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Dion Boucicault: Fortune, Fame, Failure

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Dion Boucicault: Fortune, Failure, and the Pretense of Fame

During the years 1840-1880, Dion Boucicault was the most prominent and prolific dramatist on the world stage, popular with international audiences and adored by Queen Victoria. In addition to writing or adapting more than 200 plays, Boucicault proved himself to be an accomplished actor and director, instituted one of the world's first theatrical touring companies, established the royalty system for the payment of dramatists, won and lost great fortunes, successfully lobbied the U.S. Congress for copyright legislation for playwrights in 1856, directed an American school of acting, and counted fire-proof scenery among his many stagecraft innovations. He was the most prosperous and imitated playwright of the English-speaking stage for half a century, whom some claimed would live on as the greatest dramatist of his age, his works second only to Shakespeare's. So how is it that Boucicault, so influential and notorious in his day, fails to be mentioned alongside Wilde, Shaw, Ibsen, and Zola today? The reason is simple: Boucicault was elevated, celebrated, challenged, and ultimately destroyed by the very monster he created -- his public.

In December 1820, Dion Boucicault was born Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot in Dublin. While he grew up ashamed that his legitimate father was likely not his mother's husband Samuel Boursiquot, wine merchant, but rather Dionysius Lardner, academic and encyclopaedist, this indignity did not prevent him from accepting quarterly allowances from Lardner to pursue his education and acting career in England. Boucicault was a driven young man, and he made his stage debut in Bristol on the eve of his eighteenth birthday. Only a few months later, in February 1839, his first original play, the one-act *Lodgings to Let*, was presented with Boucicault playing the lead. The play soon moved to London, yet failed to cause a stir; Boucicault, however, had tasted success, and would not be held back. His first full-length play was staged in Hull the next December, the day before his nineteenth birthday. While recognition eluded the young Boucicault for the next year, a case of mistaken identity with

another playwright afforded him a commission to write a five-act comedy for Covent Garden. The precocious Boucicault completed the play in 30 days. This was not the final version, however; given his youth and inexperience, the actors in the play made significant revisions to the dialogue that suited their individual talents. The strategy paid off: on 4 March 1841, *London Assurance* made its debut to a packed house and rave reviews. At the age of twenty, Dion Boucicault found himself the most celebrated playwright in London.

Despite his overnight success, Boucicault soon learned three valuable lessons that would shape the rest of his life. First, while he earned £300 for writing *London Assurance*, an actor made £3000 playing in it. Second, the public were not interested in clever, original dramas; they preferred adaptations from popular French theatre. And, lastly, Boucicault discovered that his youthful arrogance and colorful personality had made him many enemies in the popular press: a situation that would haunt and drive him for the rest of his life. Given these realizations, Boucicault laid out his path for the future: he would pursue personal financial success rather than seek literary renown. And with that, he was off to France to purloin more plays for adaptation to the London stage.

Boucicault kept himself in the spotlight over the next decade, courting scandal and faithfully delivering successful dramas to an appreciative public. His marriage to a wealthy French widow many years his senior raised eyebrows, but her mysterious death in 1848, coupled with Boucicault's silence on the matter, really heated up the gossip columns and made him even more of a star. His play, the *Corsican Brothers*, staged in 1852 in London, became the runaway hit of the season, with Queen Victoria attending five performances and sketching the major duel scene in her journal. The "Corsican Trap" that Boucicault designed for the play was adopted by theatres worldwide, and demonstrated that Boucicault's talents were deep and varied: he was truly a master of stagecraft, dialogue, adaptation, and self-promotion. The year 1852 also saw Boucicault marry the beautiful and talented actress Agnes Robertson, who had been the star of many of his recent successes. On account of professional restlessness, a fallout with his theatre

patron, and his desire to make himself and Agnes both international celebrities, Boucicault and his new bride moved to the United States in 1853. They briefly settled in New Orleans, where Boucicault failed in his attempt to manage a theatre, and were forced to spend the next few years on the road. However, in a truly ironic twist, Dion Boucicault—the man who spent over a decade pilfering plays from the French and passing them off as his own—successfully lobbied the United States Congress to pass copyright legislation in 1856 that protected dramatists from intellectual property theft. In the wake of this personal triumph, Agnes and Boucicault moved to New York to seek a better fortune.

The move was a wise one. In New York City, Boucicault's career and reputation soared again with his newest drama, *The Poor of New York*, first staged in December 1857. Boucicault based this play on the recent financial crisis that had panicked New York, and added a sensation scene involving realistic stage fire, an authentic fire engine, and a collapsing building. This combination of contemporary melodrama, sensation, and realism proved to be exactly what the public wanted; in the meantime, Boucicault, by drawing on recent events and local place names, had essentially created the American drama. Yet Boucicault never forgot the horrors of slavery he witnessed while in New Orleans, and, on 6 December 1859, his play *The Octoroon* opened to a combination of critical acclaim and outrage.

The Octoroon was pro-abolitionist at heart, but Boucicault also attempted to create sympathetic Southern characters. The result was to often offend both sides of the slavery issue: Agnes' portrayal of the title character with 1/8 African blood caused a stir, and pro-slavery audiences felt it a condemnation of their way of life. But, for Boucicault, it caused a sensation and was therefore a success. When *The Octoroon* was staged in London the following year, Boucicault confirmed his philosophy that audience desires were paramount by changing the ending of the play from a tragic suicide to a marriage after initial disapproval. His gamble paid off again, and the play was a sensation in Britain as well.

By Boucicault's own admission, his plays were not of the highest literary quality, and he famously stated, "I can spin out these rough and tumble dramas as a hen lays eggs. It's a degrading occupation, but more money has been made out of guano than of poetry." In that light, Boucicault continued to churn out period-piece melodramas for decades, which brought as many people to see the sensation scenes as the drama itself. In 1860, his play *The Colleen Bawn* was so successful that it ran for 230 nights, a record at the time, and led Boucicault to create the first touring company to ensure the play's quality wherever it ran. Other Irish dramas like *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864) and *The Shaughraun* (1874) cemented Boucicault's international reputation, and in the 1870s it was common for dozens of his plays—past and present--to be running in Great Britain, the United States, and Australia. Boucicault won and squandered fortunes, delighted in partaking in wars of words in the press, and remained an international celebrity. But Boucicault, for all his theatrical knowledge, failed to observe that the public was growing tired of the contrivances of melodrama, and looked instead to the naturalism of dramatists like Ibsen and Zola for their entertainment. As such, the 1880s found Boucicault a broken man. The press was unforgiving in their treatment of his new plays, and, far worse, the public were indifferent. Boucicault had discovered too late his error in seeking immediate fame over lasting literary distinction; only two weeks before died, heartbroken, he wrote to a friend: "it has been a long jig and I am beginning to see the pathos of it. I have written for a monster who forgets."