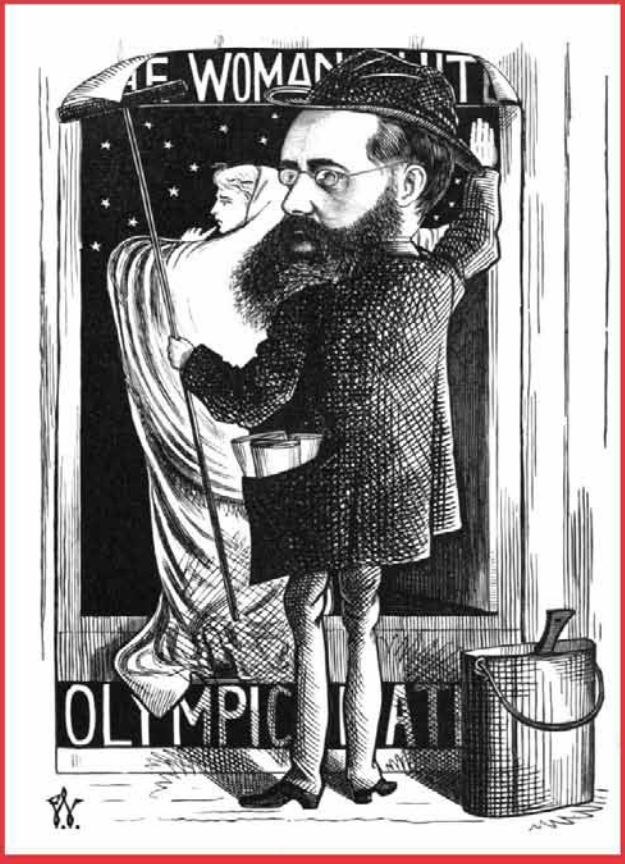
KAREN E. LAIRD

THE ART OF ADAPTING VICTORIAN LITERATURE, 1848–1920

Dramatizing Jane Eyre, *David Copperfield*, and *The Woman in White*



ROUTLEDGE

THE ART OF ADAPTING VICTORIAN LITERATURE, 1848–1920

For Alex

The Art of Adapting Victorian Literature, 1848–1920

Dramatizing *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *The Woman in White*

KAREN E. LAIRD

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2015 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:

Laird, Karen E.
The art of adapting Victorian literature, 1848–1920: dramatizing *Jane Eyre, David Copperfield,* and *The Woman in White* / by Karen E. Laird.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4724-2439-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Film adaptations—History and criticism. 2. English literature—Film adaptations. 3. Stage adaptations—History and criticism. 4. Silent films—History and criticism. 5. English literature—19th century—History and criticism. 6. English literature—Adaptations—History and criticism. I. Title.
PN1997.85.L26 2015
791.43'6—dc23

2014049238

ISBN: 9781472424396 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781315612614 (ebk)

Contents

This page has been left blank intentionally

List of Figures

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the staff at the following archives and libraries: The British Film Institute, The British Library, Chawton House Library, the Brontë Parsonage Museum, MoMA, the University of Missouri Libraries, the University of Manchester Library, and the John Rylands Library. Ned Thanhouser at Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc., and Don Lee at the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, provided helpful references. Special thanks to David Pierce, founder and director of the Media History Digital Library, for his assistance locating and reproducing silent film images.

I would like to thank the publishers of *Dickens Studies Annual*, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, and *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* for their permission to reproduce material from my previously published articles here in revised form. I am grateful to my superb editors at Ashgate, Ann Donahue and Seth F. Hibbert, for all of their hard work seeing this book through to publication. I would also like to thank my anonymous readers for their insightful critiques.

My initial research for this project was supported by the University of Missouri's Dissertation Fellowship, the Donald E. and Frances Hayden English Fellowship Award, the Judith A. and Richard B. Schwartz Travel Award, and a Research Fellowship from the University of Manchester. I am particularly grateful to the Midwest Victorian Studies Association for awarding me the 2010 Walter L. Arnstein Prize for Dissertation Research in Victorian Studies, and to Professor Arnstein for his inspiring vote of confidence.

Many generous friends and colleagues have read drafts of chapters, including Liz Langemak, Juliette Paul, Sarah Barber, Angela Rehbein, Alexandra Socarides, Anne Myers, and Margaret Beetham. I am especially grateful to Rachele Lawton and Mark McCollough for providing valuable feedback on my chapter on silent adaptations of Dickens. Elizabeth Chang's stimulating ideas on the Victorian novel formatively shaped my understanding of these texts. I thank Devoney Looser for wisely steering me towards valuable research inquiries and professional opportunities. Noah Heringman has been an inspiring guide to the field, leading me on literary excursions to Haworth's moors and geological tours of the Derbyshire caves. Ted Koditschek has provided incredibly generous feedback on my work for many years, and I am truly honored to have been his colleague. One of my very best memories from my years at Missouri was stopping by Ted's office on a Friday afternoon to discuss my draft for an article on *The Woman in White*. Our meeting ended only when I realized that the sunlight streaming through his office window had all but faded, and the department halls were silent. I crossed the portal of his office door again and spilled out into the deserted campus, elated to have spent hours in Victorian England.

Nancy West has been a cherished friend and mentor, and I am very grateful to her for helping me to achieve my professional goals (often with the help of her life-changing lists). Her careful reading of my work and Skype calls during the last months of revision were worth more to me than gold. I offer my heartfelt thanks to my lovely Victorian writing partner, Elizabeth Ludlow, for her solidarity and for her sustained encouragement. *Un milione di grazie* to Serena Baiesi, who kindly served as a translator for Italian film research queries and hosted me in her beautiful city of Bologna. I am also very grateful to Hugh Gunz and Elizabeth Badley for their steadfast support as the Toronto fan base for this project. Extraordinary thanks are due to my Emmy-nominated cousin, Neil Laird, who provided invaluable silent film research assistance from New York City.

This book is dedicated to my devoted parents, Joseph and Katherine Laird. Like many of the writers discussed in this book, my mother and father have worked tirelessly behind the scenes without credit or fanfare. I cannot repay them for all the times that they helped me to move my countless boxes of books —and four solid oak bookshelves— across the country, from university town to university town. I thank my mother for introducing me to ballet, musical theatre, and the movies at a young age, for being my trusted stylist and personal shopper, and for encouraging me to pursue graduate studies. I thank my father for teaching me the value of hard work, for instilling in me a love of books and of history, and for modelling a lifelong commitment to education. I am grateful to both my parents for supporting me wholeheartedly along a career path that was never straightforward, and for giving me their blessing when that path led to another country.

Finally, many of the ideas in this book first began in conversations with Alex Gunz and were refined during walks together in the Peak District. Alex was my cheerful companion through hundreds of screenings of Victorian film adaptations, my research assistant when I lacked library privileges, my wise counselor throughout our transition to the UK, and a careful editor in the final months of revision. This book truly would not have been possible without his love, support, and faith in my capabilities.

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in footnotes:

BFI	British Film Institute, Rueben Library, London.
MoMA	Edison Manufacturing Co. Scripts Collections, MoMA, New York, NY.
MPW	*The Moving Picture World*
MPN	*The Moving Picture News*
NYDM	*New York Dramatic Mirror*
TFEH	Q. David Bowers, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History.* Portland, OR: Thanhouser Film Preservation, 1995. CD-ROM.
V&A	Victoria and Albert Museum, Theatre Archive, London.

This page has been left blank intentionally

Introduction

The Royal Surrey Theatre had a small problem with its autumn 1838 production of *Oliver Twist: A Serio-Comic Burletta*: Charles Dickens had not yet finished writing the serialized novel upon which it was based. Not one to be deterred by such lightweight matters, Surrey staff writer George Almar supplied an ending of his own. There is no record of how Almar felt when, incredibly, Dickens himself showed up to watch one of these performances; Dickens's reaction, however, was preserved for posterity. He was so disturbed by the bastardization of his work-in-progress that, by John Forster's account, "in the middle of the first scene he laid himself down upon the floor in a corner of the box and never rose from it until the drop-scene fell."[1] Although it appears that Dickens averted his gaze from this rendition of his yet-to-be-written ending, he no doubt heard the final lines and may have even penned his conclusion—which was not published until April 1839—in response.

This unforgettable image—the celebrity novelist deflecting his gaze from the hack writer's staged botchery—echoes throughout much of the scholarship on Victorian stage adaptation. As Graham Law and Andrew Maunder explain, such popular dramatizations have long been considered to be "a form of physical assault or burglary … symptomatic of a widespread degeneration of theatrical taste which pandered to the lowest common denominator."[2] Literary critics and theatre historians alike have caricatured Victorian adapters as pirates and plunderers, bemoaned their audiences' lowbrow taste, and dismissed their plays as woefully unoriginal copies of inviolable works of art. Yet this general scorn for Victorian theatrical adaptations stands in dramatic contrast to the careful critical reception bestowed upon film adaptations of the very same literary texts, many of which utilize adaptation strategies that were first popularized by Victorian playwrights.

Aiming to correct this outdated narrative, this book reexamines the Victorian popular theatre's dynamic culture of literary adaptation and its important legacy in silent cinema. To do so it spotlights Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849–50), and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60), which all enjoyed immediate afterlives on the Victorian stage, both in England and America. All three authors, Brontë, Dickens, and Collins, expressed great interest in their fiction's cultural dissemination at the playhouse, as evidenced by correspondence to their friends, their public statements, and sometimes, in their own definitive performance version. It was an era in which unauthorized adaptations posed a particular threat to a novelist's sense of ownership

---

[1] John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. Bertram Waldrom Matz (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1911), 76.

[2] Graham Law and Andrew Maunder, *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 119.

of his or her original work, especially when the adaptation presumed to end a serialized work-in-progress. In some instances, anxiety over theatrical adaptation shaped the novelists' composition and authorial choices. Yet the novelists were also aware that dramatizations performed the valuable work of increasing book sales, expanding their body of readers, cultivating authorial fame, and exporting their work to foreign shores. Though the personal relationships between individual adapters and novelists were fraught with rivalry, the process of adaptation forged a mutually beneficial relationship between the popular page and the popular stage.

The central argument of this book is that Victorian playwrights established a language, theory, and practice of adaptation that was foundational to the development of narrative cinema. It begins in 1848, in London, with Currer Bell's new novel *Jane Eyre* debuting on stage in the form of a melodrama centered on Edward Rochester's servants—a treatment more akin to the television drama *Upstairs, Downstairs* than a Victorian bildungsroman. It ends in 1920, with a thoroughly Americanized film adaptation of *The Woman in White* that recast Wilkie Collins's sensation novel to a factory in "Steeltown," Pennsylvania. This roughly 70-year period witnessed a professionalization of the art of literary adaptation, and this book restores attention to the writers who inspired this transformation.

Alternating between chapters on stage and cinematic literary adaptation, this interdisciplinary work offers a cultural history of adaptation in the long nineteenth century. This alternating structure enables the reader to see how the practitioners of adaptation increasingly came to value change, originality, and invention above fidelity to the source text. Crosscutting between the mid-Victorian theatre (1848–71) and the mid-silent film era (1908–19) enables me to trace how a particular type of melodramatic storytelling developed across the two media. Christine Geraghty likens adaptation to "layering and transparencies" in that "features from two or three genres layer over one another in an attempt to tell the story," a process in which "the respectable adaptation is haunted by its disreputable counterpart."[3] In my study, adaptations from two or three mediums layer over one another, with the stage adaptation being most often deplored as the novel's or film's disreputable ghost.

While the dates of my chronology were initially determined by my case studies, I soon discovered that they formed two organic periods in media history when literary adaptation reached a cultural tipping point. As the melodramatic Victorian stage evolved into a theatre of sensation, popular fiction was transposed into drama at breakneck speed. Similarly, when technological advances enabled filmmakers to make feature-length films, studios raced to be the first to produce a multi-reel adaptation of a given Victorian classic. The constant demand for new scripts lead to the available literary source material being endlessly worked and reworked, all subject to the constant winnowing force of audience selection and the discipline of the theatre owners' tills. To remain commercially viable in a

[3] Christine Geraghty, *Now A Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 11.

hyper-competative market, adapters had to find novel ways to keep the attention of successive generations of new viewers—a task that required them to constantly evolve their methods of storytelling. This process hearkens to Linda Hutcheon's casting of stories as memes: "Some have great fitness through survival (persistence in a culture) or reproduction (number of adaptations). Adaptation, like evolution, is a transgenerational phenomenon."[4] It is the contention of the present work that the playhouses and picture houses of the long nineteenth century formed a natural laboratory, housing the steady workings of a transgenerational process. To illustrate this development, *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *The Woman in White* are taken as specimens. The reader can trace their evolution through successive generations of textual reproduction, as if seen through time lapse photography.

The Lives and Times of the Victorian Adapters

This book was initially inspired by my general curiosity about the motivations of the adapters. What drew a Victorian playwright to specialize in the rather dubious theatrical branch of literary adaptation, with its poor pay, minimal chance at fame, and strong likelihood of irritating the established writers working in the more respectable business of fiction? While excellent histories of the profession of playwriting exist,[5] I could find none that seriously considered those playwrights who specialized in literary adaptation.

Increasingly, I came to see that the Victorian adapter was plagued by both his liminal social position and his economic vulnerability within the theatre profession. As a case in point, consider the adapter William Thomas Moncrieff, who is best remembered today as the real life inspiration for "the literary gentleman" in *Nicholas Nickleby*.[6] Moncrieff adapted two of Dickens's early works for the stage, thereby instigating a public feud that would today merit a high ranking on the sidebar of the *Daily Mail*'s online edition. These two reworkings, *Sam Weller, or the Pickwickians* (1837) and *Nicholas Nickleby and Poor Smike or, The victim of the Yorkshire School* (1839), especially infuriated Dickens because they presented conclusions to his unfinished plots. Moncrieff responded to the insults hurled at him by Dickens (and his influential friends) by defending his identity as a professional writer: "I confess I write for my living, and it is no discredit to Mr. Dickens to say that those who know him best are aware he is as much indebted to

---

[4] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 32.

[5] See especially John Russell Stephens, *The Profession of the Playwright: British Theatre, 1800–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992); and Katherine Newey, *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

[6] See Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2009), 134.

his pen for the dinner of the day, as I can possibly be."[7] As Philip Cox explains, Moncrieff's retort makes a case that "they should treat one another with mutual respect; indeed, they should treat one another as 'gentlemen.'"[8] But the upwardly striving Dickens fiercely denied any affinity between himself and his adapter. As Cox argues, Moncrieff "is a disturbing mirror image representing what Dickens could be: a moderately successful hack writer who is constantly at the mercy of exploitative stage managers and the fickle tastes of audiences within the theatre."[9] Always inwardly fearful that he would slip back into poverty, Dickens ensured that his public image would be firmly in the realm of *legitimate* popular literature. In contrast, Moncrieff's prolific career in melodrama resulted only in personal tragedy. Despite having written close to two hundred largely successful plays, "he died blind, unrecognized, and a pauper."[10]

Moncrieff is perhaps an extreme case, unfortunate as he was to incite the ire of the fiercely ambitious young Dickens. But the trajectory of his "successful" playwriting career—critical scorn, escalating poverty, then obscurity—is an all too recurrent pattern in the lives of the Victorian adapters. More often than not, the Victorian adapters' formidable contributions to popular drama have been overlooked as a consequence of literary elitism. Although they are all but forgotten today, John Courtney, Andrew Halliday, and J.M. Ware penned inventive, artistic, and timely stage adaptations that caught the metropolitan imagination. In an era before BAFTA and Olivier awards, these Victorian playwrights worked as virtual ghostwriters for theatre managers who relied upon them to meet the public's insatiable demand for page-to-stage dramatizations. This book focuses on recovering the significant contributions of these writers to the Victorian theatre, crediting them with establishing the practical conventions, templates, and aesthetic standards for dramatic adaptation that are still employed today. It also, as a matter of background, dips into the working conditions and lives of the Victorian adapters.

In writing this book, I imagined these long-suffering Victorian adapters leading a contemporary writing workshop, bestowing the wisdom of their experience upon a new generation of script doctors and teleplay writers. I envisioned the witty Irish-American theatre manager John Brougham (featured in Chapters 1 and 3) sitting across from contemporary screenplay writer Andrew Davies on a plush red sofa at the BBC studios. The Victorian dramatist would likely share many principles of storytelling with his modern counterpart, even as they would differ in the particular language of their own generation's new media. With its gripping installments of Dickensian crime drama, Davies's televisual adaptation of *Bleak*

---

[7] Moncrieff, "To the Public." Qtd. Philip Cox, *Reading Adaptations: Novels and Verse Narratives on the Stage, 1790–1840* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2000), 138.

[8] Cox, *Reading Adaptations*, 139.

[9] Ibid., 139.

[10] Paul Schlicke, ed., *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 378.

House has been widely praised for recreating the pleasures of Victorian serialized fiction for a mass audience.[11] The less sung Brougham made Dickens's and Brontë's newly published fiction relevant to a regional, predominantly working-class audience in New York. Despite these obvious differences, Brougham and Davies both flourished as creators of bespoke Victorian dramatizations written for a segment of demanding, discerning *viewers* who were not necessarily *readers*.

Copyright and Its Discontents

While today's television writers and the Victorian dramatists both adapt fiction with a popular audience in mind, there is at least one crucial difference in their relationship with the authors whose work they adapted: the Victorian playwrights broke no copyright laws (and paid no remuneration) when dramatizing a novelist's work without their permission, and neither did the public show any scruples about attending the many "pirated" plays that were staged from London to New York.

The history of dramatic copyright is beyond the scope of this book, but a brief summary of important Victorian legislation is needed to help set the stage for the chapters ahead. Throughout the nineteenth century, writers advocated for reform to Britain's obscure and contradictory copyright laws. In 1833, Edward Bulwer-Lytton promoted the Dramatic Literary Property Act, which granted "the author of 'any tragedy, comedy, play, opera, farce, or other dramatic entertainment' the sole right to perform it or authorize its performance, but only for a limited period of time."[12] Although it constituted an advancement for dramatists' legal rights, this act did not protect novelists from undesired dramatic adaptations of their works.[13] An amended Copyright Act of 1842 caused confusion when it equalized the rights of an author first publishing an original printed work with those of a stage manager first producing a new play. It dictated that "the first representation or performance of any dramatic piece or musical composition shall be deemed equivalent, in the construction of this Act, to the first publication of any book."[14] Joseph Donohue explains why this arcane wording came to incite understandable panic in novelists:

> The Literary Copyright Act reconciles the law as it relates to dramatic, literary and musical property, combining within a single statute the two distinct rights of multiplying copies (copyright) and representation (performing right); dramatization of a non-dramatic work is not covered, however, and consequently

---

[11] For a discussion of Davies's *Bleak House*, see Nancy West and Karen E. Laird, "Prequels, Sequels, and Pop Stars: *Masterpiece* and the New Culture of Classic Adaptation," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 39.4 (2011): 306–26.

[12] Joseph Donohue, ed., *The Cambridge History of British Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 2:lxiii.

[13] Stephens, *Profession of the Playwright*, 97.

[14] Rpt. in Catherine Seville, *Literary Copyright Reform in Early Victorian England: The Framing of the 1842 Copyright Act* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 270.

> the author of a work of fiction needs to dramatize it himself or herself and secure separate copyright in that text.[15]

This caused the peculiar Victorian phenomenon of a "copyright performance," a hastily sketched dramatization performed with the novelist's friends as witnesses to legally establish performance rights. Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins read their 1860 Christmas story aloud and even published a dramatic version, *A Message from the Sea: A Drama in Three Acts*, so that they could register their ownership at Stationers' Hall.[16] Such legal precautions more often than not proved ineffectual in practice.[17] Dickens wrote an angry letter to the *Times* when *A Message from the Sea* was performed without his authorization at the Britannia Theatre on January 7, 1861, but there is no evidence that he or Collins were compensated for this copyright violation. Whether Dickens knew that John Brougham staged and published his own version of *A Message from the Sea* in New York is another matter, verging into the even more troubled, and entirely unregulated, waters of international copyright law.

Charles Reade furthered the British novelists' cause in 1861, when he successfully sued the manager of the Grecian Theatre for adapting his novel *It's Never Too Late to Mend* (1853). Reade won the case, with the verdict hinging upon the fact that he had previously adapted his novel into a play entitled *Gold* (1853) for Drury Lane. As Kerry Powell explains:

> Reade was awarded £160 in damages, not because his novel had been adapted for the stage without permission, but because his dramatic version of the novel gave him theatrical rights to his own work of fiction. In the tangled web of dramatic copyright this ruling meant that novelists could protect their work from unscrupulous playwrights only by dramatizing it themselves.[18]

Subsequent cases further reinforced this ruling, but it wasn't until 1888 that a new decision effectively outlawed unauthorized stage adaptation of fiction in Great Britain. In this pivotal case, Frances Hodgson Burnett's publishers won a suit against E.V. Seebohm for dramatizing her children's book *Little Lord Fauntleroy* at the Prince of Wales Theatre. The finely parsed verdict found for Burnett not because her popular novel was staged in public without her permission, but rather because portions of her written text were reproduced without her permission in the playscript. Importantly, this verdict was given legal teeth because, as a contemporary critic explained, "as the Lord Chamberlain cannot or will not license a play unless a copy of it is in his possession, and as no play can be performed

---

15 Donohue, ed., *The Cambridge History of British Theatre* 2:lxviii.

16 Andrew Gasson, *Wilkie Collins: An Illustrated Guide* (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 104.

17 Law and Maunder, *Wilkie Collins*, 120.

18 Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 98.

without his license," he could effectively block unlicensed work from being staged, forcing the adapter to cancel the performance—and so a new precedent was set.[19]

All of the stage adaptations discussed in this book take place prior to this 1888 verdict, and so occur in the era before copyright laws were particularly enforced. While acknowledging that such laws were indeed created and amended over the period under discussion, I sideline any further discussion of them to emphasize, instead, the reality of adaptation in practice.

The Victorian Novel Meets the Silver Screen

During the course of the Dickens centenary year in 2012, a serendipitous discovery of the oldest surviving Dickens film made international headlines. Bryony Dixon, a lead curator at the British Film Institute, made the connection that director George Albert Smith's 1901 film *The Death of Poor Joe* was actually a micro-adaptation of a page out of *Bleak House*. Only one minute in length, this film depicts the crossing sweep (who was known to readers simply as "Jo") dying in the arms of a night watchman. "The film was very likely to have been based on a stage original," as Luke McKernan explains, "or possibly a magic lantern slide set."[20] It is an important example not only of turn-of-the-century film adaptations' theatrical style, but also of its abbreviated form. Many early adaptations were, in essence, a highlight reel dramatizing a climactic scene featuring a highly recognizable character from a work of literature famous enough that the audience could imaginatively fill in the missing context. The titles of the films alerted the reader-turned-viewer to the dramatic subject matter. For example, the first film adaptations of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* were entitled *The Death of Nancy Sykes* (1897) and *Mr Bumble's Courtship* (1898), while *The Pickwick Papers* debuted as *Mr. Pickwick's Christmas at Wardle's* (1901) and *Gabriel Grub, the Surly Sexton* (1904).[21] Tom Gunning defines this early "peak-moment approach" to literary adaptation as "a strongly intertextual practice, which has little interest in the integrity of the text." In Gunning's formulation, this is "a cinema of reference rather than adaptation, the goal being to recall a famous work or even a specific performance, rather than give a treatment of its narrative or dramatic content."[22] The goal of the "cinema of reference" was thus somewhat humble: to remind the viewer of the pleasures of reading or of watching a play based on a beloved novel.

---

[19] Dramatist, *Playwriting: A Handbook for Would-Be Dramatic Authors* (London, The Stage Office, 1888), 98.

[20] Luke McKernan, "The Death of Poor Joe," *The Bioscope* (blog), March 9, 2012, http://thebioscope.net/2012/03/09/the-death-of-poor-joe/?relatedposts_exclude=11946.

[21] Luke McKernan, "Charles Dickens, filmmaker," *The Bioscope* (blog), January 11, 2012, http://thebioscope.net/2012/01/11/charles-dickens-filmmaker/.

[22] Tom Gunning, "The Intertextuality of Early Cinema: A Prologue to Fantômas" in *A Companion to Literature and Film*, eds. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 129.

It wasn't until around 1910 that cinema began developing the traits which film historians identify as classical cinema: a system characterized by a unified narrative, linear progression, story causality, omniscient narration, and a sustained interest in character psychology.[23] Gunning makes a convincing case that it was not until this new style emerged, sometime around 1907, that "a cinema of narrative integration arose in which the idea of adaptation from literary sources became a possibility."[24] Filmmakers working through this transitional time found invaluable inspiration in the Victorian novel, whose linear structure, realist setting, and psychologically driven mode meshed with the cinema's new prioritization of narrative clarity. Additionally, classic works of literature were a safer choice for literary adaptation than current fiction because "their copyright lineage was often less clear" and thus less likely to be prosecuted under the baffling new laws.[25] In some of the cases discussed in this book, filmmakers invested in adapting the works of one particular novelist rather than expressing a vested interest in Victorian literature as a whole. Cecil Hepworth and Thomas Bentley, for example, were drawn together as film collaborators through their personal interest in Dickens's fiction. Edwin Thanhouser, on the other hand, imported a diverse array of Victorian novels to America via his independent studio's adaptations, and became one of the country's most successful purveyors of English literature in the process. The 1910s witnessed a Victorian adaptation boom, as the abundance of film versions of *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *The Woman in White* from this decade attest.

As filmmakers recognized the potential wealth of Victorian source material, they studied the lessons available from the various experts who had explored this territory before them: the writers who had translated lengthy novels into playscripts, the theatre managers who had astutely gauged the public's tastes in selecting material for adaptation, and the actors who had spent years playing Victorian roles on stage. The motion pictures industry unapologetically turned back to the theatre for inspiration and know-how in producing adaptations. For the first two decades of the twentieth century, in fact, adapters working in both mediums often exchanged sources, scenarios, actors, and sets, despite their evident rivalries for audiences and profit. In this very practical way, twentieth-century models of film adaptation derived very clearly from the theatre. It was from their theatrical predecessors that silent film directors, producers, scenarists, and photoplay writers gained their willingness to experiment as they revised Victorian fiction for a new purpose.

These pioneering filmmakers shared with the Victorian adapters an understanding that to rewrite any work, one first needs to have a deep understanding

---

[23] See chapter 14 in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, ed. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), 157.

[24] Tom Gunning, "The Intertextuality of Early Cinema," 128.

[25] David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 4th ed. (New York and London: Norton, 2004), 33.

of it. As these chapters will argue, stage and film adapters continually altered three major strands of the Victorian novel—gender, class, and nation—to create new meanings and interpretations out of familiar texts. In doing so, these adaptations often purposefully undermined the politics of the original novel to provide "a sense of immediate contemporaneity, or appeal to the domestic, emotional and imaginative life of their audience."[26] By harnessing the power of melodrama, stage and film adapters propelled the Victorian novel into uncharted new territory.

The Lives and Times of the Scenario Writers

Although it is not the main focus of this work, let us once again fill out our understanding by pausing briefly to examine the conditions in which the original film adapters worked. The story of the silent film adapters followed a more pleasant and lucrative trajectory than that of their earlier stage compatriots. Whereas Victorian theatre critics had snubbed literary adaptation for its lowbrow associations, the burgeoning film industry recognized adaptation's popular appeal as a valuable asset to help gentrify the new technology. Film studios began producing literary adaptations as part of a larger campaign to shed the cinema's working-class origins. As Simon Popple and Joe Kember observe, "the classic literary text provided the film industry with a sense of intellectual and highbrow credibility." [27] Then as now, literary adaptations appealed to a middle-class viewer's desire for self-improvement. One critic writing for the *Times* in 1913 recognized that film adaptations would appeal to busy people seeking a time-efficient encounter with "famous novels," reasoning that "moving pictures are simpler, quicker, more direct than the best printed prose can ever hope to be."[28] In 1912, another critic predicted that film adaptations would soon "become an invaluable aid to the English teacher": "Students will thus clear their mind of hazy impressions of the great literary works; the lessons will be impressed upon them with mathematical precision."[29] In this writer's calculation, film adaptations have the power to teach students literature with machine-like efficiency.

As the film adaptation industry professionalized throughout the 1910s, studios recognized the importance of hiring staff writers who had practical experience "adapting all sorts of material into film scripts."[30] The scenarist (or screenplay writer) translated the antiquated prose of the Victorian novel into the modern

---

[26] Michael R. Booth, *Theatre and the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 151.

[27] Simon Popple and Joe Kember, *Early Cinema: From Factory Gate to Dream Factory* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2004), 40.

[28] Colin Harding and Simon Popple, *In the Kingdom of the Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema* (London: Cygnus Arts, 1996), 118.

[29] Stanley W. Todd, "Photoplays and Literature," *Motion Picture Story Magazine* 3 (February/July 1912): 122.

[30] Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 173.

shorthand required of film scripts. "The word scenario," Kevin Brownlow explains, "did not mean shooting script. It was the sequence of scenes, the story told in visual terms, originally devised to explain as clearly as possible what its author had in mind."[31] Unlike the majority of Victorian stage adapters, successful scenario writers—many of whom were women—had the potential to earn high salaries and negotiate lucrative contracts between rival studios. Gene Gauntier, who adapted no less daunting a work than the New Testament in *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), earned "thirty-five dollars per reel per scenario" in 1912.[32] Even as a novice in the Kalem Scenario Department, Gauntier was paid double the rate of the director—"an indication," as Tom Stempel argues, "of the relative value the company placed on writers and directors."[33]

In addition to better pay, silent film adapters eventually received more credit for their work than did their Victorian predecessors. While it is certainly true that the first motion pictures were widely considered to be collaborative works, by 1912 American copyright law was amended to recognize the authorship rights of filmmakers. The American Copyright Law of 1912 dictated that motion picture "features and shorts were at last perceived to be the products of authors, rather than stories that just happened to be made up by the actors on the screen."[34] Writing for the motion pictures became a highly sought after job in the 1910s, with literary adaptation emerging as a particularly desirable specialty. *Technique of the Photoplay*, an influential guidebook first published in 1913, warned aspiring writers not to try to dazzle potential employers with their literary credentials: "Each studio employs one or more men whose knowledge of classic and current literature is at least as extensive as your own. Do not try to sell your literary knowledge to them either as adaptation or original work."[35] Such warnings illustrate that film adaptation had become big business, one that increasingly required connections and a lucky break in addition to talent and training as prerequisites for professional entry.

---

[31] Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 270–71.

[32] Tom Stempel, *FrameWork: A History of Screenwriting in the American Film* (New York: Continuum, 1988), 9. In 1907, Kalem commissioned Gauntier to adapt Len Wallace's popular novel *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880). When Wallace's publishers won twenty-five thousand dollars in their lawsuit against the studio, adapters everywhere took note of increasingly stringent copyright laws.

[33] Ibid., 8.

[34] Lizzie Francke, *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood* (London: BFI, 1994), 5.

[35] Epes Winthrop Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay* (New York: The Moving Picture World, 1913), 124.

The Need for an Interdisciplinary Approach

I have presented portions of this book at international conferences in the fields of Victorian literature, silent film history, and theatre history. These experiences provided a sometimes bruising education in the perils of interdisciplinary research in adaptation studies. At Victorian literature conferences (my home turf, so to speak), experts on Brontë, Dickens, and Collins politely suggested that the brazen adapters of such revered novelists might not deserve serious scholarly consideration. At theatre history conferences, panelists proved much more interested in the performance history of the plays themselves rather than in the playscripts that I found so fascinating. At silent film conferences, it was difficult to convince film historians that scenario writers deserved to share the stage with avant-garde directors. In the process I may unwittingly have provided empirical validation to Thomas Leitch's contention that "Adaptation study is a marginal enterprise."[36] These intradisiplinary prejudices clearly run deep, but perhaps are worth examining as they might aid each of the disciplines to understand the insights and perspectives that the others can bring to adaptation studies.

To begin, let us consider film history. Cinema has been repeatedly charged with glossing over its theatrical heritage. Rick Altman raised this issue in his important essay, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today" (1989), in which he observes that "[b]y and large, critics have ignored the influence of theatrical adaptations." Altman diagnoses this failure as a collective act of "repression of popular theatre" which "has the effect of denying Hollywood cinema its fundamental connection to popular traditions and to their characteristic forms of spectacle and narrative."[37] Cinema had good unconscious reasons to eschew its kinship with stage adaptations, as it desired the status and respect bestowed upon high art. In *Theatre to Cinema* (1997), Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs observed how late twentieth-century scholars continued to perpetuate this critical oversight: "Theatre is probably less considered, whether as a positive or as a negative influence on cinema, by film historians today than at any other time."[38] Yet this book demonstrates how intrinsically the cinema was connected to the theatre. Kamilla Elliott takes the point even further when arguing that the very concept of a "cinematic novel" is a fallacy: "The evidence to my mind is overwhelming: it is theater rather than the novel that has been the dominant aesthetic influence on film and the art form with which film shares the most affinities" (125). Elliot's confident assertion begs the question: Why have so few scholars of film adaptation attended to this vital lineage?

---

[36] Thomas Leitch, "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory," *Criticism* 45.2 (Spring 2003): 167.

[37] Rick Altman, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88.2 (Spring 1989): 321–59. Rpt. in *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, ed. Jane Gaines (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1992), 11, 25–26.

[38] Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 5.

If film history is guilty of overlooking the cinema's roots in theatre, theatre history may be charged with ignoring the study of adaptation—which was copioneered by literature and film scholars—and often rejecting it as a valid theoretical framework. This resistance has a long institutional history, with adaptation having been relegated to the lowest form of theatre for many decades. Popular histories of the nineteenth-century stage especially relished mocking the Victorian stage adapter. Alec Clunes's remarks illustrate the often exceedingly dismissive tone that was adopted by many mid-twentieth-century commentators:

> The mid-century dramatist was perforce a hack-writer, snatching his stories from Dickens, from Scott, from the French, from all over the Continent, bundling them into manuscript all anyhow, and quickly on to the next, in case hack-writer No. 2 should steal it before he did. He was a slave to conformity, attempting only what had succeeded before—and, above all, a slave to the lowest tastes in the audience.[39]

In this view, the hack writer is completely impotent despite all of his brazen thefts, enslaved by the déclassé audience whose perverse desires dictate his ignoble reason for writing. Academic accounts of theatre history could be equally scathing, albeit using more reserved tones to convey disdain. The editors of *The Revels History of Drama in English* (1976–83) do not discuss literary adaptation until volume 6 of their copious series, where they defend this oversight:

> Adaptations from novels have not been considered hitherto in this outline of nineteenth-century drama, except in cases of two works by Pierce Egan where particular circumstances made it appropriate. The serial productions of Dickens and Bulwer were coarsely adapted for the stage, in some instances even before the original had been completed in monthly parts. Where melodramatic incident was strong it exaggerated; eccentric characters, where they existed, were made occasions for shows of professional skill, especially in matters of dress and make-up.[40]

In this light, Victorian stage adaptations are deemed an inappropriate subject for serious academic scrutiny due to their intrinsic coarseness and vulgarity. The lowly adapters do not show proper deference to the Author, especially in their self-serving attempts to achieve timeliness. Adapters are also charged with amplifying the melodramatic content in the novel, as if to do so is taking the laziest possible course. Finally, the Victorian novelist's characters are degraded by gaudy costumes and cosmetics and made vehicles for showboat actors rather than tributes to the author. More recently, John Russell Stephens echoed these long-established sentiments when he emphasized adapters' ruthlessness: "Novels had copyright protection neither from those hack dramatists who, recognizing their complete

---

[39] Alec Clunes. *The British Theatre* (London: Cassell, 1964), 137.

[40] Clifford Leech, T.W. Craik, J. Leeds Barroll, Michael R. Booth, eds., *The Revels History of Drama in English* (London: Methuen, 1976), 6:240.