

- uses Ruskin to reflect upon the duration of literary form: “Let us imagine new ways of accounting for the temporality of both social and literary forms, structures which are neither unchanging outlines nor historical moments entirely past” (“Durations of Presents Past: Ruskin and the Accretive Quality of Time,” *Victorian Studies* 59, no. 1 [2016]: 94–97, 96–97).
6. Sue Zemka’s *Time and the Moment in Victorian Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) provides a compelling example of using temporality as the basis for a larger account of hermeneutics, modernity, and the novel.
  7. Alex Woloch theorizes characters in the novel as “jostl[ing] for limited space within the same fictive universe” (*The One vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003], 13).
  8. Thomas Hardy, “I Look Into My Glass,” in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), 81, lines 2, 6.



## Theatricality

SHARON ARONOFSKY WELTMAN

**D**URING its first season, the hit television series *Glee* aired an episode named “Theatricality,” in which the talented glee club kids pay homage to Lady Gaga and Kiss.<sup>1</sup> They wear homemade versions of the stars’ hyperextravagant costumes in their high school’s hallways as well as on stage, using their wild (and wildly creative) outfits for defiant self-expression, braving harsh reactions from bullies and the school principal. Beyond the students’ personal flair, the title draws attention to the episode as exuberant performance rather than as a mimetic approximation of real life.

Because “theatricality” denotes knowingness about the medium’s effect, it is also defined negatively: “the quality of being exaggerated and excessively dramatic.”<sup>2</sup> This is how Thomas Carlyle uses the term in its oldest recorded instance (which is Victorian): *The French Revolution* (1837) opposes theatricality to sincerity.<sup>3</sup> Here Carlyle displays the antitheatricality that Jonas Barish chronicles in *The Anti-theatrical*

*Prejudice* (1981),<sup>4</sup> which details cultural bias against theater and anything theatrical from Plato to the present. But the Victorians were not monolithically antitheatrical. Lynn Voskuil states that they “developed a sophisticated capacity . . . to act authentically and be theatrical at the same time.”<sup>5</sup> This centuries-long tension between celebrating and snubbing theatricality becomes even more complicated as the word has taken on a variety of meanings among theater historians and literary critics.

Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait explain that theatricality is both a “practice” and a “theoretical concept,” on the one hand “characterized by histrionic actions, manners and devices” and on the other “an interpretive model for describing psychological identity, social ceremonies, communal festivities, and public spectacles.”<sup>6</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte defines the word through semiotics: because every actor can be replaced by another actor in the same role, actors are themselves signs representing other cultural signs outside the performance.<sup>7</sup> Janelle Reinelt traces the shifting definitions of “theatricality” in dialectical conjunction with the equally fluid meanings of “performativity”; while *performativity* requires bodies physically engaged in time-bound actions, *theatricality* points to “texts or performances that gesture to their own conditions of production or to metatheatrical effects.”<sup>8</sup> As Beth Palmer proclaims, both “performance and theatricality have become key terms for scholars working across wide reaches of Victorian studies.”<sup>9</sup> Deborah Vlock examines the Victorian novel as a genre that is intertwined with the theater both through performed readings and through language borrowed from the theater within the novels themselves.<sup>10</sup> I use “theatricality” both to designate textual invocations of theater and performance in prose as Vlock describes, particularly those moments ripe for embodied performance in adaptation, and—in the way *Glee*’s episode title suggests—to indicate a heightened (and often pleasurable) awareness of the artifice of performance of any kind.<sup>11</sup>

By “artifice,” I do not mean antirealism: on stage or in fiction, realism involves just as much artifice as theatricality.<sup>12</sup> Theatricality appears not only in live performance but also in prose. By examining novels, Joseph Litvak details the “subtle diffusion” of theater through Victorian culture, “the *normalization* of theatricality.”<sup>13</sup> He points to the amateur theatricals within Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), in which the characters enact Elizabeth Inchbald’s *Lovers’ Vows* (1798), advancing the plot and providing a mechanism for revealing the immorality of some characters. At other times, a narrated scene is theatrical because characters consciously perform for spectators, even outside a formally structured theatrical context. For example, in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*

(1837–9), the boys comically play at picking Fagin’s pockets while Oliver watches and laughs.<sup>14</sup> The theatricality of this scene—just a descriptive paragraph in the novel, without dialogue—manifests itself in performance in every significant adaptation since George Almar’s in 1838.<sup>15</sup>

Such theatricality in *Oliver Twist* is part of its explicit melodramatic aesthetic. Dickens famously reasons in Chapter 17 that his novel is counterintuitively all the more realistic for being like a melodrama (the nineteenth century’s most popular dramatic form): we do not register the melodrama of real life, he declares, because we are the “busy actors instead of passive lookers-on.”<sup>16</sup> In addition to Dickens’s seizing a theatrical genre to structure this particular novel, his writing practice in general emanated from performance: Mamie Dickens recounted her father’s acting in front of a mirror as he wrote, cracking up and jotting down whatever came next.<sup>17</sup> David Kurnick argues that for certain Victorian novelists, such as Henry James and George Eliot, “theater is a condition of the text”; had they not once been immersed in theatrical writing and experience, they would never have written fiction.<sup>18</sup> I argue that for some Victorian novelists—and Dickens is an excellent example—not only theater but also *musical* theater is a necessary condition of the text. Dickens’s full passage about melodrama quoted above from *Oliver Twist* cites alternating scenes like “streaky bacon” not only of pathos and humor but also of song, culminating in “the great hall of the castle, where a grey-headed seneschal sings a funny chorus with a funnier body of vassals.”<sup>19</sup> It is important to remember that when Dickens (or any author) writes in the melodramatic mode, he writes within the context of musical theater, since Victorian melodramas were always performed with live music, both songs and underscoring. The most theatrical moments in the novel are also often the most musically theatrical. In this light, it should be no surprise that a common synonym of “theatrical” is “melodramatic.”

Like many Victorian authors, Dickens writes scenes that are richly musical theatrical. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* burgeons with them, as when the villain Jasper plays the organ or when Mr. Crisparkle sings “Tell me, Shepherds,”<sup>20</sup> a song repeatedly identified in nineteenth-century musical literature as a glee.<sup>21</sup> Glee clubs began near London with Harrow’s Glee Club (1787–1857), proliferating internationally and flourishing throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> *Glee* not only picks up on this still widespread and largely Victorian phenomenon, but also by alternating comedy, pathos, and song, each episode inherits much of its dramatic structure from Victorian melodrama. Given *Glee*’s Victorian

heritage, it should not surprise us that it celebrates authenticity through “Theatricality.”

#### NOTES

1. Directed by Ryan Murphy, Episode 20 of Season 1 aired on May 25, 2010.
2. “Theatricality,” *Oxford Living Dictionary*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/theatricality>.
3. “Theatricality,” *Oxford English Dictionary, Compact Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3280.
4. Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
5. Lynn Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 3.
6. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, “Theatricality: an Introduction,” in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.
7. Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Theatricality: A Key Concept in Theatre and Cultural Studies,” *Theatre Research International* 20. no. 2 (1999): 85–118, 88.
8. Janelle Reinelt, “The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality,” *SubStance* 31. no. 2–3 (2002): 201–15, 206.
9. Beth Palmer, “Introduction: Theatricality and Performance in Victorian Literature and Culture,” *Victorian Network* 3, no. 2 (2011): 1–6, 1.
10. Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6–7.
11. Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, *Performing the Victorian: John Ruskin and Identity in Theater, Science, and Education* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 9.
12. George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 7–9.
13. Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), x.
14. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Fred Kaplan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 69–70.
15. George Almar, *Oliver Twist: A Serio-Comic Burletta, in Four Acts. French’s Standard Drama*. No. 228 (New York: Samuel French, 1864?), 11–12.

16. Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 118.
17. Mamie Dickens, *My Father as I Recall Him* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1900), 49–50.
18. David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 7.
19. Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 118.
20. Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (London: Penguin, 1974), 43.
21. Joseph. Mazzinghi, “Ye shepherds tell me: a celebrated glee” (New York: Dubois and Stodart, 1823–1826).
22. Don Michael Randel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 353.



## Transatlanticism

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**F**IRST a few words about the collaborative contemplation of this keyword. It emerges most directly from the fact that all five of us are currently engaged in editing *Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures, 1776–1920*, scheduled for publication by Edinburgh University Press in 2020. Three of us are Americanists, two of us British studies specialists. But I suggest that collaboration is not merely a pragmatic result of our working as an editorial team; it is intrinsic to transatlanticism itself, a metaprocess, so to speak, answering to the interactive intellectual, material, social, and cultural forces that bring transatlanticism into being.

Transatlanticism extends back in deep time further than we can see, to any humans who traveled across the Atlantic in any direction, by any means, and touched on shores on the other side.<sup>1</sup> But if Victorian-era transatlanticism emerged from prior global passages, it underwent, to pun deliberately, a sea change in the nineteenth century. Altered national relations resulting from revolutions (American, French, Haitian), wars, imperial ambitions, economic development and exploitation on one hand, or reform movements (abolition, expanding citizen rights and aspirations) on the other, quickened interchanges between nations around the Atlantic basin. New ideas—themselves “forms” in