Riot and Great Anger: Stage Censorship in Twentieth-Century Ireland (review)

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Reviews

JOAN FITZPATRICK DEAN. *Riot and Great Anger: Stage Censorship in Twentieth-Century Ireland.* Irish Studies in Literature and Culture. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. Pp. xiii + 261. $45.00 (Hb).

Reviewed by Chris Morash, National University of Ireland, Maynooth

> From a Free Stage commanded to retreat,
> Shun'd by the Cautious, silenced by the Great,
> Our author opens all his heart to view,
> And wishes to be tried, by Heaven, and you. (Brooke 5)

So begins Henry Brooke's *Jack the Giant Queller*, a stage satire attacking local government in Dublin that was banned by municipal edict in 1749. Although not mentioned in Joan Fitzpatrick Dean's survey of Irish stage censorship, *Riot and Great Anger*, Brooke's play provides a useful way of thinking about the anomalous position of stage censorship in Ireland.

When Brooke wrote *Jack the Giant Queller* in 1749 as an intervention in a simmering political battle that would erupt in major theatre riots in 1754, he did so as a playwright already experienced in battling stage censors. Brooke's 1739 play, *Gustavus Vasa: The Deliverer of His Country*, was banned in London by the Lord Chamberlain, freshly empowered by the Licensing Act of 1737. Not one to concede defeat, Brooke first printed *Gustavus Vasa* (as he would later publish *Jack the Giant Queller*), and then staged it in Dublin, which was outside the Lord Chamberlain's jurisdiction. Brooke's skirmishes with stage censorship tell us three things. First, at a time when most Irish people saw themselves as less free than their English counterparts in many areas of civic and political life, the Dublin stage (like the Irish print industry) was far less heavily regulated than that of London. Nevertheless, the appetite (and

often the rudimentary legislative framework at municipal level) existed to regulate the stage in Ireland. And, finally, there was always an underlying futility of banning performances in a society so closely linked to the cultural world of London, in which a play could reach the public, glistening with the sheen of scandal, through the medium of print.

Joan Dean Fitzpatrick touches on all of these issues in *Riot and Great Anger*, but never really comes to grips with any of them. To her credit, she follows recent theoretical thinking in extending the concept of censorship along a spectrum, with direct government regulation at one end, and disturbances by the audience at the other end. This is a useful (and, indeed, necessary) strategy, given that Irish stage censorship has seldom been directly legislative. It does, however, draw her into areas (such as the eighteenth-century theatre disturbances, or the protests over Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*) that have been examined much more comprehensively elsewhere.

In trying to produce a working theoretical framework in the context of the distinctive theatre worlds of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland, *Riot and Great Anger* is least successful in its early chapters, where the author seems to be struggling to construct some trans-historical "Irishness." As a result, there is often a lack of historical perspective, as she conflates very different theatre cultures, and veers towards a discredited essentialism. For instance, in asking if Irish audiences are particularly unruly, she cites, in the space of one paragraph, examples ranging from the eighteenth century to 1955, concluding that "no one was ever killed during a theatrical disturbance in Ireland" (33). In fact, there is a record of a stage-door keeper being killed in the Theatre Royal in the early 1830s (he was thrown down a flight of stone stairs), at a time when vicious political battles made the upper galleries of Dublin theatres genuinely dangerous places. Two decades later, the situation had changed considerably, partly because of changes in theatre management and repertoire, and partly because Irish society itself had changed. By the time of Synge's *Playboy* in 1907, the situation had changed yet again, and protests in the early Abbey were often self-consciously theatricalized – but this too was specific to a particular social situation.

Similarly, when dealing with the role of the churches in Irish stage censorship, the author begins a paragraph with Jeremy Collier in the 1690s, sweeps forward to the 1980s, and then suggests that "for Protestants, and Ulster Protestants in particular, the theatre smacked of sin" (35). Given that for several centuries most Irish theatre practitioners were Protestants of some description, this is an astounding statement, possible only if one does not acknowledge the considerable differences among varieties of Irish Protestantism. Admittedly, there were anti-theatrical elements among some members of some Dissenting churches at some historical junctures, as well as among some Low Church Episcopalians; however, their impact on theatre practice was a reflection of their relative social power at a given historical moment. By the same token,

after 1922 it could be argued that the lack of overt legislative control over Irish theatre was an aspect of the internalized self-control, policed by a Catholic social order, that governed so many facets of Irish society in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

It must be said, however, that there is much in *Riot and Great Anger* that is new (particularly twentieth-century material), culled with obvious care and effort from the archives. The book is at its best when the author makes full use of her detailed research by analysing individual instances of stage censorship in their rich contexts. So the chapter here dealing with the tumultuous response to George A. Birmingham's *General John Regan* in Westport on 4 February 1914 is arguably the strongest in the book, weaving a vivid account of the micro-politics that made a particular group of people, on a particular night, decide to break the social contract between actors and audience (in this case, by throwing chairs at the stage). Equally successful is the section of the book dealing with Lennox Robinson's *Roly Poly* in 1942. The book is less successful when it attempts to hammer this kind of detail into lasting patterns of Irish identity – patterns that the specificity of the individual theatrical event constantly resists.

WORK CITED

BROOKE, HENRY. *Poems and Plays of Henry Brooke, Esq.* 2nd ed. 4 Vols. London: John Sewell, 1789.

STEVE NICHOLSON. *The Censorship of British Drama 1900–1968*. Vol. 1. Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2003. Pp. 350. £39.50 (Hb).

Reviewed by Nadine Holdsworth, University of Warwick

This is the first of two volumes that will chart and analyse the Lord Chamberlain's theatre censorship in Britain from 1900 until 1968, the year of its abolition. This volume, which covers the period 1900 to 1932, offers a highly readable, intelligent, and good-humoured account of the complex intersection of historical, political, social, and cultural forces that influenced censorship during this period. The writing is lively, authoritative, and full of wonderful detail acquired during Nicholson's meticulous research into the Lord Chamberlain's theatre and correspondence archives that include internal reports on every play submitted, alongside numerous exchanges with powerful agencies such as the government, the monarchy, the church, the armed forces, foreign embassies, and the aptly named Public Morality Council. The scope of Nicholson's research is admirable for many reasons, not least for the months