

Literary History: A Systematic Approach

Lecture 13: A Brief History of English Drama

1) The Romantic Age: Modern Literature vs. Drama

2) Theatricality in Modern Culture

3) Co-ordinates of Drama History

1) The Romantic Age: Modern Literature vs. Drama

[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)

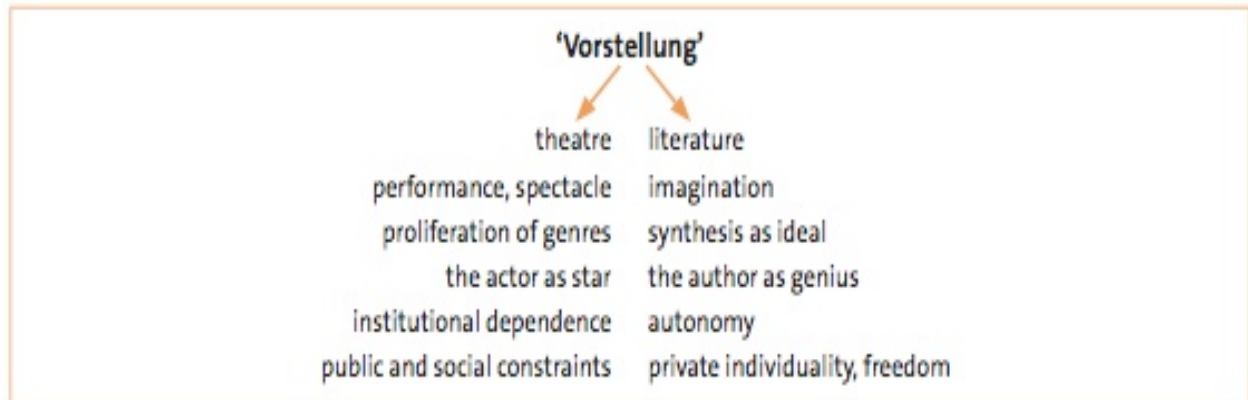
Illegitimate Theatre:

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

(cf. Moody 2000)

Theatre vs. Literature

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



(Reinfandt 2008, 170/
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 Modern Culture

[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)

3) Co-ordinates of Drama History

The Trajectory from Being to Acting as a Key Constituent of Modern Culture:

Cf. Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy of History Plays (the 'Lancaster Tetralogy')
(*Richard II – Henry IV, Part 1 – Henry IV, Part 2 – Henry V*)

The parallel between the King's and the Chorus's virtuoso performances (both make more of less in their respective media, i.e. life and the theatre) marks a shifting of emphasis from questions of 'being' to questions of 'acting'. In this sense, the play does not present history as a result of Henry V 'being' the ideal king. Rather it presents Henry V 'acting' the ideal king against the backdrop of specific historical circumstances, and while there is no doubt that his 'acting' is effective, it is also clear that effective political 'acting' affects his 'being' in an unfavourable way, substituting ambiguity for identity and contingency for virtue.

(Reinfandt 2000, 83)

The Weird History of English Drama

Mediaeval Drama: mystery and miracle plays
 morality plays (e.g. *Everyman*)

Early Modern Drama: comedies, tragedies, histories

(Elizabethan > Jacobean Theatre
> the closing of the theatres during the Puritan Interregnum 1642 – 1660)

Restoration Drama: masques
 heroic tragedy, domestic tragedy
 comedy of manners

(Theatres Licensing Act 1737:
Censorship by Lord Chamberlain, fully abolished only in 1968!)
(sentimental comedies, Romantic Drama?, Victorian Drama?,
melodrama, comic operas ≠ literature?!)

Resurgence of drama as literature only with Wilde and Shaw at the beginning of the
20th Century

Illustrations:

[The Travelling Stage of a Mystery Play]

[A 1596 sketch of a rehearsal in progress on the [thrust stage](#) of [The Swan](#), a typical
circular [Elizabethan](#) open-roof playhouse]

[Today's reconstructed Globe Theatre viewed from the stage]

[The second Blackfriars (indoor) theatre leased by Shakespeare's King's Men 1608]

[Picture-frame stage with proscenium arch and 'fourth wall' effect]

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