

# Romanticism

## Lecture 9: Romantic Drama

### 1) Theatre in the Romantic Age

### 2) Theatricality in the Romantic Age

### 3) Wordsworth in the Theatre

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### 1) Theatre in the Romantic Age

[M]uch writing during the period was trying to move drama and its readers out of the theatre and [...] much subsequent writing about the period has denied its interest and competence in drama or theatre. The standard view presented both in theatre histories and criticism on Romanticism is that the period produced no playwright of note, no play that was at once poetic and stageworthy, and that the conditions of early nineteenth-century theatres [...] were themselves hostile to classical drama, especially verse tragedy [...] With seating capacities of over 3000, theatres were cavernous, stages were huge, and audiences were noisy, raucous, and irreverent [...] The combined effect was a theatre experience that favoured spectacle over spoken discourse because so many in the audience could not hear what was being said on stage, arrived halfway through a play, or attended the theatre primarily to see and be seen. In its day, discourse regarding Romantic theatre instituted a major separation between stage and page, viewing and reading, popular and cultivated, distinctions that are still operative in discussions about art today and that tend to link viewing with the mindless masses and reading with the cultivated individual.

(Carlson 2005, 642)

**William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800):**

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind and, unfitting it for voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers (I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton) are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.

**From a contemporary report on a performance of Schiller's *The Robbers* (1781):**

The theatre was like a madhouse: rolling eyeballs, clenched fists, stamping feet, hoarse cries in the auditorium! Complete strangers fell sobbing into each other's arms, women staggered almost fainting to the door. It was a general state of dissolution, like a chaos from whose mists a new creation is breaking forth.

(Quoted in King 2003, 72. German original: Anton Pichler, *Chronik des Großherzoglichen Hof- und Nationaltheaters in Mannheim*. Mannheim 1879: 67f. See also Friedrich Schiller, *Werke und Briefe in 12 Bänden. Dramen 1*. Hrsg. von Gerhard Kluge. Frankfurt/M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1988, 965-966.)

**Legitimate Theatre:**

Covent Garden, Drury Lane (patent/license issued by Charles II in 1662)

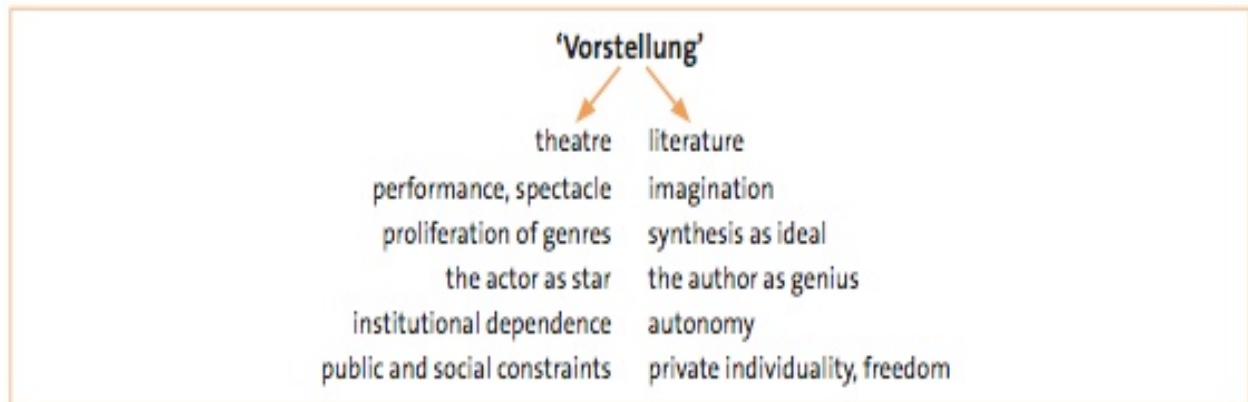
**Illegitimate Theatre:**

Sadler's Wells and others within a fifteen-mile radius from Westminster

(cf. Moody 2000)

**Theatre vs. Literature**

<b>intense theatrical activity</b>	<b>no drama of literary merit</b>
<b>sentimental comedies and farces, domestic tragedy, gothic melodrama, German tragedies (<i>Sturm und Drang</i>), political theatre, proto-psychological case studies</b>	<b>'closet drama', dramatic poems (the historical/realist novel)</b>
<b>enhanced role of Shakespeare after 1769 and rediscovery of other Elizabethan/Jacobean playwrights (e.g. John Ford, John Webster, Philip Massinger)</b>	<b>relationship between literary history and institutions (theatre, publishing industry, the 'market-place')?</b>
<b>famous actresses and actors: Edmund Keane (1787-1833), Philip Kemble (1775-1854), Sarah Siddons (1755-1831), Charles Macready (1793-1873)</b>	<b>the role of the author?</b>
<b>substantial readership for printed plays stimulated by the emergent publishing industry</b>	<b>relationship between text and performance, reading as performance?</b>
<b>increasing emphasis on spectacle, for example in the stage designs by Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg (1740-1812)</b>	<b>emphasis on entertainment as aesthetically, politically, and morally compromised</b>
<b>'realisation' of text influenced by managers, actors and scene designers</b>	<b>the ideal of artistic autonomy and control</b>



(Reinfandt 2012, 54)

**Plays from the Romantic Age (\*cf. Baines/Burns, ed. 2000):**

Horace Walpole,	<i>*The Mysterious Mother</i> (1768)
Oliver Goldsmith,	<i>She Stoops to Conquer</i> (1773)
Richard Brinsley Sheridan,	<i>The Rivals</i> (1774)
	<i>The School for Scandal</i> (1777)
	<i>The Critic, or A Tragedy Rehearsed</i> (1779)
Robert Southey,	<i>*Wat Tyler</i> (1794)
Joanna Baillie,	<i>*De Monfort</i> (1798)
Elizabeth Inchbald,	<i>*Lover's Vows</i> (1798)
(cf. von Kotzebue,	<i>Ein Kind der Liebe</i> )
Lord Byron,	<i>Manfred</i> (1817)
	<i>*The Two Foscari</i> (1821)
	<i>Cain</i> (1821)
Percy Bysshe Shelley,	<i>The Cenci</i> (1819)
	<i>Prometheous Unbound</i> (1820)
William Wordsworth,	<i>The Borderers</i> (1842)

## 2) Theatricality in the Romantic Age

[The Romantic age] was preoccupied to the point of obsession with the theatre as an institution and with the theatricality of social, political and personal behaviour. The discourse, practice, and images of the theatre pervaded all aspects of the culture.

- Politics:**
- > the ritual of protest and mass demonstration
  - > the hurly-burly of the election
  - > parliamentary performances
  - > textual strategies of ultra-radicals and their opponents
- Law:**
- > the macabre theatre of public executions
  - > the pomp of the assize procession
- Warfare:**
- > rituals of military training, discipline and the conduct of battle
  - > costume-like uniforms of both the general and the subaltern
- Art/  
Literature:**
- > the momentous drama of history painting, displayed in exhibitions which were themselves sites of communal performance
  - > the association between gendered subjectivity and performance in both the conduct book tradition and novels
- (Russell 1999, 223)

### Additional Points (cf. Merten 2005):

- > the theatre as a model for the emerging human sciences: observation/self-observation and the discovery of Man as subject *and* object (Foucault)
- > Joanna Baillie's dramatic concept of 'sympathetick curiosity' (1798) and its influence on Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)
- > Romantic criticism of the theatre as an engagement with the possibilities of representing Man as subject *and* object
- > the representation of Man as subject *and* object in poetry and fiction: 'theatrical narrative' combining internal and external perspectives (Sir Walter Scott), poetry between sympathy and subjective exaltation (William Wordsworth)

Our hero's bosom glowed with the resentment which undeserved and apparently premeditated insult was calculated to excite in the bosom of one who had aspired after honour, and was thus wantonly held up to public scorn and disgrace. Upon comparing the date of his colonel's letter with that of the article in the Gazette, he perceived that his threat of making a report upon his absence had been literally fulfilled, and without inquiry, as it seemed, whether Edward had either received his summons, or was disposed to comply with it. The whole, therefore, appeared a formed plan to degrade him in the eyes of the public; and the idea of its having succeeded filled him with such bitter emotions, that, after various attempts to conceal them, he at length threw himself into Mac-Ivor's arms, and gave vent to tears of shame and indignation.

Walter Scott, *Waverley, or 'Tis Sixty Years Since*, ch. 25 (1814)

### **The Model of the Romantic Poet (cf. Labbe 2008):**

Once upon a time there was a general consensus that Romantic poets flooded their work with a sincerity that enabled readers to feel a privileged access to the growth of a poet's mind, the fears that he might cease to be, the delight that came sudden on his heart. Although there exists a healthy critical debate of the terms, in the end sincerity and authenticity were held to be a main goal of Romantic writing. The Romantic poet spoke openly to men. Recent re-evaluations of this seemingly unmediated stance [...] have helpfully complicated this picture. Admitting a level of performativity, even theatricality, in his self-presentation allows for a remolding of the model Romantic poet. [...]

### **> Changing Critical Attitudes to Romantic Writing**

#### **Then:**

sincerity, authenticity  
expression  
access to mind:  
privileged, unmediated

#### **Now:**

performativity, theatricality  
staging of expression  
access to mind:  
by proxy (poem), mediated

### 3) Wordsworth in the Theatre

#### William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), Book Seventh (‘Residence in London’)

[London Theatres/The Maid of Buttermere, ll. 280-411]

Add to these exhibitions mute and still  
Others of wider scope, where living men,  
Music, and shifting pantomimic scenes,  
Together joined their multifarious aid  
To heighten the allurements. Need I fear  
To mention by its name, as in degree  
Lowest of these, and humblest in attempt -  
Yet richly graced with honours of its own -  
Half-rural Sadler's Wells? Though at that time  
Intolerant, as is the way of youth  
Unless itself be pleased, I more than once  
Here took my seat, and, maugre frequent fits  
Of irksomeness, with ample recompense  
Saw singers, rope-dancers, giants and dwarfs,  
Clowns, conjurors, posture-masters, harlequins,  
Amid the uproar of the rabblement,  
Perform their feats. Nor was it mean delight  
To watch crude Nature work in untaught minds,  
To note the laws and progress of belief -  
Though obstinate on this way, yet on that  
How willingly we travel, and how far! -  
To have, for instance, brought upon the scene  
The champion, Jack the Giant-killer: lo,  
He dons his coat of darkness, on the stage  
Walks, and achieves his wonders, from the eye  
Of living mortal safe as is the moon  
'Hid in her vacant interlunar cave'.  
Delusion bold (and faith must needs be coy)  
How is it wrought? - his garb is black, the word  
INVISIBLE flames forth upon his chest.

Nor was it unamusing here to view  
Those samples, as of the ancient comedy  
And Thespian times, dramas of living men  
And recent things yet warm with life: a sea-fight,  
Shipwreck, or some domestic incident  
The fame of which is scattered through the land,  
Such as this daring brotherhood of late  
Set forth - too holy theme for such a place,  
And doubtless treated with irreverence,  
Albeit with their very best of skill -  
I mean, O distant friend, a story drawn

From our own ground, the Maid of Buttermere,  
And how the spoiler came, 'a bold bad man'  
To God unfaithful, children, wife, and home,  
And wooed the artless daughter of the hills,  
And wedded her, in cruel mockery  
Of love and marriage bonds. O friend, I speak  
With tender recollection of that time  
When first we saw the maiden, then a name  
By us unheard of - in her cottage-inn  
Were welcomed, and attended on by her,  
Both stricken with one feeling of delight,  
An admiration of her modest mien  
And carriage, marked by unexampled grace.  
Not unfamiliarly we since that time  
Have seen her, her discretion have observed,  
Her just opinions, female modesty,  
Her patience, and retiredness of mind  
Unsoiled by commendation and excess  
Of public notice. This memorial verse  
Comes from the poet's heart, and is her due;  
For we were nursed - as almost might be said -  
On the same mountains, children at one time,  
Must haply often on the self-same day  
Have from our several dwellings gone abroad  
To gather daffodils on Coker's stream.

These last words uttered, to my argument  
I was returning, when - with sundry forms  
Mingled, that in the way which I must tread  
Before me stand - thy image rose again,  
Mary of Buttermere! She lives in peace  
Upon the spot where she was born and reared;  
Without contamination does she live  
In quietness, without anxiety.  
Beside the mountain chapel sleeps in earth  
Her new-born infant, fearless as a lamb  
That thither comes from some unsheltered place  
To rest beneath the little rock-like pile  
When storms are blowing. Happy are they both,  
Mother and child! These feelings, in themselves  
Trite, do yet scarcely seem so when I think  
Of those ingenuous moments of our youth  
Ere yet by use we have learnt to slight the crimes  
And sorrows of the world. Those days are now  
My theme, and, 'mid the numerous scenes which they  
Have left behind them, foremost I am crossed  
Here by remembrance of two figures: one  
A rosy babe, who for a twelvemonth's space  
Perhaps had been of age to deal about  
Articulate prattle, child as beautiful



As ever sate upon a mother's knee;  
The other was the parent of that babe -  
But on the mother's cheek the tints were false,  
A painted bloom.

'Twas at a theatre  
That I beheld this pair; the boy had been  
The pride and pleasure of all lookers-on  
In whatsoever place, but seemed in this  
A sort of alien scattered from the clouds.  
Of lusty vigour, more than infantine,  
He was in limbs, in face a cottage rose  
Just three parts blown - a cottage-child, but ne'er  
Saw I by cottage or elsewhere a babe  
By Nature's gifts so honored. Upon a board,  
Whence an attendant of the theatre  
Served out refreshments, had this child been placed,  
And there he sate environed with a ring  
Of chance spectators, chiefly dissolute men  
And shameless women - treated and caressed -  
Ate, drank, and with the fruit and glasses played,  
While oaths, indecent speech, and ribaldry  
Were rife about him as are songs of birds  
In springtime after showers. The mother, too,  
Was present, but of her I know no more  
Than hath been said, and scarcely at this time  
Do I remember her; but I behold  
The lovely boy as I beheld him then,  
Among the wretched and the falsely gay,  
Like one of those who walked with hair unsinged  
Amid the fiery furnace. He hath since  
Appeared to me oftentimes as if embalmed  
By Nature - through some special privilege  
Stopped at the growth he had - destined to live,  
To be, to have been, come, and go, a child  
And nothing more, no partner in the years  
That bear us forward to distress and guilt,  
Pain and abasement; beauty in such excess  
Adorned him in that miserable place.  
So have I thought of him a thousand times -  
And seldom otherwise - but he perhaps,  
Mary, may now have lived till he could look  
With envy on thy nameless babe that sleeps  
Beside the mountain chapel undisturbed.

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