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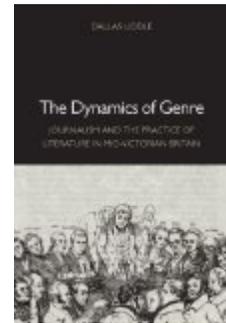


Dallas Liddle. *The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in Mid-Victorian Britain*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. x + 234 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2783-1.

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The Journalists' Tales: Genre, Journalism, and Meaning in Mid-Victorian Britain

In the prologue to *The Dynamics of Genre*, Dallas Liddle cites Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's assertion that "the full story of the interplay of genres—their competition and struggle—properly understood, is the history of literature" (p. 7). Liddle does not assert that it is also the history of journalism, but there is much here that will interest media historians who want to explore journalism from the past in a nuanced way. For although Liddle's stated goal is to better understand how the genres used by mid-Victorian journalists influenced contemporary poets, novelists, and essayists, he also offers a way to examine journalism itself by focusing not on specific institutions, practitioners, or content (as media historians often do), but on genres, or types of written discourse, and how they create meaning in relation to one another.

This is not the type of study often done by scholars who want to compare journalism and literature. Such studies are often limited to content or an author's development, comparing, say, the way an author treats a particular topic in both journalism and fiction, or the way an author's literary style developed by working first as a journalist. Instead, Liddle uses the work of Bakhtin, who contends that genre and meaning cannot be separated, for "genre is a necessary component of meaning as well as a medium for it" (p. 5). This is not simply an acknowledgement of media theorist Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism that the "medium is the message," Liddle says, but an assertion that genres limit and shape "the

terms and available meanings of texts, enhancing some and muting others" (p. 5). The overarching question in this book, then, concerns how the emerging journalistic genres in Victorian Britain—newspaper and magazine articles and review essays—influenced literary forms and meanings. Because separating form from meaning is impossible, the question is a complex one.

The core of the book is a set of case studies that attempt to answer that question by examining the work of several Victorian writers, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriet Martineau, Anthony Trollope, and George Eliot. The chapter titles are patterned after Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (the chapter about Browning is "The Poet's Tale," for example), because they suggest the "competitions and negotiations" with "tones, assumptions, worldviews, and influences of nonliterary genres" that these authors had to deal with, much as Chaucer's pilgrims had to negotiate their own positions in relation to multiple influences (p. 8).

How these authors negotiate their positions varies. Browning's protagonist in *Aurora Leigh* (1857), for example, tries not to let her literary voice be compromised by the "preexisting forms and voices of the periodicals" that she must write for in order to make a living. Although her journalism is anonymous, Aurora still feels that the periodicals prescribe "her persona and tone, requiring her to use a written voice foreign to her own personality, values, and artistic sense," adversely affecting her art

(p. 15). Aurora's struggle makes sense in the context of the increasing standardization of journalistic forms that evolved as periodicals became more financially successful in the nineteenth century. Citing journalism historian Tim Vos, Liddle notes that "one way to create a pool of workers able to produce readable text in the volume and at the speed required" to match 1840s newspaper production schedules was to "develop genre forms that are simple and teachable" (pp. 29-30).

In Trollope's 1855 novel *The Warden*, genre is itself personified as Tom Tower, the fictional editor of the *Jupiter*, a newspaper that is the thinly disguised London *Times*. As Liddle argues, "the persona projected daily in the 1200-word leading articles of the *Times* had by the 1850s become a fully recognizable and consistent ... public character." Like this editorial voice, Tower's voice was "educated, cultured, and class-marked as that of a gentleman, but with strong notes of populism; it was patriotic, but distanced from or disdainful of many traditional institutions" (p. 78). In Trollope's work, it is possible to see "how journalistic discourses interact and ramify within society as they are read and shared" (p. 10).

Martineau, meanwhile, gave up literary work to devote herself to writing anonymous newspaper articles. Her *Autobiography* (1877), Liddle contends, promotes "principles of authorship and composition" that may seem inconsistent now but are, instead, "elements of a well-integrated set of genre ideals, mutually consistent and logically interdependent, upon which mid-Victorian journalists based their discursive practice" (pp. 65-66). Eliot, finally, produced review essays under her real name, Mary Anne Evans. But while Evans's journalistic writing is sometimes taken to be the apprentice work of Eliot (Evans's pen name for fiction, of course), Liddle believes that assumption is wrong. "Hers was not a doctrine that could be inculcated as an 'opinion' or in a set of 'suitable views for sensible persons,' and the journalistic forms of mid-Victorian Britain were incapable of communicating with readers in any other way" (p. 121).

The chapter that may be of most interest to journalism historians is "The Clergyman's Tale," which discusses the relationship between sensationalistic reporting and popular sensation novels. Using the 1868 disappearance of the Reverend Benjamin Speke as an example, Liddle shows how the lines between journalism and fiction blurred when "journalist-detectives" published "comprehensible and grimly complete narratives of Speke's death" (p. 130). Based on piecemeal information, these narratives much resembled the sensation nov-

els, which newspapers condemned for their improbable plots. That they did so became all the more ironic when Speke was discovered alive, having given up the ministry to herd cattle in rural England under an assumed name.

This is an ambitious book, and most of it is characterized by the sort of precise close reading and analysis valued in literary studies—skills that are often underappreciated by media scholars. Liddle, an associate professor of English at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, worked briefly as a reporter after graduating from Yale. He offers a compelling argument in a clear and engaging scholarly voice.

That said, the final chapter, "The Scholar's Tales," subtitled "Theories of Journalism and the Practice of Literary History," is a bit of a curiosity. It seems to be a response to an unspoken question about why Liddle prefers Bakhtinian genre studies to social scientific approaches to media. In his unnecessarily defensive response, he focuses specifically on Jürgen Habermas's public sphere, Benedict Anderson's imagined community, and Pierre Bourdieu's fields theory, ultimately dismissing all as inadequate, because, he says, each focuses on human beings in relation to social groups rather than close readings of texts. That may be true, but it is not clear why he singles out these three, given the abundance of theoretical and methodological approaches to media being used. Media scholars whose work is grounded in cultural studies theories or methods that resemble those used by literary scholars should not feel that they have to defend against social science at all. Moreover, Liddle's choice of these three, to the exclusion of others, seems shortsighted. It would make more sense to compare his approach to any of the types of *textual* analysis that media scholars use, such as Stuart Hall's work on representation. A comparison with various approaches to discourse analysis might also help readers better understand Bakhtin's approach.

Nevertheless, the book is valuable not only for those interested in Victorian literature, but also for anyone interested in a more precise way to understand journalistic discourses. Scholars might also want to compare it to books dealing with similar issues at different times, such as Karen Roggenkamp's recent *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction* (2005), which examines journalism and literary genre later in the nineteenth century and in America. Both of these books illustrate the importance of a close reading of texts themselves, in the past and the present. In fact, Liddle's Bakhtinian ap-

proach could be applied to our own time, which, not unlike the mid-nineteenth century, has a multiplicity of emerging media genres, all co-creating not only meaning but also, arguably, one another.

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