
Roland Weidle. *Englische Literatur der Frühen Neuzeit: Eine Einführung.* Grundlagen der Anglistik und Amerikanistik 37. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2013, 280 pp., € 19.95.

Roland Weidle's introduction to early modern English literature is a volume especially designed for the German (or, rather, German-speaking) student of "Anglistik" who, in the course of his or her studies, has to earn a number of credit points in the field which is often (misleadingly) equated with 'the age of Shakespeare'. The well-structured, accessible and informative book unfolds a panorama of early modern literature and culture which goes far beyond the years of Shakespeare, or of the Elizabethan Renaissance. More than that, it manages to present some aspects of early modern literature which are rather neglected in the average curriculum. This may motivate the odd student to dig deeper into, say, Francis Bacon's *Essays*, Cavalier poetry or even the beginnings of theoretical-critical reflections on English Literature. Each of the six main chapters – conceptual history (chapter 1), social and cultural developments (chapter 2), poetics (chapter 3), poetry (chapter 4), drama (chapter 5), and prose (chapter 6) – concludes with a helpful summary and a short bibliography of suggested further reading.

The book opens with a chapter in which the concepts 'Renaissance', 'Humanism' and 'Early Modernism' are described, compared and explained to be related but not identical. The introduction of a number of major European artists, poets,

philosophers, courtiers and intellectuals from Petrarch and Boccaccio to Erasmus and Montaigne in the subchapter on humanism underlines the necessity for an international and interdisciplinary approach to the literature and culture of the period. The reformation, the rise of the natural sciences and new secular political theories, are described as important factors of modernization contributing to paradigm changes in many disciplines. These issues are thus aptly included in the subchapter on early modernism.

The second chapter, beginning with a slightly misleading pointer to the content of the first which does not mainly deal with the most important social changes of the age, provides a top-down historical overview (2.1) before engaging (in 2.2) with six social parameters relevant for an understanding of the epoch. The first one, social mobility (2.2.1), deals with themes as heterogeneous as court culture, Petrarchism, the great chain of being, humoral pathology, humanist education and social stratification – all well-chosen topics which provide at least as much evidence for social stasis as for mobility. The next two parts (2.2.2 and 2.2.3) are concerned with early modern explorations and encounters with the (colonial and religious) Other, chapters which benefit very much from cross-references to literary works of all kinds. The part on gender (2.2.4) introduces the one sex-model which is then used as an interpretative foil to understand the Renaissance stage in general and the phenomenon of cross-dressing in particular. A comment on gendered social hierarchies and their tentative subversion in plays such as Marlowe's *Tamburlaine 2* or Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* ends this passage. 2.2.5 is concerned with magic both as a forerunner of the natural sciences and in the context of the *Witchcraft Act* (1563) and James VI of Scotland's *Daemonology* (1597). The last subchapter, "Theatricality", underlines the pervasive strong theoretical links Weidle's overall perspective maintains with the work of Stephen Greenblatt. Self-fashioning is introduced as an important term by means of which Greenblatt has explained the emerging sense of a contingent, performative self, a notion which gains particular social relevance in the context of an understanding of the Renaissance stage as a political instrument.

In the third chapter, "Poetological Foundations", Weidle (in 3.1, "Poetic and Rhetoric") traces the origins of English literary criticism not only in the prescriptive rhetorical and poetological treatises of writers such as Thomas Wilson and George Puttenham, but also in "nicht-selbständigen poetologischen Texten" (76), passages in literary texts which today we might call metafictional such as the prologue to Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humor*. Also he mentions comments by figures in various Shakespeare plays (*Hamlet*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*) as well as self-reflexive sonnets (such as the famous opening sonnet in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*) as examples of immanent poetics. (A discussion of one of the most elaborate examples of literary criticism, Edmund Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* with its

extensive anonymous preface and comment, is missing.) The second part of this chapter (3.2, “Genre”) is extremely helpful as it makes plain to the student that genre is a highly flexible and dynamic category subject to historical change, a fact which calls into question the anachronisms inherent in convenient pigeonholing.

Chapters four (“Poetry”) and five (“Drama”) are by far the longest and most substantial ones. An overview of the poetry of the age is provided by focusing successively on the major stylistic and thematic manifestations of early modern poetry (sonnet, metaphysical poetry, Cavalier poetry, epic, pastoral and satire, and ode) as they have emerged and developed in reciprocal relation with the cultural developments unfolded in the previous chapters. A major strength of Weidle’s introduction in general consists in this particular form of intratextuality – the references to earlier or later passages in the same volume help to deepen the understanding of exemplary pieces of literature and individual readings. At the same time, Weidle’s new historicist outlook considers literature as a form of discourse indissolubly interwoven with society, politics and culture. It is one of the merits of the volume to ‘translate’, without undue simplification, the often rather difficult theoretical concepts of Montrose and Greenblatt into an accessible prose useful for the student of Renaissance literature. The chapter on the ode (4.6) deserves to be singled out exemplarily. A historical introduction describes the roots of the ode in classical antiquity and traces its path into English literature via Italy and France. Subsequently, a reading of Andrew Marvell’s famous “Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell’s Return From Ireland” shows how the classical heritage combines with contemporary politics to produce a highly ambivalent text which subtly undermines its genre and its title.

Chapter five again begins with reference to an earlier chapter (3.2) in which performativity and theatricality were described as markers not only of the stage, but of Elizabethan England as such. After a reminder of the main character traits of plays in general (in accordance with Manfred Pfister’s seminal study *Das Drama*), Weidle devotes a subchapter each to the forces which contributed to the emergence of Renaissance drama: 1) medieval popular plays, 2) school and university syllabi which included theatre performances and 3) the rapid growth, both in population and in cultural and political importance, of London. Weidle proceeds with a survey of the various stages within and beyond the capital’s city wall, from pubs such as *The Boar’s Head* to open air theatres like *The Swan* and *The Globe*, private theatres such as *Blackfriars*, and the court with its increased importance as a privileged site for masque performances under the first two Stuart Kings. The chapter suggests that the form of the theatre, the social origin of the audience and the genre and subject matter of the plays have to be seen in connection. A discussion of the dominant genres of the age, tragedy (5.3), comedy (5.4) and history plays (5.5) and their respective subgenres follows which pays

tribute to the special roles of Marlowe and Shakespeare in the history of Elizabethan and early Jacobean drama. (Court masques are mentioned in passing but do not get a chapter of their own.) – In the case of tragedy, the ‘Kydian formula’ of what constitutes a revenge tragedy is shown to be transgressed by the complexities of *Hamlet*; Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* is quoted as an example of the representation on stage of the ambivalence of human ambition; *Othello* takes domestic tragedy to a new level. In all three cases, the themes of individual autonomy, social (in)stability and mobility as well as gender relationships move to the center of attention in plays which revolutionize dramatic discourse (blank verse, neologisms, monologues, metaphors, metadrama) in order to open the stage for the paradigmatic changes of the time. – Early modern comedy is characterized by Weidle as a genre which covers huge ground: from the early, rather vulgar Tudor comedies such as Nicholas Udall’s *Ralph Roister Doister* to the witty court plays of John Lyly written for an aristocratic audience able to understand his euphuist style; and from the satirical comedy of humors (Ben Jonson) to the hybrid, loosely structured tragi-comedies of John Fletcher or Thomas Middleton. Lyly’s *Endymion* is shown to partake of Petrarchist discourse which it shares not only with the sonnets of the age and Spenser’s epic poem *Faerie Queene*, but also with politically relevant self-representations of Queen Elizabeth. The passage is thus another example of links between genres and between literature and society. In the discussion of *The Comedy of Errors*, Weidle points out how Shakespeare eclectically picks up many of the current fashions but manages to radically transform them so that a play in the tradition of Plautus and earlier Tudor comedy gains in complexity and melancholic depth – a tendency brought to its peak in the so called problem plays. In a short chapter on Shakespeare’s history plays, Weidle highlights the widely discussed themes of national identity and legitimate power but does not fail to mention that individual identity as performance (as in the case of Harry/Henry in the second tetralogy) also plays a major role. This subchapter concludes a comprehensive *tour de force* through early modern drama.

The last chapter is devoted to fictional and non-fictional prose of various kinds. Beginning with the helpful reminder that prose, contrary to drama and poetry, was often printed and thus addressed at a different audience, the chapter is then subdivided into two major parts, non-fiction and fiction. Religious texts (6.1.1; the Bible, of course, but also Donne’s *Sermons*) are shown to be closely related to the rise of the new medium, print. The chapter about historiography (6.1.2) interestingly concentrates on John Stow’s *Survey of London* (1598) which is singled out for its all-encompassing approach and its innovative narrative perspective. Weidle convincingly claims that Stow succeeds in presenting a topographical as well as a historical description of London by interlacing horizontal space and vertical time. *The Essays* of Francis Bacon and Robert Burton’s

Anatomy of Melancholy are representatives of scientific and philosophical texts (6.1.3) which combine an objective style with moral exhortation, while the subjective polemical pamphlets discussed in the chapter on political texts (6.1.4) are political not only in their subject matter but also as a medium difficult to control by state censorship. A chapter on conduct books (6.1.5) often designed to serve as guide books for the education of future monarchs, and one on biographical and autobiographical texts (6.1.6) lead over to a discussion of fictional prose (6.2). Here, texts in the tradition of the romance (Lyly's *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* or Sidney's *Arcadia*) are mentioned as prime examples of highly artificial, unrealistic prose pieces which are far away from marking the beginnings of the novel, while John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published a century later, paves the way for the emergence of this later genre.

Regarding theory, the volume is solidly underpinned by New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, approaches which consider literature as discourse that cannot be separated from other forms of social practice because it is the product of "collective negotiations and exchange" (Greenblatt 1988: vii) rather than of individual obsession and genius. (A side-glance at another recent introduction to the field by Siobhan Keenan [2008], published in the *Edinburgh Critical Guides* series, suggests this is the dominant paradigm at present. – In addition to the material unfolded by Weidle, Keenan's book is rounded off by a convenient chapter called "Student Resources" containing essay writing advice, sample essay questions, a glossary of important terms and a helpful guide to further reading.) All in all, Weidle's *Einführung* provides a well-informed and equally well-structured systematic approach to the literature and culture of early modern England. The author's choice to write the book in German no doubt makes it accessible to many students new to the field, even though it might irritate those who believe English literature should be taught exclusively in English.

Works Cited

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