

Chapter 1: Theatre and History

history

- Webster: "the branch of knowledge that deals systematically with the past"
- Henry Ford: "more or less bunk"
- anonymous student: "one damn thing after another"
- Simon Schauma: "the study of the past in all its splendid messiness"

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historiography

- “the study of historical methods”

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historia

- the ancient Greek word for “questioning”
- i.e. research (into the past)
- a term coined by **Herodotus**
- part of the **Ionian Revolution**
- which embraced a search for the “elements” which underlay all being

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historians

- are like scientists
- dig for new data in mounds or libraries
- but cannot repeat an experiment
- in that regard, historians are more like detectives than scientists
- they look for “evidence”

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evidence

- is the basis of all historical study
- must be put into context, especially when the data are conflicting
- thus, historians are less like scientists or detectives than lawyers arguing a case

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primary evidence

- the principal type of historical evidence
- in its most basic form, the contemporaneous accounts of eyewitnesses to some historical event

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secondary evidence

- second-hand accounts gleaned from others' recollections of past events
- considered a lesser form of data
- the distinction between primary and secondary evidence lies at the heart of many historical controversies
- e.g. *Antigone* 905-915

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inference

- “connecting the dots”
- allows the creation of a larger picture from a small body of data
- but also admits bias and distortion
- relies on what is compelling or **cogent** to the historian’s readership
- can turn historical scholarship into a “popularity contest”

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tripartition

- the Indo-European proclivity for seeing triads or “threes”
 - “Ready, Set, Go!”
 - the story of the Three Bears
 - “Three strikes, you’re out!”
- to us, when someone produces three examples, that confirms a case
- an example of Indo-European bias

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Battle of Thermopylae

- a battle in the Second Persian War (481-479 BCE)
- a few Greeks hold off the whole Persian army for several days but in the end they all die
- Herodotus in *The Histories* pitches this as a moral victory

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Ibn Kahldun

- an Islamic historian and philosopher who outlines seven fallacies of history
 - partisanship to a creed or opinion
 - overconfidence in one's source
 - failure to understand the intention of a source
 - mistaken belief in the truth of a source
 - failure to place an event in context
 - desire to gain the favor of superiors
 - ignorance of the laws governing society

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the worst of history

- but to what extent can a historian make things up entirely?
- historians are bound by the data and any eye-witnesses to the event

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the best of history

- thus to some extent, history must encompass the truth
- and *good* history encompasses more truth than bad history does
- and all good history involves the *pursuit of truth*

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theatre

- S. Johnson: “an echo of the public’s voice”
- Shakespeare: “a mirror”
- Giraudoux: “a trial”
- Farquhar: “a banquet”

Like hungry guests, a sitting audience looks:

Plays are like suppers; poets are the cooks:

The founder’s you: the table is this place:

The carver’s we: the prologue is the grace.

Each act a course, each scene a different dish . . .

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theatron

- in ancient Greek literally, “an instrument for viewing”
- i.e. the seats
- not the stage or orchestra or *parodoi*!

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theatre

- John Cage: “theatre takes place all the time wherever one goes”
- Bernard Beckerman: theatre happens whenever “one or more human beings, isolated in time and/or space, present themselves to another or others”
- Patti Gillespie: “performances by living actors that take place in the presence of living audiences”

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institution

- according to Oscar Brockett, theatre is an “autonomous activity”
- versus what is merely “**theatrical**”
- but who’s to differentiate between theatre and the theatrical?
- especially in a foreign or past culture!
- what are the “elements” of theatre?

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elements of theatre

- **language**: versus movement in dance, song in opera
- **impersonation**: versus rules in a game, teaching in a classroom
- **audience**: or, better, “viewers”
 - n.b. there is a theatre for the deaf, but no theatre for the blind

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theatre history

- the “inquiry” into “instruments for viewing”?
- the fatal allure of **positivism**
- is there measurable “**progress**” over time?
- are we as a species ascending from a **primitive** state to modern enlightenment?
- cf. **E.K. Chambers** and the “progress” of medieval drama

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chorus

- cf. the use of the chorus in later Greek tragedy: tedious archaism or tonic bringing new and constant joy?
- is the Greek chorus a “primitive” element in classical tragedy?
- we must look for “evolution,” as opposed to “progress”!