

Public Abstract

First Name:Karen

Middle Name:Elaine

Last Name:Laird

Adviser's First Name:Nancy

Adviser's Last Name:West

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

Graduation Term:FS 2010

Department:English

Degree:PhD

Title: Melodrama's Afterlife: *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *The Woman in White* from the Victorian Stage to the Silent Screen

"Melodrama's Afterlife" investigates the early adaptation history of three of the Victorian era's most popular novels: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1849-50), and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859-60). In the case of each of these texts, adaptation to the stage was immediate and vigorous. All three novelists followed the reviews of their novel's dramatizations; whether they responded in correspondence to a friend, by writing to the playwright, or by composing their own theatrical script, Brontë, Dickens, and Collins expressed a vested interest in their fiction's second life on the Victorian stage. This dissertation asks, "Why haven't we?" I argue that these stage adaptations reveal a vibrant, mutually beneficial relationship between nineteenth-century fiction and drama, enabled by the lingua franca of melodrama. My contention is that the Victorian playwrights reworked the melodramatic elements of the novels to heighten, clarify, and sometimes create radical social critiques. Although dismissed by some critics as remnants of an "illegitimate" form of theatre, these dramatizations performed vital cultural work. These adaptations also functioned as commemorations of the novelists after their deaths, when the playwrights infused the plays' main characters with the most recognizable traits of their celebrity authors.

Unique in building important bridges between fiction and theatre, my dissertation also traces the afterlife of these novels into the silent film era. In cinema's first two decades, writers working in stage and film exchanged sources, scenarios, actors, sets, and approaches, despite their clear rivalry for audience members. By unearthing the adaptation strategies of the Victorian theatre and early twentieth-century cinema, I ultimately challenge the theory predominant among adaptation scholars today, which holds that the experimentation evident in contemporary film adaptations represents a revolutionary break from a century-long concern with fidelity to the written word. I suggest that our new focus on originality and experimentation in film adaptation is not so much a breaking away from an older model of film adaptation, but rather represents a return to Victorian melodramatic approaches.