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Sex, Death, Dickens, and the Early American Musical

Laurence Senelick

Abstract

This article argues that the stage version of Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, adapted by John Brougham as *Little Nell and the Marchioness*, may be the first American book musical. Its enduring success was largely attributed to the performance of Lotta Crabtree in the dual roles from 1866 onwards. If the status of the play is justified, then it may require some scholarly re-visioning of the early history of the American musical.

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Miss Havisham's Expectations/Sikes and Nancy review – sex and death in a Dickens double. 3 / 5 stars 3 out of 5 stars. Clad in a frayed wedding dress and a white wig, Marlowe hints at the character's earlier vivacity, transmogrifies into the young Estella who becomes her instrument of revenge, and even does a few sportive magic tricks. Some of the aspersions on Dickens' own abandonment of his wife for Ellen Ternan are out of the standard feminist handbook, but this is a witty, unexpectedly sexy evocation of a bitterly wronged woman. In contrast, Swanton goes all out to chill our blood with the story of Nancy's murder and Sikes's own spectacular death in *Oliver Twist*. Dickens himself, when acting the same passages, wrote "Terror to the end" in the prompt book.