorian imperialist discourse through its long history of representing the military: the genre had repeatedly depicted conflicts against and within the British navy and army since early in the century. The later nineteenth century was a period of perpetual foreign wars and skirmishes as well as perpetual conversation about the shape that the British Empire might take. Jeffrey Cox makes a convincing case for melodrama’s fitness to a situation of perpetual war in the early nineteenth century, as the speedy twists and turns of melodrama’s convoluted plots habituated audiences to the sustained conflicts of the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>16</sup> Yet the public was not always so malleable. As Matthew Kaiser has recently argued, audiences of the 1820s and 1830s responded to the nautical melodramas of the period with “ironic detachment,” not as “mindless consumers of ideology” but as “active participants in melodramatic creation, players familiar with

the rules of the game.”<sup>17</sup> Within the period of ardent imperialism after the 1857 Rebellion, the melodramatic mode was a vehicle for forms of both coercion and ironic questioning in relation to British military actions. Melodrama shaped imperial jingoism and habituated its public to imperial war—as in Kipling’s more frank military ballads—yet still enabled forms of ironic detachment parallel to the ludic knowingness Kaiser describes in the working-class audiences of nautical melodrama.

Depictions of the opposition between military forces in melodrama also translated into depictions or discussions of conflicting identities—whether racial, national, or ideological. Melodrama informed how individuals constituted the nation or empire as a community. Melodrama’s moral universe eschews a middle ground of ethical ambiguity and instead relies on characters that can be recognized by the audience, and eventually by each other, as either beneficent or malevolent. For Peter Brooks, melodrama is an outgrowth of the “final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch)” during the French Revolution.<sup>18</sup> It attempts to reinvest secular life with concerns about morality and virtue, hence its obsession with moral and ethical questions. While Brooks’s theory might seem more fitting for discussions of the earlier nineteenth century, the melodramatic mode clearly influenced late-Victorian attempts to spiritualize the British Empire, to cast imperialism and nationalism as forms of civic religion. Such a civic religion might include or exclude certain citizens or create conflicting visions of citizenship. Elaine Hadley remarks that melodrama was used to imagine a “national identity premised on the familiar and patriarchal, an intrinsically social and therefore inclusive ethic,” even while it also resulted in xenophobia and racism.<sup>19</sup> By managing the inclusions and exclusions that structure community, melodrama was crucial in delineating what sort of “imagined community” (to use Benedict Anderson’s terminology) the British nation and the British Empire proved to be.<sup>20</sup>

Recent scholarship on Victorian theater has stressed the crucial role of the theater in the imagining of the British Empire. Marty Gould argues that “it was in the theatre and related venues of popular spectacle that Britons came to see themselves as masters of an imperial domain.”<sup>21</sup> As Gould’s extensive discussion of melodramas of 1857 demonstrates, melodrama played a central role in the way that British citizens identified with empire, specifically after the Sepoy Rebellion.

Yet melodrama’s significance in imagining community was not limited to the theater. Melodrama’s multiple articulations with the imperial politics of the late nineteenth century meant that it became influential not only in forms of spectacle but also in novels, stories, ballads, and travel writings that Gould describes as subordinate to the theater, “the privileged vehicle for the transmission of socially reaffirming imperialist discourse.”<sup>22</sup> Yet these other print genres were far from subordinate. In one example, the melodramatic mode functioned within the novel form as a way for Olive Schreiner to explore the difficulty of imagining a “British” community on the imperial frontier in South Africa in *The Story of an African Farm*.

Melodramatic plotting also shaped the imagining of imperial history. In narrative, melodrama’s reliance on providential plotting produces insights into the ways melodrama sequences and ascribes meaning to historical events. Such providential plotting also structures accounts of progress, victory, evolutionary superiority, and national destiny in late-Victorian imperial writing. Providential plotting is the method of ordering and giving meaning to events according to an allegedly divinely shaped design.<sup>23</sup> Providential plots usually conclude with the achievement of poetic justice and the assignment of right and wrong. Via its providential plotting, melodrama is notable for its rapid accretion of incident and its buildup to a conclusion comprising fulfillment and redemption. Since the time of René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt, the inventor of melodrama in France, melodrama has relied on a notion of providential plotting and closure.<sup>24</sup> Despite the twists and turns of the story, the good and bad characters are always revealed if not rewarded at the conclusion of the narrative.<sup>25</sup> This development also allows for the ubiquity of coincidence within melodrama, a feature often noted along with the frequency of *coups de théâtre*, for coincidence is “the evidence of truth” in a mode that bears witness to the design of an overarching providence.<sup>26</sup> Melodrama’s convoluted plot structure provides the framework for its emotional and sensational effects while also securing its moral basis. By focusing on melodrama’s providential plots in works by Dickens, Collins, Haggard, and Corelli, I reveal the melodramatic mode’s intimate relationship with imperial narratives of violent confrontation, military victory, and Christian redemption. Via its emphasis on providential plotting, the melodramatic mode provided a way to interrogate the creation of imperial history; it

turned literary and cultural texts into sites for historiographic meditation. This book highlights the commonalities and divergences between melodrama and depictions of the conflicts, histories, and triumphs of the British Empire. In light of such commonalities and divergences, melodrama served as a crucial tool in making the history and scope of the British Empire imaginable and debatable for late-Victorian writers.

*Melodrama as Genre and Mode*

Plays have been the usual genre in which to explore the melodramatic mode. However, this study attends most closely to a variety of genres outside the theater, including novels, romances, poems, short stories, and journalism. By addressing the importance of the melodramatic mode within these genres, I do not suggest that terms for the theater can be imported wholesale into studies of other genres without considering the generic hybridity that results, nor do I wish to ignore concrete and distinctive consequences of the public, embodied nature of theater that make plays special documents in relation to performance. To do justice to these differences, I contend instead that melodrama is a type of generic modulation found in late nineteenth-century writings. I adopt a view of genre based on the distinction between kinds and modes made by Alastair Fowler. Fowler distinguishes between the kind, or the “obvious external embodiment” of a literary work that “can always be put in noun form,” and the mode, which is usually “adjectival.”<sup>27</sup> To use an example parallel to one from Fowler, a pastoral novel is by kind a novel but by mode pastoral. Modes are what Fowler calls “distillations . . . of the permanently valuable features” of a specific kind.<sup>28</sup> Hence, this study analyzes the melodramatic mode and its importance in various genres outside the theater.

Yet I also seek to avoid the mere application of a restrictive generic template to diverse literary texts. As film scholars such as Linda Williams, Christine Gledhill, and Ben Singer have all noted, melodrama as a genre and mode is distinctive in its flexibility.<sup>29</sup> Matthew Buckley observes that “melodrama evolves and adapts, leaps from one place and form to another, and in so doing reshapes representational culture.”<sup>30</sup> In this regard, Singer’s argument that melodrama is a “cluster concept” proves useful, since it claims for melodrama a set of flexible and related characteristics while it resists the dismissive connotations that

often accompany everyday uses of the term *melodramatic*. Singer contends that melodrama is “a term whose meaning varies from case to case in relation to different configurations of a range of basic features or constitutive factors.”<sup>31</sup> He defines these features as strong pathos, excessive emotion, sensationalism, moral binarism, and nonclassical narrative structure,<sup>32</sup> features that I describe above or discuss later in this book.

By treating melodrama as a cluster concept with the distinctive features discussed above, this study does not attempt to outline a rigid definition of melodrama. Instead, it traces three important aspects of melodrama—its providential plotting, emotionality, and sense of community—in a range of imperial writings from the period. While this focus may not appear as flexible as the “cluster concept” described by Singer, it avoids casting the net too widely and diluting the descriptive power of melodrama as a mode. In addition, I do not attempt in this book to chronicle a larger evolution or decline of melodrama over the course of the late Victorian period. When discussing a mode that is obsessed with providential fulfillment, we need to avoid the possible distortions that could emerge from attempts to fit this examination of the melodramatic mode into a teleological narrative. For this reason, each of the following chapters is a different case study regarding the melodramatic mode in late-Victorian British imperial writings. The individual chapters address different authors and works as well as different combinations of genre and mode.

The function of the melodramatic mode in these different writings depends not only on the different genres of these writings but also on the historical emergence of stage melodrama before and during the nineteenth century. The word *melodrama* designates drama accompanied by music, and its root, *melos*, comes from the Greek word meaning “song.” From its earliest days in the late eighteenth century, the dialogue and gestures of melodrama were accompanied by music that lent them emotional depth. Thomas Holcroft’s *A Tale of Mystery* (1802), an adaptation of a work by Pixérécourt, is most often designated as the first melodrama performed onstage in England. Yet the roots of melodrama had been established well before the production of *A Tale of Mystery*. Many English melodramas had their origins in adaptations of plays by Pixérécourt as well as by German playwright August von Kotzebue, while they can also be traced back to the time before 1802, particularly given the strictures of the historically significant 1737 Theatre Licensing Act.

The 1737 act designated by law what had already been established by Charles II's earlier granting of patents royal: that only two of London's theaters (Drury Lane and Covent Garden), as royal patent theaters, could perform "legitimate" plays for money during the season. Though unlicensed theaters existed vibrantly and precariously in the period before and after the act, their repertoire was greatly determined by the 1751 Minor Theatres Act, which allowed only official patent theaters to put on plays with spoken dialogue.<sup>33</sup> Both the limited number of patents and the prohibition on spoken dialogue produced the vibrant culture of illegitimate theatrical performance.<sup>34</sup> When managers of illegitimate theaters added music to their productions—sometimes charging for the music rather than the performances—such changes made it difficult to demarcate the boundaries between spoken dialogue and song.<sup>35</sup> Given that melodrama was originally drama accompanied by music, the acts of 1737 and 1751 effectively allowed for melodrama to take root in the minor theaters of early nineteenth-century London, as managers stressed the "elaborate musical accompaniment to action and dialogue" over the dialogue itself.<sup>36</sup> Melodrama also caught on as an afterpiece in the patent theaters themselves, with *A Tale of Mystery* opening at Covent Garden.<sup>37</sup> Via its broad popular appeal, melodrama drew a crowd and aided the patent theaters in their attempts to remain financially solvent.

While melodramas such as *A Tale of Mystery* ran in the patent houses, they largely became associated with nonpatent theaters, sensational theatrical effects, and raucous working-class audiences. During the first half of the nineteenth century, melodrama's cross-pollination with other forms of spectacular theater, pantomime, and burlesque at illegitimate playhouses led to generic diversity in performances and the resulting development of many subgenres, including gothic, Oriental, nautical, equestrian, and canine melodrama. Jane Moody describes the naming of plays and their generic designations during this period as "vague, indistinct and gloriously arbitrary," thus suggesting ties between the different genres of the early nineteenth-century illegitimate theater.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Tracy Davis stresses the relations between plays and argues that "nineteenth-century performance is characterized by mixed-genre as well as downright unclassifiable pieces."<sup>39</sup> In a statement that applies not only to the early nineteenth century but also to melodrama's significance as a mode, Davis contends that "melodrama

was a highly permeable category subject to influence from many narrative, musical, and pictorial forms.”<sup>40</sup>

Melodrama’s permeability enabled the development of gothic, equestrian, nautical, and military melodramas, and these forms influenced the imperialist drama of the later nineteenth century. Beginning with John Dent’s sentimental comedy *Bastille* at the Royal Circus in 1789, which relied heavily on spectacle and music, the theater of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century became fascinated with “the physical dramaturgy of war”; it combined “military knowledge, technical innovation and topographical illusion.”<sup>41</sup> The plays that followed *Bastille* included equestrian and military melodramas set in a variety of locales such as revolutionary France, the ancient world, the Middle East, and, eventually, contemporary territories in India, the Sudan, and South Africa that were the site of imperial conflict.<sup>42</sup> Works depicting the 1857 Rebellion, whether Dion Boucicault’s *Jessie Brown* (1858) or C. A. Somerset’s *The Storming and Capture of Delhi* (1857), blended elements of earlier military or equestrian spectacle with journalistic reportage and questions about the defense and constitution of the British Empire.<sup>43</sup>

Subsequent intersections between imperialism and melodrama were also fueled by the depictions of other cultures on the nineteenth-century stage. The public encountered spectacular productions that vividly depicted foreign landscapes and peoples, such as W. T. Moncrieff’s *The Cataract of the Ganges; or, The Rajah’s Daughter* (1823), which dealt with the Indian custom of *sati*, or exotic renderings of Egypt, in Orientalist dramas such as Ralph S. Hamilton’s *Elphi Bey; or, The Arab’s Faith* (1817).<sup>44</sup> Edward Ziter stresses how “melodrama, pantomime, ballet, and opera all depicted Oriental people and places with increasingly spectacular detail”; such detailed representations, he contends, indicate how newly constituted human sciences such as geography and ethnology influenced the theater, while they also exposed the ways in which the theater impacted the human sciences.<sup>45</sup> From its inception, melodrama was imbricated with depictions of the Orient, racial difference, and military conflict.

Orientalist depictions of foreign lands and peoples on the melodramatic stage complemented renderings of Britishness in nautical melodramas. Nautical melodrama frequently examined Great Britain’s status as a colonial and eventually imperial power. These plays are

notable for their iterations of the figure of Jack Tar, the frequently comedic, chaotic, and fervently patriotic member of the navy made memorable in the original production of Douglas Jerrold's *Black-Ey'd Susan* (1829) at the Surry Theatre and later in John Thomas Haines's *My Poll and My Partner Joe* (1835). The politics of the Jack Tar figure are complex, given that he could not only serve as a figure of patriotic enthusiasm who justified English naval and imperial exploits but could also act as a disruptive influence. J. S. Bratton describes Jack Tar as "the most powerful instrument of imperialist ideology on the nineteenth-century stage," yet she also notes that he later served as a "figure of antithesis and potential disruption" that needed to be contained and incorporated in domestic melodrama.<sup>46</sup> Matthew Kaiser stresses the disruptive playfulness of this figure and questions its ready incorporation by imperialist ideology.<sup>47</sup> Through the significance of nautical melodrama, the melodramatic mode of the later nineteenth century was both an easy fit with imperialist sentiment and a mode in which imperialist ideology was challenged.

Despite the melodrama's rich history in the early nineteenth century, the second half of the century saw a decline in melodrama as a dominant theatrical genre, with farce, society comedy, Ibsenite drama, and the well-made play all gaining popularity. This was also a period when, as recently outlined by David Kurnick, the theater itself became more novelistic, as new changes in theater schedules and spaces "transformed a theatrical and public culture to reflect the new prominence of the private, domestically oriented, psychologically absorbed form of the realist novel."<sup>48</sup> While few plays were still designated specifically as melodramas in the second half of the century, the term *drama* was more commonly used to designate melodramas—often ones that targeted bourgeois rather than working-class audiences and focused on domestic settings rather than military or naval ones.<sup>49</sup> Concurrently, the tradition of equestrian or nautical melodrama was modified, yet still sustained, in large-scale spectacular productions performed at the Drury Lane Theatre under the management of Augustus Harris during the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>50</sup> These plays, which blended melodramatic aesthetics with an emphasis on complex stage machinery and a surfeit of realistic setting (including live horses, real water, historically accurate costumes, and crowds of actors), often celebrated the triumph of British national values along with Britain's technological superiority.<sup>51</sup>

They were noticeably patriotic and jingoist in their politics.<sup>52</sup> The earlier forms of nautical and equestrian melodrama were transformed, as melodrama shifted into new domestic and imperialist settings, but melodrama remained a significant mode both on and off the stage. As this study’s cross-genre approach demonstrates, the permeability of the genre described by Tracy Davis persisted during the second half of the century. The melodramatic mode proliferated into a variety of printed, nontheatrical texts.

Though critics have lamented the decline of melodrama’s power or its capacity for motivating popular resistance in the late Victorian period,<sup>53</sup> melodrama remained an effective tool in drawing attention to political causes and injustices in a variety of contexts through the end of the century. Just as melodrama became a valuable mode in representations of the Sepoy Rebellion, so too did it galvanize discussions of gender, power, and domesticity in the sensation novels of the 1860s, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). Irish playwright Dion Boucicault also penned a series of highly successful spectacular melodramas such as *The Colleen Bawn* (1860) and *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864) that brought him international fame. Though not overtly political, *The Colleen Bawn* complicated previous representations of the Irish onstage and “was claimed by Dubliners as a long-awaited national drama of Ireland.”<sup>54</sup> Later in the century, notable plays describing a “woman with a past,” particularly Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892) and Arthur Wing Pinero’s *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893), relied heavily on melodrama in attempts to reconsider sexual morality.<sup>55</sup> Even George Bernard Shaw, who proclaimed himself an energetic opponent of melodrama, frequently returned to melodrama in his treatments of imperialist politics such as *Arms and the Man* (1894) and *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion* (1899).<sup>56</sup> Despite the lower frequency of plays called melodramas on the British stage during the second half of the century, the diversity of melodramatic forms enabled the diffusion of melodramatic aesthetics in the later nineteenth century, especially in writers’ engagements with British imperialism.

### *Melodrama and Generic Hybridity*

While the research on Victorian imperialist drama outlined in the previous section proves suggestive for this study, the main focus of the

argument is on works in other genres. Theater history is included where it illuminates readings of literary works and historical documents. Discussions of theatricality in Victorian genres outside the theater, particularly the novel, also provide supplementary insights regarding the aesthetics of the melodrama and the imperialist writing of the Victorian period. Many critics have examined the often-contentious relationship between Victorian theater and the realist novel.<sup>57</sup> They not only demonstrate how Victorian novelists were tied up in the life of the theater, whether as audience members, playwrights, or theater critics, but also explore the place of the theatrical, from the sexualizing of the actress to the construction of dialogue, in the novel. Their criticism tends to emphasize the dynamics—from antagonism to attachment—between Victorian theater and realist novels. Yet the popular theater was not linked *only* to the realist novel as a singular, definite form but also—as Emily Allen contends in her discussion of prose fiction—to a variety of subgenres of the novel circulating throughout the later nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup>

For instance, the opposition between melodrama and realism is more complicated than it at first appears. Both realism and melodrama are committed to sincere and “real” depictions, yet they differ in the types of sincerity and “reality.” Melodrama relies on an “honest form of fabrication”: its “anti-naturalistic mode of signification” is composed of “artificial, larger-than-life aesthetic representations.”<sup>59</sup> These representations are thought to “construct a more convincing illusion of ‘reality’ than the more muted representations of realism and naturalism.”<sup>60</sup> Despite the fact that it wears its artifice on its sleeve, melodrama shares some aims with realism.<sup>61</sup> In keeping with these insights, this book is an attempt to remain sensitive to differences between various genres and modes while also moving beyond the melodrama/realism binary. Nearly all of the writers covered had a simultaneous interest in the theater as well as a wide range of genres, and few demonstrated evidence of constraint by realism or the realist novel form. Dickens, Collins, Haggard, Henley, and Stevenson all authored plays that were performed professionally on the late-Victorian stage, whereas Kipling drew heavily from the music hall, a venue parallel to the Victorian theater, and Schreiner, though not a playwright, wrote an unpublished allegorical “skit” that figured into her understanding of South African politics. While Corelli’s romances were adapted for the theater by

others, she founded a dramatic society while at convent school and was deeply interested in staging *tableaux vivants*.<sup>62</sup> Some of these writers also voiced their objections to realism, especially in their energetic endorsements of the romance. Haggard, in his “About Fiction”; Stevenson, in his essays on fiction; and Corelli, in her story *Ardath* (1889), firmly distinguish their own projects from those of admittedly realist writers such as Henry James and George Eliot. Multiple generic articulations among melodrama and the diverse writings of the late nineteenth century thrived outside of the value-laden opposition between melodrama and realism.<sup>63</sup>

Because this book moves beyond critical conversations about realist fiction, it is also indebted to studies on the importance of the imperial gothic in Victorian fiction. Its emphasis on the melodramatic mode is in part a response to the recent popularity of the imperial gothic in criticism.<sup>64</sup> Andrew Smith and William Hughes have highlighted the gothic’s resistance to European rationality and claim that both post-colonialism and the gothic have a “shared interest in challenging post-enlightenment notions of rationality.”<sup>65</sup> Patrick Brantlinger takes a more historicized approach in his groundbreaking discussion of the imperial gothic in the fiction of the late Victorian period. He links the imperial gothic to both late-Victorian imperial ideology and occultism, finding in both “a rejection of individual and social rationality and a movement backward to primitive or infantile modes of perception and belief.”<sup>66</sup> As subsequent critics such as Stephen Arata argue, the imperial gothic was also embedded within late-Victorian narratives about the direction of history; it signaled fears about “perceived decline” of fin-de-siècle culture.<sup>67</sup> The imperial gothic “expresses anxieties about the waning of religious orthodoxy,” the decline of British civilization, and the “weakening of Britain’s imperial hegemony” in the late nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup>

While gothic anxieties, fears, and moments of irrationality fit comfortably with the psychoanalytically inflected discussions of colonial discourse by Homi Bhabha and Anne McClintock,<sup>69</sup> an investigation of the melodramatic mode in late-Victorian literature expands the field of discussion beyond the supernatural and psychological to explore the complex relationship between literature and British imperial propaganda. Accounts of anxiety, fear, and decline are powerful ways to understand the cognitive and affective mapping of British imperialism in

the late 1800s, but other aspects of imperial discourse—such as narratives of providential destiny, strategies of masculine self-assertion, and mystifying justifications of imperial failure—also deserve attention. While there are numerous intersections between melodrama and the gothic, especially around the emotional intensity of both modes, this book expands the range of emotion discussed beyond the fear, terror, and horror often depicted in the gothic and stressed in Christopher Herbert's recent work on literature, history, and the Sepoy Rebellion.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to supplementing the prevailing emphasis on the imperial gothic, this project contributes to Peter Brooks's and Elaine Hadley's significant discussions of melodramatic aesthetics in British fiction. Brooks argues that melodrama is "the drama of morality."<sup>71</sup> Like romanticism or the gothic, it is "a necessary mode within modern consciousness."<sup>72</sup> Though this claim suggests that melodrama is a vital part of nineteenth-century literature and culture, Brooks's concluding argument about Henry James implies that melodrama waned in importance within late-Victorian prose fiction: melodrama ends up providing writers such as James with "metaphors" that they can "exploit" in the "dramatization of essential spiritual conflict."<sup>73</sup> Brooks's study does not discuss melodrama's relation to imperialism, but his emphasis on metaphor calls attention to the way that imperial melodrama can provide metaphors for the dramatic rendering of consciousness. The personages, props, and scenes of imperial melodrama can serve as metaphoric currency for depicting internal conflict in psychological realist fiction. Brooks's argument is most distinctive, however, in relating melodrama to ethical questions in the nineteenth century. Though Brooks appears to have become skeptical about this feature of the melodramatic mode since the book's 1976 publication,<sup>74</sup> his study's focus on moral and ethical questions provides one crucial way to connect melodrama to late-Victorian imperial politics. While the melodramatic mode does not often allow the level of detachment and resistance displayed by the anticolonial activists of the late-Victorian period,<sup>75</sup> its features do contribute to a passionate examination of the ethics of British imperialism.

Elaine Hadley has explored these links between activism, ethics, and melodrama in greater detail. She provides a genealogy for Brooks's alignment of melodrama with psychological interiority but stresses the public nature of melodrama and defines the melodramatic mode as a

“polemical” form of protest that can happen both on and off the stage.<sup>76</sup> In Hadley’s definition, the melodramatic mode’s public displays of “theatricalized dissent” are reactionary responses to the constitution of modern, classified, property-owning selves, performances of “patriarchal status hierarchies, which constituted identity in terms of familial and communal relationships.”<sup>77</sup> Defining a mode as a minor form of a Foucauldian discourse, Hadley sees the melodramatic mode influencing the “production of cultural meaning.”<sup>78</sup> She thus does not examine melodrama as a genre but instead charts its importance throughout the “English Marketplace.”<sup>79</sup>

Hadley provides an exciting corrective to Brooks’s argument by introducing melodrama into the public sphere, and her book ends by seeing melodrama co-opted into the psychological realism of late-century professional male writers. The melodramatic mode becomes—despite its rich history—“merely one more artifact of market culture, a tattered bourgeois commodity.”<sup>80</sup> This conclusion is notable in leaving out the prominence of imperial melodrama, which Hadley discusses in her chapter on Queen Victoria but ultimately falls outside of the scope of her work. While the chapters of this study are indebted to Hadley’s discussion of melodrama within the public sphere, they demonstrate that melodrama did provide a way for male and female writers of the middle class to examine imperial politics in the late nineteenth century. While the populist power of melodrama waned in the late Victorian period, the melodramatic mode’s plotting, emotionality, and rendering of community still allowed authors as diverse as Collins, Stevenson, and Schreiner to reimagine the politics and ethics of British imperialism. Melodrama continued to generate kinds of political resistance and insight in late-Victorian texts.

### *Jessie Brown as Imperial Propaganda*

The power of melodramatic plotting, its emotionality, and its vision of community are depicted vividly in one of the chief texts that has been cited in relation to British imperialism and melodrama: Dion Boucicault’s 1858 melodrama of the Sepoy Rebellion, *Jessie Brown; or, The Relief of Lucknow*. The different aspects of melodrama emphasized in this study are manifest in this significant play of the period, specifically, in relation to the imperial crisis of 1857. In Boucicault’s play, the aesthetics of

melodrama work to make the imperial crisis of the rebellion understandable to audiences, while they simultaneously justify British retribution and forms of community that exclude Indian soldiers.<sup>81</sup> *Jessie Brown* was first performed at Wallack's Theatre in New York in 1858, and it appeared in modified form as *The Relief of Lucknow* at Drury Lane in 1862.<sup>82</sup> While *Jessie Brown* is indeed a bold assertion of British racial superiority as well as a demonstration of Boucicault's ignorance or refusal of history,<sup>83</sup> it demonstrates how melodrama's plotting, emotionality, and communal vision served, in this instance, to support an ardent and violent vision of imperial Britain.

The play centers on Jessie Brown, a young Scottish woman, and a Scottish military family led by the widow Amy Campbell, who lives in a bungalow outside of Lucknow. Located in the province of Oudh, Lucknow was one of the sites of the 1857 Rebellion. During the conflict, Indian soldiers rebelled against the policies of the East India Company by killing their officers, as well as British women and children, before being overpowered by British military forces. Though the rebellion and its suppression lasted from 1857 to 1859, Boucicault's play focuses on events that transpired in the summer of 1857; it is thus a timely attempt to deal with a military and imperial crisis. Set at the bungalow, act 1 reveals that Mrs. Campbell and her children have stayed in Lucknow despite uprisings in Delhi. Mrs. Campbell remains because she has long been enamored with Captain Randal MacGregor, a Scottish officer stationed nearby. The play's primarily Scottish characters are held together by familial and erotic bonds: Geordie, Randal's younger brother (who is also an officer); Cassidy and Sweeney, Jessie's Irish and Scottish suitors; and Reverend Blount, a chaplain.

The rebellion quickly disrupts the domestic realm. Randal describes how Lucknow's soldiers are prepared to rebel under the encouragement of Nana Sahib, a villainous Orientalized figure based loosely on Nana Govind Dhondu Pant, one of the historical leaders of the Rebellion who ordered the massacre of British women and children at Cawnpore in July 1857.<sup>84</sup> Nana Sahib (the character) engineers the rebellion to capture Amy for his harem. When he arrives and threatens to kill her child, Jessie stabs him, and he flees. Because Geordie works with Randal to destroy a bridge that divides the Indian forces, the British characters find relative safety, though Geordie is wounded. Six weeks later, act 2 shows Geordie and Jessie held captive in a mosque. Geordie

is recovering from a fever, and the ever-valiant Jessie has allowed herself to be taken prisoner to treat his illness. Nana Sahib threatens Jessie and Geordie with death, and he forces Geordie to write a letter to the British forces advising them to surrender and promising them safe passage. Jessie realizes this is a trap by reading a copy of the *Calcutta News* regarding the massacre of the British following a similar surrender in Cawnpore. As the seemingly cowardly Geordie begins to write, Jessie sings a Scottish air to call forth his courage. When Blount and Randal arrive under a flag of truce, they discover that Geordie has indeed written a letter. Penned in Gaelic, it exposes the Nana Sahib's plot instead of calling for surrender. Furious, Nana Sahib attempts to kill Randal, Jessie, and Geordie, but Cassidy and Sweenie rescue them. The play's third and final act occurs six weeks later and follows the civilians and soldiers as they defend the (fictional) Redan fort at Lucknow. Under siege, the British suffer from starvation and exhaustion. Jessie, though a model of charity and self-sacrifice, falls ill, hallucinates, and imagines that she is back in Scotland. When Indian soldiers attempt to take the fort, the British fight valiantly, with the women firing guns and lighting bombs. As the dwindling British forces prepare for death during a second charge, Jessie hears distant bagpipes and proclaims that General Havelock will soon rescue the British. Though the others cannot hear the bagpipes, Havelock arrives in the nick of time. *Jessie Brown* culminates in a grand dramatic tableau depicting Havelock's rescue of the British.

*Jessie Brown's* conclusion illustrates the providential tendencies of melodramatic plotting and the ways such plotting might have comforted audiences of the period. *Jessie Brown* attempts to furnish a coherent and self-justifying vision of imperial struggle in India. Act 3 designates a series of frightening challenges faced by the British characters under siege, including starvation, illness, and dwindling munitions, as well as the perceived threat of rape for the British women.<sup>85</sup> The last-minute rescue resolves these challenges with a thrilling moment of military victory that generates excitement and relief. Jessie's fantastic audition of the bagpipes, though based on a supposedly true story,<sup>86</sup> suggests the possibility of a mystical force akin to providence comforting the British in time of crisis. The plot's providential bent, however, belies its seeming fragmentation, its unclear connections between the three acts, and its love stories that remain unresolved.<sup>87</sup> The split-second resolution

of *Jessie Brown* attempts to bring together what seems more like a set of scenes than a unified drama, and lends coherence to historical events still being reported. Hardly a coherent historical event in 1858, the rebellion and its containment were still under way. This traumatic outbreak was not yet fathomable, nor was the information being received entirely reliable. Via dramatic shorthand, Boucicault attempted to plot out the rebellion as an understandable victory.

Boucicault's use of melodrama's extravagant emotionality also strives to make the rebellion readily (though inaccurately) comprehensible. The real historical figure of Nana Sahib (a Hindu) is here configured as an Orientalist stereotype, a Muslim warlord whose unquenchable desire for Amy eclipses his political motivations. The politics of the rebellion are reduced to a clear case of unbridled foreign desire.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, British characters' emotions foster patriotism rather than destruction. Geordie, Sweeney, and Cassidy, through their love of Jessie, accomplish increasingly challenging patriotic feats, while Geordie's early cowardice and ignorance of the Indian threat (perhaps a suggestion of the surprise the British experienced at the rebellion's outbreak) are quickly eliminated. Beyond ties of love and family, the final act of *Jessie Brown* shows characters full of desperation, given that Amy begs Randal to kill her and contemplates murdering her children. The emotional extremity of act 3 is an attempt to elicit sympathy in the audience members, as when Amy says to Randal, "Lend me your dirk, then. Rather than see my children mutilated, tortured, they shall die. Our Father will forgive a mother when her children plead for her."<sup>89</sup> Such utterances could be channeled into support for the British army's brutal response to the Sepoy uprisings and massacres at Cawnpore.

Emotional displays are integral to the play's sense of British community and national belonging. As Marty Gould demonstrates, the prominence of Irish and Scottish characters suggests a comparative vision of Britishness that excludes the Indian rebels but also "managed to celebrate *both* an independent Scottish patriotism *and* British national solidarity."<sup>90</sup> In addition, images of domesticity combine conceptions of the home with conceptions of the nation. Set in the nursery of Mrs. Campbell's children, act 1, scene 3 depicts Nana Sahib threatening to stab one of Amy's children, only to be stabbed himself by Jessie in a melodramatic tableau.<sup>91</sup> Through setting and action, Boucicault translates the military unrest of a subject population into a sensational

violation of the sacred space of English childhood and womanhood. The wholesomeness of the nursery also complements the endearing nature of the play's Scottish cultural references. Boucicault exploits a popular romanticism that privileges quaint rural lifeways, the Scottish landscape, and various songs and airs,<sup>92</sup> thus dramatizing a conflict between rural simplicity and stereotypically racialized Indian characters. Melodrama's binaries consolidate a popular conception of British nationality and domesticity under threat.

In *Jessie Brown*, melodrama's providential plotting, excessive emotionality, and domestic, popular model of community combine to create a vehicle of imperialist justification that is racist and ahistorical in its representations. In Boucicault's case, melodrama simplified the moral ambiguities of Britain's imperial crises and transformed these crises into occasions for national valor. *Jessie Brown* is undoubtedly similar to forms of imperialist propaganda that have been recognized by John MacKenzie,<sup>93</sup> yet its techniques, which create a shorthand for the complexities of the Sepoy Rebellion, are far from simple in themselves. The writers in this study who contended with and manipulated imperial melodrama before and after Boucicault both drew on parallel techniques and attempted to overturn them. Melodrama's plotting, emotionality, and vision of community proved integral to how writers after 1857 both supported and challenged an imperialist vision of Great Britain.

### *Five Case Studies*

The first two chapters of this study examine the function of the melodramatic mode's providential plotting in works written during and after the events of the Sepoy Rebellion as well as in the imperial romances of the 1880s. Chapter 1 focuses on Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins's collaboration "The Perils of Certain English Prisoners" (1857) as well as Collins's novel *The Moonstone* (1868). In "Perils," providential plotting is fragmentary and seemingly ad hoc, but in a way that resembles the plot of *Jessie Brown*, it serves as a consolatory form of magical thinking in the immediate aftermath of what Christopher Herbert has described as a particularly traumatic first year of the rebellion. Collins employs providential plotting for a more critical end in *The Moonstone*. In that blend of detective story and sensation novel, plot enables the reader to meditate on the rendering of the Sepoy Rebellion as a historical event.

The organized plotting of the Sepoy Rebellion's history in *The Moonstone* gives birth to the imperial romance's surfeit of event and obsessive treatment of historicity in chapter 2, "Romance; or, Melodrama and the Adventure of History." Though late-Victorian reviewers and authors frequently touted the imperial romance for its male readership and its displays of masculine prowess, the romance annexed melodrama's providential plotting. In contrast to *The Moonstone*, the romances of H. Rider Haggard and Marie Corelli rely on melodrama's providential plotting to excess, until the recounting of historical events becomes indistinguishable from fantasy and adventure. I analyze Haggard's melodramatic rewriting of the events of the Transvaal War in his novel *Jess* (1887) and go on to consider how Corelli, known for her reliance on melodrama, manipulated the romance genre. Corelli blatantly undermined the romance/melodrama boundary in *Ardat* (1889), which blends exotic portraits of the Middle East with Corelli's theories about the shape of British imperial history. While the treatment of providential plotting in these romances may seem to open up possibilities for rethinking the idea that Britain was the culmination of history, providential plotting also allowed for the erasure of past imperial crimes and the erosion of historical consciousness.

The next part of the study explores the representation of melodrama's emotional excesses in poetry and the short story. One chapter focuses on the angry, bellicose masculinity in the verse of two poets associated with ardent late-Victorian imperialism and militarism, William Ernest Henley and Rudyard Kipling. One aspect of the melodramatic mode's excessive emotion—its penchant for anger and outrage—emerges in Henley's struggles with and Kipling's deprecations of the late-Victorian aesthete. Henley, an early experimenter with aestheticist verse forms, struggled to harmonize his ties to aestheticism with both his support of imperialism and his appreciation of the man of action. Alternatively, Kipling strategically lampooned the aesthete to identify with the man of action. He fashioned himself as a writer who brought the fierce intensity of combat to his poetry. Not only do many of the poems in Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads, and Other Verses* (1892) rely on melodramatic aesthetics in an effort to shock their reader into a broader, more realistic conception of the military's role in the British Empire, but Kipling also framed his writing as an angry and violent form of imperial melodrama.

Chapter 4 turns from outrage to sympathy and from imperialists to imperial subjects. It explores how the melodramatic mode enabled Robert Louis Stevenson to understand and respond to what he saw as overly emotional Hawaiian islanders suffering from leprosy. When Stevenson visited Hawaii in 1889, he enlisted the melodramatic mode to negotiate the intersections among colonialism, emotion, and disease, thus blurring the line between melodrama and anthropology. Robert Louis Stevenson’s engagement with the melodramatic mode grew out of his appreciation of early nineteenth-century dramatic forms. Yet this conscious appreciation took on unique significance when Stevenson reached the South Seas. By adapting an 1828 melodrama in “The Bottle Imp,” his 1891 short story set in Hawaii, Stevenson found the aesthetics of melodrama useful as he attempted to understand and critique the family affections he observed in native Hawaiians.

By moving from the emotional identifications between individuals to the larger community constituted by such identifications, the study’s last chapter locates the melodramatic mode at the intersection of geographic location and communal identity. I focus on a writer raised on the imperial periphery, Olive Schreiner. Schreiner’s fiction has received significant attention because of its engagement with British imperialism in South Africa as well as its impact on the development of the New Woman novel, but Schreiner’s reliance on melodramatic aesthetics is often ignored or dismissed in favor of her uncompromising modernist experimentation. Reading Schreiner’s use of melodrama not as opposed to her stylistic innovation but as part of her avant-garde project, I contend that Schreiner recognized the power of the melodramatic mode as a tool for manipulating British public opinion, though through her story “Dream Life and Real Life” (1881) and *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), she questioned its translatability into rural South Africa. I conclude with an analysis of one of Schreiner’s unpublished works, a skit in which mining magnate and imperialist Cecil Rhodes faces divine judgment.

This study ends with a short account of the different permutations of the melodramatic mode in twentieth- and twenty-first-century engagements with British imperialism. While the conclusion stresses the markedly different kinds of writing and media that draw upon imperial melodrama after the Victorian period, the Victorian writers this study examines were also diverse. They were at odds in terms of imperial

politics as well as aesthetic allegiances, yet they all understood, on some level, the powerful overlap between late-Victorian imperialist discourse and the melodramatic mode. Though extensive work in theater history has shown us the representational force of melodrama after its inception in the late eighteenth century, these studies leave out the way in which melodrama proved crucial to Great Britain's imagining of its larger global presence in many generic registers, whether detective stories, avant-garde feminist fiction, or ballads meant to be sung by soldiers. There may have been fewer melodramas on the British stage in the late nineteenth century, but on the global stage assembled by these texts, melodrama served as a crucial mode for writers representing the vicissitudes of British imperialism for late-Victorian readers.

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