

Anja Müller-Wood (ed.)

Texting Culture – Culturing Texts

Essays in Honour of Horst Breuer

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Texting Culture – Culturing Texts
Essays in Honour of Horst Breuer /

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Preface

Anja Müller-Wood

With this collection, the editor and contributors pay tribute to an admired and respected colleague and teacher. Horst Breuer's scholarly commitment and intellectual openness have been a great and consistent inspiration not only to us, but also to innumerable students at several German universities. The essays gathered in this book are a topically diverse yet analytically coherent evocation of an intellectual spirit that has always been sophisticated and imaginative, rigorous and encouraging at the same time.

The collection's title, *Texting Culture / Culturing Texts*, is an attempt to do justice to the scholarly complexity of Horst Breuer's oeuvre. While his persistent defence of time-honoured (but all too often dismissed) reading skills has led him to eschew the manifold theoretical bandwagons and contextualising distractions of the 'cultural turn', this has never stopped him from recognising the way that literary texts emerge from concrete historical and cultural surroundings. Opting for a holistic approach to literature, he has managed to avoid the divide between text and context by which the field of English literature currently seems to be haunted. For Horst Breuer, exploring the riddle of the text itself has always been compatible with using texts as windows on a wider world – a world which in turn inevitably comes to bear upon our understanding of literature.

The breadth of Horst Breuer's oeuvre testifies to an open-mindedness that has been a great inspiration to everyone working alongside him. He has written on authors as diverse as (among others) Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett; he has investigated the literature and culture of the Renaissance, the Victorian Age and Modernism (with more than passing glances at the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century); he has explored and employed critical methods ranging from historicist readings to psychoanalysis and narratology. Those of us who have studied with Horst Breuer have profited from this scholarly breadth and the openness of which it speaks, as he has always respected our own intellectual interests – even when these stretched to topics well outside the safe confines of canonical frameworks and institutional expectations. A patient and understanding advisor and mentor, he has enjoyed engaging his students in fruitful and inspiring discussions that have encouraged many of them to make literature and literary criticism a part of their lives.

Echoes of this mind-set are apparent throughout this collection, which includes work by Horst Breuer's friends, present and former colleagues and past students. The contributors tackle a broad spectrum of topics: Shakespearean drama, nineteenth- to twenty-first-century narrative fiction, early modern culture, 'chick lit' and contemporary film.

Drawing on such diverse methodologies as cultural history, corpus linguistics, narratology and psychoanalysis, the authors demonstrate how fruitfully these approaches interact with a meticulous philological analysis of literary texts. While thus participating in the current renaissance of 'philology', the contributors nevertheless steer clear of any nostalgic desire to return to a mythical 'golden age' of literary impressionism and simple answers. Instead, they seek to reformulate philological enquiry along pragmatic and rational lines, while innovatively incorporating the best and most useful elements of contemporary cultural theory.

The articles gathered here are structured by three main interpretive principles. The first is the need for a close attention to texts. Michael Stubbs's linguistic analysis of *The Turn of the Screw*, which pleads for a systematic and transparent analysis of literary texts on the basis of explicit theories of meaning, illuminates the joint interest of linguistics and literature in the workings and effects of language. Addressing the problem of first-person narration in Ian McEwan's short stories, Günther Jarfe critically explores the experimental quality of these texts, which amongst critics is more often assumed than actually proven. In a similarly text-centred way, Wolfgang G. Müller considers how encomium and apotheosis, rarely investigated phenomena in Shakespeare's plays, are in fact significant textual elements whose interaction structures many of his dramatic works.

The second principle is contextualisation, represented by a variety of contributions on Shakespeare and the early modern period. Wolfgang Kloß places the figure of Falstaff within the context of the culinary discourses of Shakespeare's England, providing a thick description of textual phenomena that are typically taken for granted or passed over. Both Ursula Schaefer and Nele Abels review critical prejudices regarding Shakespeare's histories by embedding the plays in their larger context. Drawing on an impressive array of historical sources, Schaefer challenges the notion, popularised through Shakespeare's *King Henry V*, that the historical Henry pursued specific national and international 'language policies'. Abels attends to the 'common' people in Shakespeare's histories, thereby providing a convincing rethinking of historicist conceptualisations of power. In a similar vein, Anja Müller-Wood's interpretation of early modern dramatic epilogues leads to a reconsideration of commonly held views of early modern playwrights and their professional identities.

A third principle is intertextuality in the broadest sense of the term. With Jutta Schamp's article on David Dabydeen's re-writings of *Othello* and *The Tempest*, the interest in Shakespeare points to another of the collection's concerns: the revision of canonical texts and the intertextual engagement between cultural artefacts. Dabydeen's novels and poems are both a tribute to their sources and a courageous departure from them. Dunja M. Mohr takes up Schamp's postcolonial angle when considering the continuation of the Austen cult through her reading of Joe Wright's and Gurinder Chadha's film versions of *Pride and Prejudice*. Her essay is fruitfully accompanied by Ulrike Tancke's contribution, which places a recent example from the chick lit genre

next to Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and thereby elucidates a thematic continuum between British high Victorian and postmodern culture, which are both fascinated by France as the exotic, yet liberating other. Dialogue and continuity are also the concerns at the centre of Rolf Breuer's article, in which he reads Samuel Beckett's Krapp's *Last Tape* alongside Peter Ustinov's *Photo Finish*, revealing striking similarities between two texts that have so far not been investigated jointly. Wanda Klee's essay, by contrast, brings together two infamous cult movies, Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* and Virginie Despentes's *Baise-Moi*, to explore the subtle differences that distinguish these superficially similar road movies.

In both their eclecticism and methodological rigour, these essays are a fitting tribute to the scholar in whose honour they have been written – expressing their authors' respect for Horst Breuer while at the same time illustrating their intellectual indebtedness to his inspiring example. As one of those who have benefited greatly from Horst Breuer's support throughout the years, I am honoured to have edited this token of our collective respect and gratitude.

I am also, of course, grateful to the contributors to this collection for their cooperation and the creativity that they have so generously expended on this project. Without you, this book would not exist. Further thanks go to Karin Kukkonen, Lutz Schowalter, Michael Ogletree, Andrea Stock and John Carter Wood for invaluable help during the preparation of this publication.

Bingen, May 2008

Anja Müller-Wood