

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 8 (2015)

History and Contemporary Literature



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doi: [10.12681/syn.16214](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16214)

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Abstract

After postmodern approaches called into question the foundations of academic history in the 1970s and 1980s, recent studies have identified a new boom in popular history formats such as historical novels, costume drama and TV documentaries. This trend has also spurred new theoretical approaches towards (popular) history, which are both a continuation and a reaction to postmodern theories. On the basis of these, this paper analyses two plays by the British writer and comedian Kjartan Poskitt – *Henry the Tudor Dude: A Musical Play* (1995) and *Nell's Belles: The Swinging Sixteen-Sixties Show: A Musical* (2002)—both aimed at young amateur actors. These two plays present panoramic views of the lives of the English kings Henry VIII and Charles II, respectively, and show their objects in a highly entertaining and irreverent light, concentrating on their flamboyant private lives and personal failures. The paper demonstrates how these plays approach the dual aims of teaching and entertaining that are so typical of both children's literature and popular history in general. Moreover, it argues that though the plays represent a new development in the previously neglected field of historical drama for the young, they can also serve to demonstrate recent theoretical approaches towards (popular) history.

Henry: Who's she?

Catherine P: Oh, Henry, not again! I keep telling you, I'm Catherine Parr, your sixth and last wife.

Henry: How do you know you're my last?

Catherine P: Because you are old, lame, fat, bald, and diseased.

Henry: Old? Lame? Fat, bald, and diseased? *Next!* I'll have you beheaded.

Catherine P: Stop showing off and drink your milk. (67f.)

Kjartan Poskitt's *Henry the Tudor Dude*, a comic musical for young amateur actors and young audiences, follows the life and loves of the English king Henry VIII. In Act II Scene 6, from which the above quote has been taken, Henry VIII has clearly

come to the end of his career as a royal celebrity, womanizer and tyrant, for rather than lead to the execution of or divorce from his wife as it did in the past, his notorious ‘*next*,’ which he uses to great effect throughout the play, shows no result whatsoever. Instead, the gorgeous playboy and ladies’ man has become an old and bed-ridden husband, who gets bossed around by his equally tyrannical “sixth and last” wife.

Unlike in traditional national memory, which tends to assess the Tudor monarchs Henry VIII and Elizabeth I as amongst England’s greatest and most successful royal rulers (see String and Bull), Poskitt’s play clearly shows a highly irreverent treatment of this historic king. Rather than celebrate him as an historical person worth emulating, *Henry the Tudor Dude* depicts its eponymous hero as just one more ‘modern’ pop celebrity who has lost all sense of proportion. In fact, Poskitt has used the same approach to the past in other plays as well: a very similar treatment of an historical monarch can be observed in *Nell’s Belles: The Swinging Sixteen-Sixties Show* (2002). This comic musical follows the relationship between King Charles II and Nell Gwynne and depicts Charles II as ‘Charlie’ —a typical 1960s (or rather 1660s) sex guru:

Charles: Hey! Who’s this gorgeous creature?
Irene [the charlady]: Who are you talking to? Me or my mob?
Charles: I’ll take both. (15)

Like Henry VIII, ‘Charlie’ is only interested in his own self-gratification, and important political and historical events like the Great Fire of London, the Anglo-Dutch War, or the Plague are mere distractions from his all-encompassing interest in women.

In Poskitt’s plays, then, the past primarily serves as a source of entertainment — and is blatantly used to this end. And, yet, being directed at young audiences, it also serves more serious purposes, as both plays actually provide very detailed information on historical events and commonly-known stories about the eras in which they are set. In this dual aim, they seem typical of children’s literature as a genre. Rather than provide this historical information in a didactic and in-your-face manner, however, in Poskitt’s plays, it serves as an exciting background to hilarious puns and dirty jokes, slapstick and clichés. Entertainment and instruction can thus not be neatly separated, but intertwine and support each other.

This paper will examine *Nell’s Belles* and *Henry the Tudor Dude* as both typical of recent trends in the way the past has become a major source of entertainment, and of the way drama and other media are used in order to teach the young. Based on recent approaches to popular historiography, it will examine which aspects of the past are used to teach and to entertain, and how the past is made accessible for

a young audience. At the same time, however, the paper will also argue that Poskitt's plays present a new trend in drama for children and teenagers, which is traditionally a neglected, ephemeral form of entertainment and which is now used with new vigor with clear educational aims. To these ends, the paper will first sketch recent approaches and theories of popular historiography as well as provide some background on the status and development of theatre for the young. On the basis of these popular historiography approaches, it will then examine Poskitt's plays as historical drama for children, concentrating on the question of how the past is made accessible and enjoyable in order to teach.

Recent theories and approaches to popular historiography

Especially since the 1990s, popular historiography has become a growing field of academic activity.¹ This is partly due to an all-pervasive interest in history in today's media. Indeed, history has been called "the new gardening" and the "new rock n' roll" (de Groot 17); and examining the importance of history in contemporary British culture, Jerome de Groot has remarked: "As a nation, across a bewildering amount of media, the past seems incredibly interesting. Britain is a society fascinated, continually reading, rereading, plotting, and conspiring different versions and different timelines" (2). These media include novels, films, documentaries, re-enactments and theme parks, all of which remember, re-write and reformulate history according to different purposes and interests. In teaching about the past, in creating a sense of period, it has been remarked that these popular forms are much more influential than 'academic' histories,² as they reach far more people more consistently than do for instance school lessons or academic monographs (see Schörken 20).

The current fascination with the past seems at first to be in stark contrast to postmodern theories of history, which dominated historiographical debates in the 1980s and 1990s (see e.g. Jenkins). Questioning the objective nature of history, stressing "the content of the form" (White, *The Content of the Form*), these theorists blurred the boundaries between history and literature, and—at least according to their critics—called into question the usefulness of history as a discipline by seeming to threaten its foundations.³ Yet in spite, or perhaps because, of history having become mere "verbal fictions" (White, *The Historical Text* 16), public interest in history continued. History, especially in its popularised forms, still serves to stabilise identities, to provide exotic and exciting adventures, to teach useful lessons, and to offer guidance in a world that seems increasingly fast-paced (see Korte and Paletschek). In the lives of many people, it is thus far more important than purely fictional characters and events could ever be. It has been

suggested that this increasing significance of history in popular culture is also influenced by postmodernist theories, which have widened the scope and possibilities of historiography, and have made more innovative and experimental treatments of historical material possible.⁴ In this context, it seems apt to point out that many practitioners of popular historiography are in fact university-trained historians, so that a familiarity with postmodernist theories can be assumed.⁵ Additionally, postmodernism has also called into question the distinction between high and popular culture—a development that is also of considerable influence for an appreciation of popular historiographical genres amongst academics.⁶ These are now no longer regarded as a simplification or even a ‘falsification’ of “historical research results” but as “a genre in its own right” (Berger 16). Thus, though in many ways unlike truly postmodern forms of historiography and literature, which are often elitist and difficult, popular historiographies also reflect the impact of postmodernism.

Popular historiography, then, may be defined as “representations of history in written, visual, artefactual and personal forms of presentation addressing a broad, non-expert audience” (Paletschek 4). Though the distinction between ‘academic’ and ‘popular historiography’ is one of degree rather than kind (Paletschek), most studies agree that the latter often displays a set of characteristics which are mostly a result of the desire to entertain and to capture an audience or readership. Thus, Stefan Berger sees here “greater dramatization, more reduction, [and] more narrativisation” (17). Sylvia Paletschek stresses its tendency to “personalize, emotionalize and often scandalize [its] subject matter” (4). Ludmilla Jordanova emphasises popular history’s tendency to moralise (162). Additionally it has been noted that humour and a love for the quirky and unusual are also frequent features: “it prefers the eccentric to the typical; the sensational to the routine. Wonder and marvels are grist to its mill; so are the comic and the grotesque” (Samuel 6). Popular histories abound with memorable, strong characters with whom the readers can identify and who make the past seem less foreign.

An important aspect in many studies of popular historiography is the question of genre. As Vanessa Agnew has argued, the different popular genres present the past in different ways: “different genres make their own contributions to historical thought and are governed by specific rhetorical conventions and codes of professional and social practice.” (300) Thus, for instance, are novels especially suitable for depicting a character’s thoughts and feelings—suggesting, however, at the same time that feelings such as love are timeless (Schörken 36); similarly, film is especially apt at creating a knowledge of a period’s visual specificities (Morris-Suzuki 156). What, then, are the specific characteristics of children’s literature and especially of children’s drama as a means of presenting the past?

Literature and historical drama for the young

While there have been many different attempts to define literature for young readers through its special use of language (which is often said to be simpler and shorter), through the avoidance of certain topics (such as sex, violence or death), or through the dominance of features such as the 'happy ending' —other scholars have denied that these characteristics can help towards a definition of the genre. They have argued that though applicable to large numbers of works for the young, these features are by no means all-prevailing.⁷ Instead, critics agree that this genre can only be defined via its readership —the child or the teenager.⁸ In our society, childhood and adolescence are primarily perceived as a time of development. The young are usually seen in terms of their 'difference' from adults. Youth is thus "the crucial formative period in the life of a human being, the time for basic education about the nature of the world, how to live in it, how to relate to other people, what to believe, what and how to think" (Stephens 8). Literature designed for the young therefore fulfils an important socialising function. This, then, is often seen as the defining feature of the genre as John Stephens and Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, amongst others, have stated: "what this otherwise rather amorphous body of texts has in common is an impulse to intervene in the lives of children. That is, children's fiction belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience." (Stephens 8); "[f]or this is what 'children's literature' means in its most fundamental sense to every critic who uses the term: books which are good for children [...]." (Lesnik-Oberstein 17) Literature thus aids the young in becoming fully-fledged and responsible members of a society, who share its most basic values, cultural knowledge and rules.

Though children's literature is thus regularly defined in terms of its socialising function, there is also an agreement that openly didactic books will be less enjoyable for children (Eyre). Instead, it is generally assumed that children's literature should also be entertaining, that the young like jokes and strong story lines, that children are emotional and will respond to strong morals and to clear-cut characters with whom they can identify (see Wood).⁹ That these features tally closely with those attributed to popular historiographies mentioned above is unsurprising —for the field of children's and young adult fiction in general is often (derogatorily) classified as popular culture (see Kümmerling-Maibauer). Of course there are considerable differences in popular historiographies aimed at children or adults respectively, as different interests, different knowledge and different attitudes can be and are usually assumed.¹⁰ And yet one might suggest that children's literature with its obvious socialising function is a particularly suitable

genre with which to study popular historiography and its functions of teaching and entertaining, especially as popular histories fulfil such similar functions in contemporary culture as a whole.

While historical novels for children have been repeatedly analysed (e.g. Lucas), historical drama for children is largely a neglected field. The reason for this is that drama is generally given little attention within children's literature studies (Arizpe and Styles 134-36). Moreover, in the UK, drama for children is mostly local and ephemeral; funding is a great problem, and many plays are not original works but adaptations of well-known novels (Wood; Hollindale). Though in recent years, drama has been increasingly used as a seemingly 'natural' way of involving young people in the past emotionally and of giving them an insight into the every-day world of past characters,¹¹ much of this drama is again mere short, often improvised sketches, it is openly didactic and based on the knowledge needed for school purposes, and it takes the form of questions and answers about the past (Sharpless; McCaughrean).

As will be shown in the next section, as full-length plays involving a large cast, Kjartan Poskitt's plays, which have been published with the renowned company Samuel French and have been produced over a hundred times by school theatre groups all over the UK as well as in New Zealand, France and Saudi Arabia, present something very different.¹² Nevertheless, as the author of the *Murderous Maths*-series and a stand-up comedian in successful maths entertainment shows, the educational drive of much of Poskitt's work is still obvious. Indeed, in the preface to *Henry the Tudor Dude*, the author explicitly points out that "as many relevant facts as possible were included" (xiii) and asserts "[a]ll the facts and dates are correct" (xi). Yet how do the plays pass on their knowledge of the past and how do they try to entertain at the same time? How does this compare to other works of popular historiography?

Kjartan Poskitt's history plays as popular historiography

That both *Henry the Tudor Dude* and *Nell's Belles* aim at providing their audiences with historical knowledge is immediately apparent from the plethora of historical events, dates and facts covered. Both plays follow the complete reign of an English monarch —Henry VIII and Charles II, respectively— from coronation to death, and both dramas include material on important wars as well as on the issues of succession and religion central to the years depicted. This also mirrors —probably tongue in cheek, considering the attitude displayed towards the central characters and their deeds— what has traditionally been the focus of interest in school history

lessons, thus drawing on knowledge a young audience should be (at least partly) familiar with from this context.

Both plays, moreover, share a very obvious device through which to pass on historical knowledge and detail: the presence of strong narrating figures on the scene. In *Henry the Tudor Dude*, this figure is represented by a News-reader from “Tudor News,” whose news desk is a permanent feature.¹³ He serves to introduce the action and covers time shifts. Additionally, the News-reader also reminds the audience of the historical context —such as dates, historical characters and the relationships between them. The play proper starts as follows: “News-reader: Good evening, this is Tudor News reporting on April the twenty-first, fifteen o nine AD, and today’s main story is that England has a new king! Henry the Eighth has automatically taken the Crown as the only surviving son of his late Father Henry the Seventh.” (2) Later, the reporter is used to introduce a short scene in which the audience is shown the reasons why the future Henry VIII came to marry Catherine of Aragon and how the current problem, i.e. Henry’s not having a son, came about. “News-reader: And so Thomas Wolsey has now taken over a large section of the King’s duties, but we have news of one duty that even Mr Wolsey cannot perform. First, though, we have an old report made in the year fifteen o one. Prince Henry, as he was then, is nearly eleven years old.” (8) In other cases, the reporter and his colleagues, for instance the “Latin correspondent,” help the young audience to understand terms and expressions they might not be familiar with:

News-reader: For a translation of ‘Fidei Defensor’, we once again turn to our Latin correspondent.

Latin Correspondent: ‘Defender of the Faith’.

News-reader: That’s the Pope’s new title for the King, is it?

Latin Correspondent: Yup. (25)

The rather loose action is thus through the narrating journalist turned into a structured, exciting story; unknown facts are explained and the audience closely guided through the (partly) unknown territory of the past. As this is done by a figure whom the audience would know from their every-day lives, as someone who explains the world, his educational function is played down and ‘naturalised’. The narrator becomes as taken for granted and yet as influential as a school teacher, and as the knowledge these two figures of authority provide coincides in parts, its educational impact is strengthened and at the same time less obvious.

Historical facts are also presented to the audience through other means, however, which bridge the dual aims of entertainment and instruction. Thus, they are also reportedly included in the forms of jokes —often rather silly ones. For instance, in Act II, Scene 4, *Henry the Tudor Dude* uses worn-out clichés about the

Germans in order to point out that thanks to her quick divorce from Henry, Anne of Cleves survived him by several years:

Henry: Anne, nothing personal, but you're not my type. However, I tell you what, I'll treat you like my own sister, you can have a pension, and live here as long as you like.

Anne of Cleves: Thank you. I shall live here until fifteen fifty seven when I shall die of old age.

Henry: My word, you Germans are organized. (60)

Interestingly, these jokes with historical facts often function on a double level, so that even children who might not have the necessary historical knowledge can laugh at them. In Act I Scene 4, the audience sees young Henry posing for the painter Holbein, who constantly admonishes his subject to keep still. When Queen Catherine suggests that Henry and her father attack the French, Henry runs away excitedly. Holbein mutters: "Just for that I'm going to make you look *fat*" (15). While on one level, this looks like a kind of evil school boy revenge, on a second level, this joke also winks at those sharing a common knowledge of the famous Holbein's painting —flattering them for being clever enough to understand the double meaning.¹⁴ Thus, many of the double-twists in the plays serve to remind audiences of what they may have learned previously and to confirm them in their knowledge through shared laughter.

Additionally, a means of explaining the significance of past events to the young audience is to establish a parallel between now and then. In *Nell's Belles*, one major problem of Charles II, namely that he only had illegitimate children by his many mistresses, yet no direct heir to follow him on the throne, is explained purely in personal terms, and yet the significance of this problem still becomes obvious. Additionally, the audience is told intimate details about Charles's and Catherine's relationship:

Nell: Look, if you must know, [Charles and Catherine are] desperate for a son but it just isn't working. They try to be cheerful about it, they have parties and holidays together but it isn't easy. There's times when she's been ill, he's kicked all the doctors out and sat with her himself. He sits up all night if he has to. (56)

Similarly, Henry VIII's yearning for a male heir is explained by linking him to stereotypical modern-day fathers obsessed with the desire for a son. Thus, Henry VIII, very anachronistically, confesses his favourite colour in a hilarious song entitled "Blue," and at the birth of his daughter Elizabeth adamantly refuses to redecorate the nursery: "Yes, blue is my favourite colour / and that's why I think / I'm going to faint now I'm having to paint / everything pink" (45). As past events are thus explained through present-day problems, they are simplified and immediately obvious, even to an audience not familiar with the issues involving royal succession and power in the early-modern period.

Through strong narrator figures, jokes and historical parallels, then, the plays provide detailed information of the past. Quite obviously, the author aims to offer his audiences not only a knowledge of historical facts, dates and contexts, but also an explanation of complex issues and relations. Yet by ‘naturalising’ this information so that the strong pedagogical content is less apparent, by stressing the similarity between history and other forms of entertainment, by presenting history in forms of jokes, it would seem that the plays also display the assumption that history alone might not be attractive enough to capture and keep the interests of a young audience for a lengthy time period. Thus, the plays quite blatantly attempt to present this past in as exciting and entertaining a way as possible. Like much popular historiography, they show history as adventure and romance, they work with stock characters and clichés in order to familiarise the past, thus using the cultural knowledge that can be assumed in a young audience and using aspects that, presumably, the young find entertaining.

The two devices identified above, i.e. strong narrative figures and the parallels established between the past and the present, are also central to this second aim, and indeed, this supports the view that entertainment and instruction cannot be neatly separated within popular historiography for children. In *Henry the Tudor Dude*, for instance, the Tudor-news journalist thus presents the past in modern-day style, he talks to news correspondents and interviews members of the crowd regarding their opinions of the king and his queens. He thus turns the past into a format, i.e. a news item, that is familiar to the audience addressed. This is often done tongue-in-cheek, for instance when the News-reader interviews Henry’s private tutor, who adopts the enthusiastic praise so typical of this kind of journalism:

News-reader: With us now is the King’s private tutor. What can you tell us about him?

Tutor: Extraordinary. He came top in French, top in Latin, top in Spanish, top in music, top in art, top in poetry, and top with distinction in scripture.

News-reader: How many people were there in class?

Tutor: Only one. I was his private tutor. (3)

Similarly, before the interval, the News-reader creates a cliff-hanger typical of modern-day soap operas, thus transferring famous historical characters into modern pop stars:

News-reader: And so with the arrival of the Three Toms, we conclude Part One! Meanwhile, you’ll be wondering, what will happen to Thomas Wolsey? Will Henry marry Anne Boleyn? If so, what will happen to Catherine? [...] Will there ever be a prince and what can the Pope do about it? Part Two contains all the answers as well as multiple wives, burnings, beheadings and the complete Reformation of the church as we know it. Join us in fifteen minutes after the break! (35)

In *Nell's Belles*, a similar technique turns the historical relationship between the actress Nell Gwynne and her colleague Charles Hart into a twentieth-century romance. The reporters read out a headline in typical tabloid style: “Nell Gwyn and Charles Hart dazzle with their chemistry, both on stage and off!” (38). Rather than dry, boring fact, the past is thus exciting news, it is stylish, romantic and funny, and by using well-known journalistic genres, the plays suggest that the past can and indeed should be consumed in similar fashion.

Through this, the past also looks decidedly like the present. It has been pointed out, critically, that ‘presentism’ is a common feature of literature aimed at young readers (Watkins and Sutherland 294), as this method seems to give those who have as yet little knowledge of the past an easy access to ‘foreign’ periods. Of course, it is a common feature of popular historiography in general, and much frowned on by ‘serious’ historians; yet the consistency with which it is used in literature for the young is perhaps particularly striking due to the intended audience’s (assumed) lack of historical knowledge in certain fields not covered by school lessons. Especially in *Nell's Belles*, ‘presentism’ is adopted consistently by paralleling the 1660s with the more familiar 1960s.¹⁵ Thus, after an initial, rather gruesome scene, which shows the execution of Charles I, the chorus breaks into the song “Happiest Days”:

Do you remember back in forty-nine?
We had a king who thought he was divine
They took him to court and they took off his head
That was the day that the world went dead
[...]
But now we can dance, and now we can sing
Once again there's a bright new king
Kids of the Sixties
They'll never know
The gloom of the Fifties
So long ago
They tell us we've never had it so good
They tell us we've never had it so good
These are the happiest days of our lives. (3)

This parallel between the 1960s and 1660s continues throughout most of the play, for Charles II is an advocate of free love and lives in a palace sharing community with his wife and changing mistresses. Nell Gwynne represents a typical modern-day working mum, trying to combine work and the task of caring for her baby. Moreover, she and her friends nearly perform at “a giant sixties peace and love festival at this place called Woodstock” (31).

That these parallels not only function as another shared joke between the actors and the audience becomes clear in moments when they serve to translate the changes the Restoration period signified. Thus, the standing of Nell Gwynne as one

of the first actresses is pinpointed in her opposition to the actor Charles Hart. He fails to be funny with old-fashioned jokes from Fletcher's *The Humorous Lieutenant*, as when he limps on stage with much ado, expecting the audience to laugh at a soldier's exaggerated show of pain. His traditional acting-style is mercilessly ridiculed by Nell and her friends:

Rose: Now what?
Hart: I'm waiting for the laughter to subside.
Mercy: What laughter?
Hart: My dears, surely you noticed the walk?
Violet: Was that supposed to be funny?
Agatha: I thought he'd just wet himself. (9)

Nell, by contrast, is thoroughly modern, as is evident from her hip-hop rhymes and her iconoclastic treatment of theatrical tradition:

[Nell] Only an actor's pretentious brain
Would make a big joke about soldiers in pain.
So pardon me if I don't want to know
About you and your act and your sad little show. (11)

An audience that might not appreciate the significance of the changes the re-opening of the theatres in the 1660s meant for the development of drama, would surely appreciate the opposition created between Nell and Charles Hart. As this example also illustrates, the 1660s, a period which is less well known, is linked with the 'Swinging Sixties,' a time associated with positive connotations —freedom, sexual liberation, growing equality for women, cool clothes and pop music; some of these then are transferred back to the Restoration period which is filled with imaginary colour and sympathy; thus the period is adapted to what (presumably) young audiences like to watch.

With the more liberal attitudes of the 1960s as a background, *Nell's Belles* is also able to pass strong moral judgments on the past. While this is frowned on as anachronistic by academic historians, a judgmental perspective of the past is a common feature of much popular historiography (Jordanova162). Through this, the past in popular historiography becomes not only more interesting but also more emotionally available. Additionally, in Poskitt's play, the evocation of positive values, and the contrast created with, for instance, the (comparative) religious fanaticism of the 1660s and 1670s might also be interpreted as a means of confirming today's values of religious and political toleration in a young audience. Next to dates and historical 'facts,' the play thus also teaches less tangible cultural values. In *Nell's Belles*, it is in particular the main characters Nell Gwynne and Charles II, who, for all obvious Charles's faults, function as predominantly positive characters that epitomise 1960s life-style and coolness. Thus, Charles's

indiscriminating interest in pretty women reveals not just his disgust at a narrow Puritan life-style but also at religious fanaticism. As he tells his wife about his affairs (and this seems rather more than just the lame excuse of a philandering husband): “But I’m trying to set a good example! After all the miserable years under Cromwell, it’s time for a bit of live and let live. I mean look at us. Me an English Protestant king, and you, you’re Catholic and your brother’s the King of Portugal. What a crazy mix-up and yet we’re married. Isn’t it just groovy?” (15). By contrast, Titus Oates, the man who initiated the panic surrounding the so-called ‘Popish Plot,’¹⁶ is throughout presented as a thoroughly unpleasant character. He is not only a liar, but also molests one of Nell’s friends. Nell’s Belles are amongst the few who keep a clear head in the panic resulting from his accusations and trick him into revealing that he lies because “I hate Catholics and I want the king to get rid of them” (78). As Nell and her friends are rewarded for discovering the truth, so are religious toleration and insusceptibility to lies and fanaticism depicted as positive virtues. At the end of the play, these are shown to prevail.

Being set between two periods famous for their sexual permissiveness, *Nell’s Belles* also makes the most of another strategy used in popular histories to turn history into entertainment: it sexes up the past and abounds with racy jokes. Taking into account the play’s young audience, the jokes are actually comparatively mild; and yet depicting Charles as a kind of Austin-Powers figure is clearly another means of turning the past into an exciting soap-opera, especially as Charles’s sexual prowess is presented in such an exaggerated fashion it cannot possibly be taken seriously:

Twins: Everybody knows about Charlie!
Mercy :You ask my mum. She was sneaked into the palace one night.
Twins: Yeah, and our auntie’s been.
Violet: My granny went one night and took both her sisters. (5)

Hilariously, the play also shows that it is Charles’s exuberant love-life that is responsible for the Great Fire of London, for he and Nell Gwynne secretly meet in a bakery in Pudding Lane and knock over the candle which starts the fire: “*Charles scoops Nell up and carries her off. As they go they knock over a candle. Off stage, Nell shrieks and giggles*” (46). Even this great historical event, which remodeled the face of London, is thus truly a mere, comic accident. Like the famous *Horrible Histories*-series, the play thus addresses what is assumed to be a common feature in young audiences, namely an interest in history with “the nasty bits left in.”¹⁷ That bawdiness is not normally a feature of history lessons in schools may well add considerably to Poskitt’s plays’ appeal. These might thus even capture the attention of teenagers not normally interested in history as a subject.

Rather than use just one means of turning the past into entertainment, *Henry the Tudor Dude* and *Nell's Belles* fall back on a considerable number of the strategies applied in popular culture. Next to humour and sex, they also rely on iconic celebrity-like figures, they use strong morals and create unexpected parallels between the past and the present. Considering the plays' intended addressees, this might suggest the author's attempt to interest as many spectators and as diverse an audience as possible; keeping in mind that children and teenagers are considered audiences hard to please (see Wood xxii), especially for lengthy periods, this is perhaps not surprising.

Conclusion

As full-length historical plays for young audiences and actors, Kjartan Poskitt's plays constitute a new development in a previously much neglected genre. This essay has argued that this trend has to be interpreted against the context of an all-prevailing interest in history in contemporary British culture as well as against the background of new methods of teaching history in schools and out of them.

Like most of literature for the young, *Henry the Tudor Dude* and *Nell's Belles* show the dual aim of teaching and entertaining. The strategies by which the plays aim to fulfill these goals tally closely with those of popular historiographies in general: they moralise, sex up and ridicule the past, they show close parallels between the now and the then, thus collapsing the historical past into the present. Compared to popular historiographies for adults, what is noticeable is the sheer amount of very different means by which the past is turned into entertainment. By this, it seems, that the plays attempt to entertain at all costs and as many members of the audiences as possible.

Interestingly, unlike early twentieth-century popular histories aimed at young readers (Flothow), the plays show little attempt to convince their audiences of the greatness of English history.¹⁸ This is also in considerable contrast to many modern works of popular historiography aimed at adults, where more traditional celebrations of national identity have still been identified (and criticised). If the plays create a national English identity, then, it is a very different one, a national memory that de-emphasises military triumphs and national greatness, and which, by foregrounding the liberal, cool, funny and suave historical protagonists is perhaps more suitable for England in the twenty-first century.

¹ For the beginnings, see Jensen. For a selection of recent studies, see de Groot; Paletschek; Korte and Paletschek eds., as well as further titles in the bibliography below.

² Both the terms ‘popular’ and ‘academic’ historiography are of course far from unproblematic, as ‘popular’ is often used derogatorily (not least in connection with ‘history’); and ‘academic’ or ‘professional’ seems to suggest greater reliability. For a discussion of the terms, see Berger.

³ For an extremely critical view of postmodernist theories, see e.g. Marwick.

⁴ Of course, popular historiography is not a new phenomenon, though its sheer scope and influence seem to be.

⁵ See on this point de Groot (Chapter 1). A prominent example here would be Simon Schama, who in many of his works shows a distinct influence of postmodernist theories.

⁶ In the past, the history play as a genre (to name just one example) has often been defined, or rather its boundaries have been drawn according to how closely a play adhered to ‘historical fact.’ As the nature of historical truth has been called into question by postmodernist theories, this narrow and prescriptive approach seems rather outdated. In recent definitions of the genre, this has opened the field to include more experimental plays, as well as popular forms, which were previously ‘outside the canon.’ Recent definitions have also tended to stress the importance of historical drama in creating historical ‘fact’ and knowledge, thus echoing trends in popular historiography studies. For details and recent definitions of historical drama, see Berninger and Grant and Ravelhofer.

⁷ Thus, Margaret Marshall has stated succinctly: “The whole of human knowledge and experience in any period of time and in any geographical place is open to coverage in children’s books and [...] previously taboo themes are being offered by contemporary writers” (69f.). Cf. also the discussions in Hunt, *Criticism* (esp. 42); or Lesnik-Oberstein.

⁸ It is widely argued amongst scholars of children’s literature that the implied child reader addressed in children’s literature is a social construct that is historically and culturally variable (see e.g. Rose). This fits with the findings of childhood studies, which examine the ways cultures construct images of childhood according to present needs (Jenks). As concepts of childhood change, so does children’s literature. A Romantic, idealised image of the child will thus result in a very different kind of literature from, for instance, the Evangelical literature of the early nineteenth century, which stressed the inherent sinfulness of the child.

⁹ Of course, this literature therefore implies quite a specific kind of child or teenager, who may have little in common with the serious computer nerd actually reading the book.

¹⁰ Thus, one might assume that certain topics —wars, genocides, natural disasters— are, while certainly not ignored, at least treated somewhat differently. However, a detailed study of, for instance, historical novels of the First World War has shown that though a considerable difference in treatments of war exists between novels for the young and high-brow novels for adults, this difference is far less pronounced when comparing the former and popular literature for adults (Flothow: Chapter 4). The difference here is again one of degree.

¹¹ This tallied with the aims and methods of the National Curriculum for History since its revision in 1999. Here, empathy with the past and imaginative forms of access are stressed. See Heathcote as well as an analysis by de Groot (39-42).

¹² For details, see Poskitt’s webpage www.kjartan.co.uk.

¹³ In *Nell's Belles*, this function is taken over by several characters in the play. While there is again a yellow-press journalist and Charles's infamous servant Chiffinch acts as a radio-show host, there are also a group of charladies, who move props and scenery, comment on the action and the characters, and explain the historical background.

¹⁴ As the Tudors and the culture of this period are an important topic in 'Key stage 2' history in English schools (see The Department of Education's homepage on "History"), it seems that a familiarity with the painting can be assumed by at least a considerable proportion of audiences.

¹⁵ As, unlike the Tudor period, the Restoration period is not amongst the eras treated in 'Key Stage 2' level history in UK schools, it can be assumed that less is known about the 1660s by young school children (see the Department for Education's webpage on "History"). Even at a later level the Restoration does not figure centrally.

¹⁶ In this alleged plot, Catholics were said to conspire to murder Charles II in order to ensure the succession of his Catholic brother. In the end, however, this was just a story invented by Oates and has to be seen against anti-Catholic feelings so prevalent in the period. See Miller (Chapter 11).

¹⁷ For details, see their website: <http://horrible-histories.co.uk/>.

¹⁸ A short exception is the song "Big Bessie" in *Henry the Tudor Dude*, which celebrates "the formidable Elizabeth I": "Big Bessie you better believe / is better than a baby boy / when Bessie is queen it's gonna have been / the best time we could ever enjoy. [...]" (49). By contrast, Charles II, who was mostly unsuccessful in the wars he waged, is hardly suitable for the position of a king with whom to build a traditional, imperialist or nationalist identity.

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