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The Dangerous Woman of Melvillean Melodrama

Almost in its death throes at the turn of the present century, sensational melodrama threw up a curious mutation at the hands of the prolific playwrights and managers, the brothers Walter and Frederick Melville. In numerous of their plays performed in the decade or so before the First World War, the 'New Woman', whose rights and rebellions were simultaneously the focus of debate in so-called 'problem' plays, took on a new and threatening aspect – as the eponymously 'dangerous' central character of *The Worst Woman in London*, *A Disgrace to Her Sex*, *The Girl Who Wrecked His Home*, and a score or so of similar titles. In the following article Elaine Aston and Ian Clarke explore the nature of these 'strong' female roles, both as acting vehicles and as embodiments of male fears and fantasies, in a theatre which existed in large part to serve such needs and which, through such characters, at once fictionalized and affirmed the fears of 'respectable' society about the moral stature of the actress. The authors both teach in the Department of English and Drama at Loughborough University, where Ian Clarke is Director of Drama, having previously published his own study of *Edwardian Drama* in 1989.

*This article is dedicated to the memory of
Jan Shepherd and her work on the Melvilles.*

HISTORIES AND SURVEYS of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century English drama tend to focus on the 'new' intellectually respectable drama which so frequently eschewed the habits of earlier and contemporary melodrama. Thus the focus is on Shaw, Galsworthy, Granville Barker, St John Hankin, Masefield, and, more recently, on such women dramatists as Baker, Sowerby, Hamilton, and Robins.

This 'new' drama was pioneered by progressive minority, often subscription and repertory theatre ventures – the Independent Theatre Society, the Stage Society, the New Century Theatre, the Court and Savoy seasons, etc. And it is these theatrical institutions which are foregrounded by most histories and surveys. What is effectively edited out is the mass of new contemporary writing presented in the popular commercial theatres.

Allardyce Nicoll makes this point in his survey of English drama from 1900 to 1930 by the inclusion of a double-column list of some fifty dramatists whom he cites as

'generally prolific in their output', and who 'were responsible for producing a very large proportion of the plays written between the start of the century and 1930'.¹ Included in that list are the names of Frederick and Walter Melville.²

Frederick and Walter Melville, impresarios and playwrights, belonged to the third generation of a theatrical family. By the 1850s and 1860s their grandfather, George Melville, had established a reputation as a leading actor in Shakespearean and contemporary roles. By contrast, his son, Andrew Melville, popularly known as 'Mr. Emm', went on to achieve success as a low comedian and playwright of popular pieces. As a theatrical manager he is credited with the management of at least fourteen provincial theatres, and was responsible for the building of the Grand Theatre, Birmingham.³

Frederick and Walter, both born in the 1870s, capitalized on and continued the family tradition of working in popular theatre. Their success can be measured by the advances the brothers themselves made as theatrical managers. After they had purchased the Terriss, Rotherhithe, and the Standard, Shoreditch, at the turn of the

century, for example, both of these were sold in 1907 and the brothers then moved into the West End, taking over the Lyceum in 1909 and building the Prince's, Shaftesbury Avenue, in 1911.

Furthermore, they had extensive touring interests both at home and abroad. Walter in 1905 is accredited with the 'general management of three theatres and the direction of a dozen touring companies in the provinces, and productions overseas in Australia and America'.⁴ Their estates further testify to the financial success of their theatrical ventures: Walter left over £205,000 and Frederick more than £314,000 on their deaths in the 1930s.⁵

The Melvilles and Melodrama

The brothers also achieved huge success in writing and staging their own brand of melodrama, initially in East End venues – notably the Terriss, the Standard, and the Elephant and Castle.⁶ A key moment in their careers came in 1898 when the brothers staged F. A. Scudamore's *Dangerous Women* at the Brixton, Lambeth.⁷ The staging of this piece proved to be the prototype for a series of sensational melodramas written by the Melvilles themselves which placed dangerous women at their centre. The first of these was Walter Melville's *The Worst Woman in London* at the Standard in 1899, in which Frances Vere, the worst woman of the title, provided the centre for a string of crimes and attempted crimes, past and present, notable for their sensations, complexities, and convolutions.

The Melvilles' formula, established in *The Worst Woman in London*, owed much to well-worn nineteenth-century melodramatic traditions of structuring and characterization. Thus the peripatetic fortunes of heroine(s) and hero(es) were interspersed with scenes of buffoonery featuring low-status comic characters who often aided in the thwarting of villainous plots.

However, the Melvilles exploited these conventions to their own ends, so that the chief attraction was the villainess, the dangerous woman, often a social climber seeking power and money, or else an established

Plays by the Melville Brothers

Walter Melville

- Sinbad* (in collaboration with J. W. Jones), Standard, 1897
- The Great World of London* (in collaboration with G. Lander), Standard, 1898
- Dick Whittington*, Standard, 1898
- The Worst Woman in London*, Standard, 1899
- The World of Sin*, Standard, 1900
- That Wretch of a Woman*, Standard, 1901
- When a Woman is Married* (also *The World of Sin*), Standard, 1902
- Her Second Time on Earth*, Standard, 1902
- A Girl's Cross Roads*, Standard, 1903
- The Female Swindler*, Terriss, 1903
- A Disgrace to Her Sex*, Terriss, 1904
- The Girl Who Lost Her Character*, Standard, 1904
- The Wheel of Fortune*, Terriss, 1905
- The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning*, Standard, 1906
- A Soldier's Wedding*, Terriss, 1906
- The Girl Who Wrecked His Home*, Standard, 1907
- The Beggar-Girl's Wedding*, Elephant and Castle, 1908
- The Sins of London*, Lyceum, 1910
- The Shop-Soiled Girl*, Elephant and Castle, 1910
- The Adventures of the Count of Monte Cristo* (in collaboration with F. Melville), Prince's, 1912
- The Female Hun*, Lyceum, 1918

Frederick Melville

- In a Woman's Grip*, Standard, 1901
- Between Two Women*, Terriss, 1902
- Her Forbidden Marriage*, Terriss, Rotherhithe
- The Ugliest Woman on Earth*, Terriss, 1904
- The Beast and the Beauty*, Standard, 1905
- Her Road to Ruin*, Terriss, 1907
- Married to the Wrong Man*, Elephant and Castle, 1908
- The Bad Girl of the Family*, Elephant and Castle, 1909
- The Monk and the Woman*, Lyceum, 1912
- One Way of War*, Brixton, 1914

wealthy siren using her powers to corrupt others, and tempting them to take a wrong turning. She worked in league with male accomplice(s), in a partnership or a trio

frequently fraught with internecine fighting which extended the possibilities of criminal plotting and counterplotting. Whatever the configuration, it was the woman who took the lead and who constituted a fearsome opponent.

The Melvilles' foregrounding of such strong female characters coincided with a more general unfixing of representations of femininity attendant upon the emergence of the New Woman figure in the 1890s. In the wake of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, fashionable society dramas and comedies reflected the ways in which the New Woman figure attracted both progressive thinking and an anti-feminist backlash. So plays such as *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893), *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894), and *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* (1895) shared in a wider equivocation regarding the treatment and representation of independent women. Nevertheless, at one level such plays' titles invited the audience to focus on the rebelliousness or notoriety of the eponymous female character.

The Melvilles took this strategy one step further, with titles which were unequivocal in indexing the characters' depravity: *The Worst Woman in London*, *The Bad Girl of the Family* (1909), *The Shop-Soiled Girl* (1910), *A Disgrace to Her Sex* (1904). Other titles hinted more obviously at narratives which promised the excitement of witnessing iniquity in action – for example, *Her Road to Ruin* (1907), or (a formulation favoured by Walter Melville) *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning* (1906), *The Girl Who Lost Her Character* (1904), and *The Girl Who Wrecked His Home* (1907).

Hence, although the Melvilles' melodrama marked a radical departure from the construction of woman as victim favoured by earlier nineteenth-century drama, it would be misleading to take at face value theatre historian Willson Disher's comment that the Melvilles' melodrama, by courtesy of these 'strong' female characters, was 'brought . . . into line with the age of feminism'.⁸ Their dramas coincide with the years of the first women's liberation movement and the debate around women's suffrage, economic independence, and sexual liberation. But the

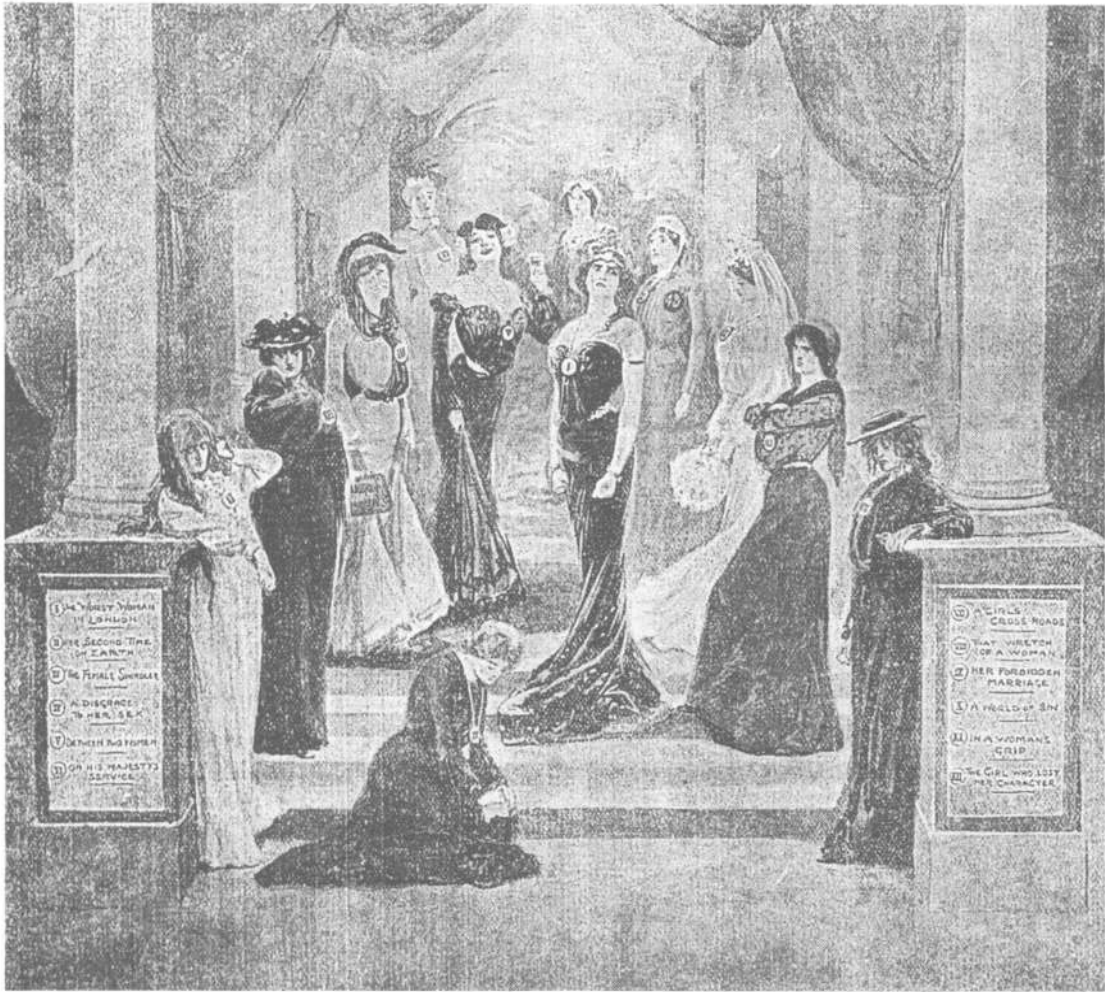
brothers capitalized on the idea of the emancipated woman not in order to further the debate on the woman question, as Jones and Pinero ostensibly did, but to exploit it for sensational and prurient masculinist ends. That said, extending 'our gaze' beyond those "literary" authors' who are now associated with the negotiation of the New Woman figure enables us to see the Melvilles' *oeuvre* not, as Nicoll would have it, 'as having no value', but as engaging with a key debate of the period in a popular cultural context.⁹

Figures to Fascinate the Audience

Publicity for the productions, posters, hand bills, souvenir programmes, and photographs capitalized on the promise of the thrill encoded in the plays' titles. Posters were often designed to foreground the dangerous woman, imaging her in powerful and threatening poses framed in eye-catching colour schemes.¹⁰ Posters were the work of the artist W. E. Morgan, who also designed the act-drop curtain at the Standard, reproduced opposite, featuring many of the Melvilles' dangerous women – with their primogenitor, the Worst Woman in London, dominating centre-stage.

Nor were audiences to be disappointed when they saw these 'arresting female figures' in the flesh, for the Melvilles chose their actresses sometimes for their looks, but 'always' for their 'powerful physique'.¹¹ The actress who played the 'heavy lady', as the villainess role was designated in the scripts, had the demanding task of fascinating, even terrorizing her audience. Miss Olga Audré, who created the role of Francis Vere in *The Worst Woman in London*, excelled in this role:

Miss Olga Audré is admirably suited to the title-role, and gives to Francis Vere a fascination, and an intensity that are enthralling. She looks very charming in some rich and well-made costumes, and one can easily understand how effective the wiles of such an adventuress as Miss Audré represents could be. Her chances are great in the bedroom scene, where the wife murders her husband. Miss Audré's expression of terror when in the madman's clutches is convincing, and quite disturbing to even the most hardened play-goer, who must be affected by the thrilling



W. E. Morgan's act-drop curtain at the Standard, featuring many of the Melvilles' dangerous women – with their primogenitor, the Worst Woman in London, dominating centre-stage.

realism of her embodiment. There are but few actresses who could play the part so well.¹²

The dominant characteristics of the character type – powerful, calculating, remorseless – established at the level of dramatic text were mirrored in a body image which worked against conventional codes of femininity. Disher remarks of the 1903 revival of *The Worst Woman in London* that Audré was 'then a fine upstanding well-built girl in her twenties and her bearing . . . was adult and imperious. You feared for her victims and were glad when they escaped on the stage'.¹³

This point may be reinforced by comparison with the role of the Magdalen figure which had dominated the nineteenth-century stage in 'serious' and popular theatrical

forms. The success, for example, of Sarah Bernhardt's Marguerite Gautier or Mrs. Patrick Campbell's Paula Tanqueray both relied on an image of femininity which encoded fragility, frailty, and powerlessness in the performers' slighthness of physique. The Melvillean construct of the dangerous woman was a transgression of such gender stereotyping, signified at its most extreme by the cross-dressing of the last act of *The Worst Woman in London*, where Francis Vere disguises herself as a man to avoid arrest. (Significantly this coincides with the attempt to put into operation her most fiendish plot.)

The dramatic role of villainess was not always as clear cut. It might, for example, encode dimensions of the saintly sinner role which could necessitate different skills on

the part of the actress. The empowered, imperious body image would need to be tempered by a counteracting note of penitence. For example, in Olga Audré's portrait of Hilda Valley in Walter Melville's *A Disgrace to Her Sex*, the actress employed vocal skills and represented an emotional state recognized as signifying something quite distinct from the role of villainess or adventuress:

Miss Olga Audré has been happily retained for the part of the adventuress. She has won distinction in this class of character and though the impersonation lacked the heinous attributes which are usually associated with it, there was present that cheery optimism that gave zest to every action, while her suave accents sounded so clearly as to allow no word to go unheard. Miss Audré excels in the part of the villainess, but she gave proof that in the portrayal of emotion she is equally skilful – a fact that became amply evident in the confession of her shame to her daughter, a scene which was made very thrilling.¹⁴

The Excitement of the Bad Girl Image

On the other hand, the bad girl image in *The Bad Girl of the Family* worked in a way which combined a commanding appearance with a saucy demeanour and comic innuendo:

The title-role could scarcely have found a more suitable exponent than Miss Violet Englefield. Of commanding physique and prepossessing appearance, Miss Englefield was natural and vivacious throughout, and with strong and expressive voice gave every effect, both dramatic and humorous, to many piquant lines, which were received with enthusiasm.¹⁵

Frederick Melville himself recognized how crucial comic delivery was to the success of this particular sort of role:

In the part of Bess Moore many laughs might not be apparent in the script, but they are caused by the different intonation of twisting the sense. A notable example is . . . 'All the injury you could have done me has been done some time ago.'

Most of the laughs in Bess Moore's part occurred by the bright snappy up-to-date intonations on serious subjects. Instead of the down trodden heroine in the usual case of melodrama the part is snappy and bright replies.¹⁶

The saucy appeal of the bad girl image is further encoded in the text in terms of male responses to this character. Barney Gordon, the comic social climber, specifically draws attention to the body image: 'That's a fine looking woman. I like them round like that'; 'There's that girl again – a damn fine woman too. . . . You're just my style' (*The Bad Girl of the Family*, Act I, Scene ii, and Act II, Scene ii). Barney's production of the actress representing Bess as an object available for spectatorship is emblematic of the way in which the dangerous woman was constructed in the theatrical text.

The ethical structuring of melodramatic plotting requires that bad actions are punished. However, it has been argued that the punishment of 'bad' characters is not necessarily greater than the excitement that is aroused when the spectator is engaged in watching the crimes in action. Zoë Aldrich's essay on Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Lady Audley's Secret* and its stage and film adaptations raises this point *via* citation of John Fiske's work on today's viewer's response to characters in television drama:

Fiske identifies a process of 'implication-extrication' in a female viewer's response to a soap-opera heroine: 'Part of me is inside Linda – it feels rude when she takes off her stockings – it feels lovely when they kiss – but when she gets slapped I'm right back in our sitting room.' While pleasurable identification with transgression is thus withdrawn at the point of punishment, Fiske suggests that such 'extrication' may not be total. The pleasure of implication with the character when she is exerting power may well be stronger than that of extrication when she is being punished. The difference in what Freud calls 'effect', in the intensity of experience, may well be great enough to prevent the ideological effectivity of the punishment.¹⁷

Indeed, the emphasis given to feeding a fascination with the villainess's wickedness surely outweighs her final downfall. Modleski's observations on the villainess of soap opera and other contemporary popular forms are also applicable to the Melvilles' melodrama:

Of course, most formula stories (like the Western) appeal to the spectator/reader's compulsion to



The image of the 'bad girl', encapsulated in the photograph of Violet Englefield on the front cover of the *Souvenir* celebrating the one hundredth performance of *The Bad Girl of the Family* at the Aldwych on 11 March 1910. Her face, which dominates the photograph, faces the camera, but her eyes are turned upwards and away in a knowing, possibly suggestive, wink to an unseen observer.

repeat: the spectator constantly returns to the same story in order to identify with the main character and achieve, temporarily, the illusion of mastery denied him or her in real life. But soap operas refuse the spectator even this temporary illusion of mastery. The villainess's painstaking attempts to turn her powerlessness to her own advantage are always thwarted just when victory seems most assured, and she must begin her machinations all over again.¹⁸

The structure of repeated setback to the villainess's plots results in one of melodrama's emotional patterns whereby the tension arising from imminent threat is released at the very last moment when the danger is averted. Moreover, whilst at one level the villainess is continually thwarted, what the setbacks encourage is greater opportunity for the representation of multiple wrongdoings.

The dominance of this patterning in the plot structure and the emphasis it places on the spectacle of wickedness therefore outweighs the dangerous woman's fleeting moments of anguish and remorse. Similarly, the retribution meted out to the villainess at the end of the plays frequently appears perfunctory by comparison with the excitement she has earlier provoked, so that, in terms of Fiske's implication/extrication model, extrication may only be partial.¹⁹

The plotting structure of a continuous serial such as soap opera is different in that it may allow for seemingly infinite repetition of the pattern of villainous danger, its frustration, and yet more villainy whereby, as Modleski notes, 'if the villainess never succeeds, if . . . she is doomed to eternal repetition, then she obviously never permanently fails either'.²⁰ The ultimate retributive punishment of the villainess of stage melodrama means that she does in one sense permanently fail, but her reappearance as the hallmark of the next Melvillean melodrama is analogous to the next episode of the continuous serial.

Dangerous Woman as Femme Fatale

The danger of the worst woman and her 'sisters' (fallen woman, bad girl, adventuress, penitent) lay not just in their criminal

actions but more specifically in the threat that these characters posed to masculinity. Francis Vere, who epitomizes the type, is, for example, variously described in terms which unequivocally and conventionally signal her evil: 'spider', 'wanton', 'degraded sinner', 'fiend', 'some demon in womanly form'. Her fatal attraction is voiced by diametrically opposed character types of villain (Vincent) and hero (Jack):

VINCENT: Trust me – (*Looking at her with fearful admiration.*) God – Francis – you're a scorcher – yes – The Worst Woman in London.
(Act I, Scene ii)

JACK: You – who has broken men's hearts, ruined their lives – yes – even forced them to madness and suicide with your diabolical crimes.
(Act I, Scene ii)

The dangerous woman as *femme fatale* was a dominant motif of Melvillean melodrama: Carmen de Severaux in *Between Two Women* (1902) is 'a woman who drinks to the full from a man's life and who afterwards throws him on one side like an empty vessel', and Rose Courtney in *The Ugliest Woman on Earth* (1904) has the power to 'break men's hearts and then laugh at the power she has'.

The role of the diabolical madame figure allowed a particular form of power over men. Val Raymond in *The Girl Who Wrecked His Home*, for example, earns a living in London by attracting wealthy young suitors and then blackmailing them to the point of suicide. Vesta le Clere in *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning* earns her living by fatally attracting young men and schooling other young women in the art of seduction practised at the expense (both sexual and financial) of the male. In both cases the women gain economic power sufficient to 'keep' not only themselves but also their male partners-in-crime.

The use of sexual power for financial gain takes a different form in *The Worst Woman in London*. Francis Vere ensnares the patriarch Lord Milford by marrying him to gain access to social and economic power. The power over patriarchy is, however, overturned when Milford recognizes her true

character and consequently alters a will he has just made in her favour. A displaced Francis is then forced to shoot Milford and hunt down his daughter, the rightful inheritor, in order to regain economic power.

Not only was the dangerous woman thus herself encoded as a 'locus' of sexual power, but this was further signified by a wide range of systems of staging, not least of which was the setting. The abode of Carmen de Severaux in *Between Two Women* is thus described as

the lap of luxury and vice, a palace which is supported by the debauched and depraved. Since the days of Cremorne nothing more brilliant and wicked has been allowed to grow and exist in our midst. The authorities either refuse to interfere or know nothing of its existence and this Carmen is queen of all its Sirens, it would be unwise even dangerous to venture there on such an errand.

(Act III)

The Pleasures of Implication

Lavish scenery such as that used for Carmen's rooms was a hallmark of every production and played a significant visual role in the contagion of excitement. *The Era* of 1 November 1902 was unstinting in its praise of all the 'lavishly mounted' and 'elaborate' sets of *Between Two Women*, while the next day's *News of the World* was more specific in pinpointing the function of the 'striking scenery' in the play's ability to 'touch the feelings, to excite the senses'.

While these reviews both euphemistically express a sense of arousal in the spectator, a materialist semiotic analysis may serve to indicate *how* exactly the dangerous woman was constructed as erotic fetishized object of a voyeuristic spectacle in the performance context.²¹ In support of this claim we shall examine specific scenes from Frederick Melville's *The Bad Girl of the Family* and Walter Melville's *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning*.

The Bad Girl of the Family offers a shop girl motif which, superficially, is not unlike that of Cicely Hamilton's *Diana of Dobson's* (1908). Hamilton's play combined comedy with a serious critique of the working conditions of the shop girl. By the time that *The Bad Girl of*

the Family had been staged in October 1909, *Diana of Dobson's* had had a successful run (February 1908) and a revival (January 1909). The shop girl and the conditions of the living-in system were topics of contemporary debate. Actress-manager Lena Ashwell, who staged *Diana of Dobson's*, remarked in a programme note:

I think the revival may have some special point of interest for you, as the theme of the play is so intimately connected with a subject which is at present attracting a large amount of attention. I refer, of course, to the discussion which has been going on in the press on the 'living-in' system.²²

The shop girl and the living-in system continued to provide subject matter for serious dramatic treatment, as evidenced in Granville Barker's *The Madras House* (1910), Elizabeth Baker's one-act play *Miss Tassey* (1910), and Galsworthy's *The Fugitive* (1913). Where, however, the Melvilles differed from these treatments lay in the way in which the figure of the shop girl is exploited for its comic and saucy potential rather than offered as a critique of a current social and economic question. Thus Bess's account in *The Bad Girl of the Family* of her downfall is merely a perfunctory critique of women's economic powerlessness and male sexual predation:

What inducement is there for girls who earn their own living to be good? I am a shop girl, the first day I went there the Manager took a fancy to me, smiled at me. I took no notice, then he began to make complaints against me. The food was so bad and insufficient that I was glad to get a meal outside, but I couldn't afford to go on paying for that. Then I was hungry – *hunger* was the start of my downfall, those outings continued until I gave way to his entreaties. (Act III, Scene iii)

Neither the tableau of penitence which follows this speech, nor the play's pictorial encoding of its closing words ('God and sinners reconciled') – i.e. moments of possible extrication – are as potent as the pleasure of implication with the bad girl character.

Despite the similarities between *Diana of Dobson's* and *The Bad Girl of the Family*, Ashwell's rejection of Hamilton's original title, *The Adventuress*, signals her unease at

invoking the titillating associations of this melodramatic stage type. This is precisely and specifically what is foregrounded and exploited in the Melvillean drama. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a comparison of parallel scenes in the two plays set in women's dormitories. The dreariness of the dormitory in *The Bad Girl of the Family* may seem somewhat distant from the erotic encodings of luxury in Carmen de Severaux's rooms, but the dormitory setting allowed for other sorts of female objectification.

The scene in Hamilton's play was perceived to have the potential for improper sensationalism in its depiction of female undressing, but dramatic text and stagecraft worked to counter the possibility of offering the partially clad female body as objectified spectacle. Sheila Stowell, for example, cites H. M. Walbrook's review for the *Pall Mall Gazette*:

If any flippant reader imagines that by booking a seat at the Kingsway Theatre he will get a view of something rather scandalous and improper – well, all we shall say is, let him book his seat! He will deserve his disappointment.²³

She continues her account of the reception of *Diana of Dobson's* thus:

This process of de-eroticization is also encouraged by the absence of any male viewers on stage. Women, at least within the context of the play's initial scene, cease to be objects of a dramatized male gaze. In fact, men are completely excluded from the action of the first act, allowing Hamilton to establish a female perspective safe from male interruption. The argument thus introduced is an indication of how far Hamilton has taken the stage undressings used by her male contemporaries for mere titillation.²⁴

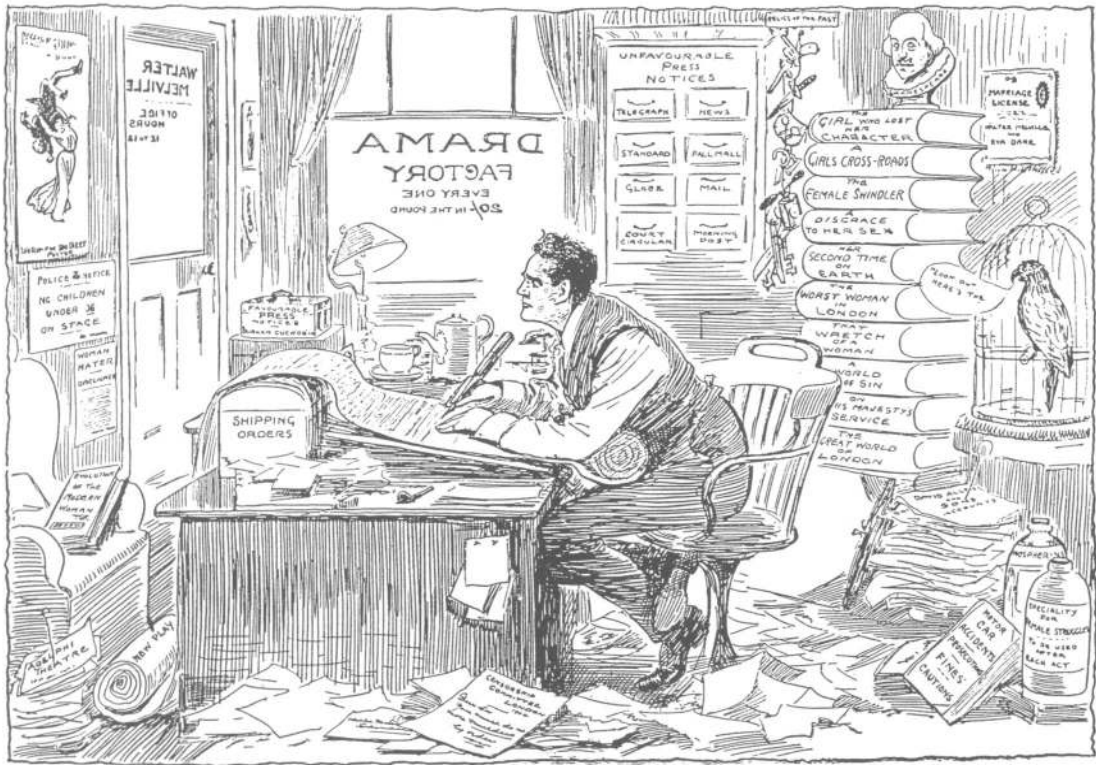
The scene in *The Bad Girl of the Family*, on the other hand, exploits the opportunities for voyeurism. This is apparent in the lighting of the scene. In *Diana of Dobson's* the scene is initially poorly lit and the turning up of a gas jet merely emphasizes the drabness of the setting. The lighting plot for *The Bad Girl of the Family* indicates that the lights are three-quarters up: and perch limes exploited this lighting state by focusing specifically on the saucy shop girls Sally and Bess.²⁵

The use of the limes to direct attention within the stage space onto Sally and Bess in this scene constitutes a process of foregrounding the female as sight.²⁶ And this is compounded by the discovery at the keyhole of the comic male character, Snuzzle, disguised as a shop girl. The disguise eventually gains him access to the women's dormitory. His presence in the stage picture resists any possibility of establishing a 'female perspective', and the comic aspects of the male fantasy of being locked in a room with scantily clad women are used to emphasize conventional constructs of femininity. Snuzzle's parodic representation of the feminine, exhibited, for instance, in his fainting, results in Sally physically mothering him. But the comic sexual overtones alter the dynamic of the way in which the male not only looks but touches and is touched. His disguised presence literally constructs the women on stage as the unwitting victims of a peeping Tom.²⁷

The Male Decoding of the Erotic

While this is a specific instance of female objectification played through comedy, the centrality and the complexity of the relationship between spectator and female performer as emblemized by the male onlooker within the stage picture is further revealed in *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning*. The metatheatrical dimensions of this melodrama can at one level be 'innocently' read/seen as a self-referential dramatization of contemporary performance conventions and theatregoing habits. But, dependent upon the pornographic literateness of the spectator, this melodrama may image a whole range of erotic possibilities associated with the theatre.

Tracy Davis, in her study *Actresses as Working Women*, details, for example, the way in which the erotic in a theatrical context might be decoded by the male spectator with access to illicit pornography from which 'respectable' women by virtue of their sex were excluded. Davis establishes her argument by citing the way in which 'the inclusion of actresses and incidents within



Walter Melville's prolific output is affectionately satirized in this cartoon of his 'drama factory', captioned 'A Busy Playwright - Mr. Walter Melville at Work'.

and around theatres in so much pornography throughout the Victorian period demonstrates the theatre's enduring erotic fascination'.²⁸ She argues that 'the erotic ambience of the West End and the pre-eminence of actresses in pornography' could have a 'potential effect on men within theatre auditoria' – i.e. those 'male spectators who were literate in pornographic codes'.²⁹ In *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning* a potential decoding of eroticism is indexed in three specific scenes: the visual construction of 'the fall'; the stage presence of the male onlooker as referent for male spectator; and the setting of one scene outside the Alhambra, Leicester Square.

The nineteenth-century opposition of the whore and the madonna is presented in the opening scene of *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning* as Vesta le Clere, the villainess, discovers Sophie Coventry, the girl about to take the wrong turning. Vesta sees in Sophie a mirror image of her former self: 'What would I not give to possess her

features, and yet I was once as she, *an innocent maiden*' (Act I, Scene i). Sophie, unable to decode the moral signification of Vesta's finery, perceives only the encoding of an economic status which promises a life free from drudgery: 'What a fine lady, and what a beautiful dress. To gaze on such a picture makes me envy her, and despise the poverty that surrounds me' (Act I, Scene i).

Her desire to become a mirror image of Vesta is realized in Act I, Scene iii, in which the 'fall' is enacted. On stage and in front of the audience Vesta undresses Sophie and reconstructs her in the image of a 'lady' by dressing her in an expensive dress and bodice, and by rearranging her hair. She goes on to teach Sophie to mimic her posture and walk. The stage direction – which reads, the '*skirt is this time removed, discovering dark underskirt, so as not to make the business laughable*' (Act I, Scene iii) – may have been included more for the censor's benefit than the performer's.³⁰ The Lord Chamberlain's Office needed reassurance on

aspects of decorum, but of course it had little control over how the instruction might be interpreted in a performance context.

Vesta's transformation of Sophie into a 'lady' is at one level central to the melodrama's narrative structure, so that Sophie may take on a dangerous woman function. At another it may be decoded by the knowledgeable male spectator as an erotic performance in which striptease is followed by a display of the vestimentary and postural/gestural encoding of sexual availability. The picture is in sexual terms highly charged. The actress, who in cameo creates the sight of a sexually available woman for heteropatriarchal consumption, also re-activates those signs which, by courtesy of the popular prejudice surrounding her profession, signify her own objectification and availability as a woman on display.

The Index of Illicit Male Pleasures

The way in which Sophie's transformation takes place on stage rather than off, as was generally the case in other 'fallen woman' dramas, is continued in the second act in a series of visions. In the first, she appears as an accomplice in a card-sharping operation where the champagne flows freely; in the second, it is established that the male victim has not been completely fleeced and that Sophie will have to employ her arts of seduction to relieve him of what money he still retains; in the third, we witness an imaging of a physical seduction in which she bargains with her body to get the money.

This unequivocal index of gambling, drinking, and prostitution provides a depiction of a range of illicit male pleasures. The juxtaposition of these visions with images of Sophie's former life (including the presence of Willie Mason, her loyal lover) may provide a conventional moral frame by which her actions may be read, but may also again provide the opportunity for a peep into the dangerous but exciting sexual subculture of Edwardian England.

The juxtaposition of Willie and Sophie, where the visual elements are kept separate, takes on a further modulation in the third

act. In a moonlit street scene outside the house where Sophie plies her trade, Willie waits, as he habitually does, for a sight of Sophie:

I have watched that house for hours, just to catch a glimpse of my Sophie. She cannot see me in the shadow. How often have I watched her enter there, dressed in all her gaiety and her jewels. (*Light appears in window R. C. and SOPHIE is seen drinking. WILLIE watches from Railings. SOPHIE drinks one glass of champagne, and is about to raise the second to her lips, WILLIE stretches out his hand with the cross in it. SOPHIE lowers glass slowly and buries her face in her hands, then bursts into laughter. Light goes out.*)
(Act III, Scene iii)

The moment is capable of contradictory readings. Willie as the forlorn but faithful lover is visually emphasized by the stage business with the cross that he had previously given Sophie as a love token. Simultaneously, however, he is constructed within the stage picture as a further encoding of the voyeuristic gaze. Willie's concealed presence on a darkened stage space staring through the window to the illuminated female presence mirrors the theatre spectator who from the darkened auditorium gazes on the actress within the lit picture of the proscenium arch stage.

Theatreland as Male Preserve

While the previous example demonstrates the way in which spectatorship is implicitly referenced, *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning* also makes explicit use of contemporary theatregoing conventions as part of its narrative and *mise-en-scène*. Poppy Fitzgerald constitutes the familiar figure of servant turned music-hall star. Although this figure is a stock-in-trade feature of nineteenth-century and later drama, in *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning* Poppy's working life in the halls is used almost exclusively to provide an excuse for exhibiting London's West End on stage. Act III, Scene iv is thus set in '*Leicester Square with Alhambra in background. Evening.*' As a metonymic representation of London's West End at night, it was encoded with a further aspect of the Edwardian sexual subculture to

which middle-class men had access. Davis comments as follows:

For the most part, the West End's theatres and music halls welcomed women and men alike, with the pricing level favouring the middle classes. Nevertheless, middle-class women's access to the full erotic life of theatres and streets in the West End was restricted by codes of propriety. . . . Young women were expected to attend in the company of male or older female escorts, apparently because without anyone to navigate a way from the sites and situations incompatible with innocence harm would inevitably occur. . . . Thus middle-class men had access to the whole of theatres' public areas and full mobility as pedestrians in streets surrounding theatres whereas women did not.³¹

When Lucy Fenton, the heroine who has fallen on hard times, enters this terrain as a flower seller, for example, she appears to be ignorant of the neighbourhood's sexual and criminal activity. A policeman, after telling her to move on, recognizes her innocence and begins to explain:

Didn't mean to say anything hard miss, but we have a rough lot to deal with, and my duty is my duty. But I don't see any harm in a girl like you trying to sell a few flowers in the street, there's many carrying on a worse game round here, and we can't stop it, well dressed fine ladies, plenty to eat and drink, and if we runs one in, we only gets into trouble. (Act III, Scene iv)

The reason for Sophie's presence in this setting is that she has agreed to an assignation with her latest young male victim. That this assignation was arranged to take place inside the theatre is a further instance of the way in which certain West End auditoria, of which the Alhambra was one, were used by middle-class men for clandestine assignations. As John Stokes remarks, the two music halls in Leicester Square, the Alhambra and the Empire, 'offered "two shows a night" variety bills, lavish dance spectacles and – less widely advertised – attractive venues for prostitutes'.³² The indexing of the theatre auditorium in *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning* as the site of illicit sexual activity self-referentially foregrounds the subcultural pleasures of the

mainstream cultural activity in which the theatregoer is actually engaged.

By placing the dangerous woman centre stage, the Melvilles had hit upon a melodrama formula which was popular and commercially successful. She appealed largely, though by no means exclusively,³³ to the heteropatriarchal spectator. Once the possible erotic encodings and decodings of the dramatic and theatrical texts are understood, then it is possible to see how this appeal centred on the ways in which the dangerous woman of Melvillean melodrama was constructed as an erotically charged object of the 'male gaze', a turn-of-the-century sight/site of *'Fatal Attraction'*.

Notes and References

The authors would like to acknowledge Professor David Mayer's encouragement of their work on the Melvilles, and his careful and constructive criticism of an early draft of this essay.

1. Allardyce Nicoll, *English Drama 1900-1930: the Beginnings of the Modern Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 180.
2. Walter Melville's prolific output is affectionately satirized in the cartoon of his 'drama factory' on page 39.
3. Brief accounts of the Melville family may be found in *Stageland*, 1 (September 1905), p. 1-2, and *Bournemouth Graphic*, 16 February 1905, p. 108.
4. *Bournemouth Graphic*, 16 February 1905, p. 108.
5. See Harry N. Greetorex, *Melville's Derby Legacy* (Derby: Breedon Books, 1985), p. 50.
6. In addition to the playtexts deposited in the Lord Chamberlain's collection, there are collections of Melville material in the Theatre Museum and the Templeman Library, University of Kent at Canterbury.
7. Scudamore's name is also included in Nicoll's list of popular authors.
8. M. Willson Disher, *Melodrama: Plots That Thrilled* (London: Rockliff, 1954), p. 166.
9. Nicoll, op. cit., p. 180, 181.
10. Disher recalls, for example, that 'Hoardings advertised that the Melvilles' dramas would be daring. They brought colour to our cheeks as well as to our streets. There was never anything improper about them, but they alarmed those who disapproved of "the sensational". The titles were alarming in themselves even without the more than life-size figures that illustrated them. There were never such posters before or since. Usually an accusing finger created a centre of interest in a colour-scheme of yellow and red surrounding one or two arresting female figures' (p. 165). Examples of Melville publicity material are housed in the collection at the Templeman Library.
11. Disher, op. cit., p. 168.
12. *The Era*, 28 October 1899, p. 11. Olga Audré went on to create other heavy lady roles in the Melvilles' melodramas, including Vesta le Clere in *The Girl Who*

Took the Wrong Turning, which was acknowledged as being yet another of 'her triumphs in this special line of business' (*The Era*, 6 October 1906, p. 15). Her depiction on stage of the dangerous woman figure was central to the creation of the theatrical text of the Melvillean melodrama.

13. Disher, op. cit., p. 171.
14. *The Era*, 28 May 1904, p. 13.
15. *The Era*, 9 October 1909, p. 17. The image is encapsulated in the photograph of Violet Englefield on the front cover of the *Souvenir* celebrating the one hundredth performance of *The Bad Girl of the Family* at the Aldwych on 11 March 1910: her face, which dominates the photograph, faces the camera, but her eyes are turned upwards and away in a knowing, possibly suggestive, wink to an unseen observer (see page 35).
16. Undated typewritten note from Frederick Melville attached to one of the typescripts of *The Bad Girl of the Family*, housed in the Theatre Museum's Melville collection, Box 35.
17. Zoë Aldrich, 'The Adventuress: *Lady Audley's Secret* as Novel, Play, and Film', in *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, ed. Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 159-74.
18. Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 97.
19. A contemporary account of the audience response to *The Worst Woman in London* in *Stageland*, 1 (September 1905), p. 6, supports this contention: 'The audience express their disapproval of her methods with a deafening chorus of groans and hisses, but they admire her superb taste in dress, her resource, and daring career'. Similarly, Shaw remarked of the audience's response to the glamorous spectacle and the conventional punishment of the stage courtesan: 'Naturally, the poorer girls in the gallery will believe in the beauty, in the exquisite dresses, and the luxurious living, and will see that there is no real necessity for the consumption, the suicide, or the ejection'. See Shaw, Preface to *Mrs Warren's Profession*, in *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with their Prefaces, Vol. 1, Plays Unpleasant and Plays Pleasant* (London: Bodley Head, 1970), p. 237).
20. Modleski, op. cit., p. 98.
21. For further discussion of this point in the theatrical context, see Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 118.
22. Quoted in Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner, eds., *New Woman Plays* (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 30.

23. Sheila Stowell, 'Drama as a Trade: Cicely Hamilton's *Diana of Dobson's*' in *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, op. cit., p. 177-88.

24. Stowell, op. cit., p. 183.
25. Various lighting and property plots are included in a typescript of *The Bad Girl of the Family*, Melville collection, Theatre Museum, Box 35.
26. Sue-Ellen Case makes the general point: 'When the *ingénue* makes her entrance, the audience sees her as the male protagonist sees her. The blocking of her entrance, her costume and the lighting are designed to reveal that she is the object of his desire' (p. 119).
27. The police raid at the end of the scene represents yet another male intrusion into what in *Diana of Dobson's* is a discrete female space. This process is reiterated in the hundredth performance souvenir. Of the thirteen photographs representing scenes from the play, no less than five are taken from either the dormitory or bedroom scenes and show female characters partially undressed or in nightclothes.
28. Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 138.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
30. In 1854 a play which indexed female criminality in its title, *Rotherhithe in the Olden Time; or, the Female Housebreaker*, was initially refused a licence for a number of reasons, one of which was the divestment of female clothing to reveal underclothing beneath. The following stage direction was underscored in red ink by the censor: 'Pulls off her gown and discovers her in a short petticoat.' Later, in 1901, the censor also objected to the comedy *Corelie & Co. Ltd*, insisting that 'it must be clearly understood that "Ethel" does not take off her dress. The "business" is to be strictly kept to "measuring for" and not "trying on".' See John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824-1901* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 69-70, 149.
31. Davis, op. cit., p. 142.
32. John Stokes, *In the Nineties* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 54-5.
33. A combination of current feminist approaches to women in soap opera, which concentrate on the positioning of the female spectator, and research into the historical and theatrical context of the Melvilles' melodrama, might illuminate what a female response to the plays may have been. It might suggest, for example, what the possible pleasures of identification for the shop girl in the gallery might have been in their spectatorship of Bess in *The Bad Girl of the Family*.