

2003

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Recommended Citation

Prueter, Betsy (2003) "Domestic Politics of Ancient and Early Modern Drama: Senior Research Prospectus," *Ephemeris*: Vol. 4 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/ephemeris/vol4/iss1/14>

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Domestic Politics of Ancient and Early Modern Drama: Senior Research Prospectus

By Betsy Prueter

My senior research project will study the domestic relationships apparent in dramatic writing and the extent to which the depiction of these relationships are reflections of state and government politics and policy. The two time periods of interest are 3rd century Rome and 17th/18th century England. Both of these eras are rich in culture, conflict and character. The controversy these eras seem to instigate politically is reflected in the literature. Politics (in a literary sense) seem to center around three relationships: master and servant, husband and wife and parent and child. The ways in which the relationships are presented reflect, to a certain amount, societal norms and state policies that affect domestic life. The playwrights appear to take the edicts, the rules and the laws, challenge them or reinforce them offer possible solutions or resolutions to them; all within the context of a comedy.

A reader might ask, and rightly so, why I might choose to comparatively study ancient Rome and modern England. At first glance, the connection might not be completely evident. But there is a strong link between the two periods, and as I investigate deeper into scholarship I am finding more, however subtle, ties that bring the two together. The primary connection between both ancient Rome and "modern" England is one of political structure and change. England was experiencing a significant shift in government and power emphasis from the upper aristocratic class to the merchant middle class. Industry among the citizens became a praised virtue and the development of the actual *working* class defined the new wave of society. Two trends in particular observed in England were the growth of the state and the development of the public sphere where the focus was on coffee houses, newspapers and political clubs- in essence, the *common* person was involved in discussion of public and state affairs. Modern English Drama can be studied by looking at the 17th and 18th centuries separately. John Spurr, in his

article, *England 1649-1750: differences contained*, argues that mid seventeenth century England was "violent, authoritarian, credulous, poverty-stricken; confident that virtue and responsibility were inherited by gentlemen and monarchs; cowering in the face of a hostile environment and universe... absorbed in religious fundamentalism." As we move closer to the reign of King George, we see noticeable changes. "Mid-eighteenth century, on the other hand, although not modern, would be full of familiar sights and institutions. This was a world comfortably like our own in many ways: with newspapers and tea-tables, concerts, and public parks, insurance policies and sales taxes, a post office and bureaucrats; a world which held a place for the "ladies," "the consumer," "the citizen," and "the middle class." This emphasis on mercantilism and the middle class is significant to my study of the drama of the time period and how it relates to Latin drama.

Rome, though obviously structured differently politically, experienced similar changes in the nature of governing. Roman government saw new leaders and authorities each year, so an overhaul of the system was extremely unlikely; being that true stability never really existed. But Rome was inter-bellum at this point. They had started to expand territorially and had colonized most of the Mediterranean and parts of Africa. This move towards imperialism represented their political metamorphoses.

Additionally, the third and fourth centuries gave rise to the creation of a middle class, the Equites, or the knights. This broke the traditional mold of upper and lower classes and shifted the social, cultural and political focus on members of Roman society who were *not* noble. This creation of a middle class caused interesting outcomes. First of all, the patricians started to become dependent on the lower classes for financial support, for what they had in name status they lacked in property. Roman law reflected the interdependence

between the two classes with enacted allowances of marriage among the classes. Finally, an emphasis on a working class took slight precedence over the patricians and the plebeians, the traditional social classes at the time. This was clearly related to the imperialistic, expansionist tendencies the Roman "republic" developed between the second and Third Punic wars. With an economy that was flourishing, a need arose for a class of people dedicated to its upkeep.

The domestic relationships that existed in the government setting found themselves quite often interpreted and reflected in the literature of the time. My interests have pointed specifically to drama and I have discovered significant connections between this particular genre and the political scene. Certain areas of domesticity are continually portrayed in the plays and result in very complicated outcomes and plot twists. The outcomes are usually difficult to interpret. Because much of Plautine and Terentian drama is meant to be funny, it sometimes is a difficult task to extract the implications and intentions of their work. Their characters employ puns, mistaken identities, trickery and intrigue to accomplish their goals; while at the same time making the audience roll in the aisles. However, by examining the structure of their plays, we can witness social politics being reflection within the text itself. The advantage of stock characters is a clear indication of trends through his cannon. The master and slave duality is one such relationship that appears again and again, with very similar structure. Husbands and wives are frequently pitted against each other and parents are usually running (or attempting to run) the lives of their children. When we look at 3rd century BC Rome and the political set-up, we might draw some parallels to the production of literature.

Restoration and Early Georgian Drama gave birth to playwrights who were very aware of the Classical tradition. In fact, imitation was one of the defining characteristics (and continues to be a defining characteristic) of drama during early modern England. This imitation was predominate in literature as playwrights attempted to write like ancient respected

authors. This is my hope. That by looking at Roman law, other Roman writers and Roman cultural practices, we see some sort of reflection in the text. But whatever the case, I feel that there is a direct connection between what Roman policy makers were promoting and what Roman playwrights were inspired to write. Plautus and Terence may be subverting the societal norms or they may be enforcing them (though I am inclined to believe the former). They may be posing solutions for state politics and their effects on the general public or they might be outwardly praising them. Only a thorough investigation of both the public policy of the 3rd Century and the evidence from the dramatic text will reveal the nature of the political reflection.

The same follows for Restoration Drama though I am essentially focusing on a shift between two regimes and time periods. What is mostly considered Restoration Drama (roughly 1660-1688) includes the playwrights such as Etherege, Wycherly, Behn and Pix. The Early Georgian Drama (roughly 1715-1737) is representative of Dryden, Shadwell, Congreve, Centlivre, Farquhar, and Sheridan. There was much struggle with the monarchy and the state religion that commenced in the 17th century and stabilized in the 18th century. Citizens were rebelling against Puritan values and the playwrights often followed suit. Characters lived in societies with political crises and no tradition to look to for guidance (as the state did), they all had heroic qualities but were unable to bring balance (as the state struggled to do) and some even offered an alternative to monarchy through the outcomes of their plays. Whatever the case, the dramatists proved that there was something fundamentally wrong with the old political ideology. They did this in primarily two ways. The first was witty and sophisticated, the other merely praised the middle class and their values and morals.

Because we can never be sure just how the audience interpreted these plays, we are left with a certain amount of freedom to do our own interpretation. And this will be partly my task. Through reading the plays, writing response papers

and think pieces for what I have read, gathering secondary scholarship to support or challenge my own theories and finally, developing a notion for how to bring everything together will define the methodology of my research. Additionally, I think it will be pertinent to obtain documentation testifying to the actual governmental laws present during both time periods and to delve into further primary sources that can attest to the political climate of the eras. It would behoove me to observe what policies were in place that affected the three domestic relationships I wish to explore. Perhaps new slave laws affected master slave relations in drama, or maybe the Canuleian law, which permitted marriage between the two social classes of Rome, altered how class and gender fit into husband and wife relations.

Whatever the case may be, this search is my task. I wish to discover what drove these playwrights to write what they did; what about the political environment at the time inspired such responses? What are implications of their works? If they are challenging social norms, how do they accomplish this and how effective was it? If they are only challenging certain norms and reinforcing others, how seriously are we to take their protests? What do the playwrights' responses tell us about society? Was it a place where only the wealthy, male authority figure stood a chance? Or does the drama give hope to the marginalized? Is Drama a more true reflection of reality than governmental documentation? Are there contradictions between the fictional literary text and the political texts? These are some questions that I hope will produce a varied and composite political theory that is applicable to both ancient drama and restoration drama.