

MELODRAMA'S AFTERLIFE: *JANE EYRE*, *DAVID COPPERFIELD*, AND
THE WOMAN IN WHITE FROM THE VICTORIAN STAGE TO THE SILENT SCREEN

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ABSTRACT

Unique in building a much-needed bridge between fiction, theatre, and film, “Melodrama’s Afterlife” proves that writers working in all three genres throughout the long Victorian era engaged in a reciprocal relationship bound by their common use of melodrama. Covering dramatic adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *The Woman in White* staged between 1848 and 1878 in London and New York, this dissertation argues that the first playwrights prioritized experimentation over fidelity to their source texts. These three case studies reveal the Victorians to be pioneers in the art of adaptation. Silent film directors depended more heavily upon these Victorian playscripts as sources for their film adaptations than the original novels. By unearthing the adaptation strategies of the Victorian theatre and early twentieth-century cinema, “Melodrama’s Afterlife” ultimately challenges 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. This study proves 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. Instead, it is a return to Modernist adaptation approaches that were rooted in Victorian melodrama.