Sibylle Baumbach, Birgit Neumann, Ansgar Nünning (eds.)
with Mirjam Horn and Jutta Weingarten

A History of British Drama

Genres – Developments – Model Interpretations

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E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

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1. An Outline of the Features, Objectives, and Premises of *A History of British Drama*

Sibylle Baumbach, Birgit Neumann & Ansgar Nünning

1. Introducing the Main Features and Objectives of this History of British Drama

Although the answer to the question recently raised by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in the title of his essay "Shall We Continue to Write Histories of Literature?" (2008) may indeed be an open and hotly debated one, students and other readers who would like to gain an overview of the main genres, developments, and plays in the history of British dramatic literature will probably be more interested in that history itself than in the debates over the alleged (im-)possibility of the writing of literary histories. And although one of the many insights of the theory of literary history is that "[it] used to be impossible to write; lately it has become much harder," as Lipking (1995: 1) observed, literary historians continue to write histories of literature, more often than not from new theoretical angles like a comparative or transcultural perspective (cf. Lindberg-Wada 2006). They may do so for many reasons, but the fact that not only students have to come to terms with the intricacies of literary history, but that the common reader, too, continues to be interested in the literary works of earlier ages is probably not one of the least important ones.

Nonetheless, one might just as well ask, 'Why *this* history of British drama?' The first duty falling on anyone who wishes to introduce a book entitled *A History of British Drama* is to explain what distinguishes it from the burgeoning collection of similar titles that might be found alongside it on the literary history shelf. Indeed, the present volume might best be introduced precisely by the ways in which it differs from traditional literary histories, which it does in five main respects:

- Firstly, this book is resolutely a history, rather than an attempt to be the (i.e. the definitive) history of British drama. Both the individual contributions and the collection as a whole are presented in full consciousness that they are selective and exemplary. In contrast to those traditional literary histories that aim to create an illusion of comprehensiveness – surely never more than a working fiction –, this volume focuses on some of the key areas, periods, and genres in the history of British drama.
- Secondly, rather than covering up the main choices that the editors have made, this history of British drama already flaunts its focus in the subtitle: It explores the main features and developments of major genres in selected periods. The individual chapters do not (and indeed could not) treat their topics exhaustively. Instead, they engage with and work through the main features of the genres and periods in

question, discussing and analysing problems and issues that each respective contributor finds most important in a given genre or in the selected plays.

- Thirdly, the present volume offers both a theoretically oriented form of literary history and very practical analyses of a wide range of plays. In contrast to those more traditional literary histories that present themselves as comprehensive and neutral surveys of the entire domain, each of the contributors here take as their respective points of departure a theoretical approach or a specific literary-historical problem pertaining to the respective genre, period, and play(s). Thus, in the title of each contribution, it is not only the genre and period treated that is denoted, but also the specific play or plays that is/are the subject of an exemplary analysis in each chapter.
- Fourth, this history aims not only to provide a state-of-the-art contribution to literary histories of British drama and to the selected genres. Above all, it is firmly oriented towards the needs of students seeking topics to work on in their own studies. The student perspective has been kept in mind by the contributors and editors alike at all times to create *A History of British Drama* that provides not only a source of information on its literary historical object, but a broad selection of theoretical and methodological models of how students and researchers might approach and analyze it: the analytical tools, as it were, as well as the materials for the study of British drama.
- Fifth, this history of British drama consists of a diachronically structured series of introductions to the main genres and exemplary analyses and interpretations of plays that serve as paradigm examples for the respective genres. The chapters that follow will thus introduce readers to both the main features of a broad range of dramatic genres and developments in the history of British drama and to an equally broad range of important plays, while also showing how the latter can be interpreted by using the analytical tools, concepts, and methods developed by literary studies in general (for an introduction, cf. Nünning/Nünning 2009) and the theory and analysis of drama in particular (cf. e.g. Pfister 1988; Pickering 1998, 2005; Baumbach/Nünning 2009).

These five distinguishing features already hint at the primary objective of this volume. It aims to give students concise information on key areas of English dramatic literary history and to provide them with the means to carry out their own independent study, analyses of individual plays, and research. As a result of this main goal, the chapters place the key features and developments of a given genre and period at the centre, providing readers with a historically and theoretically informed overview of the most prominent genres and periods in the history of British drama.

This book is primarily directed at all those students who want to gain an overview of the history of British drama and wish to conduct independent research as part of their studies (be it in preparation for a seminar paper or exam, or in developing a Bachelor's or Master's thesis). The volume should also prove helpful to all those who wish to deepen their expertise in British drama and explore new approaches to the ma-

jor periods and genres. The goals of this book have been crucial in the selection of topics. The order of contributions is based roughly on the diachronic sequence of the major eras of British dramatic history, with the emphasis within the selected periods leading naturally to a focus on the dominant genre or genres of the time.

2. Introducing the Theoretical Premises: On the Problems of Writing Literary Histories

The articles in this volume are based on the premise that literary history, including literary-historical 'objects' such as genres, periods, and contexts, are not given but constructed by the literary historian who uses explicit theories or proceeds from intuitive assumptions. The ways in which we fabricate such constructs as literary and/or cultural histories also depend on the theories, models, and metalanguages we employ. If one accepts the view that "literary-historical 'objects' [...] are constructed, not given or found, then the issue of *how* such objects are constructed [...] becomes crucial" (McHale 1992: 3). Let us therefore briefly turn our attention to some of the main processes and challenges involved in the writing of literary histories. Literary history is inevitably confronted with:

- the problem of delimiting the object of enquiry, i.e. defining key concepts like 'literature,' 'context,' or 'culture,' concepts which are themselves subject to historical change (cf. Grabes 1988; Olsson 2006);
- problems regarding the selection of texts and contexts, and the question of the canon;
- problems involved in analysing and interpreting literary texts and contexts;
- the problem of periodization and establishing 'thresholds of new epochs' (*Epochenschwellen*; cf. the essays in Gumbrecht & Link-Heer 1985; Herzog & Koselleck 1987);
- the problem of selecting a suitable 'mode of emplotment' (sensu Hayden White) by means of which authors and texts can be arranged into narrative sequences;
- the problem of contextualizing works through syntheses and classifications based on concepts like genres, movements, and traditions;
- the problem of contextualizing literary texts diachronically by relating them to various cultural traditions;
- the problem of explanation, i.e. attempting to account for literary change;
- problems inherent in presenting the subject and in finding adequate forms in which to convey sophisticated conceptions of the literature and culture of past ages (cf. Perkins 1992: 53).

Since most of these issues have been discussed in great detail elsewhere, we will merely refer here to the pertinent works of such theorists as David Perkins (1991, 1992) and Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. (1995). The main challenges that have a direct im-

pact on this history of British drama concern the following keywords: selection and canonization; periodization and genre definition (including questions of writing forms and representational techniques).

The problems of selection and canonization are closely linked to the respective underlying concept of literature at the time of literary-historical assessment. As the various definitions of the term 'literature' show, any history of literature is the result of selection processes based on the criteria of what counts as 'literature' (cf. Grabes 1988). Because selection is not possible without evaluation (cf. Plumpe/Conrady 1981: 375), the question of what aesthetic or other criteria are applied in the selection process is always at stake. In traditional literary histories, this issue is often ignored, although what history is told largely depends on highly specific values and standards. The question is not whether or not historians impose such aesthetic values in their selections, but how aware they are of the criteria and standards that they implement in those selections, and how explicitly they explain these.

Processes of selection and evaluation in literary histories ultimately result in the formation of literary canons. Broadly speaking, the term 'canon' refers to a highly selective corpus of (literary) texts, i.e. to a limited number of works which possess a substantial amount of prestige within the larger framework of culture. (Originally, the term designated a corpus of sacred religious texts based on divine revelation.) In its most basic function, the canon turns the overwhelming plenitude of available texts into a manageable history, "i.e. into a corpus of texts that can be surveyed and retained in collective memory" (Grabes 2008: 314). In a more critical sense, one could say that canons serve societies by controlling which literary texts are kept in the collective memory, taken seriously, or valued as 'good' literature.

Because the literary canon is based on evaluation and is thus inextricably linked to the values of certain groups, it is likely to be subject to "a continuing cultural negotiation that is deeply political" (Felperin 1990: xii). Indeed, for a long time in the history of British literature, canons have been shaped by the values of the ruling classes, i.e. of white upper-class men. In the last few decades the awareness of the negative effects of the selectivity of canons and their suppressive power has increased considerably. After all, the literary canon widely determines which texts remain in a society's cultural memory and are taught in schools and universities, which, in turn, influences the view of the present and the future. No wonder that 'the canon' is frequently and fiercely attacked, in particular by those groups that have long been subject to existing power structures and whose works have thus been conspicuously absent or underrepresented in the canon (cf. Neumann 2010: 12). The debates on the literature of minorities, and issues raised by feminist demands for an adequate account of the literary achievements of women, have raised awareness of the problem of every canon and the need for continuous canon revisions.

Rather than proposing a new canon of dramatic literature, this volume aims at presenting the key stages in the development of British drama from the Middle Ages to the 21st century. In each chapter the focus is set on one specific dramatic genre, whose

main features are illustrated by selected examples from one or two major plays of the time. Instead of providing a set list of key dramatic works, therefore, the volume presents a literary history based on exemplary analyses that should enable students to develop the analytic tools to identify and analyse generic features independently and to relate them in meaningful ways to their period of production. Furthermore, the problems arising from any attempt to offer clear-cut definitions of literary periods and genres are addressed in the individual chapters. Each chapter reconstructs preceding and following developments and pinpoints significant overlaps of literary genres and periods. By focusing on processes of hybridization, reception, and revival of genres, the chapters illustrate that the history of British drama cannot be understood as a linear development but rather as a discontinuous process of generic modification, innovation, and blending.

Less controversial but no less problematic than the canon debate is the question of how the selected material can be emplotted, structured, and presented. Literary histories, to give just one example, do not have beginnings; rather, literary historians choose specific dates or literary incidents as their starting point. Where we set off to study the development of British drama and where we decide to begin our history is an important decision because it inevitably influences the literary history we tell. In this history of British drama, we have chosen medieval drama as our starting point – and there are indeed good reasons for doing so. The first dramatic texts scholars localized in Britain are liturgical plays of the 10th century (cf. Goodman 1990), followed by manuscripts of late-14th-century mystery cycles and moralities in the mid-15th century. After the decline of performances of Roman plays in Britain following the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, drama seems to have reinvented itself. Based on the changing performance conditions, it established not only a new kind of theatrical space, but also a new time, form, and dramatic structure, which sets it apart from its predecessors. The closing of the Roman theatres – not unlike the closing of the theatres in 1616 – seems to have given rise to a new kind of drama. As there was no longer a designated public 'place of viewing' (*theatron*), plays were performed in churches and monasteries as well as outdoors in streets and market places. Their time of performance was restricted by Christian holidays, and their structure broke with the 'dramatic unities' of time, place, and action observed in ancient drama. What further contributes to the notion of the emergence of English drama during this period are the multiple forms of drama that developed independently from each other. The coexistence of liturgical drama, clerical drama, moralities, Corpus Christi cycles, and secular dramatic entertainment not only counters the belief in an evolutionary history of British drama, but also supports the notion that British drama could have set off right there – with the reinvention of drama after the closing of the Roman theatres.

Yet, even this beginning is somewhat arbitrary. After all, beyond and around what we can readily classify as medieval drama is a long tradition of Roman theatre. The history of theatre in Britain starts as early as the 1st century with the building of Roman theatres, which held performances of plays by the great Roman dramatists, such as the

comic playwrights Plautus and Terence, who wrote in the tradition of Greek new comedy. It is likely, therefore, that Roman and Greek theatre (and also theatre architecture) had some impact on the development of British drama: Both are based on cultic rituals, for instance, and scholars have claimed that the large spectacles shown in amphitheatres influenced the productions of medieval cycle plays. It is equally likely that the dramatic tradition never died in Britain, but that it was kept alive by mimes and other performances and that we simply lack the textual evidence to confirm its continuous, even if small, presence. After all, medieval plays were not designed for reading and the manuscripts that have survived are only a fraction of the overall performance tradition. The scarce documentation might also explain the peculiar absence of antitheatrical sentiments following the reinvention of drama in the monastic choirs, which scholars have found puzzling, given the vast criticism against the theatre in the late empire which led to the closure of theatres. Rather than assuming the emergence of medieval drama, therefore, it is important to bear in mind that beginnings in literary history are often doubtful because written records were subject to casual destruction and natural decay, as well as edited or suppressed by various groups in power.

Constructing beginnings is only the beginning of a complicated process of narrative emplotment that underlies any history of literature. Authors of literary histories have to arrange the selected texts in a readable form. Hence, they have to impose order on the selected texts, link them with one another, employ specific narrative patterns to mark distinctions and use tropes to fabricate a meaningful story (cf. Perkins 1992: 19). In order to establish a sense of coherence and structure the vast amount of literature literary histories frequently draw on two basic categories: periods and genres. Genres and periods enable us to break down the multitude of texts into manageable units. The construction of periods, i.e. periodization, is based on the premise that many literary works produced in a specific time have significant features in common. Similarly, genre constructions proceed from the assumption that texts can be classified according to similarities in content, form, and/or function (cf. Fowler 1982).

Of course, in both cases, the act of identifying representative features raises a number of problems because it usually involves reasoning in a hermeneutic circle: We cannot know which texts are to be classified as, for instance, ‘sentimental comedy,’ unless we already have a concept of comedy and sentimentalism. We must derive these concepts, however, from sentimental comedies (cf. Perkins 1992: 113). Periods and genres are therefore inherently slippery categories, which allow for different understandings and definitions.

That periods and genres are not predetermined ‘natural forms’ does not, however, diminish their benefits as concepts in literary history. As the following inventory indicates, periods and genres are not only useful for literary history, but indispensable. They fulfil

- explanatory and cognitive functions: With the help of periods and genres, the premises and classification criteria of literary histories can be explicitly stated, and tacitly presupposed assumptions are made overt;