

Melodrama and Modernity

Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts

Ben Singer



Columbia University Press
New York

Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex
Copyright © 2001 Ben Singer
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Singer, Ben.

Melodrama and modernity : early sensational cinema and its contexts / Ben Singer.
p. cm. — (Film and culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-231-11328-5 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-231-11329-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Melodrama in motion pictures. I. Title. II. Series.

PN1995.9.M45 S56 2001

791.43'653—dc21

00-064547



Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Permission has been granted to reprint portions of this book derived from essays in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ed., *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford, 1996); Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz, *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (California, 1995); *The Velvet Light Trap* 37 (Spring 1996); *Film History* 5 (November 1993); and *Camera Obscura* 22 (Winter 1990).

5

Melodrama and the Consequences of Capitalism

Melodrama was, in a quite literal sense, a product of modernity. While its basic elements—moral dichotomy, violence, spectacle, “situation,” pathos, etc.—are as old as theater itself, melodrama proper, melodrama specifically labeled as such and recognized as a codified set of structures and motifs, emerged almost precisely around 1800, appearing first in France and copied immediately in England, America, and elsewhere. The genre was already taking shape in the 1790s, in a spectacle bearing the oxymoronic label *pantomime dialoguée*, but 1800 is generally accepted as the beginning of the form because it was then that the term was first applied to a new type of thrilling popular drama, and also because a particularly important example—Guilbert de Pixerecourt’s *Coeline ou l’Enfant du Mystère*—appeared in that year. *Coeline* was a tremendous commercial success, produced almost 1,500 times. Along with Thomas Holcroft’s 1802 *A Tale of Mystery* (an equally successful British adaptation of Pixerecourt’s play), it served as a template defining the genre.¹

What was it about the beginning of the nineteenth century that fostered melodrama? One crucial causal factor is easy to identify. Melodrama coalesced in France at that time because only then was its existence legally permissible. Prior to 1791, theaters in France were

under strict government regulations that prohibited dialogue in the dramatic productions of all but a handful of officially sanctioned theaters.² Popular theaters had to settle with pantomime shows built out of non-verbal elements: music, dance, gesture, costume, scenery, etc. Stories relied on spectatorial foreknowledge of current events and folk tales (a strategy also employed in early cinema), along with signs and banners (precursors of silent cinema's intertitles), which helped clarify basic information (although probably most spectators were illiterate).³ The French Revolution transfigured the theatrical landscape. In January 1791 the bourgeois National Assembly did away with the old system of government regulation, legalizing dialogue in all theaters. With that gag removed, many producers began to integrate dialogue into the pantomimes they had been offering (hence the term *pantomime dialoguée*). This lineage helps account for melodrama's characteristic appeal to the eye and its emphasis on simple dramatic conflicts and stock characters.

Melodrama thrived in part because its ideological dynamics were so well suited to the period. The liberal-democratic ferment catalyzing the French Revolution and codified in "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" of 1789 encouraged dramatic scenarios affirming the new social principles.⁴ By demonizing venal, abusive aristocrats, melodramas reflected the revolutionary shift in political and ideological power. It expressed, as Thomas Elsaesser has observed, "the struggle of a morally and emotionally emancipated bourgeois consciousness against the remnants of feudalism."⁵ This formulation is complicated somewhat by the fact that the bourgeoisie traditionally has disdained melodrama as a product of lowbrow vulgarity. It would be more apt to say instead that melodrama manifested the powerful new *populist* consciousness. Melodrama was a cultural expression of the populist ideology of liberal democracy, even if the bourgeois champions of that ideology did not have populist aesthetic sensibilities.

To a certain extent, melodrama can be regarded as an index of actual popular empowerment after the French Revolution. Its psychosocial context was more complicated, however. For many people, the social upheavals of modernity—the erosion of traditional feudal and religious authority and the rise of modern capitalism—were more anxious, unsettling, and oppressive than they were empowering. Melodrama conveyed the stark insecurities of a modern life in which people found themselves "helpless and unfriended" in a postsacred, postfeudal, "disenchanted" world of moral ambiguity and material vulnerability. From this per-

spective, melodrama was less about an emergent liberal populism than about the anxieties of a society experiencing unprecedented moral, cultural, and socioeconomic disarray.

This view of melodrama as an expression of the instability and insecurity of the transition to modernity—and, correspondingly, as an expression of the need to "resolve" the disarray through a utopian myth of divine protection—has been developed by a number of scholars since about the late 1970s. Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976) is most often cited, but it is important to acknowledge that Brooks's symptomatic reading of melodrama echoed and expanded on insights already articulated by Eric Bentley in 1964, Michael Booth in 1965, Robert Heilman in 1960 and 1968, David Grimsted in 1968 and 1971, and Thomas Elsaesser in 1972 (and later elaborated by Martha Vicinus, Laura Mulvey, Christine Gledhill, Judith Walkowitz, and others).⁶ Indeed, as I will discuss shortly, the underlying conception of melodrama as a hunger for resacralization has been articulated with some frequency since at least the early years of the twentieth century.

Melodramatic conflicts gave dramatic shape to the adversities and insecurities of the modern world. Scenarios in which good people experience duress from forces beyond their control resonated with the urban masses. Poverty, class stratification and exploitation, job insecurity, workplace hazards, heartless contractual systems of housing and money-lending—these and similar components of the new capitalist social order, which represented such a striking contrast to the feudal *gemeinschaft* that had governed life for many centuries, played prominent roles in the narratives of classical melodrama. As Grimsted notes: "The worst clichés of melodrama in the late nineteenth century—the heroine tied to the railroad tracks or the family about to be tossed into the snow for lack of mortgage money—were telling symbols for the latent fears in a society characterized by rapid technological change and widespread home ownership on time payments."⁷ Walkowitz similarly observes the social foundations of the insecurity conveyed in melodrama:

In both form and content, melodrama was an appropriate genre for working-class audiences, evoking the instability and vulnerability of their life in the unstable market culture of the early nineteenth century, where traditional patterns of deference and paternalism had been eroded. Below the surface order of reality lurked a terrible secret that could erupt unexpectedly with violence and irrationality. The melodramatic narrative acted arbi-

trarily in its very structure calling into question the operation of law and justice. Melodramatic plots overwhelmingly reinforced the sense of destiny out of control.⁸

A number of scholars have suggested that the anxiety of modernization derived not only from the basic mechanics of the capitalist system, symbolized by unemployment (for all intents and purposes, a modern phenomenon) and the possibility of being thrown out of one's home for nonpayment, but also, more generally, from what Lukács referred to as the "transcendental homelessness" of modernity. Modernity eroded the stability, certainty, and simplicity of traditional religious faith and patriarchal tradition. The emergence of melodrama was a symptom of this loss of social and psychological moorings. As Brooks writes:

Melodrama . . . appears to be a peculiarly modern form. . . . The origins of melodrama can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath. This is the epistemological moment which it illustrates and to which it contributes: the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society. . . . It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration [restoration] as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern.⁹

By this interpretation, melodrama allegorized the modern situation in which the age-old safety nets of cosmic faith, feudal protection, and communal cohesion were fast falling apart.

Classical melodrama reacted to modernity in a somewhat paradoxical but nevertheless common psychological binary response. On the one hand, melodrama portrayed the individual's powerlessness within the harsh and unpredictable material life of modern capitalism; on the other, it served a quasi-religious ameliorative function in reassuring audiences that a higher cosmic moral force still looked down on the world and governed it with an ultimately just hand. As Brooks elaborates, "Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and dissipates it with the

eventual victory of virtue."¹⁰ With its exaltation of virtue and ultimate poetic justice, melodrama offered a kind of compensatory faith that helped people cope with the vicissitudes of modern life.

This function of melodrama has long been recognized. As Clayton Hamilton noted in 1911:

Much of our life—in fact, by far the major share—is casual instead of causal. . . . Nearly all the good or ill that happens to us is drifted to us, uncommanded, undeserved, upon the tides of chance. It is this immutable truth—the persistency of chance in the serious concerns of life and the inevitable influence of accident on character—that melodrama aims to represent. . . . We derive a solid comfort from our certainty that the virtue of the heroine is inviolable. At every moment she is chaperoned by destiny. . . . Virginity is its own defense and virtue shields itself with spiritual armor. . . . Life as it exists is not so ordered. . . . We look about us and it seems that there is neither right nor reason in the inappealable decrees of destiny. But meanwhile the noble art of melodrama stands up scornful before many spears and confronts the iniquity of fate. . . . Melodrama answers one of the most profound of human needs: it ministers to that motive which philosophers term the will to believe. It looks at life—as Paul enjoined humanity to look at it—with faith and hope. So when the toilers in our sweatshops attend the ten, twenty, and thirty cent theatres, they escape into a region where faith is not an idle jest and hope is not an irony; and thereafter, when they reassume the heavy and the weary weight of all their unintelligible world, they may smile backward in remembrance of that momentary dream-world in which destiny was just and kind and good.¹¹

An essayist writing in 1910 in the British journal *The Nation* pursued the analogy between melodrama and religion even more overtly:

There is a state of mind in which it is proper to visit a melodrama, as there is a state of mind in which it is proper to go to church. . . . On this stage nothing is in doubt. . . . You expect from the melodramatist a firm and unquestioning morality, a well-trying plot, an inevitable end. His message has the certainty of orthodox preaching. . . . The curtain is his surplice, the cheers of the gallery his ordination. He stands in an apostolic succession, and you may predict of him . . . that he will question none of the councils and prevaricate over none of the articles. In his pulpit there is no heresy. Virtue will always triumph. . . . You go to the solemn perform-

ance not because you look for novelty, but because you are comfortably certain of its absence. It is a ritual, and you love it because it stirs in your breast the older loyalties, the surer faiths of our race.¹²

Rollin Lynde Hartt, writing in 1909, further underscored melodrama's purpose to bolster faith in a stable moral order, an ideological bedrock able to ward off the anxiety of "transcendental homelessness":

[The melodrama audience] demands . . . an extreme simplicity and perspicuity of idea, a stripping of truth to the bone. I say truth advisedly. However wild and unrepresentative the incident, and however crude the depiction of character, the underlying notions must consist solely of platitudes,—or, to put it more genially, of fundamental verities. . . . The glory of melodrama is that it preaches nightly a gospel that gives the mere platitudes of morals a glaring, thrilling intensity that finds the heart and sets it leaping.¹³

The main difference between these early versions of the idea and those ventured more recently by Brooks and others is that the latter stress a more specific historical symptomology. The contemporary spin interprets the hunger for moral stability and intelligibility as a reflection of a post-Enlightenment, postsacred, postfeudal world, or in short, a reflection of modernity. This idea may have been implicit in the early versions, but they were not so concerned to argue that melodrama reflected the modern condition in particular. They implied a broader human desire for the comforting myth of benign Providence, moral legibility, and poetic justice. The recent version, focusing on psychological consequences of social change, may be more thought-provoking for contemporary scholars, but given that people in all places, at all times, undoubtedly have gained psychological comfort from the belief that destiny rewards the virtuous and punishes the bad, the early version has the advantage of being more sensitive to a wider, transhistorical dimension of melodramatic myth.

Melodrama's fusion of anxiety and wish-fulfillment is particularly evident in the centrality of chance. Chance wreaks havoc on the lives of the protagonists, accentuating their vulnerability within an unpredictable world. But, conventionally, it is also chance, rather than causal action on the part of the protagonists, that brings about the villain's demise and saves the day. The villain might be struck by a bolt of lightning, or fall into a grain silo, or be buried under an avalanche, or, as in

The Perils of Pauline, suddenly be killed by a disgruntled henchman without any dramatic preparation whatsoever. Through chance, bad things happen to bad people, and good things happen to good people. In the 1906 Vitagraph film *The 100 to One Shot; or, A Run of Luck*, for example, a poor family is being evicted from their farm because they have fallen behind on the rent. The son goes to the city, pawns his last possessions, and, stumbling on a hot tip, bets it all at the racetrack. He wins big and rushes home just as the heartless landlord is expelling his aged parents. Melodrama thus affirmed the certainty of a kind of cosmic moral adjudication. Justice was meted out by a higher power that never failed to reward the humble and good and eradicate or reform the greedy, lustful, and corrupt.

In classical melodrama, protagonists are unable to stop villainy through their own actions. Taking the causal agency of retribution out of their hands was apt for several reasons. By maintaining the protagonists' dramatic powerlessness, melodrama was able to function as a parable of modern anxiety. It also let them keep their hands morally clean (they were able to heed the commandment "thou shall not kill" in a way they could not if they themselves had eradicated the villain). Above all, making forces of nature and fate the agents of moral retribution served a psychological need. It reassured audiences that, ultimately, they were not transcendently homeless, after all. Although the world's demagification, combined with the harsh realities of capitalism, fostered moral and material insecurity, classic melodrama's clear-cut moral dichotomies and ineluctable poetic justice affirmed that some sort of Providence still reigned. Melodrama granted an ethical simplicity and legibility that made the world more secure, if not socially or economically then at least psychologically.

* * *

The ameliorative aspect of melodrama often seems grossly overshadowed by its anxious or paranoid dimension. Moral legibility is evident throughout, but punishment and reward only appear at the very end of the play. Stage melodramas typically had four acts, with four scenes each, so the imbalance between villainy and retribution was substantial. The imbalance was particularly pronounced in serial-film melodramas, which ran over sixteen weeks or so. The protagonists endure assaults week after week with nary a hint of poetic justice until the last five minutes of the last episode. The villain just keeps on launching one abduction or assassination attempt after another.

Such an imbalance conveys not just a sense of moral and material insecurity, but a whole modality of interpersonal interaction introduced (or greatly amplified) by the advent of modern capitalism. As I noted in chapter 1, nineteenth-century social theory was fixated on the phenomenon of competitive individualism as a historical development closely linked to the transition from traditional to modern urban society. In 1844, for example, Engels observed a pervasive social atomization in urban modernity:

*We know well enough that the isolation of the individual—a narrow-minded egotism—is everywhere the fundamental principle in modern society. But nowhere is this selfish egotism so blatantly evident as in the frantic bustle of the great city. The disintegration of society into individuals, each guided by his private principles and each pursuing his own aims, has been pushed to its furthest limits in London. Here indeed human society has been split into its component atoms.*¹⁴

Marx and Engels reiterated this theme four years later, stressing (with ironic ambivalence) the power of bourgeois individualism to demolish age-old patterns of human cohesion:

*The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors,” and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy waters of egotistical calculation.*¹⁵

Capitalism reconfigured society as a chaotic conglomeration of competing individual interests. It also created a world in which social antipathy was never far beneath the surface and needed only a minor catalyst to erupt into out-and-out hostility. As Ferdinand Tönnies argued:

In gesellschaft, every person strives for that which is to his own advantage. . . . The relation of all to all may therefore be conceived as potential hostility or latent war. . . .

Everybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others. . . .

Rational will [calculated maneuvering and exploitation] has always been permitted against enemies, has even been considered praiseworthy. But only gesellschaft makes such a condition general and necessary. . . . Its elementary relationships . . . become not only a possible source of hostility, but a source in which hostility is natural and merely veiled (and consequently highly probable, requiring only slight provocation to cause an outbreak). . . .

*[Gesellschaft] consists of free persons who stand in contact with each other, exchange with each other and cooperate without any gemeinschaft or common will among them. . . . These numerous external contacts, contracts, and contractual relations only cover up as many inner hostilities and antagonistic interests.*¹⁶

John A. Hobson, in his 1894 book *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism*, similarly perceived pervasive adversarial hostility as the earmark of the capitalist social structure: “Anti-social feelings are touched and stimulated at every point by the competition of workers with one another, the antagonism between employers and employed, between sellers and buyers, factory and factory, shop and shop.”¹⁷

It is intriguing that this strand of social theory developed at roughly the same time as the rise of popular melodrama. It might be helpful to describe a sequence from a typical early serial-film melodrama to see how sensational melodrama dramatizes a world in which competition, advanced to the point of social hostility, prevails as a consequence of the “every-man-for-himself” (or, more accurately, “every-man-against-all-others”) basis of capitalist modernity.

The plot of *A Woman in Grey*, produced in 1919, is incredibly convoluted, in keeping with melodrama’s nonclassical narrative mechanics (which was greatly exacerbated in serial films by the need to keep stories going for three or four months of weekly episodes, with each episode requiring at least one or two climactic sensation scenes). The bare-bones setup is this: Ruth Hope is a poor but virtuous young woman who is actually heiress to an immense fortune. She and her beau Tom Thurston battle an oily mustachioed villain, J. Haviland Hunter, who alternately wants to kill Ruth, kidnap her, steal from her a secret code leading to a treasure trove, or wrench off her hand a large piece of jewelry covering a scar that he thinks will expose Ruth as an escaped murderer. To make matters more complicated, there is a completely separate second villain,

the lawyer Gordon. He originally had helped Ruth undergo an identity change through plastic surgery when she was falsely accused and convicted of murder. Now, as repayment, he wants to have his way with her. He repeatedly kidnaps Ruth after she spurns his advances.

Toward the end of episode nine, Tom Thurston finds a note written by Gordon ordering a brutish old henchman to kidnap Ruth and take her to an abandoned mansion that the henchman and his vile hag of a wife are using as a hideout. The old man binds and gags Ruth and drags her into the abandoned building and, to keep her still until Gordon arrives, straps her to a bed in a room in which there just happens to be hanging from the ceiling a massive stone block with an impaling rod projecting out of it. He orders his wife not to toy with the quarry, and hits her when she repels his admonition. The hag (fig. 5.1) pretends to acquiesce, but when her husband goes off to take a nap, she pushes the bed right under the massive block and spike and puts a candle under the pulley rope that is keeping it up. Ruth flails helplessly as the candle proceeds to burn through the braids of the rope (fig. 5.2). Meanwhile, boyfriend Tom arrives and enters the hideout, and the villain Hunter is also hot on the trail. Tom looks through a keyhole and, in a POV shot,



Fig. 5.1 The hag from *A Woman in Grey* (Serico, 1919–20; frame still enlargement from video).

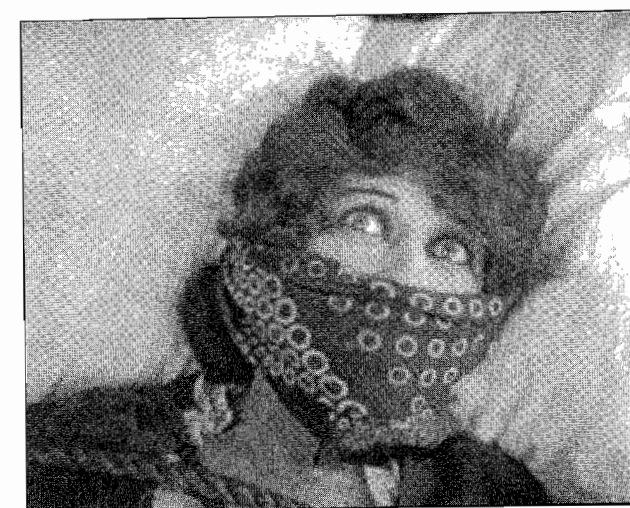
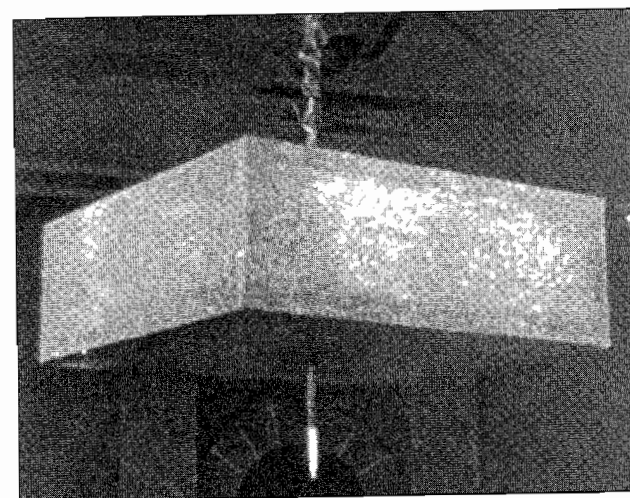
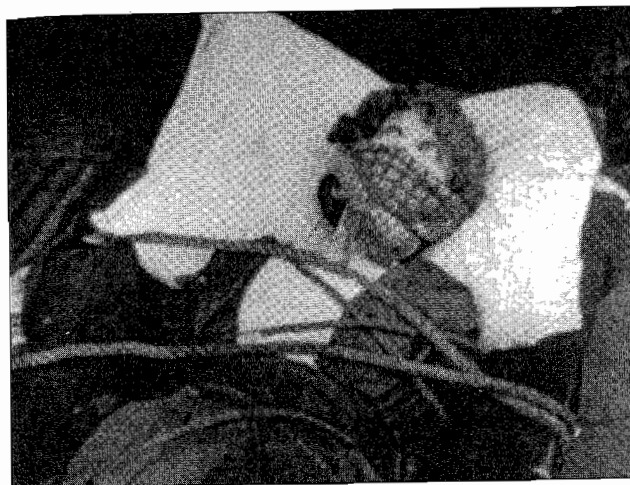


Fig. 5.2 Ruth in peril. (Three frame still enlargements from *A Woman in Grey*; Serico, 1919–20)

sees Ruth and the block that is about to impale and squash her. Just as Tom is about to break down the door, the old hag pulls a lever and he falls through a trap door into a basement dungeon, which, we find, is already occupied by a crazed savage who has been chained to the wall for years. The episode ends with the sight of the hag laughing grotesquely as Ruth squirms helplessly in terror and the rope continues to burn and snap.

Episode ten opens with the serial's characteristic temporal overlap and dubious narrative rewriting. We see the terrified Ruth, but we also now see the villain Hunter climb through the window and taunt Ruth as the rope burns down to its last strands. Tom arrives and looks through the keyhole. The POV shot now shows Hunter on the scene, trying to wrench the bracelet off Ruth's hand (fig. 5.3). The hag pulls the lever and Tom falls thirty feet into the dungeon. As the villain Hunter continues to attack Ruth, the massive block finally falls, crashing through the floor into the dungeon. It misses Ruth and Hunter because, for some reason, they are no longer directly under the block. A charitable



Fig. 5.3 Publicity still for *A Woman in Grey*. (From Lahue, *Bound and Gagged*)

reading would surmise that during his attack Hunter had inadvertently moved the bed on which Ruth was tied; but since that is not established, it is probably more likely that the film simply hopes viewers will be too excited by the thrilling events to remember the spatial details of the previous episode's cliffhanger crisis. Awakened by the crash, the henchman comes in and brawls wildly with Hunter. Meanwhile, down in the dungeon, the crazed savage jumps around, excited at having a new playmate to maim and kill. Intertitles indicate that the nasty old couple keep the savage as a kind of human disposal system. After the old man knocks out Hunter with a hammer, he and the hag look down the huge hole in the floor and delight in the plight of their "new boarder" Tom. (The extreme high-angle/low-angle POV shot reverse shot is a wonderful stylistic flourish.) Meanwhile, Ruth remains bound, gagged, and petrified. The villain Hunter regains consciousness, but now he is also tied up and can only move his head. However, this does not stop him from resuming his attack on Ruth and trying to remove her bracelet by chewing away at her flesh with his teeth.

At first glance, it may seem absurd to endow this lurid, overheated little sequence with the weight of symptomatic meaning by reading it as an allegory of capitalist modernity. Obviously, its objective was to get the primarily lowbrow and juvenile audience that patronized blood-and-thunder melodrama hollering and stamping with excitement. It must be conceded, furthermore, that as long as there have been stories, there have been stories about hostile competition between hero and villain, about coveted objects, about sexual extortion. Audiences and readers in a wide range of sociohistorical contexts have found such themes gripping. To a large extent, the sequence's dramatic appeal must be viewed as universal and historically nonspecific.

That fact, however, need not stymie more specific symptomatic interpretation. I think Martha Vicinus has the right formulation when she suggests that, "Melodrama is best understood as a combination of archetypal, mythic [elements] and time-specific responses to particular cultural and historical conditions."¹⁸ There is something about the action in this sequence—something about the extraordinary ferocity and polyvalence of the antagonism—that reverberates, inviting interpretation as a distillation of the interpersonal dynamics distinctive of its epoch. It is impossible to overlook the rabid intensity and omnidirectional ubiquity of the malevolence. As figure 5.4 diagrams, the heroine is assaulted by the villain Gordon (via his brutish henchman, whom

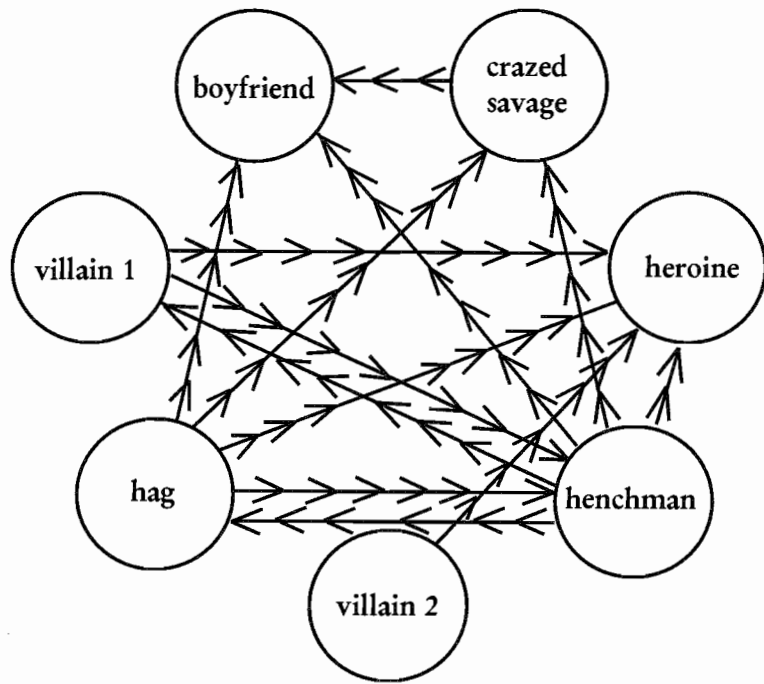


Fig. 5.4 Character relationships in *A Woman in Grey* as revealed through arrows showing targets of aggression.

Gordon domineers), by the main villain Hunter, and by the hag; the hag and the husband are starkly unpleasant toward each other; the hag does violence to the hero, who is also threatened by the crazed savage; the henchman and the hag abuse the crazed savage by keeping him chained in a dungeon.

Whether or not a sequence of such omnidirectional antagonism could have found expression in a cultural context other than modernity, it undoubtedly resonated with special power within modern capitalist society. The sequence manages to make perceptible, through the defamiliarizing capacity of melodramatic exaggeration, a situation of competitive individualism run rampant. Sensational melodramas like *A Woman in Grey* capture the essence of social atomization and all-against-all antagonism. Everyone is in competition with everyone else.

This subtextual representation of capitalist modernity is particularly interesting in film serials, since in serials the social atoms invariably were agitated, as in capitalism, by competition for sole possession of a

coveted material object (in this case, papers leading to a hidden fortune) that, like money, symbolized power and wealth. (The convention of structuring narratives around the back-and-forth exchange of a fetish object, or “weenie,” is discussed in chapter 7.) It is worth noting, moreover, that, just as the rise of capitalist *gesellschaft* was predicated on the disappearance of traditional patriarchal authority (be it the head of the household, the leader of the clan, the feudal lord, or God), in serial-film melodramas the frenzy of hostile competition was triggered, without fail, by the murder or incapacitation of a father figure (a convention also detailed in chapter 7). In serial-film melodrama, as in modern society as a whole, the rise of rampant individualism and antisocial will coincided with the downfall of benign paternalism.

Sensational melodrama’s narrative *gesellschaft* would have had particular meaning for a society that was still adjusting to modernity. For many people in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the aggressive individualism of modern social and economic life was not yet a transparent and unremarkable fact of life. It still registered as something relatively new and strange, something disquieting. Urbanization, which intensified class and ethnic divisions and a general tone of impersonality, was an exponential ongoing phenomenon. The trials of *gesellschaft* might have been felt most strongly among the millions of urban immigrants who previously had known nothing but agrarian village life. However, any worker caught up in the new machinery of exploitation and profiteering, and who faced the erratic waves of unemployment peculiar to industrial society, would have been sensitive to the harsh underpinnings of capitalist modernity. To a large extent, these were the people for whom sensational melodrama was geared, and for whom it might have resonated as the reflection of a new reality.

* * *

Any consideration of melodrama’s relation to the social context of modern capitalism must point out the degree to which melodrama grew out of, and persisted to accentuate, cultural divisions basic to the capitalist structure of class stratification. It is, of course, no historical revelation to point out that sensational melodrama was a popular amusement catering especially to the urban working class—that much generally is taken for granted. However, it is important to document the way in which the cultural division expressed itself, both in order to establish that what we take for granted is correct and matches what was taken for granted by earlier generations, and in order to highlight just how distasteful the

middle class found popular melodrama and its clientele.

From its earliest days, melodrama was affiliated with a working-class audience. As a critic writing in 1914 observed:

*It is not surprising that the French Revolution should have given birth to the melodrama as we know it. "I write," said Pixerecourt, "for those who cannot read." For the first time they and the barely well-to-do become powerful patrons of the stage.*¹⁹

Inexpensive playhouses specializing in melodramas mushroomed in the early 1800s, giving the area in Paris where they were clustered the nickname the "Boulevard du Crime."²⁰

Melodrama's class affiliation changed little over the next century. While there were strains of melodramatic spectacle in the "legitimate" productions of Dion Boucicault and David Belasco (tempered by refined sentiment and milder violence), for the most part melodrama was culturally segregated and stigmatized as a proletarian amusement. A 1911 review in the *San Francisco Weekly* described melodrama's audience as "the grubbers after mere existence."²¹ A 1909 magazine essay suggestively entitled "The Mellowdrammer" (mimicking a lower-class accent) proclaimed: "The melodrama is the primary form of entertainment with the Other Half. In every city of any importance it has several homes. All smell equally bad and contain much the same sort of people and exactly the same sort of piece."²² The author, Porter Emerson Browne, described the audience as comprised mainly of gossipy shop-girls with mouths full of gum, weaselly young men with well-watered hair and yellow suspenders embroidered with green shamrocks, and fat immigrants with respiratory problems. The essay was full of useful advice for prospective white-collar slumming expeditions:

*When you approach the box-office, don't say, "Have you, perhaps, a good aisle-seat, somewhere in the first few rows, that is not already disposed of?" Nay! Nay! The proper way to phrase your query is: "Wotter yuh got down front, Bill? . . . Hub? . . . De sekind row? Awright. Gimme it."*²³

In the same year, Hartt described the context of popular melodrama in very similar terms: "Reduce the conventional theatre to a state of dog-eared shabbiness; borrow a whiff or so of the Dime Museum's [i.e., freak show's] aroma; and fill the house with office-boys, bell-boys, messengers, common laborers, factory-girls, shop-girls, waitresses, and 'generals.'"²⁴ A few years later, in 1914, Arthur Ruhl reinforced this image,

stating that the 10–20–30 audience was comprised of "fat women in wilted shirt-waists; flippant girls chewing gum; boys and men who, one vaguely feels, ought to be at work somewhere."²⁵

The well-to-do found cheap melodrama distasteful not only because of a basic aversion to lower-class types but also owing to an aversion to melodrama's aesthetic aberrations: "Turbulent contortions of grammar, large chunks of decomposed rhetoric, spasms of emotion that have nothing to do with what has gone before or what is to follow, revolvers, hisses, saw mills . . . villains in riding breeches and black moustachios, country girls suddenly found in opium dens . . . ; these are the awful messes which melodrama puts forth."²⁶ A British columnist writing in 1919 posed the rhetorical question: "Is it conceivable that any audience with the smallest pretension to taste or education could be moved to anything but ridicule or contempt by the average melodrama production of today?"²⁷ The obvious answer was articulated by a writer in the *Atlantic Monthly* a decade earlier: "The majority of us scoff at the popular melodrama as a matter of course."²⁸ The problem, according to Hartt, was that melodrama was geared to the "Neolithic mind":

*Melodrama is not got up for psychologists. Its devotees care nothing for the portrayal of the inner life, save in its crudest, most ferocious manifestations. They want "sump'n doin.'" "Strip the action, therefore, of all those interpretative, significant, philosophic touches that make it human. Give it go. Give it noise and bluster as it goes. Let it career madly in a cloud of dust and with sparks flying. And make it simple. . . . Reduce character, incident, structure, and ideas to their lowest terms, enabling the Neolithic mind (and such is the Grand's) to comprehend."*²⁹

Hartt goes on to explain that the proletarian's interest in melodramatic thrills resulted from the fact that "only the glaringly sensational gets through their armor of stupidity to leave a vivid impression."

The Neolithic mind was not just obtuse, it was also thought to be vulgar and degenerate. A haughty letter to the drama critic of the *American Magazine*, a middle-class monthly, claimed to represent an antimelodrama coalition:

This is a plea for help from the A.V.M., meaning the American Victims of Melodrama. Consider it an urgent request to be represented as opposed to this onslaught of melodramatic stuff, this reeking, bloody, villain-pursued-her . . . sort of stuff. . . . We are sick of this sort of play, weary of their mechanical construction, of the conventional villain, hero and heroine, of

*their artificial human interest, of their trashy romance and cheap excitement.*³⁰

Melodrama, in short, was at the center of a culture war, one that essentially was also a class conflict. Of course, the well-to-do fashioned their own varieties of spectacle in forms of upscale melodrama, such as David Belasco's two-dollar Broadway shows, and in pageantry, high-class vaudeville, opera, and grandiose Shakespearian productions.³¹ But these amusements were less violent and generally less invested in the excitement of "thrills for thrill's sake." Melodrama emerged "from below" to express, and to redress through myth, the common person's material vulnerability and "ideological shelterlessness" in modern capitalism (to use Kracauer's variation on Lukács).³² It dramatized the social atomization of capitalist *gesellschaft*, and remained a reflection of the cultural divisions of a stratified society.