

## Pleasures of Disorder: New Work on Hanoverian Culture

Laura Kent

*This review essay is based on two papers written while Laura was an undergraduate at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign for Professor Walter Arnstein (who coincidentally delivered the Epsilon Mu chapter, Phi Alpha Theta banquet lecture this year) and revised while she was a M.A. in History graduate at Eastern Illinois.*

Brewer, John. *Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.

Baer, Marc. *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.

The distinctions that separate high and low culture can at times seem indiscernible. But it is valuable to compare those pastimes considered popular with those in which only the elite took part. John Brewer and Marc Baer consider the integration of high and low culture, particularly in the theatrical arena. Brewer follows the changing attitudes toward "the fine arts" throughout the eighteenth century and the changes that took place within the performance, painting, and literary worlds. Baer, on the other hand, closely studies theatre riots from mid-September through December 17, 1809, which reflect the struggle which occurred when the elite classes began to attend the theatre in greater numbers. The eighteenth century was a time of great cultural change as the court's patronage for the fine arts diminished and a commercial culture emerged within England. Brewer and Baer trace these changes from a courtly to a commercial culture. They also examine the dichotomy remaining in this consumer culture between base popular entertainment and enriching high-minded discussion of ideals.

Brewer states that he intends to "build a bridge between the general reader and academic scholarship, to write an accessible account of the fine arts and literature in eighteenth-century England that would draw on scholarly research" (ix). This he

has accomplished, and has created an entertaining and educational work. The illustrations are especially helpful in clarifying issues and giving the reader a visual memory of contemporary artists and critics. Yet the book gives the reader only a general understanding of the main issues within the cultural history of England during the eighteenth century.

Brewer divides his work into seven parts, including an introduction of the cultural contexts and a conclusion offering some inclusion of the whole of the British Isles. The main focus lies in parts two through four, in which Brewer individually discusses changes in performance, print, and painting primarily in London. In parts five through seven he places these individual changes in national political and social context, providing a definition of an English cultural heritage, and describing provincial culture and travel through Britain. Each of these parts generally focuses on a close study of one or two influential persons within each field. Brewer also makes use of contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, and letters as evidence for the changing attitudes of the general public toward eighteenth-century culture.

Brewer opens by explaining the state of the arts within the English Court. He points out that the early Hanoverian kings were not avid patrons of the arts. George II, for example, despised reading. He states that the monarch became less of a public figure, and he describes George III as "the first 'middle-class' monarch" (21). George III and his wife were moralistic and dull, hampering the liveliness and entertainment that had existed in previous eras. Brewer asserts that this forced artists to look for more commercial employment, and that they often times found private patronage more lucrative than a monarchical commission.

Because artists wanted to reach a large number of people and therefore make more money, an urban setting was the most economically practical environment for cultural development. London soon became not only the business center of England but the cultural center as well. Brewer concentrates on the artistic expression that was present within London's society, but he does acknowledge the existence of provincial artists and writers. In particular he singles out the lives of Thomas Bewick, John Marsh, and Anne Seward, all of whom avoided London and preferred the provinces.

Central to London's cultural development was the rise of the urban coffeehouse; it became a place to discuss cultural and critical ideas. Other important developments included the pleasure garden, concert hall, and exhibition room. In these places, and within social clubs, culture was defined and critiqued. Brewer defines the fine arts as "a field of human endeavor which was neither utilitarian nor rational but pleasing because it affected people's feelings" (87), and suggests that throughout the century the debate over the effect and value of the fine arts to the public continued.

The extension of literacy into a more working class culture is another focus of Brewer's work. He attempts to quantify the number of literate persons within England. Brewer estimates that sixty percent of the male population and forty percent of the female population could read by 1750 (167). Yet he claims that the change in printed matter had less to do with a growing literate public and more to do with changing restrictions on publishing, which allowed a wider range of topics and growth in writing. With more material available to read, the reading styles of the people changed from "intensive" to "extensive" (169). Brewer explains that "intensive" reading occurs in places where printed matter is rare; books are cherished, scrutinized, and re-read many times. "Extensive" reading is only available to cultures that have a wide variety of printed matter and where the book itself becomes less honored and remains an entertainment piece.

As more books became available, selling practices changed. Many booksellers began to allow the borrowing of books for short time at a small price (176). This practice developed into large circulating libraries. An intriguing chart of the borrowings from the Bristol Library (181) shows the number of books borrowed by subject. (History, of course, was almost twice as popular as any other subject listed.) Other changes in the buying of printed material included the development of book clubs, a small town phenomenon, in which people contributed a fixed amount to the club and thus were able, together, to buy more books than the individual would have access to alone. Brewer also comments on the illiterate masses noting that "even those who could not read lived to an unprecedented degree in a culture of print, for the impact of the publishing revolution extended beyond the literate" (187). Reading aloud was a popular pastime. Within the household women read to each other to pass the time and reading out loud occurred in factories as well. Even those who were illiterate were encouraged to buy books for literate guests.

With increased publishing, attitudes towards writers changed as well. Writers were condemned if they wrote simply for profit, yet the professional writer emerged. The distinction of the hack from the author of an original idea allowed the emergence of the professional writer. The theory that an original idea was the property of the creator and that the sale of this property should profit the laborer gave a special place to those writing novels and critiques. Only the hack was condemned for his use of others' ideas to make a profit. This distinction between the author and the hack illustrates the emerging contrast between virtuous culture and low entertainment.

The differentiation between high and low culture is especially visible within the performing arts, yet the line between base and moral entertainment is much harder to draw. Actors were seen as immoral; to illustrate this point Brewer quotes the *Players' Scourge* which stated actors "are the filth and garbage of the earth, the

scum and stain of human nature, the excrements and refuse of all mankind" (334). Players were thought to be immoral because they allowed the audience to sympathize with improper characters, and because in their personal lives many were violent, sexual, and bawdy. The theaters were located in close proximity to warehouses and taverns, which brought more criticism. There were actors, however, who fought to include performance arts within the realm of highbrow culture. Brewer uses the example of Sarah Siddons who refused to portray immoral characters and personally censored lines she felt beneath her character (346). She was seen as matron, mother, patriot, and exemplified English propriety in spite of her acting career.

Actors like Siddons and David Garrick gave theater a more respectable place within English culture. Garrick was a well-known actor who eventually managed to link his name with that of the respected and revered actor/playwright, William Shakespeare. Garrick strengthened this link with the Bard by revising many of Shakespeare's works (409). Garrick's link to the Bard not only helped his personal career but also established the theater as a part of a national cultural heritage, raising its reputation in the eyes of those who had dismissed it as coarse and unrefined entertainment.

The new import of Italian opera also helped to blur the image of the immoral, improper performer. Women of high social standing held private concerts (400). These concerts were separated from theatrical performance but did change the attitude of the aristocracy toward all performers. The effect that the Italian aria had on English theater is discernible in the popularity of *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay. This piece used a mixture of high and low culture to reach the audience. The mixing of the aria and the traditional ballad reflected the range of social classes in the audience attending the show.

In *The Beggar's Opera*, Gay satirized plots of other contemporary plays and figures. For example, the main character is condemned to die and in the last scene a twist of fate allows the happy ending which was a necessity for operas of the time. The characters of the opera were based on contemporary political and criminal figures. Because this opera was a hybrid of many theatrical genres and highly topical it was popular among many audiences. Brewer claims *The Beggar's Opera* "made this new heterogeneous world of high, low, and commercial art coherent" (429).

Baer also looks at the changes in the theatre and the theatre going public, but he focuses on a particular event, which illustrates the struggle between popular and elite culture then taking place. By the early nineteenth century the theatre had become an arena for the expression of political and social ideals for most classes. The theatre riots of 1809 exemplify the participation of English audiences in theatre and their dissatisfaction at being kept out of decisions affecting their cultural participation.

Because these riots lasted for so long Baer is able to look at the ways the riots changed, why rioters returned, and why ticket prices brought such an uproar from the London audiences. Baer also looks at the importance of theatre to both high and low culture, especially the important role that the theatre played for the working classes. He tries to prove that disorder can have a stabilizing effect on society and that these riots in London actually helped to preserve order. Finally he looks at the way the audience changed during and after these riots; he sees a direct correlation in the riots and the changing atmosphere of the audience, which went from a participatory group to detached and silent just after the theatre riots.

In London only two licensed theatres existed, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, both of which had to be rebuilt between 1809 and 1811 due to fire. During the autumn of 1809 Drury Lane was being rebuilt and Covent Garden was the only theatre that could legally present dramatic performance. During its reconstruction Covent Garden had undergone some major changes in seating; in the type of seating offered, the number of available seats, and the price of those seats. Not only had the manager, Kemble, raised the prices without considering the opinions of the public, but also Covent Garden at this time held a monopoly. Audiences thought these new prices were unfair. Many people felt it was the right of every Englishman to go to the theatre, these new prices might keep people from ever attending a show.

Many people believed these new higher prices were unfair and immoral. The idea of a moral economy was still popular in England at this time. Rioters thought that the prices for tickets at Covent Garden should reflect a just price and that the rise in the theatre's costs should not be covered by the general theatre going public. Some felt the managers should have asked the people if they could raise the prices; some felt they should somehow cut costs. But to offer private boxes and higher prices was not the moral way to increase profits. Thus the riots began and continued for several weeks and the letters OP, which stood for "Old Prices," became the symbol of the rioters and their complaints.

While Baer does allow that the moral economy did influence the OPs he states that "the seemingly obtuse argument of access to legitimate theatre as a constitutional right appears to have been the most important element for the OPs in legitimizing their behavior" (84). He shows that those opposed to the OPs saw them as disrupters of the peace, but the OPs "saw *themselves* as the preservers of British freedom" (80). Because the theatre had become connected to both the popular culture and politics it was a place that allowed for expression of different opinions. Baer says that most European governments "feared the stage as much or more than the press"(81), because the theatre made available new ideas to a wide audience.

To those people who did not often comment on political or social changes, "a place in the audience was also a voice" (177). It was a place to express and receive new ideas and it gave the working classes something to comment on. Baer compares the cultural importance of the theatre in the early nineteenth century to the importance placed on sports in the late twentieth century. These entertainments gave those working class people something to discuss and understand, something to cherish and cheer, yet it was much more a part of the English culture than simply this. The theatre was seen as a part of the English national culture an important part of the English heritage, and it was a place for the audiences to learn how to be English. Baer says the theatre's "social importance lay in the fact that it was one of the few urban arenas--perhaps the only one--where a variety of social orders heard and saw national virtues demonstrated"(193). The theatre and the right to attend shows was of great importance to the English people and these riots reflect the desire of the public to keep the old system intact.

In fact, Baer does argue that the theatre riots show the population's anxiety to social change and desire to contain the changes taking place. This is why he feels that these riots had a stabilizing effect on the population. The rioters showed their desire to return to the old ways, to retain stability by retaining old traditions. The anxiety of the English about social change is evident from these riots. The fact that these riots were relatively peaceful also shows that the OPs did not want to begin a revolution. The riots reflect the conservative ideals of prudence and moderation and the desire to return to the old customs, not a desire to tear down and replace old practices.

The government response to the riots also shows that the rioters were self-controlled. The theatre managers brought in bouncers to protect the theatre and to quiet the crowd, but the government did not use much force during the riots. It was understood that the audience had the right to show approval or disapproval of the shows. Therefore it was difficult to make a legal distinction between rioting and participation in the evenings events. During the riots the audience actually became the actors and seemed to understand that they themselves were putting on the show.

Baer discusses the change that began to take place during and after the riots of audience participation in plays. For many years the participation of the audience in staged shows had been declining. The audience began to take a more passive role in the theatre. Baer argues that the rioters wanted to "destroy the dramatic performances to re-create a balance between stage and audience" (185). In the short run the rioters did balance the focus between stage and audience, but in the long run the stage became the focus of the audience and audience participation in plays declined even further.

Baer shows that an understanding of the theatre riots of 1809 help to give the

historian a greater understanding of the changing attitudes of the English public. It gives an example of a disturbance that was meant not to bring about change but to revive the traditions of the past. The theatre riots show a collective desire of the English to hold onto the past and at the same time the right express their beliefs about an established system. The theatre riots also show the uniqueness of the English public during an era of revolutions: public who cherished and revels in their own past, who are cautious to accept great change, and who exercise their right to express themselves in all aspects of life.

As theatre became an acceptable entertainment for the higher classes, those laborers who had always attended performances became less welcome in the audience. Both Baer and Brewer show cultural changes taking place in Hanovarian England and the struggle that occurs because of these changes.