I.

When Thomas Holcroft (1745–1809) wrote the Preface above he was articulating to the London literary establishment one of the first class-based defenses for a rapidly changing theatrical scene in Europe.¹ For the autodidact Holcroft, it was necessary that London critics recognize that the theater was not only increasingly serving as a locus of secularized religion, but also as a place where the lower classes could be educated in the behaviors and attitudes that would allow them to function usefully in a rapidly changing society. In addition to serving a “civilizing process” (in Norbert Elias’s sense of the term), the contemporary theater also had a

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—Thomas Holcroft, Preface to *Seduction* (1787)
political role, its aim being to “rouse” and “impel” the lower-class audience to “actions” that could be considered “heroic” (P. Cox, vii–viii). Holcroft’s early plays, like *The Road to Ruin* (1792) or *The Deserted Daughter* (1795), are largely comedic imitations of Molière or Oliver Goldsmith’s works, while his most important plays are those that imported the techniques of the French mélo-drame. In bringing the French tradition onto the British stage, he secularized the gothic ethos, creating a form of gothic melodrama that has persisted in popularity to this day.2 Whereas the gothic adaptations of Boaden, Siddons, and Lewis had a fairly limited vogue on the stage, the gothic melodrama has had real staying power as a popular dramatic form with the lower and middle classes, and the question is why? And how does the gothic melodrama differ from the slightly earlier works of gothic drama? These answers can only be discerned by returning to its origins and examining two of Holcroft’s best-known adaptations from the French, *Deaf and Dumb: or, The Orphan Protected* (1801) and *A Tale of Mystery, A Melo-Drame* (1802).3

In Paris, September 1800, at the apex of Napoleon’s reign, a displaced aristocrat named René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt (1773–1844) perfected a new dramatic form—the melodrama—by building on the earlier work of J. N. Bouilly (1763–1842) and François Thomas Marie de Baculard d’Arnaud (1718–1805). Pixérécourt had managed to survive the worst of the French Revolution by hiding in a Parisian attic, and although one would think he might have been somewhat distracted, he managed to cobble together this new hybrid genre, which in turn would prove to be one of the most lasting artistic legacies of the Revolution. His *Coelina ou l’Enfant du mystère*, originally performed in 1800 at the Ambigu Comique in Paris, became the first full-fledged example of a melodrama as we understand the genre today (although some critics have assigned this honor to his slightly earlier *Víctor, ou l’enfant de la forêt*, also performed at the Ambigu Comique in Paris, 1798). But also roaming around Paris during that 1800 theater season was Thomas Holcroft, a British Jacobin who was searching for theatrical and novelistic ideas to bring back with him to an England that he hoped had become more sympathetic to the Revolutionary cause. Holcroft noted later that he saw advertisements for eighteen different theaters in Paris that season, but there were actually twenty-three in 1789 and thirty-two by 1807 (Rahill, 41). Holcroft is primarily remembered today as a writer of Jacobin novels, a compatriot of Wollstonecraft, Inchbald, Godwin, and Helen Maria Williams. But it would appear that it is more accurate to see Holcroft as the man who wrote—or more accurately stole—the first British melodramas from France. J. N. Bouilly’s *L’Abbé de l’Épée* (1800) became Holcroft’s *Deaf and
Dumb, or the Orphan Protected (Drury Lane, 1801), while Pixérécourt’s Coelina became in Holcroft’s hands A Tale of Mystery (Covent Garden, 1802). But as Holcroft’s adaptations of both works are virtual translations (or in the case of A Tale of Mystery, practically a pantomimed version) of its source, their analysis has to begin with the French origins of melodrama (see Marcoux).

It is necessary first to sketch Holcroft’s background in order to understand the role he played in transporting melodrama from France to England. In the first chapters of his Life, which he himself composed (the remainder was completed by Hazlitt after his death), Holcroft tells us that both his parents were peddlers and that he spent his early years following them from town to town, sometimes working as a stableboy or a shoemaker, eating so little that his growth was permanently stunted. In 1770, at the age of twenty-five, he joined a troupe of traveling actors, primarily playing roles in comedies. Marrying for the first time at an early age, he found himself in need of money as his family increased. It was then that he turned to writing for the stage, as well as writing novels and translating the works of Madame de Genlis, Johann Caspar Lavater, Frederick II, Baron Trenck, and Goethe from the French and German (Gregory, 53). His first trip to France was in 1783 as a foreign correspondent for the Morning Herald, but he returned the next year with the intention of watching enough performances of Beaumarchais’ thrashing of the aristocracy in Le Mariage de Figaro to present his own English version on the London stage. His 1784 adaptation, The Follies of a Night, proved unsuccessful, but the strategy of adapting a liberal French play for British audiences henceforth became one of Holcroft’s primary means of support. Holcroft’s political sympathies were liberal long before the French Revolution gave a focus and impetus to his beliefs. In 1783 he published a theatrical review that made explicit his position that the theater should be institutionalized by the state in order to serve as a force to liberalize and educate the populace as a whole:

The Theatre is as well worthy the contemplation of the Philosopher and the Legislator, as the Man of Taste. We are persuaded it contributes, in its present state, to humanize the heart, and correct the manners. . . . If it is not uniform in the tendency of its effects, it is because Legislators have never yet been sufficiently convinced of the power of the Drama, to incorporate it with the constitution, and make it a legal and necessary establishment; or rather, perhaps, because some men were fearful, lest while they were erecting the temple of morality, they should erase the tottering structure of superstition, in the preservation of which themselves, their children, or their dependents were materially interested. (qtd. Bolton, 17)
Positioning “morality” against “superstition,” Holcroft became a major voice in the secularization process that was occurring during this period. As Betsy Bolton observes, Holcroft’s theories “link the civilizing force of the drama to a leveling of social classes” (17), while other London critics of the period feared that the theater actually encouraged class warfare in its pitting of the audience against the theater managers (witness the Old Price riot in 1809). Clearly, the theater has functioned as one of society’s most publicly contested spaces, a ritualistic arena where social, cultural, sexual, and religious ideologies converge in staged combat, poised to compete for the hearts and minds of the audience. In late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British culture, however, the public-private debate took on a new urgency and the stakes were indeed high. A corrupt aristocracy sought to stave off the sort of political unrest that would shortly engulf France, and the theater was very obviously a potent weapon in either calming the populace or enflaming it. In a blatant bid to shore up British nationalism and patriotism, revivals of Shakespeare and classical works dominated the early eighteenth-century theater, but increasingly the public was attracted to works that dealt with contemporary social and political issues. Once the theater was recognized as one of the spaces where public instruction in manners, civility, and proper class-based conduct could occur, the struggle was on for control of the stage. As Bolton argues, “Romantic nationalism relied on spectacle both in appealing to the public’s patriotic sentiments and in projecting a sentimental code of honor: benevolent mastery of domestic and international affairs” (21; emphasis in original).

But where does this place Holcroft as a melodramatist with a liberal (nay, radical) agenda? Writing in a culture where the patriarchy was both under siege and vigorously buttressed, Holcroft imported the melodrama, a mixed genre that embodied ambiguity and moral oscillation in its very nature. Unable to outright condemn the corrupt king-father, Holcroft instead presented morally flawed fathers or sinful patriarchs who are admonished by the female and bourgeois voice of common sense in the conclusion of his plays. Such admonishment has led at least one critic to argue that A Tale of Mystery is a radical, avant-garde production, in line with Holcroft’s political sympathies (Shepherd, 507). And certainly there is no question about Holcroft’s atheism or his Jacobin allegiances, for, in addition to his work as a dramatist, Holcroft was also a private secretary to the abolitionist Granville Sharpe, and a member of the London Corresponding Society, a group that advocated constitutional reform and that explicitly encouraged public debates. He was also part of the Hardy, Tooke, and Thelwall “conspiracy” of “constructive treason” against the crown in
1794. Although he was briefly held in custody, Holcroft was never tried for supposedly “imagining the King’s death,” but he did spend the rest of his life labeled as “an acquitted felon,” and hence found attendance at his plays and purchases of his novels decline (Barrell, 411–14). In fact, his reputation had fallen so low by 1795 that he had to submit his comedy *The Deserted Daughter* for production under the name of his friend Elizabeth Inchbald (P. Cox, xxiii).

After the failure of his 1798 play *Knave, or Not?* Holcroft concluded that he might be better off financially if he emigrated, leaving first for Hamburg and later moving to Paris where he lived from 1800 to 1802. Gary Kelly characterizes him as an advocate of “a kind of English Jacobin theology,” a believer in condemning “pride, avarice, lust, wrath, gluttony, envy, and sloth” not so much as sins but as “bad habits [that] are best laughed at rather than hated” (139–40). By examining Holcroft’s *Deaf and Dumb* and *A Tale of Mystery*, we can understand how gothicism merged with melodrama as the latter made its way from France to Britain. During the eighteenth century the British stage was flooded with works that employed sentimental categories clearly derived from Samuel Richardson, but after the importation and adaptation of *Coelina* onto the London stage, British drama veers off to become a distinctly hybrid genre, one that merges tragedy and comedy into something that we would recognize today as tragicomedy, an amalgam of “tears and smiles,” an uncomfortable mixture of bathos and pathos, snickers and sneers (see Ellis; Sherbo). As always, the most interesting question for the literary historian is: why? Why would a culture want to place extreme, hyperbolic—one might say absurd—emotions on public display? And why would dramatists create the most untenable plot situations—most of which we would be charitable to recognize as unrealistic? And even more puzzling, why would lower- and middle-class audiences flock to these productions, knowing before the play began that they were soon to witness yet another variation on a few simple themes: the beautiful orphan in distress, the machinations of the unmasked greedy villain, the exaltation of the virtuous mother or chastised father, and the eventual triumph and restoration of the patriarchal family? The answers to these questions can only be discerned by starting at the beginning.

The term *melodrama* is itself subject to a fair amount of debate (see Shepherd and Womack). Some critics have claimed that the term is derived from the Greek word *melos* (music), because melodrama originated in the mingling of music with action and spoken dialogue on stage. *The Oxford Companion to Music* now defines “melodrama” as “a play or passage in a play, or a poem, in which the spoken voice is used against a musical back-
ground.” Theater historians, however, have suggested that the French verb 
*mêler* (to mix) is actually the origin for the term. Contrast these positions to 
one provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “a dramatic piece character-
ized by sensational incident and violent appeals to the emotions, but with 
a happy ending” (Scholes, 624), and one can see that both literary critics 
and musicologists have attempted to lay exclusive claim to the genre. It is 
clear, however, that melodrama’s origins are most accurately understood 
as a mixture of words and music, and that the genre has to be approached 
through both mediums in order to be fully appreciated as well as under-
stood. As music (and ballet) faded from the repertoire of the romantic 
melodrama, something had to be inserted in order to sustain the same 
level of audience involvement. Enter “tragedy,” that is, the mute character 
who acts out his buried and abusive history through the dumb show that 
explains his extended stay in a prison, a hospital, or a pirate ship.

Musicologists as well as theater historians locate the origin of melo-
drama in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Pygmalion* (Lyons 1770; Weimar 1772; 
Paris 1775), a short *scène lyrique* with libretto composed by Rousseau. 
Although he acknowledged that he was borrowing from the Italians, Rous-
seau was the first to use the term “Mélo-drame” in 1766 to describe his 
*Pygmalion*, explaining that he was using music to express emotions in 
a particular situation, while another actor used pantomime to act out the 
same scene. Only when the music concludes does the actor speak, 
expressing verbally what had just been communicated through gestures 
and accompaniment. Certainly the development of such a style suggests 
the continuing power of an oral-based culture. The next influences on the 
evolution of melodrama were the theatrical antics perfected at the Jacobin 
Boulevard du Temple, where all manner of jugglers, pantomimes, and 
freaks performed, juxtaposed with outlandish adaptations of fairy tales 
taken from Perrault. The crucial element in this strain of melodrama is its 
use of pantomimes, set to music, and based on mythic, historical, or moral 
topics. Large word boards were used to help the audience understand the 
action, much like the use of print in early silent films. *Pantomime Dia-
loguée* seems to have fully evolved by 1785, characterized by fragments of 
spoken dialogue, stolen operatic arias, and a mixture of broad pantomimic 
actions (see J. Smith; Bentley).

British dramas were highly dependent not just on French models, 
but also on German works like *Die Räuber*, as well as the sentimental 
dramas of August von Kotzebue (1761–1819), which were adapted for 
performance quickly in both England and France. For instance, Bouilly’s 
*L’Abée de l’Epée* was not simply adapted by Holcroft, but also by Kotzebue, 
who staged a production in Germany as early as 1803. The success of
these melodramas across Europe illustrates what Charles Taylor (using Max Weber) has called the reanimation of the “enchanted world [where] the line between personal agency and impersonal force was not at all clearly drawn” (32). In the enchanted world of melodrama, a “whole gamut of forces” ranging from Satan to minor demons (like the melodramatic villain) inhabit a world where there is “a perplexing absence of certain boundaries which seem essential to us” (33), like the boundary around the mind that had been “constitutionally porous” during the premodern period (40). Without these boundaries, meanings exist outside of human beings, prior to contact with us, and as such, they have the power to take possession of us from the outside; they can take up residence not only in the minds of characters, but also in things that are external to us, what Taylor calls “charged objects” (34–35). Along with our vulnerability to being attacked by evil things that exist outside of us, the enchanted worldview presents a universe in which we are forced to continually propitiate these forces through staged demonstrations of guilt and punishment (37), and hence we can see how the plotlines of melodrama evolved as enactments of propitiation. Because there is no clear distinction between the mind and body in the enchanted worldview, the “porous self” can never effectively disengage from either the internal or the external realms. Melodrama stages this immersion into the psychic and physical vulnerability of the enchanted world over and over again, and in its use of the large identificatory portrait or the scar on the arm, melodramas present us with “charged objects” that are almost magical in their ability to either protect or harm their heroes and villains.

As melodrama developed, it increasingly invested in attempting to present the development of the modern “buffered self,” a being who claimed that he could avoid distressing or tempting experiences because he could disengage from everything outside of his own mind (Taylor, 38). This hero became modern by possessing the ability to distance himself from both his emotions and from “charged” external objects that no longer held power over him. Taylor notes that “as the creation of a thick emotional boundary between us and the cosmos” developed, we increasingly tried nostalgically “to recover some measure of this lost feeling. So people go to movies about the uncanny in order to experience a frisson. Our peasant ancestors would have thought us insane. You can’t get a frisson from what is really in fact terrifying you” (38).

Melodrama is also a cultural practice that stages depictions of the family as the acme of human flourishing. It is a textual practice that stages the triumph of the bourgeois system of morality by claiming that the fate of
an entire class of people could be represented by the actions of one family, for the private and interior spheres come to ensure order, social protection, and the powers of redemption. In this final phase of melodramatic consciousness, God is banished in favor of a worldview dominated by the notion that “buffered selves” live in a society that they are increasingly able to control and dominate without recourse to external or supernatural aids. The earlier melodramatic, however, would appear to be a genre caught between the premodern, traditional worldview of tragedy and the new consciousness of the bourgeois individual triumphing over all social constraints in a bold act of self-assertion and self-possession.

As we have also seen, the gothic dramatic aesthetic, with its celebration of a loyalist, chivalric code of ethics, infiltrated the stage in response to an audience that had come to expect sightings of ghosts, supernatural events, and a Manichean system of justice. Paula Backscheider argues, in fact, that melodrama is a continuation of the gothic (174). Further, she claims that gothic narratives all display the same structure of feeling, stock characters, codified settings, and highly stylized plots (155–56). Certainly one can see that Lewis’s *Castle Spectre* contains a number of incipient melodramatic elements and characters, including the supposedly orphaned heroine, the evil uncle, and the hero disguised as a peasant. And one can also see incipient melodramatic aspects in James Boaden’s adaptations of Radcliffe’s novels (see chapter 3). But it seems necessary to distinguish between gothic drama as a unique genre separate from although related to melodrama. Gothic dramas contain historical and nationalistic elements that melodramas do not. Indeed, we could claim that the two genres—like bookends—reveal the public and historical (gothic) and private and domestic (melodrama) faces of the culture. The conventions of melodrama are a curious mixture, then, of musical forms, literary genres, and conservative political and social sympathies all bound up in a strikingly visual manner, suggesting the pantomimic background of the genre, with the broad gesture and the silent, mute wound at the core of the tale. Consider the prevalence of the telltale scar (originating, as Erich Auerbach has noted, most likely from the scene where Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus by the scar of the boar hunt on his leg), or the prominence of the portrait of the dead parent in melodramas and gothic fictions, the theme of secret marriages or disputed inheritances in both, the letter that is either indecipherable or deceptive, the arrival of the supposedly orphaned child or parent long believed to be dead, and finally, most melodramatic of all, the conspiracy of the powerful against the innocent or the foiled in the nick of time seduction or murder plot.
II.

Why was a voice denied to [a] sensibility so eloquent!

—Deaf and Dumb, I.i.34

J. N. (Jean-Nicolas) Bouilly is remembered today, not as the author of L'Abbé de l'Épée, one of the close to a dozen minor plays he wrote, but as the writer of Léonore, ou l'Amour conjugal (1798), which formed the basis of the libretto for Ludwig van Beethoven's Fidelio (1814; see chapter 2). Originally trained as a lawyer, his numerous works include operas, plays, stories, and a memoir, and it is interesting that, unlike Pixérécourt, he did not spend the height of the revolution in hiding, but rather as the head of the Military Commission in Tours. His interest in the Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb in Paris was inspired by firsthand experience and observation during the years he spent working in Paris for the Committee of Public Instruction (1795–98). Based on the historical character of Charles-Michel de L'Épée (1712–1789), the play acquaints its audience with the use of the gestural alphabet for the deaf (sign language), and educates them about the basic human rights due to the disabled, as well as the fact that deaf and dumb people are capable of having feelings and thoughts, as well as inheritances and rights. The use in this play of a deaf and dumb hero allegorizes the struggles faced by the rise of the lower class and the dispossessed, or, as Jane Moody has noted about the play, the subject of muteness “is endowed with a powerful political subtext. . . . [M]uteness becomes a political as much as a semiotic condition.” For Moody, the slight adaptations that Holcroft made in his source material “suggest that muteness constitutes a political experience as much as a physical disability. Indeed, Holcroft was no doubt attracted to this play precisely because it offered an idealistic counterpoint to that suppression of political opposition taking place in Britain” (89–90).

Holcroft’s Deaf and Dumb is reminiscent of a number of earlier gothic dramas, complete with an orphaned hero, Julio, the Count of Harancourt/aka Theodore; Darlemont, a greedy uncle who usurps the deaf and dumb boy’s estate; the Abbé, a virtuous holy man who seeks to restore the boy to his rightful inheritance and identity; and Dupré, a conscience-stricken accomplice/servant to Darlemont. The gothic tropes continue in the “charged objects” or identificatory tags that figure throughout the play, all of which would have been familiar to audiences since the genre’s early days. In particular, the use of a “whole length portrait” of Julio is reminiscent of the walking and breathing life-size portrait that begins Walpole’s Castle of Otranto, as well as the oval portrait lockets that had functioned
so prominently in Reeve, Radcliffe, and Lewis. Rather than use a minia-
ture portrait that would not visually signify on the stage, *Deaf and Dumb*
employs a life-size portrait of the missing and supposedly dead heir, com-
missioned by Darlemont when he was informed that Julio died in Paris. In
truth, eight years earlier Darlemont and Dupré had taken the boy Julio to
Paris, dressed him in rags, and then abandoned him to die in the Parisian
streets, thinking that a deaf and dumb boy with no resources would not
be able to survive. In addition to his distinctive disability, however, Julio
carries the ultimate gothic identificatory tag on his arm, a wolf bite that
the boy suffered when he saved his cousin St. Alme’s life. As this cousin is
also the son and heir of Darlemont, all of the elements of the gothic plot
of restored inheritance and the punishment of the usurper are in place.

*Deaf and Dumb* begins with three standard gothic moves, the haunted
portrait, the ominous dream, and the guilty conscience. In the very first
scene Dupré confesses to his fellow servant Pierre that he can no longer
bring himself to look at the full-length portrait of Julio prominently dis-
played in the central room of the palace because he has seen “him start
from his frame, and stand before me. . . . I believe, it was only a dream.—
Perhaps, he lives” (I:i). This recourse to a device used in Walpole’s *Castle
of Otranto* suggests not simply the gothicness of the drama, but also its
employment of the uncanny, the doubling of the rightful heir with his
simulacra or counterfeit, the painting that can walk and exact vengeance
on the guilty Dupré much as the ghost of the portrait of Prince Manfred’s
grandfather does in *Otranto*. As Hogle, using Baudrillard has noted, the
“ghost of the counterfeit” refers to both fakes and to a nostalgia for a time
when images referred to embodied people who were firmly “ensconced
in a class and role [that was] predetermined and immutable” (2008, 216).
Ghosts look, like counterfeits, “both back towards a more grounded condi-
tion (as an object of desire) and away from such foundations to a conflict
among ideologies about ghosts that exacerbates, even as it also stems from,
the breach between sign and substance in the counterfeit that also longs
for no breach at all” (2008, 217).

We can see this ghosting of the counterfeit when, confessing to Dar-
lemont that he feels “haunted” by the presence of the painting, Dupré is
quickly reminded by Darlemont that he is “a slave” to his master, to which
Dupré responds, “I remember too that you are mine: accomplices in guilt
are of necessity the slaves of each other” (I:i). This master/slave dialectic
ironically functions to inform the class relationship in this drama, as Dar-
lemont holds his inheritance only as long as the servant Dupré continues
to swear that he did indeed see Julio’s dead body and has signed a legal
document to that effect. This melodramatic spin on class status suggests
that the aristocracy holds its power only so long as the lower class allows it to possess what is not rightfully theirs to hold. As Gabrielle Hyslop has noted about those who defended the melodrama, the genre did “provide a much needed form of social control for the potentially dangerous subordinate classes at a crucial stage in French [and British, I would add] political history,” and certainly it is possible that “individual spectators found within the plays themselves representations of class conflict in which oppressed members of the subordinate classes triumphantly overthrew their ruling-class tormentors” (65–66). The revolutionary implications of Deaf and Dumb are only too clear, and yet the Jacobin flavor of the work is undercut by the fact that Julio is himself an aristocrat who has been disinherited by his scheming maternal uncle, described as “but a petty merchant” before he maneuvered himself into his young nephew’s title and estate (I.i.345). Like so many literary works of this period, it is certainly possible to read Deaf and Dumb as a loyalist drama that privileges the “true” aristocracy of direct blood descent over the collateral (maternal) branches of a family. It also speaks quite negatively about the tainted natures of those who have compromised their character by bourgeois employment.

Not content simply to usurp his nephew’s estate, Darlemont seeks to cement his newly gained class status by marrying his son St. Alme to the president’s daughter. This would not be a melodrama without a romantic complication, and St. Alme provides one when he tells Pierre that he is determined to marry his true love, Marianne, the daughter of Franval, “the most renowned advocate of Toulouse” (I.i.345). It is no coincidence that a lawyer is introduced into the dramatic proceedings, because melodrama frequently has recourse to the law to resolve its central issues: inheritances, identities, and marriages. The Franval family has recently fallen on hard times, as Madame Franval explains when she complains that her husband once held the “office of Sénéchal [governor],” but that she was compelled to sell it at his death “and the degradation cuts me to the soul” (II.i.356). This upper-class family has been reduced to having to work for its survival, rather than to “govern” from a position of inherited privilege. As the lawyer-son Franval explains to his mother, “[T]his circumstance [the family’s loss of status] has stimulated me to attain by my own talents that consideration in the world, for which I should otherwise, in all probability, have stood indebted merely to accident and prejudice” (II.i.356). Madame Franval can only consider St. Alme and his father as a “mushroom family,” sprung up only “yesterday” from their earlier status as “petty traders.” “What,” she asks, “have his riches made him forget the disparity of our births?” (II.i.357). Clearly, the eventual marriage of St. Alme and Marianne is meant to suggest the construction of a new and improved class, one
tempered and chastened by their loss of the inherited privileges that they
did not deserve to possess without their own personal struggle and effort.

Holcroft, following his source, has presented a series of class conflicts
that are all too familiar on the gothic stage. He also presents a religious
ideology that bears scrutiny. In the last scene of Act One, the Abbé and the
defaf and dumb Theodore are introduced as traveling throughout France
in an effort to help Theodore discover his native home and identity. As
Theodore signs to the Abbé that he recognizes the Palace of Harancourt
in the city of Toulouse, the Abbé bows his head and prays, “O, thou, who
guidest at thy will, the thoughts of / men,—thou, by whom I was inspired
to this great undertaking,—O, power omnipotent!—deign to accept the
grateful adoration of thy servant, whom thou hast still protected—and
of this speechless orphan to whom thou hast made me a second father!”
(I.i.350). Later, he remarks to Theodore that he suspects Theodore has been
“the victim of unnatural foul-play,” and he prays again to “Providence” for
the ability to “unmask and confound it! So men shall have another proof,
that every fraud will soon or late be detected, and that no crime escapes
eternal justice” (I.i.351). Finally, the Abbé lectures Darlemont when he
tells the villain that “chance, or rather the good Power that governs chance
and the destiny of man” saved his nephew from death (V.ii.387). The god
who is invoked here suggests how much in flux the melodramatic cosmos
was, for initially this god is presented as an “omnipotent power,” a sort of
providentially deistical presence, and then as a manifestation of the long
arm of the law, and finally as a fatalistic form of chance.

Legal complications occur when Franval is presented with incontro-
vertible proof that Theodore is in fact the supposedly dead Julio, and that
Darlemont has been the mastermind of the scheme to eliminate Julio so
that he can usurp the Harancourt estate. Franval is motivated to handle the
matter with the utmost of discretion because he wants to protect St. Alme’s
reputation as the future husband of his sister. As he argues to his mother,
“Ought we to make him responsible for his father’s faults?” (III.ii.367). He
goes on to explain, “[S]uch are the prejudices of the world, that I cannot
publish the guilt of the parent, without reflecting the disgrace of his actions
on his blameless son” (III.ii.367). What is interesting in the melodrama is
the persistent privileging of this premodern web of familial alliances, this
anti-individualist notion that all people are inextricably connected to their
families and that the actions of one family member bear on the character
of all other members of that family. Such a belief is very close to the world
depicted in the Brueghel painting (cover), and it stands in sharp contrast
to the social realities that had been evolving in Europe for the past century.
Melodrama appears to depict this earlier, lost world of tight family clans
that by the early nineteenth century had been replaced by a new political state and capitalist system that had the power to define each individual's status and worth.

The secularization process also reveals itself in this work through its endorsement of the bourgeois premium placed on literacy. Strangely, in a genre so given to the unspoken or pantomimic, literacy emerges in the melodrama as central to its depiction of the modern subjectivity of “buff-ered selves.” As Stone has shown, popular literacy had been steadily but slowly increasing in England and by the end of the seventeenth century 40 percent of the adult male population was able to read, while by 1800, 60 percent of men and 40 percent of women could read in Britain (1969, 109, 125). In addition, literacy was seen by religious reformers as allowing Christians to read and interpret scriptures for themselves, thereby freeing them from the domination of a self-serving clergy. Papists were accused of discouraging literacy, and a prejudice against illiterates became one of the central tenets of anti-Catholic polemic (Shell 2007, 14). It is perhaps no coincidence that so many melodramatic heroes are mute, for it forces them to pick up the pen in order to communicate, and in this act we can see the importance of literacy and public education reified on the stage. It is also clear that literacy is the crucial tool that enables so many happy endings in the melodramas that were patronized by the lower class and bourgeoisie. The Abbé publicly proves Theodore's worth and identity as an aristocrat by demonstrating his “feeling heart” and “enlightened mind” when he arranges a public test of Theodore's writing and cognitive skills. He asks Marianne to address any question to Theodore, and she asks him to identify the greatest genius that France has ever produced. Theodore's written answer: “Science would decide for D'Alembert, and Nature say, Buffon; Wit and Taste present Voltaire; and Sentiment pleads for Rousseau; but Genius and Humanity cry out for De l'Epée; and him I call the best and greatest of all human creatures” (III.i.369–70).

Aside from the nationalistic tenor of the question and answer, this response displays the superiority of an evolving public educational system and the Abbé's efforts as a teacher of literacy. As the Abbé himself states about his educational mission, “'Judge what are my sensations, when, surrounded by my pupils, I watch them gradually emerging from the night that overshadows them, and see them dazzled at the widening dawn of opening Deity, 'till the full blaze of perfect intellect informs their souls to hope and adoration. This is to new-create our brethren. What transport to bring man acquainted with himself!’” (III.i.370). The celebration of literacy is connected here with religious and spiritual significance, so that
to read is to know the deity, to write is divine. But there is also something of the magical about this scene. Someone who should not be able to communicate is suddenly able to conduct a philosophically sophisticated “conversation” with his auditors, and perhaps the most pertinent question is: how would this scene have been understood by the theatrical audience of 1800? The advances of science are clearly being privileged in ways that present the secularization process here as a species of magic, allowing the dumb to speak and the deaf to hear, much as Jesus did in the miracles attributed to him in the New Testament. In other words, science is not an alien force to be feared by the Abbé and his traditionally spiritual followers, but in fact the fulfillment of scripture.

Theodore’s restoration to his name and inheritance is dependent on a number of other more prosaic factors, not the least of which is the machinations of the female servants in the household, Dominique and the nurse of his infancy, Claudine, who identify him as the long-lost Julio. The importance of lower-class female servants will be developed further by Holcroft in the later *A Tale of Mystery*. A full confession from the remorseful Dupré is also necessary, and the final identificatory tag emerges in all its prominence when Theodore confronts his cousin. The skeptical St. Alme is convinced that the dead indeed can return only when Theodore “bares his right arm, and points to the scar upon it” (IV. ii.379). With his identity confirmed, Theodore now becomes Julio, the rightful Count of Harancourt, except that his uncle continues to hold that position and will not relinquish it short of the embarrassment of a public trial. The rest of the drama works to prevent that very public shaming of the family unit, with all participants convinced that such an exposure would equally condemn all members, even the innocent, to infamy and disgrace. All of the principals now descend on Darlemont, who has come to represent tyranny (read: the aristocracy) and the abuse of power over the deserving weak (read: the lower class and bourgeoisie). According to the Abbé, the muteness of Theodore “‘left [him] destitute of that distinctive prerogative of man, the power of appealing against injustice and oppression!’” (Vii.387), and this statement is the closest the work comes to making explicit its political agenda. That is, if we read this melodrama allegorically, we realize that the play is a fantasy rewrite of the Revolution, whereby the Church speaks for the dispossessed lower class, and the Revolution itself is given divine sanction. We know that the clergy were in fact one of the first targets of the Revolution for their long-standing complicity with the aristocracy, so the ideological work of *Deaf and Dumb* actually allows the supporters of the Revolution (Bouilly
as well as Holcroft) the chance to rewrite history and align themselves with an idealized clergyman and his more palatable and liberal divinity.

The power of the legal system is the final ambivalently presented institution in the drama, with the lawyer Franval operating as something of a *deus ex machina*, holding over Darlemont the threat that he will subject him to a public exposure of his crimes if he does not renounce his claims to Julio's title. Darlemont, for his part, continues to cling to the letter of the law, claiming that Julio's death has been established through "a formal register of death," a piece of paper signed by Dupré as (false) witness (V.ii.388). Only after St. Alme tells his father that he will kill himself before his very eyes, "the dread of indelible disgrace—the cry of my despair—the horror of my death prevai'ld—nature triumph'd—my father relented" (V.ii.391). The recourse here to "nature" suggests that the final arbiter for the melodramatic conscience is the appeal to blood ties. Darlemont may be a monstrous usurper, but finally he is a father and he was motivated by the very human (or "natural") feelings of a father who desired not simply to be rich for himself but to advance the standing of his son. Melodrama cannot bring itself to recognize irredeemable evil in the world, and so it obfuscates and presents endings that undo much of the dramatic action that has occurred. When Theodore becomes Julio, he promptly writes a letter in which he bequeaths half of his fortune to St. Alme, declaring, "'From our cradles we were accustomed to share every good, like brothers—and I can never be happy at the expense of my friend'" (V.ii.392). Closing the play are the words of the Abbé, who pronounces that he hopes "the example of this protected orphan, may terrify the unjust man from the abuse of trust, and confirm the benevolent in the discharge of all the gentle duties of humanity" (V.ii.392). Notice that the melodrama concludes, not by invoking a divinity, but only by appealing to a secularized system of justice predicated on a sentimentalized vision of human nature.

Holcroft's melodrama was so popular that it was quickly transformed into a chapbook, *Julius, or the Deaf and Dumb Orphan*, a tale intended "for the youth of both sexes" (1806). This anonymous pamphlet went through three editions in one year and faithfully translated the ideologies of Holcroft's drama to children. Here the Abbé prays to a "providence whose sovereign will directs both fate and fortune," while the greatest "happiness" in life "springs from the powers of reflection, and the communication of ideas" (48; 78). So there is no luck or chance in life, only effort and the attainment of useful skills. The bourgeois agenda could not be stated more clearly.
Following the tradition that had been established by Bouilly, Pixérécourt understood the melodrama as asserting “religious and providential ideals” (4:498), while Charles Nodier in his Preface to Pixérécourt's collected plays observed that they conclude by asserting that the “old order was right” and “that moral stability wins out over political innovation” (I:vii–viii). As the “father of melodrama,” Pixérécourt further developed the genre by using all of the devices that the British gothic had contributed to the French stage, and, for good measure, he introduced a hero whose tongue had been cut out, thus ensuring the pantomimic nature of much of the stage action of his Coelina. Translated into Dutch, German, and English, Coelina was so popular that it ran for 387 performances on the Boulevard du Temple (J. Smith, 6). As was typical of the time, Coelina the melodrama was adapted from another source, Coelina, ou l'enfant du mystère (Paris, 1799), a six-volume roman noir written by François-Guillaume Ducray-Duminil, who, along with Baculard d'Arnaud, was the most important author of French gothic novels (roman noir) during this period. Ducray-Duminil's earlier novel, Alexis; ou La Maisonnette dans les bois (1780) was the source for much of Radcliffe's The Romance of the Forest (1791), while his Victor, ou l'enfant de la fôret was translated into English and published by the Minerva Press in four volumes in 1802 (Mayo 1941). Exploiting the success of Holcroft's play, Coelina was translated into English as a four-volume novel entitled A Tale of Mystery, or Celina by the British gothic novelist Mary Meeke (Minerva, 1803). All of Ducray-Duminil's works are concerned with the quest for truth and identity, and the importance of reestablishing domestic and social order. Often set in prison cells amidst underground passages, Ducray-Duminil's novels move from uncanny spaces to the familiar, reassuring his lower-class readers that the threats assailing them will be resolved in fairly short order either by the king (as in his early 1789 Alexis) or through the good offices of the family (as in the postrevolutionary Coelina).

Like Ducray-Duminil, Pixérécourt was able to change his political colors to suit the mood of the times, and therefore his Coelina simplified Ducray-Dumenil's roman noir to cohere to the about-face of the Napoleonic
era. By transforming Ducray-Dumenil's emphasis on fate and the superior power of Nature (the storm) that resolves the destinies of the characters and exposes the villain, Pixérécourt's use of the “archers” and the powers of the new military state illustrate perfectly the new Napoleonic Civil Code (see Martin). In Pixérécourt's melodrama, the heroine Coelina is an orphan living with her uncle Dufour and courted by her wealthy neighbor Trugelin, although Coelina herself loves and is loved by the uncle's son, Stéphany, her cousin. The villain-suitor is motivated by the promise of a large dowry and the adjoining estates that Coelina will bring to the marriage, all of which he reveals to the audience in a series of soliloquies that conceal none of his greed or villainy. Also living in the household of Dufour is a mysterious and mutilated stranger named Françisque Humbert, a man who cannot speak but who conveys through pantomimic gestures his history to his adoptive family: he was betrayed, sold into slavery on a pirate ship, and had his tongue cut out. Once returned to land, he was attacked in a wild mountainous region and left for dead. Coelina is strangely drawn to the old man, as he is to her. Such a device, called the “voice of the blood,” was a standard recognition technique also used in such gothic works as Radcliffe's *The Italian*, among others. But if the displaced hero cannot help being recognized, neither can the villain. When Trugelin confides to his thuggish assistant Germain that he had attacked Françisque years ago and now intends to kill him that night, his confession is overheard by Coelina, hidden nearby. His plot backfires and Trugelin himself is revealed as the villain, so he resorts not simply to absconding but to delivering more threats: “If I do not receive your consent [to the marriage] by ten o'clock tomorrow, tremble! A single word will break off the nuptials you plan [with Stéphany] and that word I shall utter.”

All of this action occurs in the first act, while the second act begins with preparations for the immediate marriage of the hero and heroine, neither of whom appears to take Trugelin's threats seriously enough to find out what it is he has to say. Following a comic interlude between two country bumpkins, the villagers gather for the wedding, and at this point a formal ballet occurs, again revealing the residue in early melodrama of the carnival and festival, as well as music and dance as crucial pantomimic elements of an essentially oral culture. This pastoral vignette is rudely interrupted by the arrival of Trugelin, who appears amid a flourish of “charged objects,” the supposedly legal documents that assert that Coelina is not the daughter of Dufour's dead brother, but instead the illegitimate child of Françisque (the mute) and Trugelin's adulterous sister. The recognition scene between father and daughter—so central to sentimental, gothic, and melodramatic cultural practices—occurs, but the happiness of this pair is
marred by the accusations of illegitimacy and the mother's adultery, not stains that can be easily dismissed in the melodramatic universe. In accordance with the dictates of melodramatic characterization, the once amiable Dufour suddenly is transformed into an evil uncle, compelled to banish both father and daughter for their sins against the honor of the family. Dufour quickly regrets his action when he learns that it was Trugelin who had assaulted Françisque so many years ago. Exposed by the local doctor as the villain he is, Trugelin flees to the same woods where he had earlier attacked Françisque—scene of act three's most spectacular action as well as scenery, the wild mountainous pass in Savoy where all the principals meet to resolve their melodramatic fates.

Act three is announced by claps of thunder and the fleeing figure of Trugelin, now disguised as a peasant. In the melodramatic logic of repetition and reversal, the same man who had assisted Françisque eight years earlier at the time of the initial assault on his person by Trugelin, now appears to assist Trugelin in his desperate bid to escape the forces of the law closing in on him. As he tells his version of the events to Trugelin, the miller shakes the villain's hand and notices a large scar on it. Only later, when it is too late to easily capture him, does the miller realize who the supposed peasant was. By that time, however, father and daughter have arrived, seeking shelter. Almost immediately, Trugelin engages once again in a struggle with Françisque and tries to kill him, stopped only when Coelina throws herself across the body of her father (recalling Lewis's Castle Spectre). When the archers finally capture the villain, peasants descend, wanting to kill the man on the spot. Dufour suddenly appears—deus ex machina—and pronounces, “Leave him to the law,” a statement that reveals how thoroughly trusted Napoleon's new Civil Code had become. In other words, in lieu of the caprices of a king, now there is a system of law administered by a tribunal of citizens, presided over by a secularized and omnipotent warrior-emperor. All that is left is the redemption of Coelina, and this Françisque supplies by informing the assembled that he was actually married to Isoline, whose later marriage to Dufour's brother was a bigamous one, forced upon her by the threats of her evil brother Trugelin. After a quick marriage ceremony, the action concludes with a ballad and dance signifying the closing and healing of the social and familial units.

Pixérécourt's Coelina has been called “the prime example of the essentially reactionary drama engendered by the Revolution,” a work that “restrained, even defused, the radical impetus for change” (G. Taylor, 203), while Jeffrey Cox sees Holcroft's version of the play as the very embodiment of “transnational literary Europe,” a work that expresses the spirit of the Treaty of Amiens, signed by England and France on March 25, 1802.
With a run of thirty-seven performances, Holcroft’s version, *A Tale of Mystery*, is a very close translation, in two acts, with only one scene and the ending slightly changed (more on both anon). The interesting question, however, is what does Holcroft’s use of Pixérécourt reveal about the evolution of gothicized melodrama in Britain and its role in the secularization process? As Moody has noted, Holcroft “expunges much of the play’s original dialogue, and substitutes the silent dramaturgy of pantomime. . . . [A]s Holcroft pared away the language of *Coelina*, the moral, legal, and hereditary order of Pixérécourt’s play began to disintegrate” (90). Further, she observes that one of the most important subjects dramatized by illegitimate theater is “the questionable authority of the law, and, more generally, of the state. Mute characters often embody the failure of law to prevent the tyranny of the powerful over the powerless; false accusation is another important trope in these plays” (91). The use of mute characters like Julio/Theodore in *Deaf and Dumb* as well as Françisque/Francisco in *A Tale of Mystery* “enable Holcroft to create what is in fact a political drama about the possession and the loss (or censorship) of speech” (91).

Holcroft’s *Deaf and Dumb* as well as his *A Tale of Mystery* represent, as several theater historians have noted, the birth of a new genre in Britain, the melodrama. But where exactly is the distinction between the slightly earlier sentimental works (like *Nina*, chapter one) and the newer melodrama? I would claim that sentimentality attempts to read human character through the theories of Rousseau or Shaftesbury, believing in either an innate human goodness or the potential for human perfectibility. In contrast, Holcroft’s works privilege the theories of Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) in their construction of a static and less sympathetic human character. In fact, Holcroft’s melodramas focus on trying to understand people’s characters and motivations through reading their eyes or the slant of their facial features. When Stephano and Selina approvingly discuss the mysterious stranger Francisco, Selina notes, “I am interested in his favour. His manners are so mild!” To which Stephano replies, “His eye so expressive” (1:401). As Philip Cox has noted, the theories of Lavater “go against a Godwinian notion of human perfectibility, for, in Lavater’s view, each individual ‘can be but what he can, is but what he is. He may arrive at, but cannot exceed, a certain degree of perfection, which scourging, even to death itself, cannot make him surpass’” (*Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Holcroft [1789]; qtd. Cox, xv). In other words, for Lavater character is fixed, not subject to reform, and as such, his view of character is premodern in its static quality. It is important to appreciate that Holcroft translated Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789) and went on in a review published in the *Monthly Review* (1793) to defend
Lavater, who was being satirized as “Lord Visage” in the contemporary farce False Colours (1783):

Lord Visage, we think particularly objectionable. He is a physiognomist, and in his character Lavater is satirized, or, to speak more accurately, burlesqued. A poet, who does not consider the moral effects of his satire, is, in our opinion, highly culpable. Any attempt to make men believe that the countenance of man does not bear visible signs of individual propensities, and of vicious or of virtuous habits, is immoral, because it is false. (qtd. J. Graham, 569)

Holcroft was, in other words, a true believer, and his melodramas are full of attempts by characters to read the faces of others as if they were books that were available for scrutiny. Lavater’s Essays on Physiognomy (1772) was so popular that it went through nine printings in Germany by the 1780s, twelve versions in England by the 1790s, and eleven different translations in France by 1800. Matthew Lewis is listed as a subscriber to the ornately illustrated version of Lavater translated from French into English by Henry Hunter (1789–1798) and illustrated by William Blake (Graham, 567). By 1810 there were fifty-five different versions of the work, including Dutch and Italian ones (Graham, 562). As Graham notes, Lavater managed to “fuse science and religion through a personal enthusiasm and sensibility that satisfied an age in which emotional response and almost occult perception were to become the criteria of the new ‘ideal’ man” (563). It was not for nothing that William Godwin called in a physiognomist to produce a lengthy report on the facial features of the infant Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. Like Holcroft, Godwin was also a true believer, declaring, “[N]othing can be more certain than that there is a science of physiognomy” (qtd. Graham, 568). But the theories of Lavater were not universally accepted; indeed, Hannah More and Maria Edgeworth both criticized him as a “mountebank” and a fraud, as someone who might as well be using a “divining rod” in his so-called studies (Graham, 566–67).

What I am calling a premodern and static quality to the characters in melodrama needs to be supplemented by the theories of Hobbes. As a secularist, Hobbes was intent on nothing less than, as Mark Lilla has phrased it, “the dismantling of Christendom’s theological-political complex” (75). In his Leviathan (1651), Hobbes set out to use physiology, specifically the analysis of the human eye, in order to understand religion and politics. For him, the basic realities of human existence could be understood, not through metaphysics, but by coming to terms with the fact that we are all “bodies alone in the world” (Lilla, 76). The push-pull that sense impres-
sions, memories, and imagination have on human subjects causes them to imagine that they have a “soul,” something inside their essentially hollow bodies and minds. To Hobbes, what we have is nothing more than “matter driven from within by nothing but the basic passions of appetite and aversion. Henceforth we shall not speak of the soul; we shall speak only of human striving” (qtd. Lilla, 77). In the Hobbesian worldview, human beings are much like puppets whose strings are pulled, not by the sort of ideals that operate in the sentimental universe, but by their own crudest appetites or basic needs, and such a vision is not far from the characters we actually do see in the world of melodrama.

The logic of the melodramatic worldview works in a very similar manner, moving toward confrontation with the mysterious, unknowable, and hidden until there is a veritable public and private explosion and the truth is revealed in the most painful and humiliating way possible. In the conclusion, all the characters sort themselves out by realigning into tighter and closed clan or tribal units that vindicate the value of maintaining a rigid class system. But there is always a residue left from the melodramatic conflict and that trace is the recurring theme of the survival of the fittest. A secularized moral tenor pervades melodrama, but the voice of morality is not exclusively male, nor is it aristocratic, nor is it transcendent, although all of these characters still do occasionally raise their heads in these works. The melodramatic evolved in England as a vehicle by which the audience was again schooled in the importance of literacy (note that Francisco tells his tale through the act of writing), while women, specifically lower-class women, are given the final word, and that word is the voice of simple common sense.

We can see some of these shifts in emphasis by looking at the changes that Holcroft made as he adapted Pixérécourt for the British stage. The longest speeches in the melodrama now belong to the maid Fiametta, and it is she who narrates the attack on Francisco as an eyewitness:

It is now seven or eight years ago, when, you having sent me to Chambery, I was coming home. It was almost dark; everything was still; I was winding along the dale, and the rocks were all as it were turning black. Of a sudden, I heard cries! A man was murdering! I shook from head to foot! Presently, the cries died away, and I beheld two bloody men, with their daggers in their hands, stealing off under / the crags at the foot of the mill. I stood like a stone: for I was frightened out of my wits! So I thought I heard groans; and afeared as I was, I had the sense to think they must come from the poor murdered creature. So I listened, and followed my ears, and presently I saw this very man. (I:401; emphasis in original)
This very gothic scene is conveyed in language that is virtually telegraphic, while music becomes an invisible character, used “to express pain and disorder” (I:403), “doubt and terror” (I:407), “pain and alarm” (I:408). As Pixérécourt himself observed, “[A] melodrama is nothing but the drame lyrique, where the music is performed by the orchestra instead of being sung.”

When Francisco writes his responses to a series of questions delivered by Fiametta and Bonamo (the Ducour figure), he recalls Julio/Theodore in Deaf and Dumb, a dispossessed victim of tyranny and greed who nonetheless is constrained by familial ties that prevent him from openly identifying or condemning his oppressor. Francisco makes it clear that he knows who attacked him and sold him to “the Algerines” as a slave, but he refuses to name this person because, as he writes, his attacker is “Rich and powerful” (I:403). This particular scene was in fact one of the most frequently reproduced from the melodrama, and the subject of a popular painting by Samuel de Wilde depicting Francisco posed as if in a tableau vivant and delivering his handwritten explanation. The theme of unjust class oppression emerges in both melodramas, suggesting one of the ways that they directly appealed to the growing lower-class and bourgeois audiences in attendance at these productions.

In Holcroft’s adaptation, Bonamo refuses to consent to the marriage between his niece and ward Selina and Stephano, his son, stating that he would instead defer to her free choice of a spouse “lest marriage become a farce, libertinism a thing to laugh at, and adultery itself a finable offence!” (I:404). The ideological agenda motivating much of the action concerns the validation of companionate marriage against dynastic or arranged marriages for the purpose of acquiring property. Holcroft’s liberal agenda is actually undercut by the fact that the play ends with the promised marriage of Bonamo’s son Sephano to his cousin Selina, thereby creating an even tighter familial clan and hold on property. But before that happy ending can occur, the crisis of the work centers on Bonamo’s refusal of this love match once he learns that Selina is illegitimate. Despite the pleadings of his son, Bonamo threatens to disinherit and curse him should he marry Selina without his father’s consent. This impasse is quickly resolved when the servant Fiametta enters to tell her employer exactly what she thinks of his decision: “‘I don’t care for you. I loved you this morning; I would have lost my life for you; but you are grown wicked’” (II:415). When Bonamo tries to silence her, she continues to speak in a manner that very few female servants had used before on stage: “‘I know the worst: I have worked for you all the prime of my youth; and now you’ll serve me as you have served the innocent wretched Selina; you’ll turn me out of doors. Do
it! But I’ll not go till I’ve said out my say: so, I tell you again, you are a hard hearted uncle, an unfeeling father, and an unjust master! Every body will shun you! You will dwindle out a life of misery, and no body will pity you; because you don’t deserve pity” (II:416). Sounding very much like a curse, this speech enacts the same sort of revolutionary ideological work that was accomplished when L’Abeé de l’Epée confronted Darlemont with his crimes in *Deaf and Dumb*. In fact, in examining Fiametta as well as Pierre in *Deaf and Dumb*, one is reminded of Bruce Robbins’s observation about the literary portrayal of servants during this period, “[T]here was in fact a sudden and well-documented new anxiety on the part of masters and mistresses about the damage that servant spies and informants could do” (108).

But what is most important in Holcroft’s revision of *Coelina* is that he removes the villain’s prayers to God after his capture and instead inserts an earlier scene in which Fiametta, the maid, essentially takes the place of God. Shepherd argues that Holcroft’s revisions of his French source reveal a new subjectivity, an anarchistic posture toward the state and the family, a condemnation of marriage, and a much more complicated position toward justice, law, class structure, and family (510–11). One way in which this anarchy can be seen is in Fiametta’s outburst, for here she issues orders and offers condemnations and curses to her aristocratic employer; it is she—not the clergy or the aristocracy—who has assumed the voice of moral authority in the play. It is she who will forgive or not and allow the master to continue in society, not God or anyone else. As Shephard notes, early bourgeois British dramas were predicated on the exclusion, marginalization, and victimization of female characters, all of which served the “male-centeredness” of the stage’s actions and the audience’s expectations. Lower-class-artisan culture was itself the product of working practices that ensured a “closed shop,” a union that excluded women as workers (514). Such a culture expected to see men at the center of the stage, not women, and hence the gothic—with its victimized and orphaned heroine in need of male protection and intervention—very much suited its tastes. What is most revolutionary about Holcroft’s *Tale of Mystery* is the positioning of the woman—and a maid—at the center of the stage and as the voice of moral and social authority.

In *A Tale of Mystery*, the heroine Selina sleuths, uncovers a murder plot, aligns herself with her disgraced father, and then in the final scene she pleads for her evil uncle’s forgiveness as the soldiers close in on him in order to kill him. We do not see her aligned with her fiancé Stephano in Holcroft’s version, although clearly a marriage is promised. Instead, we see her standing between father and uncle, the feminine mediator in
Romaldi and Malvoglio drawing their Daggers, seize Francisco by the Arm, and are in the attitude of striking, when Selina's shrieks, joining the Music, bring Bonamo, Stephano and Servants.

Allegro

FIGURE 6: Musical score by Thomas Busby for last act of *A Tale of Mystery*
a system of masculine dyadic dysfunction. The crucial recognition scene occurs when Michelli, the miller, “makes the sign of biting his right hand” to Francisco so that Francisco can verify to him that Romaldi indeed was his assailant. As Romaldi flees the miller’s house with his pistol, Francisco “opens his breast for him to shoot, if he please. Selina falls between them. The whole scene passes in a mysterious and rapid manner. Music suddenly stops” (II:422). As Hibberd and Nielsen have observed, the music in *A Tale of Mystery* is simple because the moral aspects of melodrama are “unambiguous” and the emotions depicted are connected with moral issues: “the music is implicated at a fundamental level because of its explicit as well as its non-specific language and its ability to heighten emotional extremes.” The intensity, indeed fury, of the music can be suggested by the excerpt below, which accompanies the climactic confrontation scene between the two brothers and Selina, who attempts to figure as a mediator (see fig. 6).

The pantomimic quality here is reinforced by a very primitive recourse to blood ritual and sacrifice. Romaldi refuses to shoot his brother, shouting, “No! Too much of your blood is upon my head! Be justly revenged: take mine!” (II:423). As the peasants supplemented by the Archers prepare to kill Romaldi, again “Francisco and Selina, in the greatest agitation, several times throw themselves between the assailants and Romaldi.” In the final lines of the work, Selina screams, “Oh, forbear! Let my father’s virtues plead for my uncle’s errors!” while Bonamo sounds the quasi-religious reconciliatory note by stating, “We all will intreat for mercy; since of mercy we all have need: for his sake, and for our own, may it be freely granted!” (II:423).

The Christian tone to this conclusion is both significant and paradoxical. The appeal to “his sake” echoes a traditional Christian prayer requesting the intercession of Jesus Christ, “in whose name we ask forgiveness.” Instead, in this passage Bonamo (the “good” secularized father) asks that the forces of the state and the laws “freely grant” forgiveness and mercy to Romaldi, a man who has destroyed the life of his brother, his brother’s wife, and orphaned their daughter. Also odd is the positioning of Selina as very much in the center of the action. Selina is more than a daughter functioning to prop up a tottering and corrupt patriarchal system. She is a social arbiter, a political advocate who cautions against rash revenge and instead pleads for forgiveness and acceptance of those who have committed even the most heinous crimes against their fellows. In short, the evolution of melodrama is predicated on the emergence of women as forces to be reckoned with in an increasingly secularized society. God is replaced in the melodramatic universe with wise women who do not hesitate to speak truth to power.
So if *speaking* is the issue, why is the hero mute? When Shepherd attempts to answer this question he observes:

The emotion of the moment of speaking out is something very different from the frustration experienced when the dumb man cannot speak to clear himself. Being able to acclaim the truth is the opposite of being trapped into a false truth. Melodrama may be said to construct excitement out of the possible alternation between being trapped in circumstances and being able to change them. (201)

For Shepherd, the rhetoric of false virtue and self-serving hypocrisy can finally be defeated only by the ontological reality of truth which does not speak; it simply is. Whereas Shepherd wants to argue that melodrama serves a liberal agenda, George Taylor insists that melodrama is inherently conservative, invested in depicting “tradition as innocent and change as evil” (205). Brooks, on the other hand, points out the highly metaphorical aspect of muteness, arguing that the mute gesture is “a displacement of meaning . . . whose tenor is vaguely defined by grandiose emotional or spiritual forces and gestures that seek to make present without directly naming it, [and instead] by pointing at it” (72).

We might also recall that Burke in his essay on the sublime had listed a number of “general privations” that he considered “great, because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence*” (II.v.115–16; his emphasis). In some ways, the deaf and dumb heroes of Holcroft’s melodramas inhabit a silent world in which their inability to communicate places them in terrifyingly vulnerable positions. But what exactly does the mute hero point to but his own maiming at the hands of a patriarchy in which he himself was/is complicit? The rhetoric of the melodrama swerves violently between hyperbole to mute silence, enacting cultural anxieties that are caused by a moral code that is allied with a conservative political agenda. Such a strategy served to defuse free-floating cultural anxiety by first enacting the worst that could happen and then containing that performance in fantasies of resolution on the stage. This technique reassured its audience that evil would be recognized and punished, good would be restored and vindicated, and stability and harmony would triumph over the capricious or chaotic. Melodramas, in short, are about the struggle to remain a believer in a world that no longer sanctioned such premodern belief systems. God is absent, but his presence is mourned and nostalgically remembered in the melodramatic universe. The god that failed in melodrama is embodied in the evil uncle, the corrupt father, the patriarch who oppresses and seduces, while the savior is the daughter/mother.
figure, a class indeterminate woman who reminds her culture that life has value in and of itself and that familial codes of appropriate conduct must function in lieu of abstract and outmoded religious principles. The melodrama works to make social and class relations feel like familial structures, the public becomes privatized, or as Shepherd observes, the melodrama “makes [the] forms and structures of society feel like private relations, elements of the inner person” (508). In short, the melodrama dramatizes the challenges faced by the older “porous self” as it finds itself confronted with a variety of changes that a modern epistemology has created.

How ironic that a committed political radical should be credited with importing melodrama, a genre that George Taylor has termed “the classic reactionary genre” (199), into Britain. And how revealing that the changes Holcroft made in his French sources caused melodrama to swerve toward the increased power and prominence of lower- and middle-class women as social arbiters in this new bourgeois nation. In fact, this trend had been recognized by Hegel in his discussion of Kotzebuean melodrama when he noted that these works tended to extol an “ordinary morality” (92). One of the legacies of Holcroft’s swerve can be seen in later gothic works like *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, where servants frequently chastise aristocrats for their excesses and follies. Holcroft revealed the moral vacuity at the social core that aristocratic Britain had constructed for itself, while his “temple of morality” became the nascent Jacobin stage presided over by a sharp-tongued maid who was morally centered enough to understand that society could not be based on outmoded codes of rank and privilege, but on forgiveness, generosity, and human decency.