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STAGING HISTORY: Renaissance Dramatic Historiography

edd. Sofie Kluge, Ulla Kallenbach
& David Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt

Staging History: Renaissance Dramatic Historiography, edd. Sofie Kluge, Ulla Kallenbach
& David Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt

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Preface

Though it may not have been as monumental and unified as earlier generations of scholars imagined, a transformation in the conception of history occurred in the second half of the 16th century. Following the sixteenth-century debates about historical knowledge and the “art of history”, mediaeval chronicles gave way to antiquarian historiography and new aesthetic forms of historical representation also began to flourish. No doubt, the various manifestations of this change had multiple individual causes. Yet they were fundamentally united by a sharpened focus on history as a complex realm of incongruous details, heterogeneous customs and traditions, conflicting motives, ideas and interests: by a conception of the historical world as a battlefield of opinions and beliefs ever subject to interpretation and manipulation.

Among the many new historiographical departures of the period the historical drama stands out. Due to its eminent ability to make history come alive before the eyes of the audience through an increasingly advanced set of technical and performative devices it was certainly the most far-reaching in terms of public appeal and, thus, the prime aesthetic vehicle of collective memory and cultural identity formation during this period of nascent nation states – an effectful means of “rekindling famous deeds and words in the memory of the people”, as Lope de Vega put it in the dedication to his history play *La campana de Aragón*, 1623;¹ a “bewitching thing” with “the power to new mold the hearts of the spectators and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt”, as Thomas Heywood said of history plays in *An Apology for Actors*, 1612.²

The present volume approaches Renaissance historical drama from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, examining its intriguing intertwining of aesthetics and historiography. While taking different approaches and treating different materials, the articles collectively explore the problem-oriented and dialogical discourse of Renaissance historical drama and what can be termed its “relative autonomy”: simultaneous critical interpretation *and* answering to the demands imposed by royal patronage and state sponsorship; or exercise of what Margaret Greer has called “loyal criticism” and Dirk Niefanger has conceptualized as “verdeckte Ambiguität”.³

Thus, taken as a whole, the articles suggest an image of Renaissance dramatic historiography as an extremely complex discursive and representational space. Together they convey the idea of Renaissance historical drama as a problem-oriented reflection on the defining moments and charismatic protag-

¹ Quoted in Case 1975, 204.

² Quoted in Pollard 2004, 221.

³ Greer 1991, 79; Niefanger 2005, 113–44.

onists of European history and as a creative-performative negotiation of heterogeneous perspectives that included not only a sensual revivification of the past, but also theologico-philosophical contemplation on the ephemeral nature of history, moral lessons on the usefulness of historical examples, and, not the least, the careful address of politically and religiously sensitive issues. Through analyses of selected examples, the articles illuminate how Renaissance historical stagings, by means of a highly formalized aesthetic, theatrical, and performative language, were able to present controversial historical issues in a dialectical manner; make ambiguous statements; and create irreducibly complex syntheses of apparently irreconcilable historiographical perspectives; and how they exactly therefore came to influence the contemporary historical horizon in a valuable, thought-provoking way.

The underlying theoretical-methodological take of the volume can be described as a transformative merger of narrative historiography and New Historicism. On one hand, following the narrative turn in the theory of history inaugurated with Hayden White's famous *Metahistory* (1973),⁴ narrative historians have for some decades envisioned a cross-over between historiography and literature.⁵ However, this vision never materialized in historiographical readings of texts traditionally considered aesthetic nor in aesthetic readings of historiographical texts, although the idea was briefly introduced by Alun Munslow.⁶ On the other hand, New Historicists have of course long been reading literary texts as historical documents, but they have done so with the explicit goal of downplaying the privilege of "Literature" as compared to other discursive forms,⁷ and their work therefore imply a neutralization of the power of aesthetics which the articles of the present volume implicitly and explicitly assert through the emphasis on Renaissance historical dramatists' use of aesthetics to produce complex, problem-oriented forms of historiography.

Grafting the insights of narrative historians about the aesthetic components of historiography onto New Historicist recognitions of the historical embeddedness of literary texts, the superordinate approach to Renaissance historical drama presented in this volume fills two gaps: it amends historians' lack of attention to the historiographical contributions of texts traditionally considered extra-historiographical and compensates for the lack of attention in literary studies to the historiographical contribution of Renaissance historical drama. As Paulina Kewes has correctly stated, "the drama's contribution to

⁴ White 1973.

⁵ Ankersmit 2001.

⁶ Munslow 2007, 64–79.

⁷ Gallagher & Greenblatt 2000, 1–19.

transformation in the ways history was written and used [in the Renaissance] has gone largely unrecognized".⁸

The driving intention behind the present collection of articles is thus to establish a new basis for studying Renaissance dramatic historiography and the volume will hopefully encourage more work along the proposed lines. First of all, it can hopefully work as a kind of prolegomenon to a more comprehensive comparative study of European Renaissance historical drama. For different reasons, most of the articles presented here concern materials from England and Spain, but the approach can – as the articles on Busenello and Racine demonstrate – be applied to other contexts, including less explored dramatic cultures such as the Dutch Renaissance theatre (Vondel) or the German *Trauerspiel*. It could also be extended to other literary genres and text types, including, obviously, historical poetry (epic and lyric), but also, perhaps, genres traditionally considered non-aesthetic such as historical literature, travelogues, and diplomatic literature.

In the opening article, Ulla KALLENBACH discusses the English Renaissance concept of imagination in relation to historical stagings, examining the various epistemological and moral aspects of the debates surrounding history plays and their basis in Renaissance theories of cognition. The period's ambivalent attitude toward the mirroring of history can be traced back to the contemporaneous idea of the imagination as a fragile faculty within a precarious mental hierarchy that was always on the verge of collapsing, she argues.

David Hasberg ZIRAK-SCHMIDT's article examines Shakespeare's *Richard III* and shows how questions of ideology and historiography are discussed in the play's characterizations of Richard and Richmond. Focusing on Shakespeare's sources and the play's metatheatrical rhetoric, the article argues that both characters are represented in accordance with Tudor orthodoxy, yet the play's engagement with theatricality and metatheatrical language allows for an undogmatic approach to historical representations.

Per SIVEFORS's article investigates the metaliterary discourses that characterises Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*. Looking at the tension between the foreign and the vernacular, the public and the private, and the poetic and the historical, Sivefors argues that Marlowe privileges the artful over the historical. In doing so, Sivefors argues, Marlowe's play questions and moves away from both nationalistic representations of history and domesticated Latinity.

Bent HOLM examines the historiographical perspective of Shakespeare's *Othello* in light of the Battle of Lepanto (1571), focusing on the historical and metaphorical aspects of the image of the Turk in the depiction of both Venice, the Turks and the 'moor of Venice'. Holm analyzes how the actual event of

⁸ Kewes 2006, 4–5.

the battle transformed into an apocalyptic narrative, which he terms a “historiographical mythologization”, which again transformed into performative ritualized stagings or re-enactments.

Sofie KLUGE’s article examines Lope de Vega’s problem-oriented historiography of one of the milestones of Renaissance history: the discovery of the fourth continent by Christopher Columbus in 1492. Focus lies on how *El nuevo mundo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón* exploits aesthetic and performative devices such as secondary dramatization and the literary dream in order to make its audience reflect on whether Columbus was a visionary figure, carrying God’s word to the heathen, or in fact a raving madman who, inspired by demonic voices and visions, brought calamity on Spain through his fatal initiation of imperialism.

Kristoffer SCHMIDT’s article examines Jean Racine’s use of historical and literary sources in *Bajazet* and the play’s rather adverse seventeenth-century reception in the light of the contemporaneous discussions of verisimilitude from the viewpoint of the historian. Studying the two different “historiographical” prefaces penned by Racine for his Ottoman play, both of which claim the play to be based on a true but unpublished account, Schmidt concludes that although the dramatist held psychological verisimilitude to be of prime importance and although he probably relied, directly or indirectly, on literary sources as well, he still held historical authenticity in high esteem and understood his drama to be historiographical.

Magnus Tessing SCHNEIDER, in his article, uncovers how *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (*The Coronation of Poppaea*, 1643) by librettist Gian Francesco Busenello and composer Claudio Monteverdi reflects the historiographical challenge posed by the 1623 discovery of *Secret History* by sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea; a book which had vilified Emperor Justinian I and his wife Theodora. Schneider analyzes the central theme of unreliability of historical narratives in *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, one of the first opera librettos to feature historical characters, by way of the opera’s use of allegory, disguise and role doubling, which challenges the audience to adopt a critical stance when engaging with theatre and with the world of politics.

Christian DAHL’s article examines the temporal ambiguity of Shakespeare’s roman play *Julius Caesar*, which is seen to derive from the two different calendars that were in use during the Reformation: the Julian and the Gregorian. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck’s notion of “recursivity”, the article shows how the recursive structure of *Julius Caesar* simultaneously stresses the cyclical dimensions of historical time and exposes the political dimensions of the calendar’s repetitive nature.

In the volume’s sole article on the Renaissance staging of sacred history, Rebeca SANMARTÍN BASTIDA examines the sixteenth-century Spanish visio-

nary Juana de la Cruz's dramatization of one of the crucial events of this history: the fall of Lucifer. She argues that the Spanish visionary's treatment of this event in *Auto de la Asunción* should be approached within the framework of the author's recurrent preoccupation, in various generic registers, with *angelomachia* – the world-defining battle of angels and demons – of which it offers an alternative, corrective historiography as compared to the official version of the day.

Finally, Sacramento ROSELLÓ-MARTÍNEZ's article on Lope de Vega's *El último godo* examines the playwright's contribution to the popular contemporary understanding of the key period in Spanish history known as the *Reconquista*: the period between the Umayyad conquest of Hispania in 711 and the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada in 1492, retrospectively construed in Christian historiography as the Catholic "reconquest" of the Peninsula. Problematizing the play's allegedly unambiguous messianism and pondering the political nature of spectatorship, the article discusses the nature of the cultural and collective memory created by Lope.

September 2018

Sofie Kluge, Ulla Kallenbach & David Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt, editors of *Renaissanceforum* 13

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