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978-0-521-03242-1 - American Drama: The Bastard Art

Susan Harris Smith

Excerpt

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I

*Introduction**The Problem of American Drama*

AMERICAN DRAMA is, for me, the canary in the mine shaft of American literary and cultural studies. That it lies gasping for air is a sign that something is wrong with the entire critical and educational apparatus that promotes, sustains, and generates disciplinary enterprises. Therefore, my project is an inquiry into the cultural reception and position of American dramatic literature, which, in my view, is marked by the extensive degree to which it has been marginalized, excluded, or “disciplined” in the culture in general and the university in particular. Although the use of “disciplined” necessarily invokes the historian Michel Foucault and his analyses of institutions and their discourses and processes, this study is not theorized along strict Foucauldian lines. Certainly I am concerned with the creation of academic disciplines and the organization and management of fields of study; but I am interested as well in the “punishing” power of disciplinary fields, in particular in the ability to hierarchize, denigrate, and exclude American drama.

Four major concerns have prompted me: first, the generic hegemony, that is, the dominance of poetry and prose, which has always characterized canonized American literature and literary histories; second, the debatable essential “Americanness” of American drama and its objectives as perceived and codified by literary critics, anthologizers, and historians; third, the use to which drama was put in early American educational texts and the problematic location of American drama in the developing higher-education curriculum; and fourth, the cultural “place” of American drama as created in part by the emerging discipline of American sociology and in part by the fraught status of realistic dramaturgy. It is my contention that, to a

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significant degree, the contested and uncertain location of American drama is the consequence of the rise of disciplinary fields in English and American literary studies and has far less to do with the intrinsic merits or demerits of the genre than with the struggles for authority and legitimation of emerging professionalisms.

I initially became concerned over the lack of attention paid to American drama by American literary historians and critics at the Salzburg Seminar in 1985; there, Emory Elliott and Sacvan Bercovitch, the editors of two then-forthcoming histories of American literature, one from Columbia University Press, the other from Cambridge University Press, led seminars addressing issues pertaining to the reevaluation of American literature. Welcome and needed though this reconsideration was, it focused exclusively on poetry and prose. The absence of drama from consideration at the seminar and from more than a passing reference in the planned histories troubled me, and since that time I have been asking questions about what has proved to be a complex cultural phenomenon. A short version of my preliminary study, "Generic Hegemony: American Drama and the Canon," first presented at the Modern Language Association in 1987, was the focal article for a discussion with three other scholars (C. W. E. Bigsby, Joyce Flynn, Michael Cadden) about the problem in *American Quarterly* (March 1989). That article, in a much expanded version, forms the first chapter of this study.

Focusing largely but not exclusively on both the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century, I document and examine the history of the academic and critical bias against American drama in anthologies and literary histories, college texts and curricula, literary magazines, scholarly journals, and critical histories. This prejudiced high-cultural attitude, which ignores the American drama as if it were an unwanted bastard child, has prevailed for at least one hundred years because teachers, scholars, and critics have been either the willing producers or the unreflexive, unquestioning inheritors of a long-standing, ingrained disposition to dismiss drama as unworthy or not "literary." To my surprise, some readers of that article have assumed either that I, too, believe that American drama is not literature or that I believe American drama should be understood only as literature. Neither is the case. Quite to the contrary: I believe that American dramatic literature has as much claim to literary status as any other genre, but I believe, as well, that although a study of dramatic literature should place the text at the center, dramatic literature must be understood in its widest possible manifestations and contexts, from production of texts to reception of performances. To do an evaluation of the literary and aesthetic

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qualities of American drama would be to focus on particular works at the expense of larger issues; my project has been to look at the ways in which American drama has been devalued by others, not to vindicate its status as literature. Nor, despite what some mistakenly see as my “negative” focus, is my work in any way meant to discount or discredit those who have worked to keep American drama alive as a serious subject for scholarly and critical, literary and historical, investigation. Far from it; my work has been illuminated by the vigilant flame of earlier studies, most notably the historical work done by C. W. E. Bigsby, Travis Bogard, Ruby Cohn, Walter Meserve, and Brenda Murphy.

American drama has been written almost out of the American literary canon because of enduring hostile evaluations and proscriptions that themselves need to be reassessed. I argue that for several reasons American drama has been shelved out of sight: in part because of a culturally dominant puritan distaste for and suspicion of the theatre; in part because of a persistent, unwavering allegiance to European models, slavish Anglophilia, and a predilection for heightened language cemented by the New Critics; in part because of a fear of populist, leftist, and experimental art; in part because of a disdain of alternative, oppositional, and vulgar performances; in part because of narrow disciplinary divisions separating drama from theatre and performance; and in part because of the dominance of prose and poetry in the hierarchy of genres studied in university literature courses and reproduced in American criticism. As a consequence, American dramatic literature has no “place” in the culture either as a “highbrow” literary genre or, surprisingly, as a “lowbrow” popular form of entertainment. As a sociocultural product, “literature” is not born, it is made by institutional processes, by disciplinary fiat, and by critical assertion. In the production of an American national literature, American drama has been a casualty of the wars of legitimation fought in the academy and has been so diminished that not even the revisionists have taken up the cause. Ultimately, however, I am interested not as much in arguing for American drama as literature as I am in examining the phenomenon of exclusion and in studying the tactics, discourse practices, and maneuvers employed to deal with American drama by those who were busy dominating and defining culture and legitimating their claim.

In an introductory note to a special issue of *Resources for American Literary Study* (Spring 1990), the editors, Jackson R. Bryer and Carla Mulford, observe that “inquiry about American drama and theater is just coming into its own” (iii). This is supported by the existence of and the work being done in three new academic journals, *American Drama*, *The*

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Journal of American Drama and Theatre, and *Studies in American Drama, 1945–Present* as well as the continued attention paid to American drama in journals with a broader focus, such as *Modern Drama*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Theatre Annual*. The notion that American drama and theatre are only now achieving independent stature is both unsettling and welcome news: Those in the fragile field of American drama have been aggrieved by the long-standing neglect but have had little chance outside the fortress walls to challenge or engage their colleagues in American literary and cultural studies. It is gratifying and exciting to be part of an intellectual movement now riding the cresting wave of amplified contextualization and new methodologies. Work on the issues is currently being done in histories of American literary and theatrical practice by scholars such as David Grimsted in *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater & Culture, 1800–1850*, Lawrence W. Levine in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, and Loren Kruger in *The National Stage: Theater and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America*. In *American Drama, 1940–1960: A Critical History* (1994), Thomas Adler reads the central motifs of American drama through the lenses of “the sociopolitical currents” and “the sociocultural milieu” (5). Gary Richardson, emphasizing the critical marginality of his subject in *American Drama from the Colonial Period Through World War I: A Critical History* (1993), argues that “the stepchild of American literary culture” has been marked by a distrust of the historical, critical, and economic forces that shaped a canon rich in “formal diversity and cultural complexity” (ix–xi). I hope to add to the useful work being done by my colleagues by basing my avowedly polemical reconstructive consideration on movements in academic institutions and on impulses in literary criticism.

Obviously, concern about American dramatic literature is but a small part of larger, related concerns about the professionalization of literary study, of the creation of disciplines, of the debatable Americanness of American literature, and of canon formation, concerns that have become increasingly central to any evaluation of literature. Given the recent proliferation of studies on the history of the creation of academic disciplines and the struggles to legitimate those disciplines, this is an opportune, even necessary, moment to join in the discussion. Valuable considerations include such recent work as Gerald Graff’s pioneering *Professing Literature*; Arthur N. Applebee’s *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History*; Gerald Graff and Michael Warner’s documentary anthology, *The Origins of Literary Studies in America*; Bruce Robbins’s *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture*; Peter Carafiol’s *The American Ideal:*

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Literary History as a Worldly Activity; essays by Michael Colacurcio and William Spengemann; Paul Lauter's *Canons and Contexts*; and David Shumway's *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline*, all of which have informed my work.

Of necessity, much of this book is the documentation of literary and cultural history; the rest must be informed speculation. The documentation, I insist, is a necessary step in calling back yesterday and in recovering those voices, many now forgotten though their traces linger on, which spoke so stridently or urgently against or for the drama. The particulars of those arguments are revealed as much in the discourse as in the thematics, and, at times the cacophony is staggering. Although many wrote against the drama as literature, they were far from coherent or uniform in their charges; in fact, I contend that the very evident dissensus of opinion – the posturing fatuousness, obvious biases, and not so hidden agendas in many of the arguments against the drama – support my contention that dramatic literature itself was not so much the issue as were the contriving of necessary hierarchies, the forming of boundaries, and the excluding of a troublesome and slippery literary form that resisted entrapment in a narrow genre. In fact, the very elusiveness speaks to a fundamental flaw in the whole concept of disciplining drama. Therefore, rather than presuming to have written a history with a narrative cohesiveness, I think of this reconstructive effort as an idiosyncratic trip through a museum with stops at significant exhibits, an effort to eschew a totalizing or organic history for an introductory investigation of related problems prevailing in American drama's cultural location.

The other part of this exercise, my informed speculation, admittedly is only a tentative first step toward an understanding of an enormously complex issue, but it is the best contribution I can make at this juncture. Although, from my perspective, to argue *for* American dramatic literature seems like a radical stance, I am fully aware that I open myself to a plethora of critical charges: of being superficial in taking such an approach, of not dealing in sufficient depth with any one issue, and of accepting outworn paradigms, to say nothing of employing the narrow generic term itself. In defense of my approach, I would respond that to investigate how and where the boundaries were framed, I have stayed within the narrow parameters of the "field" as it historically has been constituted by those who profess literature. In trying to construct my own mapping of the marginalization of, and embarrassed confusion in, cultural discourse about American drama, I have read, quite deliberately, for the exclusions, for the limited inclusions, for the defensive maneuvers, and for the nervous apologies in

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previous histories. What I found were discourses of legitimation anxiously and hegemonically focused around concerns for nationalism, gender, and the construction of disciplines, all conservative enterprises that stripped American dramatic literature of its potential academic and actual rich cultural capital. In my survey of cultural history, I make no claim to an unbiased reading, exhaustive scholarship, or complete “coverage,” all of which are impossible; but I have tried to analyze the standard texts and some peripheral ones to reposition American drama, to take it out of the wings and put it, if only briefly, into the spotlight. Like many narrative contrivances, this may open avenues for discussion. I urge readers to consider the matrix of cultural, ideological, and aesthetic criteria that have resulted in the neglect of American drama. If a debate ensues, then the question of opening the American literary canon to drama may emerge as a first, though not the final, step in rethinking American drama.

I do not think this is a minor or peripheral problem. Given that the canon of American literature is currently undergoing an overdue scrutiny and revision, this is also an opportune moment to draw attention to the problem because it has wide ramifications in culture studies. If American drama in general has been buried, so, too, in particular have been the voices of the experimentalists, marginalized minorities, and ethnic groups who have tried to speak through the drama. The recovery of “lost” plays has been well under way for several decades, but these plays must be studied in a wider context. To a great extent the burgeoning interest in culture critique, culture studies, performance studies, and multicultural and interdisciplinary studies could act as a corrective to the narrow and ill-conceived dismissal of American drama from consideration.

Because I primarily study the texts of dramatic literature rather than records of theatrical productions or performance histories, I turn to theatre histories only when they have some direct bearing on the matter. I recognize that this is a difficult point of separation, a play being as much a script for full realization in production as it is a literary text. I feel strongly, however, that one great attraction of a play’s printed text is that it can serve two masters, the reader and the audience, and that the dissemination of a text through print and through critical reception is as vital to its survival as is a well-received production, especially when one of the vexed questions is the literary status of the genre. Also, much of the material I study, such as the creation of a literary discipline, is built on the presumption of printed texts. That this model must be enlarged is one of my final arguments.

I am fully aware that the formation of canons and disciplines is the result of a complex interaction of forces, for example, institutional and profes-

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sional debates over curriculum, critical rhetoric, economic and political objectives, and a dominant, cultural insistence on rational order. A “complete” study of the cultural situation of American drama would have to account for the intersections of theatrical and textual production, convergences with the other arts, government funding and censorship, educational systems, copyright laws, the book publishing industry, and a host of related problems, full considerations of which are beyond the horizons of this book. As a consequence, I have not attempted a comprehensive chronological narrative but, instead, have constructed my investigation around four problems with a substantive location in higher education and connected sites: generic hegemony, “Americanness,” the academic curriculum, and sociology.

I recognize that teachers, critics, and historians and their canons of national literature can become agents of legitimation, sites for fixing dominant ideologies, and purveyors of self-aggrandizing myths for established or dominant interests or classes. I also recognize that the very idea of an essential “American” literature is being strenuously questioned. Nonetheless, until very recently, critics, historians, and anthologizers took it for granted that they could define and point to the central texts of American literature. Their enshrined values are implicit in the texts they chose to canonize; the desired image of a progressive America rested firmly in a preoccupation with historical situations and with topical verisimilitude, with native characters and indigenous forms rather than cosmopolitan imports. The few who wrote in favor of American drama valued and valorized a democratic hegemony through what they understood as “civilizing” discourse and dramaturgical strategies of containment. In the chapter devoted to the problem of the Americanness of American drama and its cultural work, I argue that these perceptions were illusions rigorously imposed in defiance of what was really happening in American theatres and in American drama. As a consequence of American literary historians ignoring or dismissing American drama in general, in particular the pluralistic voices of resistance, the voices of women, African Americans, ethnic groups, leftists, and experimentalists, to an astonishing degree, also have often been left out of the history.

Annette Kolodny has written that the delegitimation crisis “asserts as its central critical category not commonality but *difference*” and has urged critics to focus on the forces of exclusion (293). In studying the cultural history of the disciplining of American drama, we need to understand how drama exists within American culture, to explore the many dimensions of the relations between society and drama. We need to accept drama as a

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literary genre but not solely as a literary genre; drama is a complicated genre that is socially created, distributed, experienced, and shared in a multiplicity of ways. Drama is what theatre does, but it is not the only thing that theatre does. We need to reencounter both the plays themselves and the responses to them, the circumstances of publication, performance, and reception, to recover the historical narratives. By so doing, I hope to make a modest contribution to “re-placing” American drama in its literary and cultural framework.

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2

*Generic Hegemony**The Exclusion of American Drama*

“IN THE FOUR QUARTERS of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play?” queried Sydney Smith in *The Edinburgh Review* in 1820 (79). More to the point, who *reads* an American play? The evidence would suggest that few have or do. The question has to be, Why? Even though the American literary canon has been “busted,” the firm pronouncement from the pen of Dion Boucicault in 1890 that “there is not, and there never has been, a literary institution, which could be called the American drama” would provoke very little argument from most American critics more than a hundred years later (641). In fact, the neglect of American drama is so pervasive that Ruby Cohn, in her history of twentieth-century drama for the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), begins with the observation: “Given the chokehold on drama of a misnamed *Broadway*, given the lure of Hollywood, and given the power of some small-minded reviewers in the daily press, it is a virtual miracle that American drama merits admission to a history of American *literature*” (1101).

Despite its segregation from the main corpus of American literature, American drama has never been written in a vacuum. It has mirrored peculiarly American social, political, and historical issues in traditional as well as challenging forms and experimental styles. It has been the forum for a plurality of American voices. A reflexive cultural barometer, American drama has always responded to national and regional problems, either in reifying prevailing sentiments or by challenging dominant ideologies. Like

This chapter is based on “Generic Hegemony: American Drama and the Canon,” *American Quarterly* 41 (1989). Reprinted by permission of the Johns Hopkins University Press.

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other forms of American literature, drama embodies the American struggle. Certainly, American literature itself was for years excluded from or relegated to a minor role in higher education; in 1936, Howard Mumford Jones referred to it as the “orphan child of the curriculum” (376). Even with the expansion of American literature in the higher-education curriculum after World War II, for too many critics and historians American drama is still American literature’s unwanted bastard child, the offspring of the whore that is theatre. For decades scholars and critics of American literature, engaged in establishing an academic discipline with canonical hierarchies and feeling embattled in the face of longer-lived English literary studies, have practiced generic hegemony; as a consequence, American drama historically has been the most devalued and overlooked area in American literary studies.

It is also the most maligned, vilified, and unjustly neglected area. For instance, to begin near the middle of the twentieth century, George Beiswanger’s assertion about the drama, in an article entitled “Theatre Today: Symptoms and Surmises” written in 1944, captures the bias against American drama that has prevailed in American literary studies. “It is a fact,” he writes, “that the American imagination is not at home in the medium of the drama. . . . Serious drama, I surmise, is not an American art. It has never been. We have no tradition of playwriting on the deeper things of life” (26–27). In the same year, in an acid assessment of the theatre season for *The Kenyon Review*, he wrote that “it has always been unwise to expect much of theatre . . . its task is show business; its mind essentially (and wisely) illiterate; its instincts that of a jade” (318–319). John Gassner in “‘There Is No American Drama’ – A Premonition of Discontent” (1952), worried about the New Critics’ hostility to the drama but conceded that “the literary element was never the strong point of American playwriting” (84). Eric Bentley, in a 1954 article “The Drama: An Extinct Species?,” drew a similar conclusion, “‘there is no American drama.’ There is a lack not only of Shakespeares and O’Caseys but also of Dekkers and Joneses. In America playwriting is not yet a profession” (413).

In 1963, Richard Gilman was as harsh: “The drama has suffered more than the other arts from the disjuncture between thought and activity that is so characteristic of our cultural life. The American drama is itself almost mindless,” because of “a refusal to believe that intellect has anything to do with theater” (157). He continued by arguing that unlike European drama, which has undergone a modernist transformation, American drama continues to be at fault for “its refusal to take thought, its clinging to passion when passion is mere noise” (169).