

***Sensation Drama, 1860–1880: An Anthology* (2019), ed. by Beth Palmer and Joanna Hofer-Robinson**

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A new anthology of nineteenth-century drama is always a welcome addition to Victorian studies. Since the pioneering work of editors who brought the texts of popular dramas such as *The Colleen Bawn*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *East Lynne* and *The Lights o' London* to light, more recent publications have tended to focus on single-author collections or collections that cover a range of performances and genres, such as Tracy C. Davis's Broadview anthology¹. While many of these publications include examples of 'sensation' drama, they are rarely defined or contextualised specifically as such. Similarly, while published editions of dramas by leading sensation authors, including Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade, are available, there has been no representative collection of sensation dramas *per se*. Given the rise in studies on sensation literature and their prevalence on undergraduate and postgraduate courses, *Sensation Drama, 1860–1880: An Anthology*, edited by Beth Palmer and Joanna Hofer-Robinson fills this gap by providing five representative dramas from original printed versions, each carefully and informatively edited and annotated.

It is worth noting that there was a clear theatrical development with adaptations of new sensation fiction emerging throughout the 1850s and 1860s and culminating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in what became more prevalently termed 'sensation drama' – sensational in terms of its nail-biting plots and spectacular stage effects. Frequently adapted from the novel, sensation drama soon attracted criticism for its emphasis on the spectacular special effects employed to create the heart-stopping moments of suspense and action. True to form, some of the dramas included in this volume are exemplary of a sensationalist theatre, containing impressive visual scenes created as media for daring rescues, attempted murders, avalanches and suicides. The spectacular form is perhaps best epitomised by the railroad scene in Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight*, included in this anthology. First performed at the

¹ Davis, Tracy C., ed. *The Broadview Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Performance*. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2012.

New York Theater in 1867, it was billed as “a totally original and picturesque drama of life and love in these times” (169); embodying nineteenth-century New York urban life with its depictions of sensational crime scenes, framed within a rich-versus-poor narrative of identity substitution offering an apposite example of American melodrama.

Palmer and Hofer-Robinson have chosen variants that highlight playwrights who were central to nineteenth-century popular drama but who are only now receiving the attention they merit. Lacy’s edition of C. H. Hazlewood’s *Never Too Late to Mend*, performed at the Royal Marylebone Theatre (1859), is notable as it predated Reade’s own dramatic version of 1865. Hazlewood was an important and prolific playwright, and his adaptations are highly representative of the intrinsically theatrical treatment of popular literature of the time. Adapted from Reade’s 1856 novel, Hazlewood’s adaption was uncompromising in its presentation of onstage realism, strengthening the novel’s humanitarian call for prison reform. The editors provide a clear account of the complex performing history of the drama including a later version, also by Hazlewood.

Symptomatic of the collection as a whole, Reade’s narrative moves between Britain and Australia, representing “the fluidity of sensation drama between continents, social spaces and literary and social cultures” (xxix). The dramatic locations of all five plays span Australia, Ireland, America, Italy and France, and the frequent concentration on London productions found in many play collections is challenged by the editors through their choice of two dramas that were originally produced in New York, Boucicault’s *The Colleen Bawn* and Daly’s *Under the Gaslight*. Refreshingly, the editors are also mindful to present dramas by key female dramatists: Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Missing Witness* and Florence Marryat’s *Miss Chester*. Both of these plays were written as original dramas, by women who worked not only as novelists, journalists and playwrights but as actors themselves, highlighting, as the editors note, the interconnectedness of the dramatic and literary landscape. Written in collaboration with Charles Young, Marryat’s drama, while employing some of the tropes of sensation fiction, lessens the emphasis on dramatic sensation by giving voice to female discontent, gesturing towards the New Woman dramas to come; Braddon’s play “challenges the idea of the morally righteous and passive heroine” (xxxiv) through the vindication of its female characters. Although *The Missing Witness* (performed in

Liverpool, 1874) can be found in other recent editions,² its inclusion contributes to the cohesiveness of the volume by including Braddon, and indeed Marryat, as a seminal figure in the rise of sensation literature and drama; but here again, the editors provide useful contextual notes, likening the Alpine avalanche scene to Collins's and Dickens's *No Thoroughfare* of 1867/1868.

Perhaps best known and more widely available than the other dramas in this collection is Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* (first performed at Miss Laura Keene's Theatre, New York, 1860), chosen by the editors for its instrumental position in popularising sensation drama as the "new dramatic phenomenon" (xxx). Boucicault's most successful Irish drama featured the heroic rescue of the innocent beauty Eily O'Connor from a watery death by the lovable rogue Myles na Coppaleen, played by Boucicault himself. Giving rise to numerous adaptations and parodies, this is the only drama in the collection to have remained firmly within the modern theatre repertoire. One of the few failings of this edition is that it is unclear which version of the play the editors have selected out of the many extant variants, which, paradoxically, are all described in some detail within the footnotes. Described as "printed but not published," it would suggest that this is an acting edition for the British production, based on the original New York production, but the provenance, frustratingly, is not clearly stated.

Other than this small omission, the editors have been careful to provide comprehensive references and useful annotations that not only note differences between existing texts but provide helpful contextual notes. The volume also includes a range of illustrations relating to each of the dramas including reproductions of the original textual sources and prompt copies, which are particularly illuminating for theatre scholars.

This anthology makes an original and rigorous contribution to the field of Victorian studies and will be particularly welcome to theatre scholars, literary scholars and nineteenth-century social historians. It is a useful resource for teaching, providing a representative selection of significant plays from the sensation drama repertoire, and

² Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. *The Missing Witness*. 1880. Ed. Jennifer Carnell. The Sensation Press, n.d.

includes a scholarly introduction which analyses the genre both in its literary and theatrical contexts.