melodrama as provocateur

LINDA WILLIAMS

Edited by
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FOR LINDA WILLIAMS,
1946–2025

Inspiring many generations of film and media scholars, she is remembered with love and admiration by all who worked and spent time with her

Contents

Introduction

Christine Gledhill, Laura Horak,
and Elisabeth R. Anker

This anthology centers on the provocations of a posthumous essay by Linda Williams, "The Fortunes of Melodrama in France and America; or, Why Melodrama Is Still Important," based on her groundbreaking research undertaken during a fellowship at the Institut D'Études Avancées de Paris, 2019–20. There, until halted by a major stroke, she was engaged in a comparative investigation of the emergence of, and critical responses to, theatrical melodrama in France and America, followed by its later transformations in their respective cinemas and screen media. The goal of this unfinished project was to assess how these comparative cultural and critical histories reorient understanding of the aesthetics and politics of melodrama today, an understanding made more urgent by melodrama's formative role in social media and political rhetoric.

Part I, "Provocations," comprises Williams's "The Fortunes of Melodrama in France and America; or, Why Melodrama Is Still Important." This long essay—reconstructed from her notes, talks, and reports by Christine Gledhill—outlines Williams's premises, provocative questions, and preliminary propositions. Central to Williams's argument is a challenge to the contention of many French scholars that melodrama, despite claims for its origination during the French Revolution, had disappeared from the

French stage by 1825 and that it had no subsequent place in either French theater or cinema histories. Thus, paradoxically, in the twentieth century, French cinephiles feted America's unabashedly melodramatized film genres under the name not of melodrama but of the "auteur." To explain this paradox, Williams argues the different conceptions of democracy, citizenship, the people, and popular culture stemming from the American and French Revolutions. Consequently, against Anglophone film studies' French-influenced construction of Hollywood genre films as "classical," and the widely held kudos of tragedy, Williams argues that melodrama's supposed emotional and spectacular "excesses" are effectively American cinema's—and indeed French popular cinema's—"norm." At the same time, she defends melodrama's derided "happy ends" as aesthetic realization of the hopes that fuel revolutions. Untangling this complex cross-cultural history is crucial, Williams argues, since it is the melodramatic mode of imagining we must recognize if we are to understand the emotional appeals and political power of popular culture today. For, if melodrama's opposition between villain and victim is reversible, turning the victim into villain-hero as avenger of wrongs—as Williams shows in the case of Donald Trump's rise to power—the point is not to throw out melodrama but rather to recognize its capacity to engage the conflicts of the modern world through its dramatic structures and emotional, aesthetic, and visceral appeals.

As an exploratory and provocative work in progress, covering broad historical and cultural ground, Linda Williams's essay called for response. Bearing in mind her evocative use of Henry James's description of melodrama as a "leaping fish"—liable to land in, and adapt to, unexpected places—we invited historians and scholars from different disciplinary fields to engage with the questions and provocations fielded by her project. To this end, contributors to *Melodrama as Provocateur* offer new research that responds to, or expands on, Williams's propositions. Seeking to understand how and in what way melodrama became the default mode of modern media culture, they ask what was involved in its historical emergence and in its global spread from theater to screen media, as well as how evolving digital technologies have given it new ground on which to flourish. The hope is that to understand better what melodrama brings from its past and how it works now will enable creators, activists, teachers, and critics to turn its power into emancipating rather than repressive directions.

Part II, "Refiguring Melodrama's Histories as Transnational/Transmedial Form," explores Williams's contention that melodrama as an evolving modern modality, crossing centuries and cultures, shapes the emergence

of modern mass-mediated screen fictions worldwide. Defending Williams's challenge to French theatrical history's restricted understanding of melodrama as a short-lived phenomenon of the French Revolution, Matthew Buckley establishes its complex, dispersed, and interrelational emergences across Europe, Britain, the Americas, and their colonies from the eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, leading up to, during, and after the French Revolution. Displacing *Coelina* as a conventional point of origin, Buckley evokes the processes by which melodramatic modality emerged in diverse and syncretizing forms. In the dramatic mix, pantomime—often using dialogue and *Coelina*'s initial designation—was important for the dispersal of melodrama-in-the-making through transnational circuits used by traveling companies, either seeking new outlets for their business or driven into exile by revolutions and social upheavals caused by expansion of, or resistance to, Enlightenment ideals of freedom, equality, and social justice. Through all these travels and dislocations, different forms of melodrama were continuously adapting to new cultures, mixing imported works with local forms, and producing new cross-generic hybrids.

Buckley's broad sweep through 150 years of theater and cultural history enables us to reimagine historical change as a variable process rather than a chain of fixed arrivals and definitive consolidations. In this way, melodrama tracks or interacts with diversely emerging experiences and conceptions of modernity, prefigured in Enlightenment investment in humanist values. In reverse direction, Jane Gaines, moving discussion into early twentieth-century cinema, homes in on one particular point of contention over modernity between America and China, Alla Nazimova's film *The Red Lantern* (1919). Taking up Linda Williams's favoring Miriam Hansen's concept of vernacular modernism over Kristin Thompson's recourse to classic narrative style as an explanation of Hollywood's worldwide dominance, Gaines displaces both systems of meaning-making by rejoining Williams on the overarching modality of melodrama. To this end, Gaines proposes a hybrid model, in which production of the supposed "classical" mode of narration provides the necessary substructural means of story comprehension, while serving the rhetorical power of melodrama to cross national borders, as demonstrated by Matthew Buckley. However, melodrama's translatability is not a foregone conclusion; its appeals are culturally shaped, as in *The Red Lantern*. Taken on by the distributor Metro Pictures for export to China, it was so vigorously disowned by American Chinese, it could never be shown there. Demonstrating how the film's call on melodrama was galvanized by American perception of Chinese culture, Gaines anticipates later chapters

concerned with the ambivalent politics of melodrama's moral configurations. Nevertheless, in this case she suggests the power of melodrama's musical underpinnings to provide a counteracting twist.

Williams's claim for the power of melodramatic aesthetics lies in its capacity to stir bodies and emotions. However, emotion is not built into the two paradigms—classical narrative, vernacular modernism—seeking to explain Hollywood's appeal. Taking up Linda Williams's critique of film studies' inability to grasp the "vital emotional and sensational effects of the medium," Deidre Pribram extends this problem to television studies, arguing the inappropriateness of current attempts to construct television within the contentious model of classicality, or by reclaiming serial programs as "quality TV." Against these notions, she calls on television serialization's link to nineteenth-century serial publication and to melodrama as the more revealing models. In calling on melodramatic modality, she argues, the narrational structures of TV serials are driven by the dynamic of its oscillations and swings between contrasting emotions, generated through performance, camerawork, editing, and the episodic structure of serialization. Emotions create and drive the narrative, not the conventions of causal logic or psychological realism associated with "classicality" or "quality" drama. Rather than representing expressions of individual characters' psychologies, emotions function as drivers of narrative structures. In Pribram's example of *Killing Eve*, these conflicting emotions are played out across two female protagonists, ostensibly representing villainy and innocence; but, bound to each other in a kind of fascination, they each become morally ambiguous in a way anticipated in nineteenth-century melodrama's similar fascination with doubles, and raising questions about audience attraction to villains, an issue taken up in later parts of the book.

Given Pribram's focus on emotionality, the question arises, Can melodrama think? Sergei Eisenstein clearly thought so when he theorized the tripartite effects of montage, in which bodily shocks produce emotional effects, which in turn lead to intellectual perceptions. Carolyn Williams follows up on this question with her concept of "strip thinking" that she finds operative across different media. Drawing first on nineteenth-century stage melodrama, she links the "stop-and-go" dynamic of the tableau to the spaces between frames of serial paintings and the comic strip, to the mechanics of filmic perception, and to the strategies of experimental photography and film. The pause produced by the tableau and the frame's break between pictures create space for the spectator, who, caught between narrational past and future, is able to perceive causes and consequences and

from thence, perhaps, to make narrative and emotional judgments. Introducing the comic strip maker's concept of the gap between frames as the "gutter," Williams suggests the uncanny space in which melodrama roots its strongest effects/affects.

In her essay tracing the pervasive power of melodrama as it intertwines with an evolving modernity, Linda Williams suggests that it will be found at work in newly emerging digital media. While melodrama theory makes much of the expressive power of bodily gesture and facial expression, this part of the book closes with Carla Marcantonio's exploration of the shift from analog media to the digital processing of "real" actors, for example, when Andy Serkis yields his body and voice to the digitized Gollum in *Lord of the Rings* (2003) or in the creation of CGI characters as in *Avatar* (2009). Here, we might say, following Carolyn Williams, that the gap between analog and digital represents a new site for melodrama's uncanny feelings and perceptions.

Part III, "Melodrama's Fortunes in France and America: Eighteenth to Twenty-First Century," pursues across the cinematic century questions raised by the refusal of French theatrical historians and film critics to acknowledge the continuing existence of melodrama in French theater or cinema, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary and in contrast to America's welcome and adaptation of the form. This critical blank in French theatrical history, argues Linda Williams, shapes not only the French intellectual response to cinema but also the wider critical field. For without a language to grasp melodrama's structures and emotional dramaturgy, it is impossible to understand its popular cultural and political power, whether in France or America. Contributors to this part open up the contrast between French and American critical values embedded in the terms they employ to designate melodrama's effects, moving in the last two essays to examine twenty-first-century manifestations of the melodramatic imaginary as it infiltrates American political discourse today.

Opening this part, Victoria Duckett uses a feminist perspective to focus on the circulation of *Les deux orphelines* (1874), one of the most popular theatrical productions of late nineteenth-century France (and proof of melodrama's flourishing on the French stage well beyond 1825), which took new life in America in D. W. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1921). Drawing on Linda Williams's association of melodrama with Enlightenment ideals, Duckett shows how the play restages ideas about virtue, equality, and justice through a drama of sisterhood, in which women exert agency in defense of each other against class tyranny and male power. The play, Duckett argues,

expands melodrama's democratic potential for widening participation in civil society, especially for French women of all classes and provinces. Moreover, she suggests, sisterhood was expanded in its performance, offering roles to emerging female celebrities, while prioritizing an ensemble cast over individual stars—in what Duckett calls "sisterhood on stage." *Les deux orphelines* was performed across France and America, and in 1921 was given its iconic cinematic translation in Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm*. But, Duckett argues, while Griffith's film drew from theatrical melodrama's sensationalism and emotional power, it suppressed the democratizing power of sisterhood from its American vision.

The issue of differential national vision is the focus of Richard Abel's comparative analysis of the French and American film trade and journalistic press during cinema's formative years, 1908 to 1912. Here he finds Linda Williams's conclusions about French suppression of melodrama and America's more positive response replicated in the terminology employed by the countries' respective journals. Noting the almost complete absence in the French press of the category *mélodrame* in advertising of, and commentary on, both French and imported films, he records the use of substitute terms that both implicitly recognize and mask melodrama's strategies—*sensationnel*, *pathétique*, and *sentimental*—terms variously applied to heroic dramatic action, domestic and family drama, or moral dilemmas of crime or psychological conflict that were familiar from Romantic literature and more acceptable to French critical values. However, toward the end of this period, Abel notes, there was an increasing ambiguity and slipperiness in the use of such labels, which suggests the continuing adaptability and evolution of melodrama, as well as French concern to elevate filmic form into high art.

Turning to the fate of melodrama in America, Abel notes the flourishing theatrical production of stage melodrama as a "commercial enterprise and a popular form of entertainment." Early American films, often occupying or displacing the "10–20–30 cent" sensational melodrama theaters, easily slotted into their place as part of American enterprise. However, while recognizing these films' status as melodrama, the trade and critical press was concerned to assess them for their "good" or "bad" practices, rejecting "vulgar" sensationalism and favoring moral oppositions between virtue and villainy that concluded in "clean" happy endings, as a pitch to the middle classes.

What is for Richard Abel the "masking" of melodrama in the French trade press becomes "silencing" in Charles-Antoine Courcoux's analysis of *Le silence est d'or* and of its critical reception. As a dramatization of melodra-

ma's cultural status in postwar French cinema, the film, Courcoux argues, is effectively a meta-melodrama, spanning the career of the film studio director Monsieur Émile during cinema's silent period, when its future as popular entertainment or art was in question. At the center of Courcoux's analysis is Émile's production of a silent film melodrama, whose climax is the outcome of a love triangle that parallels a similar triangle across generations in the studio. The question debated on the studio floor is the value of the tragic outcome of high art versus the happy ending necessary to popular appeal, when virtue and victimhood are redeemed. Although Émile quickly agrees to the happy ending, his position as director of the film within the film and his forgoing his attachment to the film's ingenue star in favor of her young studio-hand lover enable a cultural and masculine recuperation of the "melodramatic." Understood by French critics as displaying a new emotional sensitivity by René Clair—the exiled director now returned from Hollywood to France—revealed through his surrogate, Mr. Émile, the film plays out a male melodrama that can neither recognize itself as such in the text nor speak its name in film criticism. Perceived as feminizing, melodrama is effectively silenced.

If Charles-Antoine Courcoux sees the emotion of melodrama recuperated in French criticism through a masculine lens, the last two chapters in this part move from the political implications of melodrama's cultural forms to the cultural implications of its political forms. Both chapters examine how melodramatic cultural modes turn directly into political speech. Elisabeth Anker examines Donald Trump as the most melodramatic figure in American politics. She argues that Trump uses melodramatic tropes, familiar from mass media's merging of culture and politics, to position himself and his followers as the victim-heroes of the cultural politicization of American society represented by the villainy of Black and brown people, feminists, and immigrants. Rather than deploying melodrama as a democratic force that fights for the underdog and expands representation, Anker shows, right-wing political discourses use melodramatic tenets to argue for distinctly antidemocratic ends. Trump encourages identification with himself among his supporters, who begin to see in his performances of heroism the power they would like to capture in their own lives, what Anker calls a melodramatic politics of "trickle-down domination."

In a similar vein, Laura Horak examines how the political language describing transgender people's lives takes melodramatic form. In "Trans Melodramas," Horak shows how many right-wing politicians and legislative actions use melodrama to denigrate transgender experience, placing trans

people and their supporters in the position of villains destroying traditional gender identities, while trans children are named as victims not of right-wing hate but of overzealous left-wing parents and their leftist supporters. Equally, Horak notes how left-wing politics that advocates for transgender people may also use melodrama negatively, casting trans people as helpless victims of right-wing misogynistic transphobia and gender policing, which does not do justice to the richness, complexity, and beauty of trans life. However, she concludes by following up Linda Williams's contention that "if melodrama is our problem, it will only be better, more effective, more ethically convincing forms of melodrama that can imagine a solution," in an analysis of Isabel Sandoval's multilayered *Lingua Franca* (2019). In its engagement of a verisimilitude expanded to include trans perspectives, this film avoids the traps of antagonistic polarization and opens the possibility of dramatizing a complex sense of trans personhood.

Part IV, "Aesthetics and Politics of Emotion," takes up Linda Williams's emphasis on melodrama's convergence with cinema as an aesthetics of emotion aiming to "move" audiences. Historically, the structure of pathos discussed earlier by Deidre Pribram has focused on female protagonists, who, oppressed under different forms of patriarchal control, have figured as imaginary sites of cultural and political change. This concluding part of the book explores melodrama's engagement with complex and contradictory emotions generated in the interaction between its aesthetic strategies, discourses of gender, and women's changing sociocultural experiences. Across this part, the melodramatic mode provides a structure for documentaries, music albums, music videos, and television series to explore the paradoxes and struggles of women's lives in different national contexts, spanning Mexico, India, America, and China, as these played out across the twentieth century to the present day. The conventions of melodrama allow these works to convey what women otherwise cannot express, either because of patriarchal oppression, anxiety about appearing to be "bad feminists," or their mental health challenges, or simply because their experiences exceed language. These films' performative strategies include the bodily gestures of falling and hovering, the use of song, metaphoric lyrics supported by musical upbeats and downbeats, and expressive vocal qualities alternating with strategic muteness (or in Zhang Zhen's Shanghainese term, *buxiang*). Three of the four essays examine in depth the *melos* of melodrama.

Dolores McElroy and Martin Shingler examine the gesture of falling from two different perspectives. McElroy argues that today's pop feminism works so hard to present women as independent, self-sufficient

subjects that it leaves us without tools for dealing with big and inexplicable feelings like the drive for self-dissolution that accompanies irrational, all-consuming love. In contrast, by putting on display the falls—both literal and metaphoric—and comebacks of larger-than-life American and Mexican performers, McElroy's diva documentaries provide a model for "achieving subjectivity through a spectacularized and performative suffering." These women perform their redemption through the strength and power of their singing voices. And yet, as McElroy points out, the films are characterized by "irresolvable contradiction, the diva's *inability* to 'have it all' as opposed to the straightforward 'empowerment'" that is so often the goal of a simplifying feminist discourse.

The diva documentary's interest in self-dissolution contrasts with the strategies of the US pop singer P!nk in her album *Trustfall* (2023), as analyzed by Martin Shingler. P!nk is also interested in women falling, including falling in love, but she stages these falls more heroically—even donning a superhero suit and hanging from digitally erased wires to pull off an acrobatic fall in the music video for the title track of *Trustfall*. In her lyrics, she asks, "Is someone supposed to catch you . . . or do you catch yourself?" Shingler argues that P!nk uses melodrama to structure *Trustfall* as a "dramatic song cycle," using it to address "the psychological consequences of COVID-19 and lockdown" for Gen Z, including anxiety, depression, and isolation. Shingler analyzes not only the short narrative of anxiety and confidence in the "Trustfall" music video but also the vocal qualities, lyrics, and rhythms of the successive songs on P!nk's album. The final song ends on a long-held note by P!nk and country singer Chris Stapleton, which becomes thin and wavering by the ninth beat, calling for tears but retaining the sense of potentiality promised by melodrama. In different media, both Shingler and McElroy explore the oscillation within melodrama of falling, but also getting back up again.

Focusing on Bombay cinema of the 1930s to the 1950s, Ira Bhaskar considers song—and particularly poetic lyrics—as a melodramatic strategy to articulate women's otherwise unspeakable and socially impossible desires. In these films, women fall in love across caste or class differences, to the disapproval of the village community and family. However, melodramatic song sequences make the couple's forbidden emotions legible, creating "legitimate space for and recognition of the inner feelings of women." While the films' narratives invariably punish the women, having them submit to forces of patriarchy and casteism, the mediated emotionality generated by their songs creates "a powerful affective and emotional surplus." Bhaskar

observes that comparing Indian melodrama's dramatic traditions with those of the West reveals that "while the melodramatic encounter with modernity is common," it takes a distinctive form in mainstream Indian cinema, achieving, despite narrative repression, an "emotional legibility" and "ambivalent justice" through the musical and lyrical structures of its songs.

The volume concludes with Zhang Zhen's personal essay about her experience of caring for her ailing sister in Shanghai, interspersed with watching the recent Wong Kar-wai television melodrama *Blossoms Shanghai*. Zhang reflects, "I ended up, involuntarily and inescapably, living a melodrama of life and death." Watching the TV show "turned out to be part of the unplanned fieldwork for this process of, and reflection on, mourning." Effectively circling back to Pribram's earlier chapter, Zhang's essay shows how melodrama provides a framework for dealing with a "rich, complex body of emotions" and how the structures of feeling and oscillation of emotions generated by both the book and television versions of *Blossoms Shanghai* give her tools for understanding and grieving her younger sister's life. Like so many female protagonists in fiction, Zhang's sister Li encountered hardships throughout her life that were unnamable within her family—marrying young, raising her children alone while her husband traveled for work, getting fired from her job shortly after having her last child, and experiencing isolation and pain at home during COVID lockdowns and then in hospitals and care homes. Zhang uses her sister's memorial service to make this suffering legible and to remember the ways her sister kept getting back up—until she couldn't. In her grief, Zhang asks: "What's the use of feminist scholarship such as melodrama studies, more often than not wrapped in a cocoon [of] shell-like academic lingo, in the face of this kind of life drama?" Her own essay suggests one answer: that attention to melodrama's emotional dynamics helps us pay attention to the ineffable contradictions and struggles of women's lives, sometimes promising future potentiality or better justice, but at other times simply bearing witness and offering the gift of recognition.

Linda Williams's "provocations," contrasting the historical fate of melodrama in France and America through its different historical constructions, critical understandings, and transmedial practices, are driven by her conviction that melodrama does not simply belong to a theatrical past but is crucially important for understanding the interdependency of aesthetics, emotional life, and cultural imagining that drives politics today. Responding to the complexity of her challenge, this anthology moves from part II's

broad historical sweep through melodrama's diverse emergences, crossing national borders and, like Henry James's melodramatic fish, leaping between media (theater, print cultures, cinema, television, and digital innovation); then on through the focused comparative analyses of part III, examining the outcomes of melodrama's differential fates in French and American critical understandings, in their different media practices and political discourses; and concluding in part IV in close-up, homing in on melodrama's personalized mode of embodiment and performativity that dramatizes the desires, defeats, and triumphs of individuals caught in force fields of social, political, and ideological pressures they do not control. That the conduits through which such convergences of social restriction and aesthetic resistance are here focused on female protagonists is both fortuitous in the commissioning of these chapters and revealing of the acculturated, symbolic role of gender as it both oppresses women socially and enables their imaginary role as vehicles of hope for change.

Between broad historical sweeps across geographies and centuries and close focus on aesthetic and discursive analysis of particular works, between national cultures and lived experience, such oscillation captures the capacity of the melodramatic imagination to embed individual lives within the—personalized and so graspable—social forces that shape them. Melodrama thus offers a history of modernity that pivots between the demands for freedom of the—now in 2025—hyperdemanding individual in tension with demands for equality and social justice for all. In a moment of extreme grief and personal loss, Zhang Zhen's questioning the use of melodrama studies is partly answered by her recognition that no individual act could have changed things. Melodrama implicitly recognizes this, its dramas fought out between protagonists channeling contradictory social drives. But as analysis of the Trumpian melodrama now playing out shows, there is no guarantee as to how such social forces align across a moral or socially just spectrum. What can be said, however, is that the melodramatic imagination makes palpably visible the polarization between those emotional, social, and political forces that knot together on one side the human capacity for, and attraction to, the destructively malign, and on the other commitment to the struggle for human liberation, social justice, and peace. Melodrama can activate with overwhelming aesthetic and social force the dystopic imaginary, but we should remember and support its happy ends.