

MELODRAMA:
Race, Gender, Sexuality, 1850-Present



Audrey Hepburn in The Children's Hour (1961)

What exactly do we mean when we call something “melodramatic”? In colloquial speech, melodramatic is a derisive term, used to dismiss certain artworks and categories of persons—such as women, gay men and people of color—on the basis of their excessive feeling. Yet, though the term has the power to marginalize, this course will examine the centrality of melodrama to modern definitions of race, gender, and sexuality by analyzing how the narrative and visual devices of melodrama encode the historical transformations of these identity categories.

The course will center on three key tropes in melodrama: the pathologization of transgressive desire, sexual violence, and interracial violence. We will begin with the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind* in order to establish a foundational vocabulary for describing melodrama’s formal characteristics and then move backward to analyze the codification of the aforementioned tropes on the nineteenth-century stage. We will then examine how postwar Hollywood film uses these tropes in order to translate the dehumanization and restriction experienced by women, queers and African-Americans into feelings of melancholy and resignation which critics argue defer political critique. Our course concludes with the relationship between melodrama and identity politics by studying how post-1968 work responding to sexual assault, LGBT civil rights and AIDS appropriates melodramatic conventions in order to declare an explicitly political project. Readings include the dramas *Camille*, *Tosca*, *The Octoroon*, *Angels in America* and *An Octoroon*; the films *Black Narcissus*, *The Children's Hour*, *Outrage*, *Imitation of Life*, *Milk*, and Yoko Ono’s *Rape*; the course ends with the television serials *Mad Men* and *Orange is the New Black*. Students will also be introduced to key feminist, queer and critical race scholarship on affect theory and the relation between identity politics and representation.

Though a few of our texts were originally written in French, a reading knowledge of French is not required. The original French scripts as well as English translations will be made available on Courseworks, and you are encouraged to consult the original if you can read French.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, students will:

- *Practice research skills in primary sources by finding nineteenth century theatrical ephemera and use primary sources to enrich our understanding and interpretation of plays
- *Practice collaboration in primary source research and by listening and responding to class discussions
- *Recognize narrative and visual conventions of melodrama and identify technical components of narrative film
- *Identify and analyze continuities and changes in representations of race, gender, and sexuality from 1850 to the present
- *Compare and evaluate different feminist, queer, and critical race approaches to affect and representation
- *Synthesize understanding of formal aspects of melodrama and understanding of theoretical work on affect and representation in analyses of films and plays

REQUIREMENTS

PARTICIPATION (25%). This class is run seminar-style, so your consistent and thoughtful participation is vital to the success of the course. **As you complete the required reading and viewing for each week, please take careful notes.** When a film is required for that week, this means pausing the film to take notes on your thoughts and re-watching striking scenes according to your own interests. *Expect that watching a film will take more time than the running time of the film.*

To help you prepare for class each week, you will be required to **write short responses (250-400 words), posted to Courseworks for weeks 2-14. These will be due 24 hours before class (so, 12PM on Sunday).** You are allowed to claim exemption **twice** in the semester: the week you are completing the dramaturgy assignment (see below), and another week of your own choosing. Responses are informal, but they should be analytical and focused: discuss a short scene or a series of film shots rather than trying to cover the play or film in its entirety.

Dramaturgy assignment: For each of the nineteenth-century plays, we will spend some class time informally blocking and performing a brief scene and brainstorming what kind of costuming and *mise en scène* we would use in staging the scene. This exercise will help us master an understanding of melodrama's visual and dramaturgical conventions. We will do the same for the plays in unit 3 (*An Octoroon* and *Angels in America*) in order to consider how avant-garde and post-modernist drama engages melodramatic conventions.

For ONE week (among weeks 3, 4, 5, 11, 13), you will volunteer to do some outside research on a production of the play we're reading for the week; for nineteenth-century plays, you should research a nineteenth-century production, and for the contemporary plays, you should research the original production. You and your classmates also "on" for that week will decide who will research a particular aspect of the production: costumes, set design, the style and interpretation and the actors, and blocking. You will create a brief *dossier* and informally report on your findings as we collectively stage a scene. *In week two, I will give you some tips for researching nineteenth century ephemera on the web, through Columbia's Library Services, and—if you're ambitious—through NYPL's Library of the Performing Arts.*

SCENE ANALYSIS (15%). Due February 29. Write a short analysis (3-4 pp) of a short segment of a scene from one of the plays we've read. Papers should demonstrate mastery in identifying the narrative and dramaturgical conventions of melodrama, where relevant. You are welcome—but not required—to expand one of your weekly responses into a polished paper.

LENS ESSAY (25%). Due April 4. Choose a short passage from one of our theoretical readings from the unit “Feeling Historical.” Use a key term or question from that passage to mobilize an analysis of a short scene from one of the films from unit 2 (4-5pp). Your analysis should incorporate some technical film vocabulary, where relevant. You are welcome—but not required—to expand one of your weekly responses into a polished paper.

FINAL PROJECT (35%). Due May 6. Two options:

- (1) Write a research paper (8-10pp) in which you craft an analysis of a single piece of any performance medium—theatre, performance art, film, television—of your choice, subject to my approval. You can write about something not on the syllabus provided that it dates from the nineteenth century or later. The work does not need to be conventionally considered a melodrama, but your essay should make a compelling case why understanding the work as using melodramatic devices illuminates our understanding of it. You should situate your analysis in scholarly debates with which you are in conversation; it is likely that you will be using scholarship to generate EITHER a *theoretical* analysis or a *historical* analysis.
- (2) Write a short melodrama—or a narrative work which refers to melodrama in some way—which examines a question or topic of contemporary interest. Then, in a 3-4 page reflection essay, explain the choices you made in creating this product and reflect on how it demonstrates what you’ve learned about melodrama in this course
 - a. You can choose to simply *write* a melodrama, or *stage/film* an original melodrama. If you write a melodrama, aim for 8-10 pages (single spaced, but with 6 pt space after a line break). If you choose to stage or film a melodrama, your script can be shorter (2-3 pages), or a brief scene, unless you’re feeling really ambitious. If you imagine your script as best suited to be staged, you are not expected to actually stage it. Instead, imagine what the costuming, set, and blocking would look like. Acceptable documentation would include sketches and photographs for costuming/set (anything goes--fashion editorials, Etsy, online retailers, etc.); blocking should conform to the style of a stage manager’s blocking notes (see your instructor, a former stage manager, for further details if necessary). If you film your script, you should still think about costuming, set, and blocking, but you do not need to provide additional documentation beyond the film and the script.

Detailed instructions for each assignment and a rubric will be circulated in advance of the due date. A project proposal is required for the research essay and will be due April 25th.

CLASS POLICIES AND RESOURCES

Classroom protocols

The members of this class are bisexual, lesbian, gay, straight, asexual, and queer; transgender, genderqueer, male-bodied and masculine identified, female-bodied and feminine identified, and intersex; monogamous and polyamorous. We are racially and ethnically diverse; we have differing class backgrounds. We will be of different religious, political, and cultural affiliations. Some of us may find the issues discussed in this class sensitive, personal, or troubling, as well as challenging and provocative.* **As a genre, melodrama relies heavily on the plot devices of rape, racist violence, and suicide. Please be conscious that all of us enter the classroom with personal histories which will have consequences for how we individually respond to class readings**

and materials. By enrolling in the class, you agree to discuss the material in a mature manner respectful of both the material and your classmates.

On the first day of class, we will be collaborating on a *seminar contract* in which we will craft a set of mutually agreed upon guidelines for how we will conduct discussion. These guidelines will offer practical ways of honoring the spirit of the class protocols listed above. By participating in the creation of this contract, you agree to be held accountable for following the guidelines. On the first day of class, we will also discuss whether we would like to work from an updated syllabus which includes indicators of sexual violence, racist violence, and suicide for relevant plays and films. *If you are having difficulty with the material or class discussions to the point of being unable to complete the assignments, please let me know.*

Melodrama thrives upon soliciting strong emotional reactions from readers and viewers. Thus, you are welcome—but by not required—to use your first impressions or other anecdotal or personal comments as a point of departure for analyzing how these performances construct our understanding of race, gender, and sexuality. However, disclosure for the sake of disclosure is not encouraged; impressions and first-person “I” statements should mobilize a critical discussion.

*adapted from Thomas King, Brandeis University

COURSE CALENDAR

DEFINING THE GENRE

January 25: Introduction: What is melodrama?

*Drafting of seminar contract

*Mini-lecture: what is melodrama? Excerpt from Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976); clips from *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

February 1: Foundations: *Gone with the Wind*

Primary

Gone with the Wind (1939), dir. Victor Fleming. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004. (3 hours, 58 min)

Secondary

Linda Williams, “The American Melodramatic Mode,” from *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. (pp 10-45)

February 8: Pathologies of desire: fallen women

Primary

Alexander Dumas fils, *Camille* (1853). Trans. Edith Reynolds and Nigel Playfair. From *Camille and Other Plays*. Ed. Stephen S. Stanton. New York: Hill and Wang, 1999. (57 pp)

Secondary

Judith Walkowitz, “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” from *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. (pp 81-121, focusing on pp. 85-102)

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February 15: Resisting sexual violence

Primary

Victorien Sardou, *Tosca* (1887). Trans. W. Laird Kleine-Ahlbradt. From *La Tosca (The Drama Behind the Opera)*. Edwin Mellen Press: 1990. (100 pp)
Act II of Puccini's *Tosca*, Covent Garden, February 9, 1964; dir. Franco Zeffirelli, with Maria Callas and Tito Gobbi (44 min) : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rT-86OtwzDI>

Secondary

Carole S. Vance, "Innocence and Experience: Melodramatic Narratives of Sex Trafficking and Their Consequences for Law and Policy," *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 2:1 (Fall 2012): 200-218

February 22: Miscegenation: interracial sexual violence

Primary

Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon*, in *The Selected Plays of Dion Boucicault*, ed. Andrew Parkin (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1987) (53 pp)

Secondary

Daphne Brooks, "Our Bodies/Our Selves: Racial Phantasmagoria and Cultural Struggle," from *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. (pp 14-66)

FEELING HISTORICAL: POSTWAR TRANSFORMATIONS

February 29: Pathologies of desire: women on the verge

Primary

Black Narcissus (1947), dirs. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Criterion Collection, 2001. (1 hr, 47 min)

Secondary

Lauren Berlant, "Introduction: Intimacy, Publicity, and Femininity," from *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. (pp 1-31)

SCENE ANALYSIS DUE IN CLASS

March 7: Pathologies of desire: unhappy queers in celluloid closets

Primary

The Children's Hour (1961), dir. William Wyler. Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2002. (1 hr, 37 min)

Secondary

Heather Love, "Introduction," from *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007. (pp 1-30)
Sara Ahmed, "Unhappy Queers," from *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. (pp 88-121)

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March 21: Screening rape

Primary

Outrage (1950), dir. Ida Lupino (1 hr, 15 minutes):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCRemHI0usY>

Secondary

Review Berlant

March 28: Postwar miscegenation and categories in crisis

Primary

Imitation of Life (1959), dir. Douglas Sirk. Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Video, 2002. (2 hrs, 5 min)

Secondary

Anne Anlin Cheng, "The Melancholy of Race," from *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. (pp 3-30)
Lauren Berlant, "National Brands, National Body: *Imitation of Life*" from *The Female Complaint*. (pp 107-145; pages to focus on TBA)

IDENTITY POLITICS: USES OF MELODRAMA AFTER 1968

April 4: Anti-sexual assault activism

Primary

Rape (1969), dirs. Yoko Ono and John Lennon (1 hr, 15 min)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJiDDe8vcH8>
"10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman" (2014), from Hollaback! (2 min)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A>
"Slut Walks' and Modern Feminism" (2011), interview with co-founder of SlutWalk Heather Jarvis and others (35 minutes): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol-ND8oQREc>

Secondary

Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," from *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. (pp 385-403)
Carine Mardorossian, "Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape," *Signs* 73.2 (Spring 2002) (pp 743-758 required; pp. 758-777 optional but recommended)

LENS ESSAY DUE IN CLASS

April 11: Dramas of black masculinity: 21st-century lynching narratives

Primary

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon* (2014) (100 pp)
Editorials on the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner [TBD]

Secondary

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Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* vol. 43 (July 1991) (pp. 1241-1299; focus on the section "representational intersectionality," pp. 1282-1299)

*Review Marcus

April 18: Queer Tosca: LGBT rights discourse

Primary

Milk (2008), dir. Gus Van Sant. Universal City, CA: Universal Home Entertainment, 2009. (1 hr, 28 min)

Secondary

Wayne Koestenbaum, "Opera Queens," from *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*. New York: Poseidon, 1993. (pp 9-45)

PAPER PROPOSAL DUE

April 25: After *Camille*: AIDS drama

Primary

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (1993) (290 pp)

Secondary

Review Koestenbaum's "Opera Queens," esp. sections about HIV/AIDS

May 2: Conclusions: Serial melodrama

Primary

Twin Peaks [available on Netflix; screening TBD]

Season 1, Episode 1: "Pilot: Northwest Passage" (94 minutes)

Mad Men [available on Netflix, screening TBD]:

Season 2, Episode 12: "The Mountain King" (47 min)

RECOMMENDED: Season 2, Episode 13: "Meditations in an Emergency"

RECOMMENDED: Season 3, Episode 1: "Out of Town"

Orange is the New Black [available on Netflix, screening TBD]:

Season 1, Episode 1: "I Wasn't Ready" (51 min)

RECOMMENDED: Watch as much as you want, but do so responsibly! I know it's the end of the semester ☺

FINAL PAPERS DUE FRIDAY, MAY 6 AT 5PM