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Oaths and Promises in Dion Boucicault’s Spectacular Melodrama

Miki Iwata

Queen Victoria, before going into her never-ending mourning for Prince Albert, was a frequent theatregoer. Her journal for 18 February 1861 comments on her favourite play that “One could appreciate it even more the 2nd time, but my enjoyment was damaged by seeing dear Albert so uncomfortable” (Qtd. in Fawkes 123). She went to the Adelphi Theatre to see that play three times in total, and it was the last time she showed herself in a place of public entertainment. The play was Dion Boucicault’s The Colleen Bawn, a sensation melodrama which is set in Killarney, south-west Ireland. However, nearly half a century later when W. B. Yeats endeavoured to establish a new Irish theatre that would not cater for the English audience, his hypothetical enemy was Boucicault—presumably all the more for the huge success he enjoyed in Victorian London.

Yeats’s undated letter to Lady Gregory in mid-October 1901 complains, in broken phrases which may reflect his exasperation, that: “Here are we a lot of intelligent people…yet here we are going through all sorts of trouble & annoyance for 〈a [indecipherable] body of ignoramuses who prefer Boucicault an audience a mob that prefers Boucicault to us, & the Freemans Journal to [?] Ruskin〉 a mob that knows neither literature nor art” (Collected Letters 117-18, square brackets inserted by the editors). Given the context, it can be supposed that what is insinuated in their manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897—“We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism” (Gregory 9)—is against Boucicault and his Irish plays, and this is the very attitude with which critics have followed suit. What is at stake about Boucicault—approvingly or disapprovingly—is always the matter of race (Irishness) and the melodramatic genre.

Since the 1990s, postcolonial re-reading of Boucicault’s plays has drastically changed the derogatory images of them proposed by Yeats, emphasizing Boucicault’s serious engagement in the Irish nationalist movement of the day. The issue of the Irish race is often discussed in relation to the melodramatic mode, in which Boucicault was so adept. As Peter Brooks’s seminal work,
The Melodramatic Imagination (1976), argues, melodrama is essentially a modern phenomenon. However, while Brooks focuses on the religious features of modernity, maintaining that melodrama is a “form for secularized times” and “offers the nearest approach to sacred and cosmic values in a world where they no longer have any certain ontology or epistemology” (205), subsequent scholars have enlarged the field in which melodramatic modernity is engaged, including the development of the machine culture and the new temporal-spatial perception generated by industrialization. Thus, following after Luke Gibbons’s demonstration that Boucicault’s visually-focused melodrama is a precursor of the cinema, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford asserts that Boucicault “manipulated his ‘sensation scenes’ so that technical triumphs of staging were invested with non-verbal political affect” as “mass culture, he understood, operates not through intellectual analysis, but through the politics of empathy” (18).

When we consider that ethnic identity itself, to borrow the famous phrase by Benedict Anderson, is a modern product of “the biography of nations” (204) generated by print-capitalism, it seems that Boucicault’s spectacular plays are the embodiment of modernity from every perspective, severed from the long tradition of pre-modern, aural theatre. Nevertheless, Boucicault could have been ambivalent about his own strategy. The playwright’s comment on his own dramaturgy—“It’s a degrading occupation, but more money has been made out of guano than out of poetry” (Qtd. in Walsh 96)—has often been quoted as a proof of his pragmatic mindset towards commercialism and willing dismissal of literary theatre. Even so, one can also recognize a strong sense of self-humiliation and a longing for poetry. Indeed, Boucicault’s plays arguably reflect the trajectory of his desperate, losing battle throughout his career to produce literary drama in which verbal activity can be a prime determinant of the work.

This essay examines how Boucicault, glancing at Shakespeare as his model, endeavoured to infuse his hyper-spectacular melodramas with intense moments of speech acts, which, ironically, could only be a fake and even at times contribute to the visually-oriented dramaturgy of the time. In spite of his status as the lucrative Victorian theatre incarnate, Boucicault also pines for the tradition of the pre-modern aural theatre with a listening audience rather than spectators who desire to have a feast for their eyes. And yet, as an actor cum playwright whose initiation into drama was his playing Rolla in a school production of Pizarro, the most insipid work in R. B. Sheridan’s oeuvre, a melodramatic tragedy without anything of his signature word play, Boucicault’s lines are too obvious and facile to be a match for Shakespeare’s profoundly equivocal ones. Nevertheless, as we shall see later, it is his very failure that made a guidepost for succeeding Anglo-Irish writers and, consequently, even makes him a hidden bridge between the Victorian theatre and the Irish Literary Revival.
Among almost 150 plays he worked on during his career, I will look at two plays, *The Corsican Brothers* (1852) and *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), to be discussed here, as both plays are especially famous/notorious for their technology-based visual effect. Detailed analyses will reveal how, in the former play, a prolonged scene of reconciliation by oath destroys the consistency of the dramaturgical structure of the work, or, in the latter, which generated the word “sensation melodrama,” the traditional act of oath-taking in the midst of the play’s sensational “water cave” scene highlights the possibility as well as limitation of illocutionary acts on stage in the Victorian theatre world.3

### 1. “We shall meet again”: Verbal Promises in *The Corsican Brothers*

*The Corsican Brothers* was first performed at the Princess’s Theatre under the management of Charles Kean, on 24 February 1852. It was an adaptation of a French play, itself the dramatization of Alexandre Dumas, père, *Les Freres Corses* (1845), a novella about twin brothers who can communicate telepathically with each other at their emotionally critical moments. When one of them is killed in a duel in Paris, the other, in Corsica, sees his brother’s apparition and, realizing his death, sets out on revenge.

In Boucicault’s version, Charles Kean played the double role of the twins, Fabien and Louis, and was greeted by applause for his calm acting style. George Henry Lewes, grandson of the comic actor Charles Lee Lewes, in his review in *The Leader* (28 Feb 1852), was lavish in praise: “Charles Kean plays the two brothers; and you must see him before you will believe how well and how *quietly* he plays them; preserving a gentlemanly demeanour, a drawing-room manner very difficult to assume on stage…which intensifies the passion of the part” (210). And yet, the huge success of the play, which received 66 consecutive nights’ performances, was largely owed to the technology-driven spectacle in the two apparition scenes (one at the end of Act 1 and the other at the finale).

Trap doors for supernatural beings, of course, could be as old as the stage itself, but Kean contrived a glide trap especially for *The Corsican Brothers*, to make the ghost’s movements appear sliding. This new theatrical device became so famous that it came to be called “the Corsican trap.” *Era* (29 Feb 1852) reports the shock of the new: “The visitation of ‘the shade’ was astonishingly contrived. A resemblance to Mr. Kean seemed to rise from the floor. First the head was seen, and then, as it slowly ascended higher and higher, the figure advanced, increasing as it neared him… Melodramatic effect was never more perfectly produced” (11). The theatre historian and technician Geraint D’Arcy, in his detailed explanation of its mechanism and how it was received in the Victorian theatre world, maintains that
“the cause of the play’s popularity was not the script, but the trap” (13). According to him, the Corsican trap is symbolic of the machinery-driven dramaturgy of the Victorian period: “What is interesting about this is not the contrivance of a ghost upon the stage in a melodrama, but that the device was seen as essential to the production, as if the play was incomplete without the machinery” (13).

The idea behind this argument seems as follows: Victorian theatre studies cannot but be either theatre history or performance studies because the actual plays written in that period are not worth reading. And this seems a consensus among scholars. Sharon Marcus’s opening essay of the special issue of Victorian Studies 54/3 (2012), which features Victorian theatre, declares that “it is a manifest, a list of reasons to take an interest in Victorian theater as performance, and of ways to study it that go beyond reading texts” (440). There is no denying that going beyond reading texts would be crucial for Victorian drama. However, that does not follow that authors themselves cared little about their texts. At least, Boucicault did care about his works. He was always indignant at the English theatrical practice in which playwrights had to sell a work for a lump sum, without further profit, insisting that “the play [is] more important than the star” (Fawkes 123). And indeed, as Andrew Parkin explains in his introduction to the Colin Smythe edition of Boucicault’s plays, the playwright endeavours to exercise his literary ingenuity in The Corsican Brothers: it “has brilliant symmetry of structure” (16), the “ironies…manifold” (17), and the manipulation of “time also adds depth to the play” (17).

Michael Meeuwis interprets Boucicault’s artistic contrivance in The Corsican Brothers from the context of the social liberalism of the day. For the Victorian social liberalists like Walter Bagehot, Meeuwis argues, “the two interrelated processes of social norm-making…were shaped by theatrical thinking: emulation and governability” (1094). Individuals, ideally, would assimilate others’ behaviours for their own (emulation) purely by their own volition (governability). As a result, “Theater was the primary cultural form of emulative liberalism” (1094) to “engineer audience perception in line with national norms” (1095).

From this viewpoint, Meeuwis emphasizes the importance of the episode of Fabien’s peacemaking between the two Corsican families, which appears to have little to do with the main plot and is awkwardly inserted before the climax of Act 1 (the apparition scene). While Fabien talks with Alfred, a Parisian friend of Louis, about their telepathic power and the pre-modern culture in Corsica—“what you gain in art you lose in nature. You are more prone to believe the miracles of a science which you have invented, than to believe the wonders of that creation which a divinity has made” (104)—the brothers’ mother interrupts the conversation to announce that supper is ready. This makes the atmosphere change from the serious to the comical. Fabien is still lamenting the decline of old beliefs
“by the modern mania of improvement” (106) during their meal, but now he is ironical and self-mocking. He says he is also to blame as he is “at this moment engaged in action [his] ancestors would have deemed disgraceful to them” (106), that is, working as an arbitrator between the two families, the Colonnas and the Orlandos, which have a long vendetta against each other. Though seemingly introduced as an advocate for the pre-modern for the plot’s sake, Fabien, as Meeuwis points out, actually represents the modern idea of “the stability offered by national government” (1099).

Boucicault, rather surprisingly, devotes almost all the latter half of the first act to describing their peacemaking ceremony in the presence of a judge, including a transfer of a surrogate chicken and a handshake. Consequently, watching the rituals under the guidance of Fabien, the audience, whatever social class they belong to, “perceive the world as an aristocrat does…. This aristocratic viewpoint is no longer the private property of that class; by being exposed to the theater audience, it is made universally accessible, and so compatible with national normativization” (Meeuwis 1101-2).

Though Meeuwis’s interpretations cleverly reveal what can be hidden in the apparently irrelevant details in Act 1, they would not ultimately solve the problem about the inconsistency of Fabien’s behaviour in Act 3, where he himself, observing the code of the Corsican vendetta, kills Louis’s adversary, Château-Renaud. Moreover, even in the peacemaking scene, representatives from both families are not so much impressed with the institutionalized formality as with Fabien’s personal influence as a feudal lord:

FABIEN. Your hands, I say. *(They shake hands unwillingly.)*

JUDGE *(reads).* ‘Before us, Antonio Sanola, Justice of the Peace for the district of Sullacaro, it has been solemnly and formally agreed between Carbano Orlando, and Marco Colonna, that from this day forth, the 22nd of March, 1841, the vendetta declared between them since the 11th of February, 1830, shall cease for ever….’

FABIEN. Now then, Colonna, restore the hen. (110)

It is true that the official document of reconciliation is here put between a handshaking and a hen and, therefore, theatrical performance is inseparably mixed with a bureaucratic procedure of a modern nation state. Nevertheless, for Orlando and Colonna, the most important decision was already made before the ceremony in the form of a promise by word of mouth. Immediately before the judge arrives at Fabien’s house, Orlando confides his extreme reluctance:
ORLANDO. Monsieur Fabien dei Franchi, it chokes a man to be reconciled to an enemy.

FABIEN. Remember, Orlando, you have given your word.

ORLANDO. Yes, yes, I have—Oh, if I hadn’t! (107)

For Orlando, his having given his word seems more binding than the legal document of reconciliation. Boucicault repeats the same conversation to emphasize a promise’s precedence over a formal agreement. When his deep-rooted grudge makes him linger on feigned ignorance, Fabien reminds him that “can an Orlando’s memory fail, when he has passed his word?” (107). And then, he (though “with a deep sigh”) cannot but murmur in acquiescence, “Ah! If I hadn’t!” (107).

The playwright insistently demonstrates how official documents still fail to avail in the Corsican traditional culture. After reading aloud the agreement of reconciliation, the judge demands signatures from both the parties, but Orlando bluntly replies: “I can’t sign; I don’t know how to write” (110). Consequently, the lengthy peacemaking scene as a whole does not so much underline the authority of the institutional order generated by a modern nation as the chivalric code of honour in which what you utter is almost sacred and irretrievable, and functions as a mise en place for Fabien’s own vendetta in the final act.

At the end of Act 2, having watched through the vision how and why Louis was forced to die, Fabien swears that “I go to avenge him” (126). As Montgiron warns Château-Renaud in Act 3—“Only this: he [Fabien] is a true Corsican… he will traverse the world to obtain revenge” (129)—Corsicans still live in a community based on blood, where a word by mouth is as valid as (or even more powerful than) a legal contract. For Fabien, the custom is even mythical: “Know you not that a Corsican race is like the fabled Hydra? Kill one—another supplies his place. You have shed my brother’s blood; I am here to demand yours, or yield my own” (131).

Even in the spectacular finale, the power of verbal promises still lingers on stage. After Château-Renaud collapses and dies under the tree exactly where Louis died two weeks ago, the apparition appears once again:

FABIEN. (rising). My mother, I have kept my word. Louis! Louis! I can weep for him now.

(He passes behind a tree up stage; then advances, with face covered by his hands, and sinks weeping upon the fallen tree. A pause. LOUIS DEI FRANCHI appears, rising gradually through the earth and placing his hand on the shoulder of his brother.)

LOUIS. Mourn not, my brother. We shall meet again. (133)
In this scene, the sense of relief that he could keep his word comes first to Fabien. Mourning for the dead can be allowed only after that from his point of view. Moreover, the very last line that closes the play is, rather surprisingly, uttered by the ghost in an iambic pentameter. From the early-nineteenth century on, stage ghosts had become more and more silent in reverse proportion to the advancement of theatrical technology. As early as in *The Castle Spectre* (1797), with the ghost of the heroine’s mother silent throughout the play, M. G. Lewis claims that the dramaturgy of stage ghosts of the age is different from that of Shakespeare. Though critics complained that “She ought not to appear, because the belief in Ghosts no longer exists! In my opinion, that is the very reason she *may* be produced without danger” (Cox 223). Stripped of the veil of myth and faith, stage ghosts were nothing more than a show in the Victorian theatre.

Nevertheless, the speaking ghost of Louis is not Boucicault’s invention. It is actually the French dramatisation by Eugène Grangé and Xavier de Montépin in 1850 that made a great leap from the original novella’s ending without any ghost into an eye-catching final curtain in which the apparition, putting his hand on the shoulder of Fabien, says, “Eh! pourquoi me pleurer, frère? Est-ce que nous ne nous reverrons pas là haut?” (28). Still, I would argue that Boucicault here is not altogether a mere plagiarist. In Grangé and Montépin, there is no ambiguity in Louis’s last words. The phrase “là haut” (up there) clearly shows what he is saying, “Isn’t it that we will meet again *in Heaven*?” In contrast, Boucicault’s ghost makes a more equivocal call not only to his brother but also, by implication, to the audience—“We shall meet again.” When and where shall we meet again? Does the word mean, as in the French version, that the twins will be able to see each other again in heaven after Fabien dies in future? Or rather, should we expect that a weird telepathic communication between the living and the dead might go on? Or, does the ghost simply invite the audience to come and see the play again? The three interpretations overlap with each other and one is never encouraged to choose one meaning. Besides, by transforming a rhetorical question (Est-ce que nous ne nous reverrons pas là haut?) into an affirmative (we shall meet again), Louis in Boucicault’s version is virtually making a triple promise or forecast, an illocutionary act that sets up a bridge between the present time in the play and the time to come after the curtain falls.

Thus, *The Corsican Brothers* endeavours, with minimal changes, to represent a traditional, oral culture on stage as well as a shocking spectacle, and the ambiguous closing line seems to reflect the playwright’s contrivance for ending the play with a word that would remain lodged in the audience’s ears in spite of the blockbuster Corsican trap. Emilio Sala, discussing the musical dramaturgy of *Les frères corses* by Grangé and Montépin, emphasizes the importance of the “mélodie de l’ésprit,” an accompaniment tune in the ghost scenes composed by Alphonse
Varney. He argues that the tune was experienced as acousmatic voice, “a voice-object” (11) of the silent ghost by the audience of the day, which demonstrates “the continuity between melodrama’s incidental music and musical accompaniment for narrative silent film” (13). As the same melody by Varney was used in Boucicault’s version as well, Sala draws a direct line of musical development from the French version through the English one to silent films. Nonetheless, as seen above, the ghost was never really silent at the Princess’s Theatre, London, in 1852, though he was not always good at producing poetic, powerful lines.

2. The Oath-Taking in The Colleen Bawn

In the same year as the huge success of The Corsican Brothers, Boucicault experienced another major event in his life. He fell in love with Agnes Robertson, a young actress at the Princess’s. As their relationship caused a breach with her guardian, Charles Kean, they sailed for America in 1853 and Boucicault began to work on topical material relating to America in his playwriting. For example, The Octoroon (1859), based on Mayne Reid’s novel, The Quadroon (1856), deals with an illegitimate daughter (one-eighth black by descent) of the late master of the Plantation Terrebonne in Louisiana. George, his nephew and sole heir to the plantation, loves the girl, Zoe, but the state law to forbid mixed marriage and the bankruptcy of the plantation stand in their way as well. To prevent herself from being bought by (and made a mistress of) the villainous mortgagee, M’Closky, Zoe kills herself by taking poison, not knowing that the plantation with its movable properties (including slaves) has been saved by a hairsbreadth.

Uwe Juras interprets the heroine as a variation of the “tragic mulatta”—a stereotypical (and usually female) character that appeared in mid-19th-century American slave literature.7 Zoe’s death is necessary because “the ultimately all-too visible representative of the never quite invisible political shame must depart from the plantation system” (132).8 However, Juras maintains, “Zoe’s suicide remains her only act and the only form of movement originating from her” (133) and, therefore, can be regarded positively as an act to incite cultural mediation or dialogue rather than as a passive self-victimization. The racial issue Boucicault took up in The Octoroon has influenced critics for their reading of The Colleen Bawn, whose major events pivot upon a clandestine marriage between of a peasant girl and a gentleman. Scott Boltwood, paying attention to similarities both in plots and characters between the two plays, argues that, “Although avowedly not intended to be an ‘Irish Octoroon,’ The Colleen Bawn anticipates the racial conflation of Irish and African that the English ethnological imagination scientifically argued for beginning in the 1880s” (384). Thus, for Boltwood, what apparently seems a class
difference for a modern audience actually represents a racial conflict between the Irish Celts and the Anglo-Irish Saxons.

It is true that Boucicault composed and rehearsed *The Colleen Bawn* for Laura Keene’s at the time when *The Octoroon* was scoring a big run at the Winter Garden and there are many overlaps between them. *The Colleen Bawn* is a stage adaptation of Gerald Griffin’s novel, *The Collegians* (1829), which itself is based on a true incident. In 1819, the murdered body of Ellen Hanley was found on the banks of the River Shannon. It turned out that Lieutenant John Scanlan from Ballycahane Castle, who had secretly married the beautiful peasant girl but soon regretted it, hired his boatman to get rid of her. In spite of having the famous lawyer and future patriot, Daniel O’Connell, in defence of him, Scanlan was found guilty as well as the perpetrator. Griffin made a three-volume novel that meditates on religion, morality, and the criminal psychology out of this painful case that happened in his hometown, Limerick. However, Boucicault transformed the story into a mortgage melodrama in the same vein as *The Octoroon*.

While, in *The Collegians*, Hardress Cregan (a Scanlan figure) rather selfishly transfers his affections from the peasant heroine, Eily O’Connor, to the Anglo-Irish lady, Anne Chute, Hardress in *The Colleen Bawn* is forced to marry the rich heiress, in order to keep his financially ruined estate and protect his widowed mother from an unwanted marriage with another villainous mortgagee, Corrigan. Marjorie Howes persuasively explains the importance of the genre of mortgage melodrama which Boucicault takes pleasure in. Mortgage melodrama, whose plot usually begins with a (threatened) dispossession of an estate and ends with its eventual restoration to the rightful owner, is a genre which is “obsessed with property” (Howes 86). It is an emotional reaction against “the general shift from status to contract, not just…American slavery or race” (Howes 90). As a dramatic representation of the threatening power of the modern contract society, Boucicault’s mortgage melodramas are obsessed with speech acts. According to Howes, “previous scholarship on Boucicault has been too preoccupied with those aspects [of race and colonialism]” (101), and has neglected how seriously Boucicault was engaged in “the large shifts in social and economic relations” (101).

Howes’s insightful study reliably shows the importance of speech acts in Boucicault’s plays. Even so, she mainly takes up written contracts or utterances of legal weight as examples of Boucicault’s speech acts—the invalid document about freeing Zoe from slavery or an auctioneer’s pronouncement that Zoe is bought by M’Closky in *The Octoroon*, and the marriage certificate of Eily and Hardress in *The Colleen Bawn*. Nevertheless, as was examined in the previous section of this essay, Boucicault’s plays clearly distinguish words that belong to the modern contract society from utterances that represent the traditional code of honour and, importantly, give precedence to the latter.
In the case of *The Octoroon*, the real occasion of her self-poisoning is not legal transactions about Zoe. The rash words of her lover, George, drive her to self-destruction. On the night before she will be sold to M’Clofsky, Zoe asks her nurse for drastic medicine, saying: “I sat outside his door all night—I heard his sighs—his agony—torn from him by my coming fate; and he said, ‘I’d rather see her dead than his!’” (177). His murmur to himself, which does not really mean what it says, functions as a powerful edict for her. The playwright, making the dying Zoe repeat exactly the same words in the final scene, emphasizes George’s responsibility for her death—as he himself cries, “Have I then prompted you to this?” (183). In the world of Boucicault’s drama, what is uttered is always irrevocable and must be done.

As for *The Colleen Bawn*, too, my conclusion will be different from that of Howes regarding the relationship between Boucicault’s speech acts and modernity. Nevertheless, her pointing out that “Just before Danny’s [Hardress’s boatman’s] murder attempt, he speaks of the certificate, rather than Eily herself, as the obstacle to Hardress’s plans” (94) is significant, for it is the very scene that was regarded as the chief attraction of the play, not because of the words but because of the massive stage set that represents the existent water cave in Killarney, Ireland, and a spectacular rescue of Eily.

This is the biggest change Boucicault made from his source text. In *The Collegians*, Eily is killed by Danny Mann behind the scenes. Since Hardress tells Danny that “She must not stay in Ireland” (2: 278) in Chapter 27, nearly at the end of the second volume, nothing about Eily is made known to him or the reader until her corpse is found in Chapter 35. The novel largely concerns the culpable gentleman’s psychological trepidation caused by the ambiguity of his own words as well as his own mind and his ignorance of the result. The most intense moment in the novel comes in Chapter 40, in which Hardress goes to see Danny, now in police custody and facing trial:

“But not for death,” said Hardress. “I did not say for death.”
“I own you didn’t,” returned Danny…;“I own you didn’t. I felt for you, an’ I wouldn’t wait for you to say it. But did you mane it?”
“No!” Hardress exclaimed, with a burst of sudden energy. “…I did not mean to practice on her life…. I even bade you to avoid it, Danny. Did I not warn you not to touch her life?”
“You did,” said Danny, with a scorn which made him eloquent beyond himself, “an’ your eye looked murder while you said it. After dis, I never more will look in any man’s face to know what he mains…. But listen to me, master Hardress. As sure as dat moon is shining, an’ dat fire burning; an’ as sure as I’m here, an’ you dere, so sure de sign of death was on your
Danny was right. And Hardress knows it himself. Without the indication of his boatman, he is conscious—though he would not admit that he is—that “during his conversation with Danny Mann [about getting rid of Eily], the idea of Eily’s death had flashed upon his mind, and for that instant it had been accompanied with a sensation of willful pleasure” (2: 322). Because of Hardress’s failure to see through his own mind, the disappointed Danny forsakes him, which leads to his arrest on the day of his wedding to Anne. *The Collegians* is, in a style which is suitable for a novel, occupied with what is not spoken, words floating upon the liminal border of the conscious and the unconscious.

*The Colleen Bawn* shows little interest in this kind of mental dialogue within a self, as it is a generic convention of melodrama that makes its characters clear-cut heroes and villains. Regretting his clandestine marriage and thinking about polygamy already make Hardress in the play appear an astonishing anomaly. Thus, in Boucicault’s version, Danny’s murder attempt is occasioned by a sheer misunderstanding between the master and the servant. The point here is not a meditation on criminal minds but a visual presentation of a girl threatened to death and *The Colleen Bawn* achieved it very well.

Nicholas Daly, giving a detailed account of the enthusiastic response of the contemporary audience to the water cave scene, calls it “industrial pastoral” or “a pastoral-modern hybrid” (71). Act 2, Scene 6, begins with a discovery of “A Cave; through large opening at back is seen the Lake and moon; rocks—flat rock; gauze waters all over stage; rope hanging. Enter MYLES singing, top of rock” (229). Myles-na-Coppaleen (played by Boucicault himself) is a great development from a minor character in *The Collegians*. What was an uncouth mountaineer in the novel is here transformed into a lively trickster that anticipates another famous Irish trickster invented and played by the playwright, Conn the Shaughraun. Myles is a poacher and poteen maker, a vagabond who has a far stronger link with the traditional Catholic culture than with the establishment. Loyally cherishing his unrequited love to Eily, he works as a contrast to Hardress. While an Anglo-Irish gentleman would betray and kill her (though Hardress as individual does not know it), a Catholic-Irish vagabond would love and save.

Coming down to see his whiskey-still, he happens to come across the very moment when Danny has pushed Eily into water to drown her. Myles at first does not recognize what is “something white there” (230) sinking under water. After a pause that makes the audience anxious, finally he cries—“Ah! that dress; it’s Eily. My own darlin’ Eily”—and makes a great jump from the rock, “then MYLES and EILY rise up—he turns, and seizing rock—EILY across left arm” (231). The sensational close of the second act made such a big stir that a dramatic
correspondent of *Punch* (4 May 1861) cynically analyses: “Of course the ‘header’ [of Myles] has been to some eyes the attraction, and the business of the cave scene is so cleverly contrived that I am not disposed to wonder at the plaudits it calls forth” (186).

According to Daly, in spite of the façade of the pre-modern pastoral world, the cave scene is thoroughly modern. This kind of “split-second timing” (70) rescue can be really appreciated only by the audience who are used to the “sense of industrialized time” (71). This is “a thoroughly modern rescue, depending not just on timing, but also on all of the illusive resources of the stage: lighting to imitate moonlight, trapdoors and a small army of stage hands to facilitate the disappearance and reappearance of Myles and Eily from beneath the ‘waves,’ and not least those gauzy waves” (71).

In this critical context, at the centre of which technology and industrialization lie, it is noteworthy that Howes, maintaining that the “marriage certificate and the chain of speech acts embodied by that document express the most significant features of Eily’s identity” and that the “certificate drives the plot from the possibility of mere abandonment to murder” (94), indicates that the real core of the water cave scene is not a spectacle but speech acts. Even so, as we have seen, the “speech acts” in her meaning also reflect the general shift from the status society to the contract society—in short, modernity.

Nonetheless, like Orlando in *The Corsican Brothers*, Eily obviously attaches far more value to an oath by mouth than to the written certificate. When Hardress insinuates to Eily that he wishes to retract their secret marriage in Act 1, Scene 3, she acquiesces with him, showing no sign of the qualms of conscience:

EILY. Oh! When you talk that way to me, ye might take my life, and heart, and all. Oh! Hardress, I love you—take the paper and tare it.

(HARDRESS takes paper.)

(ENTER MYLES.)

MYLES. No, I’ll be damned if he shall.

HARDRESS. Scoundrel! you have been listening?

MYLES. To every word. I saw Danny wid his ear agin that dure, so as there was only one kay-hole I adopted the windy. Eily, aroon, Mr Cregan will giv’ ye back that paper; you can’t tare up an oath; will ye help him then to cheat this other girl, and to make her his mistress, for that’s what she’ll be if ye are his wife. (211)

It is Myles, “an outlaw” (211) in his own words, who ironically claims the authority of the document and explains to Eily the continuity between a written certificate and “an oath” by mouth. Just after exasperated Hardress throws down
the certificate and exits, Father Tom (a Catholic priest who married the couple) enters and makes her take a solemn oath in a highly ritualistic way:

FATHER TOM. Be the hush, and spake after me—by my mother that’s in heaven.
EILY. By my mother that’s in heaven.
FATHER TOM. By the light and the word.
EILY. By the light and the word.
FATHER TOM. Sleepin’ or wakin’.
EILY. Sleepin’ or wakin’.
FATHER TOM. This proof of my truth.
EILY. This proof of my truth.
FATHER TOM. Shall never again quit my breast.
EILY. Shall never again quit my breast. (EILY utters a cry and falls—(Tableau.)

As Father Tom makes Eily repeat the same phrase, the exact words of the oath are accordingly emphasized to the audience’s ears, and they are much more binding for Eily than the certificate itself. At the same time, however, we should note how spectacular the scene itself is. Needless to say, this scene with a beautiful girl fainting and falling on the floor is also put into the play in order to impress the audience’s eyes as a tableau. Furthermore, the ritualistic oath-taking is quite simple, even facile, as an illocutionary act after all. There is a huge gap between meaningfully equivocal oaths and vows in Shakespeare’s plays and Boucicault’s obvious, straight oaths.

John Kerrigan, analysing oaths and vows in the bard’s plays including *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Winter’s Tale*, points out that they can be “dramatically productive because they are uttered in one context but still make claims on fidelity when the setting changes” (63). In the former play, Hector sticks to his oath to fight with Achilles in spite of Andromache’s plea to stay. Yet, from the contemporary casuistry on oaths, the audience was presumably not so sure whether his oath was really binding. On the other hand, when Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale* delusively swears that his queen has an affair with Polixenes, his words reveal that the fabric of his linguistic universe cannot be refuted by material evidence. In short, Shakespeare’s plays show us that the “speech-act, so complete for [J. L.] Austin, is dramatically potent because insufficient” (Kerrigan 78). From this point of view, Boucicault’s oaths cannot but be dramatically impotent because of its sufficiency.

When Danny threatens her with death to give him the certificate in the water cave scene, Eily replies: “Take me to the priest; let him lift the oath off me. Oh! Danny, I swore a blessed oath on my two knees, and ye would ax me to break
that?” (230). What is really at stake for her is not so much a written certificate of a marriage contract as a divine oath on one’s knees—the simplest, most clear-cut way to represent the power of oral tradition on stage.

Also at the climax of Act 3, Scene 5, in which the presumed dead Eily appears at the wedding of Hardress and Anne, a series of speech acts are performed on stage to ensure the happy ending of the play, but all of them are quite obvious. Seeing Eily, Hardress finally acknowledges her in public: “My wife—my own Eily” (250). Then, his mother begs her pardon: “it was my foolish pride spoke in his hard words—he loves you with all his heart. Forgive me, Eily” (250), to which she replies just in one word of declaration: “Forgive” (250). For all the intended aural-centred dramaturgy, these performative lines betray weakness all the more for their lucidity.

Only in the final exchanges, Eily faintly shows her potential to expresses the inexpressible:

EILY. I’m only a poor simple girl, and it’s frightened I am to be surrounded by so many—
ANNE. Friends, Eily, friends.
EILY. Oh, if I could think so—if I could hope that I had established myself in a little corner of their hearts, there wouldn’t be a happier girl alive than THE COLLEEN BAWN. (251)

Stopped in the middle of a sentence by Anne, Eily checks herself before uttering what she was going to say (judging from the use of the pronoun “their hearts,” her very last words are spoken to the audience as an epilogue as well as to Anne as a reply). The sense of incompleteness in their conversation is augmented by the subjunctive mood, “if I could think so,” which suggests that she does not believe Anne’s patronizing pronouncement and still thinks herself as an alien in the establishment. Then, the pale shadow casted on this oh-so-happy “Cinderella” ending finally succeeds in insinuating what the apparently impressive oath-taking scene failed to convey—the creative kind of ambiguity which lingers even after the curtain.

3. Boucicault on the Dramatic Critic

How many among the audience of Boucicault appreciated his lines spoken on stage rather than spectacles? Probably very few. Sporadic, awkward references to the pre-modern oral culture in Corsica or Ireland, where spoken words exercised greater authority, were too tiny a hint to think of Boucicault in association with the
early-modern aural theatre. Instead, his contemporary critics described his works in the words “novelty” and “spectacle,” in stark contrast to literary drama by the Bard.

“Shakespeare, and His Latest Stage Interpreters,” an unsigned article in *Fraser’s Magazine* (Dec 1861), deplores the deterioration of taste, referring to *The Colleen Bawn* as a notable example: “how could the *furore* be explained which has been excited by such a drama as *The Colleen Bawn*?… Poetry, passion, elevation of character or thought, are of little or no account…. Touch the hearts of your audience, if you can, but by all means gratify their senses, and work them up into a fever of physical excitement. On this principle Mr. Boucicault has wrought, and being a master in the technical requisites of his craft, his piece has proved a very gold mine to him” (772). Throughout his long theatrical career, Boucicault was dogged by this kind of censure. When J. Francis Hitchman proposes in his essay “Decline of the Drama” (1867) that there is “no reason why the very obvious defects we have pointed out should not be removed” (65), one of the “defects” means Boucicault: “Of Mr. Boucicault’s literary qualifications…[m]ost people who have ever seriously examined the sensational dramas which have brought so much money and fame to this prolific writer will be apt to think rather meanly…. He is, however, a consummate master of stage effect” (59). It would be impossible to exhaust the list of the articles in which Boucicault is described as a symbol of the non-literary commercial theatre depending on cheap adaptations with sensational scenes.

What was worse to the playwright, they were not without reason. As analysed in the previous sections, the gesture of dramatic speech acts in Boucicault’s plays is, after all, a popularized counterfeit of oaths in Shakespeare, except occasional successful lines, especially in finales. Possibly all the more because he could not regard himself as innocent of the charge, he was exasperated at the “decline of the drama” argument of the day. Not only defending himself in various periodicals and newspapers, he even meddled in his colleagues’ business on some occasions. When critics complained that T. W. Robertson’s *School* (1869)—“the most popular of all his plays at the Prince of Wales’s” (Jenkins 88)—smacked of borrowings from other plays and was not really original, it was not Robertson himself but Boucicault who hotly refuted the opinion in *The New York Times* (21 Feb 1869): “It is time that this ridiculous cant about ‘originality’ should be exploded. There is no such thing as originality, as the word is now used” (3):

This cant about “originality” is a new cry. It would have opened SHAKESPEARE’s eyes to hear himself accused of being a mere literary thief…. VANBURGH did worse than SHAKESPEARE. He took a play of CIBBER’s, and adapting all the principal characters therein, he wrote
a continuation. And SHERIDAN took VANBURGH’s continuation and remodeled it under the title of “A Trip to Scarboro.”

Under the cover of defending Robertson, Boucicault clearly tries to justify himself and acquire a position in the English theatrical tradition traced to Shakespeare. There is, of course, some truth in his claim that working on adaptations is the rightful tradition of the theatre world from the time of Shakespeare onwards. But it cannot dispel the repeated criticism that his adaptations lack due literary qualifications.

Thus, in his version of “The Decline of the Drama” (1877), Boucicault dares to explain the reason he should write in an unpoetical style—to keep in step with the age. While the “Shakespearean age was meditative” (238), he argues, “the mind of mankind has been eagerly devoted to the application of scientific discoveries to useful purposes” during the 19th century (239). The ghosts that visit Richard III, Brutus, Hamlet, and Macbeth, would appeal to the audience’s imagination, but “Ghosts are now secured by patent and produced by machinery” (239). In short, the age requires “the mind of the dramatist to be practical, utilitarian, to be in sympathetic accord with the minds of the people. He must not consider anything too deeply; his audience cannot follow him” (239). Though Boucicault’s logic appears that he is either playing on a self-deprecating humour or shifting the blame onto the decline of the audience, it actually does not make an issue of the failure nor the success of the modern intellect:

So our Milton has been directed to dismount Pegasus and bestride the lighting which science has bridled, Shakespeare is occupied in editing a morning newspaper.... Bacon is trying to reach the North Pole, while Michael Angelo is inventing a sewing-machine. Great intellect, no longer meditative, is active. (240)

It is just a matter of what intellectual faculty people would like to employ. According to Boucicault, while the meditative (poetic) faculty reached its culmination in the Renaissance, the active (scientific) faculty is essential in the nineteenth century. Slyly replacing the subject with something else, Boucicault indirectly (but boldly) maintains that he is as good a writer as his great predecessor in his own way.10

And yet, his ingenuity in arguing what is the quintessence of the contemporary drama compels him to acknowledge the claim of his adversary critics that his work solely depends on modernity rather than literary tradition. Thus, Boucicault cannot be consistent in his logic but, in the concluding part of the essay, he rather abruptly changes the direction of an attack, deploring the
“decline” of the dramatic critic. While drama criticism was once “the body-guard of the drama,” he laments: “Its functions have been of late years usurped by the newspaper press, and the old critical band has been dissolved” (241). From the viewpoint of enlightenment, critics bear even greater responsibility to preserve the quality of literature than writers do. In this newspaper age, it is they who can most influence the taste of the common audience. As a result, Bouicicault maintains that “The dramatic critic should be thoroughly acquainted with the principles and craft of dramatic composition, the art of acting, a student in dramatic literature,” with a complaint that “Yet I have known many instances where eminent newspaper critics have failed conspicuously in their judgment of plays at a first performance” (242). For him, it is not playwrights but critics who have deteriorated in their literary qualifications.

If we stop disregarding Bouicicault’s opinion merely as the misplaced anger of a non-literary, populist playwright, something significant for our understanding of the Victorian theatre might emerge from beneath the prevailing idea that it was thoroughly modern and solely about music and spectacle. The continuing contention about the degradation of the drama between Bouicicault and theatre critics betrays that both theatre people and critics were in fact divided between the traditional ideals of men of letters and the realities of the technology-driven, mass culture in the late-nineteenth century.

In a series of heated wars of words, both groped for a literary breakthrough, which culminated in Yeats’s enthusiastic call for reformation in his essays in early 1900s—“a bitter hatred of London is becoming a mark of those that love the arts [i.e., theatre]” (Essays 98), and, therefore, in order that “the right people may escape the stupefying memory of the theatre of commerce which clings even to them, our plays will be for the most part remote, spiritual, and ideal” (Essays 166). Here, it is not that Yeats found and pointed out a problem which was rampant and passed unnoticed in the Victorian theatre world. Rather, its own struggle to articulate its impasse taught what was wrong with it to the poet, who once embraced, as a twelve-year-old boy, Henry Irving’s performance of Hamlet as “an image of heroic self-possession for the poses of youth and childhood to copy” (Yeats, Autobiographies 47).

Of course, Dion Bouicicault’s dramatic career cannot be promoted through favouritism. Nevertheless, he should not be dismissed too much, either. The point we should really note is his contradictory, even desperate, attempt to be an expert in both dramaturgies of the modern theatre and the early modern theatre at the same time. Victorian theatre critics attacked him as a modernity incarnate and Yeats followed the tenor of their argument, criticising Bouicicault for his vulgar English Victorianism and advocating that Ireland is “the home of an ancient idealism.”
And yet, his viewpoint was in fact that of the Victorians, or, more correctly, was developed from the debate between Boucicault and critics.

Then, it is less surprising than it appears that J. M. Synge saw Boucicault from a different angle. His review of some revival performances of Boucicault’s *The Shaughraun* at the Queen’s Theatre, Dublin, in June 1904, says that it offers “an interesting comparison between the methods of the early Irish melodrama and those of the Irish National Theatre Society” (2: 397-98), regretting that “at the present time few are perhaps aware what good acting comedy some of his work contains” (2: 398). Synge goes on to report that “Mr. James O’Brien especially, in the part of Conn, put a genial richness into his voice…and in listening to him one felt how much the modern stage has lost” (2: 398). Interestingly, he regards Boucicault’s comedy as “good,” not because of spectacle nor sensation, but because of the lines which can bring out the best in actors. For Synge, Boucicault’s theatre was primarily aural rather than visual.

Thus, Synge goes so far as to add that “It is fortunate for the Irish National Theatre Society that it has preserved—in plays like *The Pot of Broth*—a great deal of what was best in the traditional comedy of the Irish stage” (2: 398). Mentioning *The Pot of Broth* (1902)—a one-act folk drama by Yeats himself with the help of Lady Gregory—in this context, he suggests that their own movement for the revival of poetic theatre actually shares a common ground with Boucicault. He might have been secretly pleased with the animadversion of *The Leader* (17 Oct 1903) upon his *In The Shadow of the Glen* (1903): “one of the nastiest little plays I have ever seen…an evil compound of Ibsen and Boucicault” (Qtd. in Yeats 445). In his search for the words which are especially suitable for use on stage, Boucicault could have been a precursor of the revival movement of verse drama in the early 20th century.

**Notes**

1 Nicholas Grene begins his *The Politics of Irish Drama* (1999) by introducing the playbill for the first production of *The Colleen Bawn*—“Irish dramas have hitherto been exaggerated farces, representing low life or scenes of abject servitude and suffering. Such is not a true picture of Irish society” (Qtd. in Grene 5)—in juxtaposition to the above-quoted manifesto. Thus, he calls attention to the fact that “Authenticity and authority have been issues in Irish drama as far back as Boucicault” (6). More recently, Deidre MacFeely’s monograph—*Dion Boucicault: Irish Identity on Stage* (2012)—exhaustively illustrates the complex interaction of his plays, the audiences in England and America, and the Irish independence movement. As for the American audience response to Boucicault, see also Orel 66-77.

2 The phrase is seen in his letter to Edward Sterling on 13 March 1864, a
month after The Poor of Liverpool opened at the Amphitheatre in Liverpool. It is a localized version of his The Poor of New York in 1857, which is itself an English adaptation from Les Pauvres de Paris by M. B. Brisbane and Eugène Nus (1856). What Boucicault means as “a degrading occupation” here is the continuous re-adaptation of the same material to add a tinge of locality of the place of performance.

3 The word “sensation” was first used not for plays but for novels like Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White (1859-60). The advertisement for the London performance of The Colleen Bawn which appeared in The Times (1 October 1860) reads: “the London public at last has been roused by a real theatrical ‘sensation’” (Qtd. in Roach 56).

4 Hereafter, all the quotations from Boucicault’s plays will be from the Colin Smythe edition and page numbers will be given in parenthesis.

5 For some mysterious reason, Meeuwis confused Château-Renaud with his second at the duel, Montgiron. However, in all the reliable editions of The Corsican Brothers, including his own source text, Booth, the person who kills Louis and is accordingly revenged by Fabien is Château-Renaud.

6 The original novella by Dumas, père, ends with the simple cry of the surviving brother (named Lucien), “Ah, my brother, my poor brother!” (128), and a concluding comment of the narrator: “These were the first tears that the young man had shed” (128).

7 Though the “tragic mulatto” is the more common term, Juras, following Eve Allegra Raimon, uses the feminine form. See Juras 118. As for the origin of the term, see Sollors 223-25.

8 Boucicault revised the tragic ending of The Octoroon into a happy one immediately after its London première in December 1861. The Adelphi’s playbill for 9-14 December reads: “Mr. BOUCICAUTL begs to acknowledge the hourly receipt of many letters, entreatting that the termination of the “Octoroon” should be modified, and the Slave Heroine saved from an unhappy end. He cannot … refuse compliance with a request so easily granted” (Qtd in Fawkes 129), though one never knows how easy he actually felt it was to change the ending.

9 In its first London performance at the Adelphi alone, which began on 10 September 1860, The Colleen Bawn was given 230 performances in total. A correspondent of Punch (3 November 1860) reports his visit to the most popular play in the season jokingly: “Of course I went to see the Colleen Bawn. I couldn’t help myself. Everyone was bothering me about it. ‘Have you seen the Colleen?’ , says one. ‘What d’ye think of the Bawn?’. . . (between ourselves I’ve not the wildest notion what either of those words mean)” (171). The title shows an Anglicized spelling of the Irish phrase “cailín bán” (a fair girl), referring to Eily.

10 Bouicault’s habitual juxtaposition of Shakespeare with himself was another butt of critical derision. After the failure of his Rescued in September 1879, “Mr. Dion Boucicault on Himself,” an unsigned article in The Theatre (Nov 1879), maliciously announces that “everybody knows that the author of Rescued is the Shakespeare of his age” (187), but proceeds to say, “He runs up and down the whole gamut of vain self-glorification” (188).
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