

Susan Valladares. *Staging the Peninsular War. English Theatres 1807–1815*. Farnham & Burlington: Ashgate, 2015. Pp. xii, 459. £80. ISBN: 9781472418630.

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*Staging the Peninsular War* is a study of theatre in England during the years of the Peninsular campaign against Napoleon. The book does, however, offer a lot more than a survey of the propagandistic uses of theatre during times of war: Susan Valladares teases out the links between the dramas studied and the wider theatrical and print culture that surrounded their reception, as well as the political, social and geographical factors that influenced it. The ups and downs of the military campaign provide a context of interpretation for the theatrical works studied by Valladares, which in turn allow the author to examine the multifaceted reception of the war itself within the public domain.

The book is conceived of as a study of theatre during the Peninsular War underpinned by a thorough survey of the contemporary playbills of Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres, as well as of those of Bristol's Theatre Royal. There is some focus on landmark plays such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *Pizarro* (1799), as well as on unlicensed theatre and minor genres which also played their part in influencing public opinion about the War. The first chapter is devoted to Sheridan's play and its staging and reception during the years of the War. Valladares directs her attention towards the ways in which the audiences' appreciation of the play was conditioned by the events in the Peninsula, as well as by the rendering of the play and parts of it into different formats and in different contexts. Although the politicised reception of *Pizarro* has been noted before, the main interpretative thrust here comes from revealing how the Spanish setting, its concomitance with the ongoing war, and other broad claims about the Black Legend and the fate of empires, turned *Pizarro* into "one of the defining narratives of early nineteenth-century Britain" (15).

As Valladares observes, "English theatres constituted contested spaces in which political ideas were disseminated and consumed" (29). This feature was particularly salient during a conflict such as the Peninsular War: the war was followed very closely in Britain, partly due to strategic reasons, but also due to the political and literary significance of the popular uprising against Napoleon and the early experiments with monarchical constitutionalism



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heralded by the 1812 Cádiz Constitution. The political interpretations of *Pizarro* during the Peninsular war were complex: if the character of Pizarro could be read as a convincing allegory of Napoleon and his imperial ambitions —therefore providing justification for the War— the portrayal of Spaniards as “dreamers of a mythical golden age” (56) could provide ammunition for opponents of the war. In the first fifteen years after its publication the play was a success and was subjected to multifaceted interpretations once the events set off by the Napoleonic Wars turned the attention of the public towards Spain and Portugal. As Valladares observes, “the transformation of the Iberian Peninsula into Britain’s new focal point for military intervention meant that Pizarro’s narrative of imperial encroachment and patriotic agency acquired renewed relevance” (43). The early emancipatory movements in Latin America would provide yet another context for the interpretation of the play, now with a real struggle between Spaniards and Americans taking place which echoed the plot of the play.

This first chapter provides a sort of theoretical frame for the rest of the book, setting out a rigorous methodology of reading the plays as embedded in wider processes of performance and reception. The study is informed by a constant awareness towards the synchronic and diachronic reception of the dramatic texts, which are read in conjunction with the audiences’ moods and behaviour, the reporting of the military and political news in the press, the dissemination of the play and parts of it in pamphlets, its reception in cities outside London, etc. This allows Valladares to develop an approach suited for the critical understanding of non-canonical plays and how they took part in the symbolic construction of the War, but it also sheds light on landmark plays such as *Pizarro*: particularly interesting is Valladares’s idea about how its peculiar colonial perspective (a non-British one, but still open to allegorical and patriotic interpretations) “set out to make Britain seem less familiar” (38).

Chapter 2 focuses on the political and patriotic uses of Shakespeare during the years of the War. Recurrent themes such as patriotism or expatriation are emphasised by the new context provided by the military campaign as well as by the constant stream of literature published about it. Shakespeare is therefore redeployed during these years with markedly political purposes. A good example is Coleridge and his lectures on Shakespeare, which are, together with his theatre and political journalism, a manifestation of a similar set of political ideas. Coleridge’s own interpretation of *Richard II* might have influenced his rewriting of *Osorio* (1797) into *Remorse* (1813), a Spanish-themed play intersected by

pedagogical concerns: the emotional depth of the ‘experiences’ provided by the stage can be considered as part of a political and moral education. The staging of Shakespeare in Covent Garden by John Kemble provides another opportunity for the consideration of how traditional, canonical plays could be put in dialogue with recent events and become part of renewed discursive confrontations: Kemble’s adaptations of *Henry V*, *Henry VIII*, *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* are good examples of how the actor-manager adapted the plays to contemporary audiences taking into account issues such as the political agency of the populace or the representation of national characteristics.

If the first two chapters provide keen insights into theatre-going at the London’s patent theatres (those with licence to stage spoken dramatic plays), Chapter 3 is entitled “Spectacular Theatres” and looks at the unlicensed theatres of the capital. These theatres held other ‘minor’ dramatic forms such as burletta, song or the pantomime, but the absence of dramatic dialogue did not detract them from becoming influential in the formation of a public opinion about the war, and they often engaged directly with it by offering spectacular re-enactments of naval and land battles. The “Serio Comic-Pantomime” *Harlequin & Don Quixote* (1813), for instance, conveys a sense of optimism via its Spanish characters that has to be read in the context of the sense of impending victory after the Battle of Salamanca (149). The removal of the Portuguese royal family to Brazil or the role of the Spanish peasantry in the emergence of guerrilla warfare are also identified as key concerns tapped upon by some of these productions.

The final chapter, “Playing to the Provinces,” moves the focus from the capital to Bristol’s Theatre Royal and the Regency Theatre. As a garrison city with audiences largely consisting of soldiers and sailors, the representation of war themes and of plots and characters reminiscent of the ongoing war would have attracted considerable interest. Valladares uses the example of Bristol to further illustrate the way in which different circumstances of performance can alter the meaning of a play. As her discussion of *The English Fleet in 1342* shows, “the best repertoire plays were characterised by an interpretative openness that resists neat explanation” (19). The treatment of themes such as female heroism or the portrayal of comical Spanish national stereotypes provided a form of comedy underlined by a sense of topicality related to the different stages of the War and the Anglo-Spanish alliance. The chapter overall presents an interesting counterpoint to the previous ones and highlights the importance of provincial theatre while qualifying some of the conclusions reached in the

previous chapters: on the one hand, the performances at Bristol demonstrate the same interpretative fluidity of the dramatic text and its political inflections familiar from previous chapters, but the case also serves as a warning against drawing up generalisations based on the theatrical culture of London alone, since plays that were a success in London such as *Remorse* did not find similar favour with Bristolian audiences.

A final “Afterword” throws a brief look upon the theatres of Lisbon during the War, a city with a large English presence and which serves as an interesting point of comparison with the materials discussed previously. The last part of the book is made of three appendices with the playbills of Covent Garden, Drury Lane, and Bristol Theatre Royal for the years 1807–1815. These are an invaluable resource for researchers working on the theatre of the time and indeed on the cultural reactions to the Peninsular War, and Valladares helpfully highlights in bold those plays with a Peninsular theme.

*Staging the Peninsular War* is a significant contribution to the study of British theatre, but it will also be of interest to students of Romanticism, the Peninsular War and its reception in Britain and the image of Spain and the Spaniards. Valladares’s attention to print culture and the different synchronic and diachronic circumstances of performance is exemplary, and her interpretation of the texts is erudite and perceptive. The distance between the dramatic text and its successive performances (and between the performances and their different receptions) suggests that plays such as *Remorse* should be understood more as process than as finished products with fixed meanings. The contested nature and ambiguity of some of the works studied suggest a cultural environment where crucial assumptions about Britain and a traditional enemy such as Spain were being revised, in accordance with the propagandistic efforts and centrality of the Iberian Peninsula seen as a Romantic *locus* for the literary imagination.

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