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**Matthew S. Buckley**, *Tragedy Walks the Streets: The French Revolution in the Making of Modern Drama*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. ix + 191 pp. Notes, index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8018-8434-9.

Review by Jeffrey S. Ravel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

It requires a certain amount of daring these days to undertake an interdisciplinary project on theater and politics during the French Revolution. It may take even more audacity for someone outside the author's academic field to critique such a book, as the lengthy H-France exchange occasioned last October by a review of Susan Maslan's *Revolutionary Acts* suggests. For the record, Matthew S. Buckley, the author of *Tragedy Walks the Streets*, is a professor of English Literature at Rutgers University, while I am a historian. In his book, Buckley is interested in some of the questions that have intrigued both literary critics and historians of the Revolutionary period for over a generation. His discussion draws on the work of Peter Brooks on melodrama and George Steiner on tragedy, but he also relies heavily on arguments made by cultural historians such as Lynn Hunt (how literary genre shapes historical understanding), and Paul Friedland (the convergence of political and theatrical representation). Curiously, there are no references to Maslan's Johns Hopkins University Press book or her other work on revolutionary politics and the stage.[1]

Buckley's book differs from those of Maslan and Friedland in two important ways. First, while he is widely read in the current historiography of the Revolution and while his approach to the stage is resolutely historicist, Buckley explicitly states that *Tragedy Walks the Streets* is an intervention in the debate about the origins of modernist drama. The subtitle of the book underscores the idea that he is not attempting to revise our understanding of revolutionary politics *per se*. Second, Buckley does not confine his investigation to the borders of France. The first two chapters consider the complex interplay between theatricality and the practice of politics at the end of the old regime and during the Revolution, but the next two chapters shift the scene across the Channel to the London stage during the 1790s. The final chapter offers a reading of Georg Büchner's 1835 German-language play, *Danton's Death*, which sees that work as a resolution of the revolutionary tensions Buckley invokes throughout. *Tragedy Walks the Streets*, therefore, is a historically contextualized interpretation of the origins of modern western drama. Although the French Revolution is the central historical event in this story of generic evolution, the Revolution's impact is not limited to France alone.

Buckley gets to the heart of his thesis in the second chapter, entitled "The Drama of the Revolution." In it, he alludes to Friedland's argument that well before 1789 theatrical representation shifted from the *vrai*, in which the actor insisted on being someone he or she was not, to *vraisemblance*, in which the performer presented the illusion of representing someone else and in which spectators agreed to suspend their disbelief for the duration of the performance. For Friedland, this representational shift in the theater corresponded to a similar move in politics, from the sovereignty of the King's two bodies justified by Christian doctrine to the principle of a representative political body based in natural law. For Buckley, the change in theatrical representation mirrors the shift in the generic definitions of history and drama at the end of the old regime. History, as an elite literary practice, changed from being an account of individuals and stories worthy of emulation to a narrative of temporal progress that highlighted differences between the present and the past. History's new open-endedness transformed dramatic genres in the years before the Revolution. Classical comedy and tragedy, dependent on stable, exemplary characters, no longer satisfied audiences that now desired unpredictable narrative outcomes.

Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro* had the most successful first run in the pre-revolutionary history of the Comédie-Française, Buckley argues, because it hinted at the decay of the nobility, instead of reinforcing social hierarchy.

In France from 1789 onward, however, both history and drama faced new dilemmas. The events of the Revolution confirmed that the present no longer needed to recreate the past. But in the absence of a known narrative for political events, the Revolution became a dramatic void in which the country's politicians, a significant number of whom had been stage professionals before 1789, turned to the old, discredited stage genres to provide a script for the nation's political drama. Buckley here reminds his readers of Mona Ozouf's now venerable assertion that "the most urgent task of the Revolution was to decide on the narrative of revolutionary events," and Lynn Hunt's provocative formulation, following Northrup Frye, that in generic terms the plot of the Revolution moved from comedy (1789-1791), to romance (1791-1792), to tragedy (1793-1794). But Buckley also points out that the fall of Robespierre in 1794 did not neatly close the narrative of the Revolution. The old dramatic genres no longer conformed to the new, open-ended historical narratives. The end of the Terror marked "the collapse of tragedy as a way of thinking, acting, and ordering historical experience" (p. 61).

Buckley takes this insight — the inability of classical dramatic genre to explain historical change in a post-1789 world — and turns his attention to a fundamental problem in literary and theater history. The reigning narratives in these fields, at least in a French context, hold that the revolutionary decade was a moment of rupture in the history of dramatic genre, a time when tragedy, for example, "was rendered obsolete," and "melodrama emerged to dominate the stage" (p. 1). But Buckley wishes to suggest that the 1790s did not constitute a radical break with the generic past as much as a pause in the face of monumental, real-time political events. If one looks beyond the borders of France, as Buckley does in the last three chapters of his book, one perceives a different, syncopated generic evolution. In Britain, for example, Buckley argues that Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, relied on older, increasingly obsolescent dramatic forms to stage his royalist sympathies in the famous scene of the invasion of the Queen's bedchamber at Versailles in October 1789. In contrast, Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine borrowed from newer, more populist theatrical conventions in their responses to Burke in the 1790s. But for Buckley the staging and reception of Samuel Coleridge's 1794 tragedy, *The Fall of Robespierre*, provides the best proof of the period's generic ambiguity. It seems quite likely, as Buckley suggests, that the romantic tone of the play derives from the speculative accounts of events in Paris published in the summer of 1794 by *The London Times*. The paper's editors, in the absence of direct reporting from Paris, published wild scenarios that owed more to the plot of *Macbeth*, then being played at the Drury Lane playhouse and heavily covered in the paper, than to any factual information. Once reliable, detailed reports of the events of 9 Thermidor reached London, Coleridge's over-wrought play, based on the *Times's* speculations, failed. The newspaper, in turn, reverted to a less dramatic voice, "more in keeping with the day-to-day rhythms of modernity" (pp. 116-17). Tragedy did not abruptly lose its hold on British audiences, playwrights, or even newspaper readers, who continued to explore its possibilities for making sense of the bewildering events in France. But its limitations in the new historical moment were evident.

It would not be until the plays of Georg Büchner, a Hessian writer, anatomist, and political radical, that the history of theatrical genres would reconnect with the narrative demands of history outside the playhouse. Theater history has assigned Büchner the role of precursor to the avant-garde stage, but Buckley, following the same historicist impulse evident in his reading of Coleridge, insists on Büchner's engagement with the failed revolutionaries of 1830 and his subsequent political disillusionment. *Danton's Death*, composed in 1835 (on his father's dissecting table!), dramatizes the thirteen days from the execution of the *enragés* to the execution of Danton and his followers. The play is characterized by rapid scene shifts, radical choices of character and subject matter, and obscene and pornographic language, qualities that appealed to later avant-garde theater artists. Buckley argues that Büchner adopted these dramatic conventions to explore his disenchantment with politics in the wake of the failed

Hessian radicalism of the early 1830s. The playwright downplays the “great men” of the Revolution; Danton, for example, is portrayed as a spent, lifeless figure resigned to the guillotine. The piece’s energy derives from its representation, in several scenes, of the commoners, “the monstrous body politic of the Revolution, teeming with disorderly and contradictory actions, resistant to rational order” (p. 133). For Buckley, the play’s significance is that Büchner, unlike Coleridge, avoids an overly romanticized, Shakespearian portrayal of the Terror’s main politicians. The work, through its subject matter and stage conventions, attempts to represent the inadequacies of the people’s movement at the precise moment (Danton’s death) that the popular phase of the Revolution was ending. In the context of Buckley’s revision of the history of dramatic genre, *Danton’s Death* signifies the theater’s return to a more direct engagement with the new forms of historical narrative. Büchner’s play, written four decades after the Terror, allowed the stage once again to offer meaningful commentary on contemporary politics, at least in theory.[2]

H-France readers may find gaps in Buckley’s bibliography or a few regrettable errors in his text and notes. He has read Michèle Root-Bernstein on the boulevard and fair theaters, but not Robert Isherwood.[3] The literary scholar who wrote on the relationship between theater and war in revolutionary and Napoleonic Britain is Gillian Russell, not “Russell Gillian” (p. 167, n. 22). The historian Patrice Higonnet is male (p. 163, n. 76). These details aside, literature scholars, historians, and others interested in the period should find much of interest in *Tragedy Walks the Streets*. Ultimately, this book responds to historians and others who would still dismiss the art and literature of the revolutionary period as mere propaganda or escapist fare for those weary of the decade’s intense ideological struggles. Buckley’s carefully historicized consideration of theatrical genres in the 1790s suggests new perspectives on how the great and terrible saga of the French Revolution reverberated across national boundaries and over generations.

## NOTES

[1] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (1961; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002); Susan Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

[2] Büchner’s play was not performed in Germany until 1902.

[3] Michèle Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theater and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984); Robert Isherwood, *Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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