

Sibylle Baumbach, Birgit Neumann, and Ansgar Nünning, eds. *A History of British Drama. Genres – Developments – Model Interpretations*. WVT Handbücher zum literaturwissenschaftlichen Studium 15. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011. 449 pp.

Writing a history of British drama is certainly a daunting task, and the editors address this issue already in the title. As they stress in the introduction, the volume "is resolutely a history, rather than an attempt to be the (i.e. the definitive) history of British drama" (1). This deliberate limitation in the project's aims has the great advantage of allowing the editors to make some fundamental choices which give the book its distinctive quality: Proceeding from a basically constructivist understanding of literary classification, the necessary selection processes in literary histories and the criteria employed in them are addressed openly both in the introduction and in the subsequent chapters. Moreover, instead of trying to be as comprehensive as possible and thereby losing themselves in a barrage of details, the contributors can concentrate on the most important points in their analyses. This is also connected to the book's deliberate orientation towards the needs of students either preparing for examinations or starting out on research of their own. This focus is characteristic of the *Handbücher* series in general, but in this volume it is highly pronounced (even including explicitly didactic elements in the introduction and in some of the chapters) and increases the overall cohesion of the different parts.

The immense field of 'British Drama' is subdivided into 26 roughly chronological sections, the titles of which often combine a period term with the dramatic genre(s) that can be considered most prominent at the respective time (cf. 3). The choice of medieval drama as a starting point is explained in the introduction, but despite all the reasons given there, the editors conclude - in keeping with their constructivist approach - that it still remains "somewhat arbitrary" (5). The early 20th century is then reached in the 16th analytical chapter, and the remaining 11 parts concentrate on the period from the 'New Drama' of the 1950s up to the beginning of the 21st century. In this way, a certain balance is achieved between the canonised tradition of British drama and more contemporary developments. The overall corpus of dramatic forms examined is convincing, with some choices (e.g. the omission of British Asian drama, while Black British drama is included) remaining a bit obscure. The term 'British' in the book's title is stretched to its limits by the use of Irish plays in some parts, with one chapter even exclusively presenting the formation of Irish drama at the beginning of the 20th century.

All chapters share a number of structural elements, but the contributors have luckily retained the freedom to approach their topic in the most fitting way, starting with the period, the genre or with a concrete play. All parts present the characteristic elements and/or subgenres of 'their' category and study one or more typical example(s) in some detail, including both the cultural and the theatrical context of the time. Most frequently, two rather different but still representative plays are selected and compared. As the introduction makes clear, the contributors were invited to use a range of methods and approaches (2), which will be helpful in encouraging students to try out their interpretative skills on dramatic works and develop their own research questions. The analyses conclude by pointing out later reappearances of the particular genre under consideration, thus assisting readers in establishing relations between different periods and trends. The comedy of manners turns into a kind of leitmotif here, connecting Restoration comedy and Wildean aestheticism with "new forms of (tragi)-comedy" as devised e.g. by Alan Ayckbourn (353) - and arguably with the Theatre of the Absurd as well. Fittingly, Jürgen Kamm states in his contribution on the 'eighteenth-century comedy of manners' that the genre seems to have "flourished towards the end of centuries" (189) - giving readers food for thought in transcending ingrained period labels. Finally, each chapter is rounded off by a bibliography which lists the plays that have been analysed in detail as well as secondary literature on the specific genre, with the most important works included in a separate annotated section.

When one surveys the succession of chapters, binary opposition can be seen to emerge as a salient ordering principle: Restoration comedy and tragedy are followed by sentimental comedy and tragedy, just as the often unstaged romantic verse drama precedes the inherently stage-oriented Victorian melodrama. It is probably not possible to determine in how far this is due to the aim of mapping out dramatic history as clearly as possible for student readers and in how far (in keeping with the tenets of Russian formalism) new genres really emerge in opposition to the previously 'dominant' form. The neatness of such opposing categorisations recedes in the post-1950 chapters when - due to temporal closeness - critical categories are still more fluid and sometimes (especially in the chapter on the so-called 'In-Yer-Face Theatre') contested. Laudably, the volume does not follow the reductive attempts that have been made to structure this period by a basic division between politically oriented plays on the one hand and more self-reflexive drama affiliated with postmodernism on the other. The book is far more specific in the genre categories it suggests and sets in relation to each other. Indeed, despite their arrangement in contrastive pairs, the earlier chapters do not contain artificially rigid classifications either. On the contrary, genre hybridisation and the testing of recognised genre boundaries by the plays is another leitmotif in the whole book, linking the parts on Shakespeare's comedies with domestic tragedy in the second half of the 18th century, the aestheticist comedy of manners and even some Black British dramas (47, 173, 232, 445).

On the whole, the volume can wholeheartedly be recommended to student readers. They will find it very useful as an overview of the whole field of British drama as well as for brief reference or as a starting point for in-depth reading. In addition to thus reaching its declared aims, *A History of British Drama* also contains

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chapters (especially with regard to more recent developments where secondary literature is still rather hard to find) which may prove helpful at the beginning of more advanced research projects.

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