

BOOK REVIEW

The Persistence of Allegory: Drama and Neoclassicism from Shakespeare to Wagner. *Jane K. Brown*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Pp. xii+272.

Jane K. Brown's wonderfully expansive new book attempts to rewrite entirely the history of neoclassicism by considering it as a "wave of inter-related movements" that fluidly bridges its medieval ancestors to its modernist descendants (x). Challenging received wisdom, Brown argues that the mimeticism that dominated dramatic forms since the sixteenth century in fact engulfed and incorporated the allegorical traditions—most markedly those of mystery and morality plays—that it putatively swept away. The juxtaposition of dramatic modes that critics see easily in Christopher Marlowe's plays, in other words, is obscured but no less present throughout theater history of the three centuries that follow him.

In her discussion of secular tragedy, for example, Brown shows how the interplay of three neoclassical tendencies—Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, and pastoral—works to conceal the allegorical traditions that they have been thought to displace by the turn of the seventeenth century. In her perceptive reading of *King John*, she exposes how Shakespeare's failure to meet our expectations points to limitations not of the play but of our classically minded critical purview. Shifting our perspective, the play's "incoherence vanishes" (68), and "a new form of allegory arises . . . out of the carefully managed encounter between different dramatic modes" (75). This compelling argument grounds what it precedes, and in subsequent chapters Brown explores such interplay in scores of writers across Holland, Italy, Germany, France, Spain, and England, including Lope de Vega, Jakob Bidermann, Joost van den

Vondel, Corneille, Joseph Addison, Voltaire, Metastasio, and Gotthold Lessing.

Initially, some of her readings seem more persuasive than others. In her third chapter, for example, in an astute analysis of *Twelfth Night*, Brown sets what she sees as the allegory of Olivia's and Malvolio's plots against the mimeticism of Orsino's; Shakespeare braids these three plots together, as suggested by the much-discussed anagrammatic play of the characters' names. Brown's careful consideration of Shakespeare's language anchors her argument and throws into relief the relative inattention to poetry she pays in her less successful analyses, such as that of Racine's *Athalie* (1691), the religious preoccupations of which we can account for easily without recourse to allegory in general or the morality play in particular.

As the book proceeds, however, the apparent limitations of some of her allegorical readings evidence one of her implicit themes: that the increasingly illegible allegorical signifiers in Western drama collectively enact the crisis of referentiality that Walter Benjamin diagnoses in his *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928). For Brown as for Benjamin, an especially capacious notion of allegory is necessary for significant sense to be made. This necessity she makes clear in discussions of an astonishing range of theatrical activity, including opera and dance; many of these discussions, while brief, are superb: the unique spotlight she puts on Calderón's *El divino Orfeo* (1663), for example, or George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731) allows each to be seen anew. This is true, too, of her more extended consideration of Wagner in her concluding chapter. In offering us a transparently allegorical *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1848–74) even as he obscures the allegory's referent, Wagner also offers Brown the perfect telos for her argument: the cycle, she elegantly notes, "allegorizes its own turn from allegory" (226).

Before providing the dramatic history offered by her third through final chapters, Brown considers the allegorical signification of the paintings of Claude Lorrain (ca. 1600–1682), which she sees as analogous to that of much neoclassical drama. As an argumentative foundation for the book, the chapter proves unsuccessful and, I believe, unnecessary. Claude's paintings seem too removed thematically from most of the dramatic corpus she examines. Indeed, despite the proscenium archlike framing of Rembrandt's *Holy Family with Curtain* (1646), which for Brown suggests the relevance of art-historical paradigms, the generic and indeed ontological difference between the paintings and the performative genres that Brown discusses elsewhere seems unbridgeable. Moreover, the allegorical resonances of Claude's paintings are, in my view and in the view of most of the painter's critics, overwhelmingly secondary to their mimeticism if they are present at all. Even setting

generic differences aside, the chapter can only compel if one adopts Benjamin's stance, but this degree of faith is difficult for the reader to muster so early into Brown's argument.

A more compelling foundation (and visual key) for her argument might have been provided by evolving staging practices and stage technologies during the centuries she discusses. For example, the shift to perspectival stagecraft and proscenium-arch stages (and, indeed, the movement of the actors behind this arch in the eighteenth century) reconfigured rather than obliterated the complex relationships between stage and audience and form and content established by allegorical theater of the late Middle Ages. It is no accident that the book's strongest chapter, on the illusionist stage, focuses largely on playhouse and set design, radical innovations to which were incited by the Renaissance revival of Vitruvius's *De architectura*. In Brown's terms, increasingly illusionistic stagecraft "could be used to heighten morality drama without hesitation" (139), even as the increasing fondness for (distinctly unmedieval) disguise in many plays of the period "severely reduces the legibility of the world" (147). Discussing the "new allegorical idioms" engendered by new theatrical conventions (125), Brown offers terrific readings of, among others, Jonsonian masque, Andreas Gryphius's *Cardenio und Celinde* (1657), and Calderón's *autos sacramentales* and commercial drama. (Despite the playwright's withdrawal from secular plays, Brown smartly sees the distinction as fraught if not irrelevant.) In moments such as these, her analysis and argumentation are frankly brilliant—and they make clear that her gentle chiding in the preface of scholars who too infrequently read across periodical and national borders is better directed to historians of dramatic literature than those of dance or especially theater. Indeed, equally paradigmatic shifts in stage technology may also help to explain the dramatic difference Brown sees in the most historically recent plays she discusses: Shaw's *Candida* (1898), Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), and Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* (1907).

This methodological complaint, however, is minor, and it is too easy to criticize a book for not being another kind of book. After all, the richness of many of Brown's readings and her remarkable scholarly range fuel her argument and ultimately provide a compelling picture of allegory's afterimages, which appear and recede across the history of Western drama from the sixteenth century. The scholarship, as exemplified by the helpfully extensive discursive endnotes, is exemplary. (Due to a printing error, unfortunately, these notes are incomplete, and the final thirty-two pages in my edition clearly belong to a different book. I am thankful that the author does not discuss Jerry Falwell, as the book's index claims she does.) On English and German drama—and especially on Goethe, unsurprisingly—Brown is particularly com-

elling. By contrast, my least favorite passage in *The Persistence of Allegory* is the first sentence of its preface, which declares: “In today’s climate of culture studies and globalism, some explanation for a book focused on the forms of the European literary past seems to be in order” (ix). Surely written at the behest of an editor, the sentence reveals a wholly unnecessary anxiety about the book’s interventions into contemporary literary criticism. A contrary and truer caveat might be that, in today’s climate of ever-narrowing academic specialization, a book that considers at least ten national traditions and ranges across centuries of history—of literature, opera, dance, and theater—is surely as intellectually necessary as it is bracing.

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