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reads
Romantic Drama: Acting and Reacting
(Cambridge University Press, 2009)
by
Frederick Burwick

AS INDICATED BY its subtitle, Frederick Burwick's lively and innovative *Romantic Drama* gives 'primary attention to the varied dynamics of performance and audience response' (8). This focus is not only consistent with the author's previous scholarship on, for instance, stage illusion and perception, but also noticeably informed by his work as theatre director and, recently, editor of John Waldie's journal.[1] Two optical metaphors, elaborated in chapters 1 and 3, serve to clarify the book's approach and thematic strand: the periscope and 'Pepper's Ghost'. Recreating the experience of joining spectators at a particular time and place, eye-witness reports by critics, aficionados, or actors provide readers with various periscopic views into the theatre (14, 56), which, taken together, allow for more representative insights into the contemporary reception of individual performances (14-15). The metaphor of 'Pepper's Ghost', an illusion produced by superimposed reflected and refracted images, illustrates 'the double-perception experienced by a theatre audience in beholding, if not simultaneously then at least in an easy alternation, the actor and the character, the illusion and the stage' (57). For Coleridgeans, this stage trickery is compared with a passage from *The Friend*, in which the Sage of Highgate observes reflections of objects inside his library seemingly merging with the scene outside at twilight (57; see F II 117).

In the Introduction, Burwick sets the stage for his *Romantic Drama* by outlining changes during the period, such as in the background and expectations of spectators, or the capacity of theatres, which, given the reciprocity of 'acting and reacting', led to radical shifts in acting style, setting, stage illusion, and the forms of drama that gained popularity. Among the developments that heightened the double-perception of performances was the prevailing 'star' system, since audiences watched 'the actor acting' (4), whose success paradoxically also depended on how convincingly he or she could enter into a role (1). To use one of the most extreme cases, theatre-goers flocked to see the popular child actor Master Betty perform as Osmond in Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Castle Spectre*, yet, as Burwick puts it with amusing bluntness: 'In a dramatic representation of a forty-year-old lecher assaulting an eighteen-year-old girl, the audience did *not* see a thirteen-year-old boy grabbing hold of a forty-one-year-old woman' (177). In addition to offering a brief overview of his nine chapters, the author expounds his central argument of a 'fundamental duality or bifurcation' in all aspects of performance and theatre at the time (2), thus guiding readers through this ambitiously wide-ranging work on topics as diverse as nationalism, acting style, or vampires. The first chapter,

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[1] *The Journal of John Waldie: Theatre Commentaries, 1799-1830*. Ed. Frederick Burwick, assisted by Lucinda Newsome. E-Scholarship Repository. California Digital Library. 2008. http://repositories.cdlib.org/uclalib/dsc/waldie/.

'Periscopes into the theatre', not only introduces us to the metaphor of Burwick's methodology but also to his main 'lens', John Waldie, a theatre enthusiast set apart from other critics by his 'peculiar obsession' (32).

By focusing on the tension between Francophilia and Francophobia in stage representations of French character and national identity, the ensuing chapter on 'Nationalism and national character' confronts us with the first example of a bifurcation. Political events complicated these representations and their reception as did the success of adaptations from French playwrights, who themselves voiced a critique of the vices and atrocities committed in their country, which the English audiences in turn applied to their own domestic situation. In examining plays that depicted the French character as benevolent, such as Thomas Holcroft's *Deaf and Dumb* (adapted from Jean Nicolas Bouilly), or Richard John Raymond's *The Old Oak Tree*, in contrast to comedies whose 'jokes were often at the expense of French manners and customs' (40), Burwick brings out how Romantic drama 'gave rise to a paradox of attraction and repulsion, or of identity and alterity' in portrayals of the French (34).

The third chapter on genre challenges the notion of an opposition between fantasy and realism by investigating the intermixture of illusionism and realism in contemporary melodrama and documentary drama. Whilst Edward Fitzball's *The Flying Dutchman*, belonging to the former genre, exemplifies the efforts to depict 'what is not there' as real, such as supernaturalist elements, William Thomas Moncrieff's apparently documentary *The Shipwreck of the Medusa, or The Fatal Raft!* equally betrays a dependency on stage illusion. To be sure, no matter how 'real' the events and their representation, the fact that theatre-goers were 'gathered at the accustomed site of artifice' would already distance them (72). From the superimposed views of the illusion and the stage, we proceed to an analysis of further complexities in the spectator's dual perception of the actor and the character in what is, to my mind, one of the most intriguing chapters of this study: 'In addition to beholding an actor acting a character, the audience was expected to perceive as well when that character commenced another dimension of role-playing' (81). The doubleness inherent in a *character* acting a role duplicates, and thereby complicates the primary double-perception.

Burwick arrives at this central issue, the duality of dissimulation, by surveying the shifting theories of gesture and body language, with Henry Siddons's adaptation of Johann Jakob Engel's *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (1785-86) as his main source. The distinction between natural and feigned gestures, or, more generally, expressing and dissembling emotions, emphasized in the Engel-Siddons account, leads us back to Diderot's paradox that, in order to convincingly act out an emotion on stage, the actor must not feel it but perform it with studied deliberation (81). Given that all stage gestures are consequently counterfeit, how does an actor portray a character who dissimulates, conceals his motives, assumes another identity, and pretends to lapse into madness?—or, to put it more pointedly, how does he 'feign the feigning of an emotion' (82)? And, moreover, how can audiences distinguish

the artifice? With the help of contemporary sources such as engravings of Shakespeare performances, reviews, or treatises by German critics, Burwick addresses these questions, which were particularly interesting to a period whose drama depended heavily on dissimulation in its plotting (102).

Playwrights themselves were giving attention to the revelations and deceptions of body language, even introducing performative self-reflections into their works alongside characters evaluating the subterfuge of others. These trends Burwick locates in a number of plays; for example, a third-party observer estimates the truth of other characters' statements in Hannah Brand's *Adelinda*, and in Hannah Cowley's *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*, a new servant is instructed in the tactics of successful lying after his botched attempt. Having identified a countermovement in melodrama that discarded highly nuanced gestures for a reductive stylization and pantomime, the chapter closes with the exceptional case of the deaf mute, Theodore in Holcroft's *Deaf and Dumb*, for instance. Gestural communication being his natural language, he creates 'the momentary illusion on the stage that pantomime has ceased to be mere artifice' (109). Burwick indeed argues that, in contrast to his French source Bouilly, Holcroft was fully aware of the subject's potential to foreground the current concern with theories and practices of gesture (113).

In chapter 5, the author applies his optical metaphor of superimposed images to representations of sexual identity as well as gender norms and transgressions. The prior preoccupation with dissimulation is furthermore resumed in examinations of trans-sexual disguise, as in Cowley's *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*, already mentioned briefly. Victoria, dressed as a man, successfully seduces her husband's mistress, thereby demonstrating 'the great ease with which one sex can mimic the other' (115). Thus, besides its popular appeal and effectiveness in jests, cross-dressing allowed for more profound explorations and problematizations of sexual identity and gender norms. Yet, having previously scrutinized the representation of French affectations in a comedy devoid of French characters, with only an Englishman and his Irish servant mimicking them (Frederic Reynolds's *Notoriety*), and the use of gesture in a play in which a character, born deaf and mute, can merely gesture (Holcroft's *Deaf and Dumb*), Burwick again proves that it is frequently a seemingly topsy-turvy example that fully brings out his point: the connection between cross-dressing and the display of homosexual touch is discussed in Elizabeth Inchbald's *The Widow's Vow*, in which two characters are precisely *not* cross-dressed but only assumed to have exchanged roles. Believing the Marquis to be a woman in men's clothing, the Countess's uncle 'begins to ogle, touch, and stroke the presumably disguised impostor' (122).

Comparable dramatic strategies also allow for an effective portrayal of deviances from gender norms—especially compromised masculinity—in farces such as W. C. Oulton's *The Sleep-walker; or, Which is the Lady?*: the markedly effeminate Sir Patrick is mistaken for his wife posing as a young Irishman (127-28). Ranging widely through plays that evolve around the 'love versus money' dilemma, seducing libertines, adultery, and sexual villains, this chapter extends

its concern towards eye-witnesses' reactions to transgressions of social norms and gender on stage. From condemnations of the kind found in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* regarding Charles Maturin's *Bertram*, Burwick concludes that 'Players, playwrights, and audiences all seemed far ahead of critics in coming to terms with the complex gender issues of the drama'—although, he concedes, 'Perhaps the popular response was in fact no more sophisticated' (150).

The ensuing chapter on setting is dedicated to the duality of 'where and elsewhere', as the subtitle puts it. After a brief inspection of the doubleness inherent in the stage itself, the author centres on the geographical and historical dislocations of dramatic settings, spanning from ancient Assyria (Byron's *Sardanapalus*) to present-day France (Inchbald's *Animal Magnetism*). Most obviously, displacement circumvented censorship, but equally important was the consideration of spectators' tastes, interests, and sensibilities as they affected box-office successes. An impressive array of samples supports Burwick's thesis of an 'elsewhere' that 'provides a matrix for authorial manipulation of levels of reference and representation, and brings into play a complexity of social and cultural interaction that explores, exploits, explodes audience fears and desires' (169). Having 'learned to see identity in alterity' (11), theatre-goers were able to discover domestic or political relevance in distant times and places, and so, for instance, given their anxieties about a Napoleonic invasion, identified with Sheridan's Peruvian natives defending themselves against the Spanish Conquistadores in *Pizarro* (157).

Chapter 7, on the Gothic and anti-Gothic, interrogates the contrasting presence of horror and comedy in Romantic plays. It discloses how comic characters and situations, songs and music may cause the entire Gothic structure to collapse into parody, as in Cobb and Storace's *The Haunted Tower*, adapted from de Sade (200), or simply fail to be integrated (Hazlitt and Waldie's complaint about George Colman's *The Iron Chest*, in which the opposing elements do not accentuate but thwart one another (196)). Burwick's attention to contemporary casts of *The Haunted Tower* nicely illustrates the illuminating potential of his approach. Determining the degree of comedy in the malignancy and lecherousness of the false Baron, the author notes that in the first few seasons he was played by Robert Baddeley, an actor who was not only frequently cast as a comic villain but also habitually smacked his lips while speaking, thus giving 'an impression of salacious lechery [to] no matter what he was saying' (188). Another function of comic elements is elaborated in the final chapter when Burwick analyses Planché's inclusion of the Scottish drunkard McSwill in *The Vampire* with reference to De Quincey's 'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth'. Re-establishing the ordinary human world that is suspended in supernatural scenes of terror, the comic heightens the horror and sense of doom through dramatic contrast (238).

In addition to exploring the dialectic of Gothic and anti-Gothic further, the concluding two chapters on dramatic representations of Blue-Beard and the vampire revisit dualities previously discussed, thereby giving a sense of closure

to Burwick's study. For example, due to social denial and the audience's sensibilities, adaptations of both stories involve a doubleness effected by displacement: playing out recognizable acts of domestic violence and subservience, Blue-Beard and his wives were relocated geographically and historically (203), while in the case of the blood-sucking vampire, 'The acts of seduction and rape were distanced by transforming them into demonic fantasies' (257). Finally, taking into account the fact that stage vampires imposed a spell on their victims and male companions as well as on spectators, Burwick considers how transgressive theatre 'provoke[s] audience tensions of participation and repudiation' (230). His survey of such affective aesthetics culminates in an examination of Moncrieff's *The Spectre Bridegroom*, a play which—as readers may be able to anticipate by now—does not include a vampire but only a vampire scholar mistaken for one, hence revealing the *Wirkungsästhetik* to be an 'effect without cause' (250).

If one were to point out a shortcoming of Burwick's *Romantic Drama*, it would lie exactly where its strengths are to be found. In isolated instances the immense amount of detail, reflecting the author's meticulous research and inexhaustible knowledge, does not seem to leave quite enough room for fuller critical use to be made of the information. At times biographical backgrounds or the descriptions of particular performances could have been trimmed in favour of an extended analysis of other material. However, these objections are quibbles, especially since this kind of content forms part of the study's unique, 'telescopic' methodology. Furthermore, what may appear locally as a limitation is, more generally, a major virtue of this book: we are stimulated by the sheer wealth of information; and who does not take delight in a detail every now and then that is in there not so much for our enlightenment but for our enjoyment? Highly aware not only of Romantic audiences but also his own, Burwick never hesitates to share an anecdote,[2] such as Waldie's discovery of the prompter's box on the continent, or to amuse with a witty aside: discussing James Robinson Planché's *Giovanni the vampire!!! or, How shall we get rid of him?*, for example, he remarks dryly about the figure of Don Giovanni that 'It does not require Planché to turn him into a vampire. His repeated resurrections reveal that he already is one' (244). Thus, with its abundance of knowledge and enjoyable content, its unusual angle, its astute observations and insights, all delivered in an appealing and entertaining style, this highly informative work is a valuable asset to Romantic theatre studies and leaves us looking forward to the author's forthcoming publication.[3]

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[2] Neither does this review: 'During the first performance, Waldie grew curious about the strange box front and center, at which the players seemed to stare repeatedly. As soon as the performance was over, Waldie rushed onto the stage and peered into the box, frightening a bald-headed man who dropped his sheaf of papers. The prompter's box, Waldie decided, is a Continental innovation that should be kept on the Continent' (29).

[3] *Playing to the Crowd: London Popular Theatres, 1780-1830* (Palgrave).