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The Victorian Theatre 1792-1914: A Survey by George Rowell
(review)

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type (comedy, masque, interlude, etc.), title, and author are specified. Some indication of those plays known only from the Larpent manuscript would not have been out of place. The notes are full and accurate, and the index lists plays under both title and author—a welcome convenience. The book is adorned with eleven handsome illustrations, courtesy of the Harvard Theatre Collection.

Considered as criticism or literary history, this book is scrappy, trivial, and woefully lacking in central point. To deal seriously with this material, the critic could concern himself with the plays for their own sake—and legitimately so, since a whole flock of them are delightful, interesting, and little-known. Alternatively, the critic might search the plays for information about the theatre, or attitudes toward the theatre and the theatrical professions. Smith and Lawhon fail to do any of these things in more than the most sketchy and rudimentary fashion.

Whether this manuscript should have been resurrected is questionable at best. In its favor can be said that it speaks enthusiastically of a lot of almost unknown plays. Macklin's *The New Play Criticiz'd* (1747), Murphy's (?) *The Spouter* (1756), and elder Colman's *New Brooms!* (1776), the younger Colman's *New Hay at the Old Market* (1795), O'Keefe's *The Eleventh of June* (1798), and Reynolds' *Management* (1799) are among the many plays—not to mention the numerous occasional preludes—well worth the attention of a reader prepared to go beyond anthology pieces. In its exploration of such byways this book does have something to offer us.

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George Rowell. *The Victorian Theatre 1792-1914: A Survey*. Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Pp. xiii + 239. \$26.00 cloth; \$8.50 paper.

Few have ever claimed that British drama flourished in the time of Carlyle and Dickens. The theater in nineteenth-century London has been variously assessed, but always at a higher valuation than new plays of the period. Aids toward assessment have been previously provided by George Rowell, Special Lecturer in Drama at the University of Bristol, in two anthologies of plays and one of dramatic criticism, adaptations of several Victorian works for the stage, and the survey first published in 1956 by the Oxford University Press, reprinted in 1967, and now appearing under a new imprint with an "Afterword 1978."

The survey is a reprint of the reprint. In response to complaints that neither Victoria nor her stage lived from 1792 to 1914, those dates have been added to the title. The Kembles, the Keans, Macready, Irving, and Tree are here. The heroes—though Rowell proceeds by understatement—are Marie Wilton and her husband Squire Bancroft at the Prince

of Wales's and their playwright, T. W. Robertson; Pinero in the 1890's; and perhaps Harley Granville Barker for his productions of Shakespeare and Shaw. There are fewer hard facts than in Michael R. Booth's Introductions and Prefaces to the five volumes of *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century* (1969-1976), but perhaps a greater caution, as over the question of whether Madame Vestris introduced a complete box set in 1832 (Rowell p. 79; Booth II, 3). The bibliographies of memoirs, biographies, critical studies and works of reference have been brought up to 1977. The fine descriptions of the nineteen illustrations of sets and scenes remain, although the illustrations have lost their luster in reproduction. The play-list is arranged chronologically by birthdate of playwright.

The "Afterword" of twenty pages rushes through some of the subjects that Rowell and others have been studying since 1956. It epitomizes his book *Queen Victoria Goes to the Theatre* (1978) and his brief Introduction to *Victorian Dramatic Criticism* (1971). In response to the labors of Michael Booth particularly, it acknowledges the existence of the provincial theaters and of the comedies, farces, burlesques, extravaganzas, and pantomimes that received attention proportional to their historical significance in Booth's anthologies, book-length studies, and articles. The "Afterword" represents the sort of economy that successful publishers force upon authors, but no amount of revision could have caught up with the research reported by a widening body of workers or with such informative delights as Kate Terry Gielgud's *A Victorian Playgoer* (Heinemann, 1981).

Apart from its brevity the chief limitations of this handy and durable work are two. The book is a review of the London theater 1792-1914 from an academic critic sitting near the stage in the year of *Look Back in Anger*. Rowell practices the limitation he ascribes to most of the playwrights he surveys: to know the theater is to ignore most of life. Rowell's theater is lighted with gas and later with electricity; it does not require his attention to other literature, philosophy, politics, or social forces. Typically he specifies the French original of Sydney Grundy's *A Pair of Spectacles*, in which borrowed glasses change Goldfinch's view of life, without any reference to E. T. A. Hoffmann. His is one of the few books on Victorian life of any sort that has no place for Carlyle.

As a second limitation, Rowell has a total distaste for the Romantic accomplishment—Walter Scott's "misty Romanticism" and "medieval trappings" (p. 50)—and a lack of interest in most evenings of Victorian theater as a result of his teleological belief in realistic society drama. A portion of this bias can be put down to historical fact: the most easily encompassed plays of the British theater 1837-1914 were representations on proscenium stages of scenes less and less unlike those in the lives of the theater-goers; "realism" won. The bias is also Rowell's, as illustrated in his dismissal of Dion Boucicault's *London Assurance* in five separate passages. A large portion of the new works that succeed in the English-speaking theater today have more in common with the Regency and early Victorian staging of burlettas than with the methods of Henry

Arthur Jones or John Galsworthy. Rowell should encourage the venerable theater at Bristol to stage a wider range of Victorian pieces, and then tell us how they went.

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George L. Geckle. *John Marston's Drama: Themes, Images, Sources*. Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, and London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1980. Pp. 217. \$18.50.

I can see no compelling reason why this book should have been published. Mr. Geckle's own rationale includes the negative argument that his book does not have a thesis, and that it therefore avoids the "critical pitfall" into which "the two most currently influential books on Marston" (Anthony Caputi's and Philip Finkelpearl's) allegedly stumble because of their constricting approaches. Since "each play is unique and . . . must be approached on its own terms," each chapter of Geckle's study is therefore presented "as a nearly independent essay"—or, if you will, as a journal article, in which form three of them had already appeared (pp. 9-11). Something could be said for the freedom of this approach, surely, if a receptive critic allowed it to open the way into complex questions prompted by the different plays themselves. Alexander Leggatt, for example, who also insists on respect for "the individuality of particular plays," effectively illustrates the benefits of such an open inquiry in his *Shakespeare's Comedies of Love*. But since Geckle's method is to close down his reading of each play at the outset with a confining thematic thesis about it, the main advantage to be gained by the "independence" of one chapter from another seems lost in his hands.

Through his use of this method, Geckle violates a cardinal precept of the very critic he would claim as an ally, Richard Levin. Like Levin, Geckle prefers a "straight" reading to the "ironic" or "burlesque" readings of Marston's plays that are "becoming commonplace" (p. 27). But he totally ignores the equally strong case Levin has argued (in *New Readings vs. Old Plays* and elsewhere) against precisely the kind of reductive thematic readings presented in every chapter of this book. The opening paragraph of the chapter on *The Dutch Courtesan* will serve to illustrate Geckle's basic procedure. Though "a great deal of good criticism has been written" about this play, "in no discussion has anyone seen an overall structural pattern that satisfactorily explains all of the principal characters and actions" (p. 148). The next sentence translates "structural pattern" into "underlying and unifying concept," which can in turn be contained in the one magic word, "temperance." The struggle is now over, and the play lies flat under Geckle's triumphant sway. Nothing that he touches in *The Dutch Courtesan* offers any resistance to his thematic wand.