


Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel.

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Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel. By Emily Allen. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003. viii + 254 pp. "The novel" has been deliriously playing itself into being over against a succession of "others" ever since the days of More and Deloney and Cervantes, when what was not-novel was simply all those others that had always been there: the classics, the romances, the philosophical writings. Whatever it was not, however--not poetry, not hagiography, not allegorical romance--the novel was always vernacular, ephemeral, popular. Its rival, its double, its bad mother, therefore, was theater. The novel vigorously borrowed from and badmouthed theater, trumped it and misread it, until by the British novel's nineteenth-century heyday these exchanges were well out in the open: readers of plots from Jane Austen to Arthur Conan Doyle could expect a trip to the theater. The realistic novel's antitheatrical theatricality has been well studied of late, by Jonas Barish, Nina Auerbach, Joseph Litvak, and J. Jeffrey Franklin, among others; Franklin, for instance, treats it as a category among the nineteenth century's several "discourses of play." (1) Emily

Allen's Theater Figures is a welcome addition, especially for three refinements of focus. First, Allen reminds us that the familiar argument within novels about which of the many genres of novel a given novel might be is actually a form of the older oedipal struggle with theater: tales of contemporary amours, melodramatic and gothic tales--these theatrical genres are not-novel. Second, she proposes that the oedipal struggle is with the mother rather than the father: theater is surprisingly often figured in the feminine. This means that the novel cannot truly abject what it relies on. The struggle is more like the one described by Lord Jim's philosopher-adventurer Stein: only if the novel submits itself to the destructive element of the oceanic-theatrical can it, by exercising its particularities and extremities, make that element support the novel, as a distinct entity swimming atop it. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, Allen suggests that while eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelists both merrily and anxiously dramatized these generic struggles in their texts, it is really we twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics who keep the antitheatricality of realist fiction at theoretical center stage, determined as we postmoderns are to demonstrate our superiority to an ancestor reader-critic we need to picture as repressed and terrified of play, antiperformative, unable to game, inflexibly earnest. Not amused. With humor and...

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