



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

11 | 2015

**Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican Culture /
Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British
Literature and Culture**

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/6745>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.6745

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Ignacio Ramos Gay, "Naumachias, the Ancient World and Liquid Theatrical Bodies on the Early 19th Century English Stage", *Miranda* [Online], 11 | 2015, Online since 21 July 2015, connection on 08 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/6745> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.6745>

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Naumachias, the Ancient World and Liquid Theatrical Bodies on the Early 19th Century English Stage

Ignacio Ramos Gay

- 1 Writing in 1802, political reformer and English naval officer John Cartwright suggested the idea that the government should erect a temple to celebrate naval games and to provide a suitable venue for the commemoration of important victories. In his work *The Trident, or The National Policy of Naval Celebration*, he conceived a monumental building in the Greco-Roman style, incorporating statues of whales, balustrades, bas-reliefs, friezes, personifications of the winds, and engravings of Alfred the Great. The games should include “rowing and sailing matches, mock boardings, gun-boat engagements, triumphal barges cars” and even chariots (176). Cartwright’s naval sanctuary was not meant to imitate the sobering authority evoked by classic monuments, but to rise above it. In Cartwright’s words, “how must Englishmen smile at the puerile exhibitions of naval battles in the boasted naumachia of Rome” (175). The temple, made of a Gymnasium and a Hieronauticon, was to be constructed on the south east coast of England, in the isle of Portland and the bay of Weymouth, a natural location with an elevation of 200 or 250 feet above the sea, where the assembled audience would overlook the military manoeuvres, as well as the games of the festival, whilst being at the same time “encompassed on every side, east, west, north and south, by the briny element” (175). Cartwright’s vision theatricalised British superiority on the sea by means of a mass display of “the actual manoeuvres of whole fleets of line of battle ships, or the imposing representations of sea engagements, between such floating cathedrals enveloped in fire, smoke and thunder” (175). Although such a spectacular maritime scene drew inspiration from its classic forerunners, the ambitious project of the modern naumachia would soar beyond average expectations through an industrious and graphic staging of the magnificence and splendour of the British Empire on sea. As Cartwright put it, “How, then, can any comparison be drawn between a Roman naumachia, which was a mere wet dock (...) and this naumachia of England, formed by the mighty hand of nature” that “once figured the whole Spanish Armada”

(175). Unsurprisingly, the author concluded that the British naval battle was “far superior to the naumachia of Rome” (177).

- 2 Indeed, his statement may account less for his thorough understanding of the functioning of Roman naval battles than for his interest in overcoming classic models whilst at the same time imitating them. His imaginary temple parades Britain as a seafaring nation whose superiority over the Roman archetype mirrors its naval warfare domination over the French. Its enemy is doubly incarnated within the symbolic and the real, the past and the present. By overcoming the cultural authority of the classic model (while symbolically appropriating its invincible powers in warfare), he foresees and conjures up triumph over current rivals.
- 3 Theatre history shows that naumachias had peppered the political image of the European nations at least since the 16th century. It was the cultural robustness that the Italian Renaissance projected upon the models originating in classical antiquity that legitimised and conferred authority to the re-appropriation of the Roman naumachia. In Italy, the baroque movement staged a naval battle commemorating the wedding of the Grand Duke Ferdinando I de Medici of Tuscany to Christine de Lorraine: “the Florentine performance epitomized the modernity of the Italian naumachia as a celebration of contemporary naval prowess. It promoted the potent role of the Medici in the naval alliance forged between the Mediterranean Christian powers to combat the advances of the Islamic Turkish Empire” (Eyres, 172). It was this model of courtly spectacle that was subsequently resurrected and appropriated by social elites in France and later in Britain. Similarly, in England, the celebrations for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth to the Elector Palatine, Frederick V, in 1613 included a naval battle on the Thames (Thomas 300) and, later on, English Georgians rejoiced in animated naval warfare in Peasholm Park featuring Christian fleets bombarding and conquering a Turkish castle. “By the 1750s”, Eyres argues, “the British naumachia had become an exciting, popular fad staged on the lakes of aristocratic and gentry landscape in patriotic celebration of the Royal Navy as the supreme agent in Britain’s imperial expansion” (173).
- 4 Theatre historians have regarded modern naumachias as the theatrical expression of British patriotism, naval supremacy and wealth through sea trade. However, the mechanisms for the creation of a national identity through the enactment of water battles have rarely been explored in the light of the connection between Roman naval displays and the myriad of popular dramatic forms staged in the 19th century. Beyond the acknowledgement of the vinculum between the classic and the modern mass naval spectacle, my aim in this paper is to analyse the persistent revival and evolution of Roman naumachias during the Georgian era in relation to its connections with modern popular entertainments. Such theory exposes how the classic world was resurrected, filtered and shaped into multifarious forms by way of its association with contemporary genres such as nautical drama and the press. More than a kind of spectacle linking antiquity with modernity, the British naumachia ought to be conceived as a sort of liquid theatrical body—a representational and performative space defined by its incorporation of real water—whose signification was to be filled by modern aspects of British popular culture that helped refine and update its classic connotations.

Etymology, illusion and the modern *naumachia*

5 Contrary to Cartwright's understanding of Roman naumachias as tiny mock battles lacking verisimilitude due to their limited dimensions, modern archaeology and philology have found evidence to support the theory that these were astonishing faithful replicas of actual epic battles. Confusion as to the true proportions of these dramatic enactments derives from the chronological overlapping inherent in the modern definition of the term. Etymologically, *naumachia* is the Romanised term for the Greek 'naval battle' and has come to designate a series of interrelated performances whose differences, however, should not be overlooked. When referring to modern naumachias, the term describes a mock combat between miniature and manned, replica warships; a sort of aquatic drama performed for the elite in the gardens. Yet, when referring to the populist, epic spectacle that took place in the Roman amphitheatres built by Claudius, Titus and Domitian, the performance was one of waterborne gladiatorial combat to the death, a titanic battle between fleets with criminals, convicts or prisoners of war as the bloodthirsty warriors. Just as much as animal fights and animal hunts (*bestiarii*), executions of condemned criminals by throwing them to wild beasts (*damnatio ad bestias*), or the extermination of defenceless victims by armed combatants, the actual death of the performers was considered the proper outcome of the fray (*munera sine missione*). The theatrical display was therefore considered more as a highly graphic exhibition of a real performance than an illusion mediated through the acting of the combatants.

6 Although theatrical realism is a modern notion associated with late 18th century bourgeois drama, the veracity of classic spectacles was to be observed in the physical and material proportions of the theatre where they took place. Julius Caesar is generally credited by historians as having been the mastermind behind the first naumachia. Records show that under his rule a lake was dug in the Campus Martius in order to orchestrate a naval battle. Emperor Augustus followed his lead and in 2 BC he took naumachias beyond their original potential and staged an Athenian-Persian battle in a basin by the River Tiber extending all the way to an impressive 400 by 600 yards. By 52 AD, the monumental engineering of such demonstrations had dramatically evolved, and Emperor Claudius was able to witness the massive exhibition of one hundred ships and ninety thousand combatants engaged in the art of naval warfare. Almost thirty years later, yet another memorable display took place as part of Titus's one hundred days of spectacles to celebrate the inauguration of the Flavian Amphitheatre. In his *History of Rome*, Dio attested to the effort made in investing the scene with as profound a realism as possible. Audiences could not but feel overwhelmed not only by the detailed elaborateness afloat, but also by the very architectural possibilities of the theatre itself:

Large numbers of individuals fought in single combat, whereas others competed against each other in groups in infantry and naval battles. For Titus had suddenly filled this same theatre with water, and he had brought in horses and bulls and other domesticated animals that had been taught to do in water everything that they could do on land. He also brought in people on ships; they engaged in a naval battle there representing the Corcyreans versus the Corinthians (...). On the first day—once the lake in front of the images had been covered with a platform of planks and wooden stands had been erected around it—there was a gladiatorial display and a slaughter of wild

beasts; on the second day there was a horse-race, and ‘Athenians’ conquered the ‘Syracusans’, landed on the island, and stormed and captured a wall that had been built around the monument. (quoted by Coleman, 1993: 48)

- 7 The mock-naval battles staged in parks, gardens, and theatres in England in the 18th and 19th centuries would have been conscious re-creations of these events. Though never operating with so Herculean a scope nor reaching such magnificent effects, aqua-dramas and naumachias were held in parks—chiefly Peasholm Park, in Scarborough—and in playhouses, such as the Sadler’s Wells theatre in London, which specialised in marine plays and nautical melodramas. Charles Sprawson enthusiastically recalls German visitors in London astonished at the sight of the Sadler’s Wells theatre, “where the whole space beneath it, like the Roman arena, was filled with water” so as to perform aquatic scenes and underwater ballet (33).
- 8 John Cartwright founded the superiority of the British naumachia upon the faithful re-enactment of the physical dimensions of a naval combat. 18th century replicas and models were disdained by the author as they lacked the material size of real battleships. Historicity was subjugated by spectacularity. The aim was not merely the factual transcription of a historic event, but its spectacular recreation in the audience’s psyche. This statement is furthermore reinforced by a narrative analysis of the plot of the battle. The Roman spectacle described by Dio re-enacted a distorted, when not openly contradictory, version of the actual—and disastrous—attack of the Athenians to Syracuse that took place in 414 B. C. Titus’s Athenian troops were indeed victorious contrary to what History has taught us. Coleman interprets such a deviation from historical data as the Roman “preference for verisimilitude over veracity” (1993: 69). It could also be argued that geographical and temporal distance enabled the carving out of a mythical history to sustain the plausibility and the significance of this performance. Consequently, it seems that the quality of the theatrical illusion depended more precisely upon adherence to visual, rather than factual, historicity.
- 9 This shows that the Roman spectator was not preoccupied with historicism but with spectacularity, what the 19th century would have termed “sensation”. Michael Diamond sets forth the meaning of “sensation” following the classic lexical definition, as “a condition of excited feeling produced in a community by some occurrence” (1). The notion of theatrical verisimilitude was alien to the Roman playgoer, as the relevance of the display resided in the spectacular effects of the action witnessed. Spectacularity was not based on faithful realism but on a grandiose visual display, similar to that accounted for in legendary war narratives of Roman authors, which in no few cases have been said by modern historians to distort actual facts. Like modern naumachias, the “Roman sensation”, made of real aquatic displays, invited the people of Rome “to participate vicariously and retrospectively in the campaign” (Coleman 1993: 49).
- 10 Although the dimensions of a naval battle were not faithfully respected in the modern British naumachia, and although actual deaths were obviously never staged, it would be erroneous to assume that the 19th century playgoer did not draw the very same sense of verisimilitude and spectacularity from the modern water displays as Roman audiences. The theatrical exhibition of stage machinery largely contributed to the creation of an illusion that challenged and overcame mere realism, and to which was incorporated the collective mental imagery instilled by peripheral arts and genres. Regardless of the fact that the modern naumachia commodified and dulcified its ancient forerunners, and though no actual death took place in these performances¹, the enhancement of realism

was twofold: firstly, through the physical reconstruction of the battle itself, and secondly, through the mental representation of naval battles propounded by painting and the press. Due to its limited proportions concerning size, duration and lack of human casualties, the modern British naumachia was both a metaphor and a metonymy of a real naval battle.

- 11 During the first decades of the 19th century, different means were used to excite the thrill of wonder. The inventive productions of the stage mechanic aimed at the creation, in Alan Reynolds Thompson's words, of a "spectacular, direct effect upon the spectator of something strange, startling and wonderful" (816). Fireworks, mass choreography, stage-props and the dynamism of the scene were encompassed within the allegorical celebration of the nation's grandeur. As recorded by Francis William Blagdon, the naumachia that took place at Hyde Park on the 1st of August 1814 as part of the Grand Jubilee declared by the Prince Regent (the future King George IV) in celebration of the recent victory over Napoleon and a centenary of Hanoverian rule displayed a magnificent show that appealed to all the senses:

About ten o'clock the spectators were suddenly surprised by the instantaneous burst on their sight of a ship on fire. This was at first beheld as a calamity; but, in a few minutes, it was universally perceived that she was bearing down on the French fleet, previously driven on shore. The awful grandeur, and the still increasing splendour of the scene, drew forth bursts of enthusiastic acclamations from both the shores of the Serpentine; and, in a few minutes, the first ship of the French fleet, which lay in her line, and with which she came in contact, was set on fire, and added to the magnificence of a scene (...) the whole French fleet were set on fire and demolished. The effect produced by this blaze was such as to make the whole water appear on fire. Soon after this the fireworks began; but the superior splendour of the expiring fleet eclipsed, for a long time, every thing that could be produced by pyrotechnic ingenuity. (56)

- 12 Apart from the use of "pyrotechnic ingenuity," one of the most notorious features providing realism to the scene both in classic and modern naumachias was the use of *real water*. As Charles Sprawson argues, British culture at the turn of the century was irremediably mesmerised by liquid entertainments: "anything to do with water seemed to exert an extraordinary fascination" (32). It was, after all, an era of architectural emphasis on the scenic and economic opportunities afforded by water: towns bordering shorelines featured crammed houses with outdoor balconies; bay windows, terraces and seaviews offered new recreational spaces adjacent to the coast; seashore resorts and piers were erected to promote leisure activities and were also publicised as havens for the treatment of ailments. Moreover, the average Briton could now easily access such places thanks to the infrastructure of mass transport by railway and sea. Contact with real water seemed to provoke a sense of detachment from daily routine: "here by the seashore their dull, dreary existence could be forgotten for a week of two and substituted for a world of fantasy" (Sprawson, 28).
- 13 The theatre proved to be a privileged spot for spectacular display. When performed in closed playhouses and not in open-air parks, the curtain rose to disclose a stage flooded with water and miniature boats floating. The impression of a real sea was startling, and the audience, surprised and pleased at the success of the illusion, applauded in awe. The rediscovery of such a common space under the spell of naumachias conveyed a certain aura of exoticism (even when performed out in the open) or what Turner calls "a willing transition from familiar daily environment, a release into here and now, into

a space out of time and out of the social structure” (quoted by Eyres, 174). Furthermore, the function and purpose of the parks themselves were drastically inverted (Eyres, 173-176). Rather than instilling placidity and inspiring contemplation, parks became places of escapism meant to arouse excitement. Quite paradoxically, naumachia audiences gathered in search of the exotic and the historically-distant within ordinary boundaries as common as any park or garden could offer. The collectivity created the necessary atmosphere to transcend, by way of entertainment, into a world of mystifying significance and plenitude.

- 14 The aquatic milieu is therefore to be construed both as a decontextualizing element fortifying this estrangement and the fascination over the scene, and as a liquid body congruently suffusing realism to the performance. In fact, when compared to the Roman models, the naumachia acts as the natural extension of the gladiatorial practice. As argued by Coleman (1993: 49), if the gladiatorial combat could be expanded to a collective fight on land, it is logical that the skill and the spectacularity of the show could be heightened when transposed onto a different material element such as water. The make-believe sea in an artificial basin presented a step beyond classic *terra firma* fights and implied a challenge for the combatants. The water not only hindered the gladiators’ movements, it also emerged as yet another deadly element, as is proven by the number of gladiators who drowned. Moreover, the basin materialised a metonymic vision of the Mediterranean Sea as it was completely dominated and “owned” by the Romans, and connected the battle to the community’s shared imagery of the Empire’s naval might. As a consequence, the naumachia as both the enactment of naval mass engagements and its physical container integrated the audience within the theatrical sphere of imperial identity.

Classical waters, liquid entertainments and the romantics

- 15 The presence of water had further class connotations both in Ancient Rome and in modern Britain. Water was associated with the increasingly elaborate irrigation systems, and many of the performances and religious festivals held at the Roman theatre became drastically intensified thanks to the building’s design to become inundated and to distribute water. As described by Cynthia Finlayson, the Great Roman Theatre of Apamea, Syria, had a reservoir and a water collection system underneath, and the modern infrastructure for the dispersal and disposal of water contributed to the complex, extravagant staging while at the same time linking theatre performance to the urban development of the city (284-285). The waterworks technique relied on the water from local sources such as distant springs, rivers or lakes, and was flowed in through carefully-designed and interconnected pipes, aqueducts and bridges. Water was used both for popular consumption, and, in the case of impure water, for adjacent gardens, private irrigation, and the naumachias, as shown by Augustus’s introduction of the unwholesome Aqua Alsietina for the Trastevere region (Bloch 338). The use and exploitation of water was associated with the modern city mainly because the construction of such works also depended upon the concentration of urban wealth. Ellen Churchill Semple states that “the water system of Rome supplied private houses, the 30 ornamental fountains of the city, and 75 public structures, chiefly baths”, like those of Nero and Caracalla, together with gardens in and about the city (474). The

naumachia was therefore a display of complex hydraulic engineering and social power. “Three things reveal the magnificence of Rome”, Sprawson declares, echoing a historian from Halicarnassus, “the aqueducts, the roads and the sewers” (59). A token of imperial might, the successive Roman emperors delighted in the copious construction of baths and pools within the city for both the elites and the population to indulge in water entertainments. Sprawson estimates there were nearly eight hundred pools open to the citizens of Rome, each capable of hosting over one thousand swimmers, which conveyed a combination of political control and mass leisure. The power of the empire was symbolised by the stylistic voluptuousness of the city’s different aquatic bodies, surrounded by “colonnades, libraries, and palaestrae where athletes trained” to the point that, according to Sprawson, “the more degenerate the emperor, the more sumptuous tended to be his baths” (46).

- 16 Such an exhibition of social wealth and power through aquatic display may also be observed in Georgian Britain. Contrary to the popular naval warfare performed within playhouses, the garden naumachia reflects the ways in which patriotism was commodified in the interest of the state and the landowner. Elite identity was enhanced by the development of the landscape garden as a site of high culture. As Patrick Eyres contends, Georgian and Victorian country landowners did not hesitate to rent their estates to include firework naumachias mounted as profitable popular entertainments in the landscape garden, thus linking landed dynasties with the expansion of the theatricalisation of the empire. As Eyres suggests (176-177), the gardens’ evident connotations of higher social status could not help but become exacerbated by the mesmerizing results of the generous investments made for the productions. The spectacular theatrical elements (ranging from the materials themselves to the special effects and props), not only harmoniously suited the garden space itself, but were also flaunted before a public which was exploring and practicing the modern lifestyle enmeshing commodities, consumerism, patriotism and leisure.
- 17 Nor should we overlook the mythical connotations of the prime element of water itself. The alleged curative powers of springs, pools and rivers, among other bodies, within ancient Mediterranean culture, has often been discussed by historians. Ellen Churchill Semple argues that in many Hellenic cities, the spring was the nucleus of town and village life, the source around which the community grew, like the Virgin’s spring in Nazareth. The sanctity of the liquid is easily observed in the connection between irrigation and the mythological divinities of agriculture, Apollo and Demeter. Similarly, Rome instituted the Fontinalia, a pagan festival in which garlands were thrown into all the city fountains to ritualize the god Fons’s appearance with the goddess Flora to secure the abundance of rain. Moreover, innumerable healing powers and properties were attributed to water in both Greek and Roman cultures. Greek civilisation revolved around a conception of water as a mysterious body imbued with divine and magical—and sometimes sinister—properties: “there was a spring that made you mad, another that once tasted could make you teetotal for the rest of your life” (Sprawson, 53). The number of myths describing water spells illustrate its infinite potentialities. “Hera renewed her virginity every year”, Sprawson argues, and “to render Achilles invulnerable his mother dipped his infant body in a river” (53). Water could prey on men in the most unexpected ways, by causing them to fall in love with their own reflections, for example (the archetypal myth of Narcissus was later immortalized by Ovid). It could also “[dissolve] glass, crystal, stone, corrupted metal, even gold” (53).

The Romans mastered and regulated so magic and mysterious a fluid, and inherited its divine connotations, as can be easily observed in the number of Roman myths revolving around aquatic plots or intrigues. It is no surprise, therefore, that the water springs were regarded not only as a resource but as a source as well, for they represented the embryo of the city, reinvigorating the sense of *communitas* amongst citizens, driving them towards collective transcendence when beholding the magnificent spectacle of naumachias.

- 18 This fanciful signification of the water spectacle can also be noticed in the overtly mythological connotations inherent in the modern naumachia. One of the less explored connections between the classic naumachia and its British counterpart is the use of water-basins not just for sham naval battles but for other types of aquatic performances as well. A myriad of more or less theatricalised water entertainments germinated during the 19th century, and numerous tanks—the so-called “crystal aquaria”—were built in city halls or on the stage of music halls where noted performers and swimmers of the time remained submerged for a number of minutes while eating, drinking, writing, or even “swam for days on end, alone or racing against each other (...) watched by vast crowds that included members of the Royal family” (Sprawson, 33).
- 19 The transcendent meaning conferred to aquatic display in ancient times translated into early 19th century British popular culture’s glorification and mystification of figures such as the swimmer or the sailor. Romanticism has been traditionally construed as the retrieval of the Ancient world within modernity, yet very rarely have classic water entertainments been studied in the light of modern aquatic theatrical bodies. In many ways, English romanticism updated the mythical implications of water inherent in classic culture. The extraordinary enthusiasm for naval scenes in painting and drama as well as the heroic dimension of the open-water swimmer as displayed by the exploits of legendary bathers like Byron, or by those who valiantly perished in the sea like Shelley, mirror the transposition of the ancient fantasy world onto modern society. Charles Sprawson defines the admiration attached to aquatic practices during the late 18th and early 19th century as the manifestation of the “Homeric dimensions to swimming” (9), mainly through the conceptualisation of the swimmer “as someone rather divorced from everyday life, devoted to a mode of exercise where most of the body remains submerged and self-absorbed”; an image which “appealed to the introverted and eccentric, individualists involved in a mental world of their own” (5). If the wanderer and the Baudelairean *flâneur* are the product of the modern industrial city as argued by Walter Benjamin, the early 19th century swimmer emerges as the Romantic prototype of the heroic attributes conferred by Roman civilisation to water.
- 20 Charles Sprawson connects the Romantic English swimmer with his classic forerunners on the basis of their noble qualities, their distinguished courage and ability, and the brave deeds they were admired for. Old Etonians, the first to establish a swimming society in England, lauded their classical predecessors. Such glorification was best verbalized in their motto, borrowed from Pindar’s Olympian Odes: *ariston men hudor* (water is best) (Sprawson, 83). The rigorous efforts for self-preparation, exercise in the water, or the building and polishing of a perfected physique through strict discipline were much revered as an instance of moral principles. On the other hand, the fantasy world imagined by classical cultures was also to be found in modern England. For most *décadents* and aesthetes, swimming became an obsession. The corporeal “alienation”

the individual finds himself in when immersed in water along with the mental and physical prowess that were associated with swimming further inspired 19th century writers in their conception of the element as a source of mystical experiences and as a space for transcendence. “The ocean expressed the romantic spirit of the age” (Sprawson, 31). More than a sport, the act of swimming into new pools of love, mystery and death conveyed a mythic sense of estrangement away from an altogether dull and ordinary life.

***Naumachia* and the competing arts**

- 21 Furthermore, the metaphorical transposition of the sacredness of the British Empire and of the Royal Navy as the agent of the grandeur of Imperial Britain on the Georgian stage, be it in the form of naumachias or nautical melodramas, is inherent in popular performances at the turn of the 18th century. The reinforcement of a national identity forged through naval warfare against European rivals is actually one of the elements that most directly relate British naumachias with their Roman counterparts. Julius Caesar and Domitian staged in naumachias within the context of a triumph. The articulation of an ideological engagement in classic naval battles is therefore the result of endorsing imperial might through its basic theatrical representation.
- 22 The theatricalisation of national identity implies an otherizing process based upon a clear-cut distinction between enemies and allies. The enactment of the battle mainly comprised the antagonistic, ritual juxtaposition of two opposing sides. As can be appreciated in the excerpt quoted above, the categorical distinction between “us” and “them” endorsed the Manichean implications of the performance. However, the textual simplicity of the modern naumachia, in which visual physicality suppressed dialogue, was counterbalanced, if not completed, by its interaction with competing nautical plays. The patriotic style of the nautical melodramas performed in indoor playhouses compensated for the naumachias’ lack of denser plots, to the extent that they were reduced to exhibiting the drama’s flashiest scenes. Plays like *Black-Eyed Susan* (1829) and *My Poll and My Partner Joe* (1835) theatricalised the same crude fantasies and dramatized a dream-world of ideal justice, courage and virtue that were represented in modern naumachias: “long before imperialism was a conscious political doctrine the Union Jack waved triumphantly over a battalion of militantly expansionist and imperialist melodramas” (Booth, 10). Just as much as their material incarnations, these plays celebrated the mythical expansionism of the empire and made up for the lack of textual support inherent in the ritualistic enactment of the naumachia.
- 23 But nautical theatre could also (although less frequently) provoke the opposite effect: British national identity could itself be subjected to criticism. For instance, the play *British Neutrality*, a nautical drama in four acts performed in 1867, a few decades after the accession to the throne of Queen Victoria, presented a myriad of tableaux which vividly depicted “the destruction of the British iron-clad, the Dodger” as well as the crimes perpetuated by the British fleet: “destroying the town, murdering the inhabitants, robbing the banks; and indulging in all those other atrocities for which the British people are so notoriously famous” (Shugge, 166). The success of such dramas resided in their didactic purpose as well as in their straight—yet hyperbolised—connection with real naval fights as described by sensational press reports. As claimed by the author of the review, “*British Neutrality* is a noble and

instructive drama. One that must always cause the American heart to palpitate with patriotic feelings, and instruct the American people to look with still greater scorn upon the base-born hirelings of Britain” (167). Based on a mixture of didacticism and visual entertainment, these dramas resorted to immediate information popularised by competing literary genres and arts that built upon the collective imagination of the audience.

- 24 The alleged “absence of truth” displayed in the theatrical performance was also completed or replaced by the language of the press. Graphic details and pathetic descriptions of naval tragedies, drownings, wrecks and dead pilots were often featured in newspaper reports, as they were very common at the time. Surely Georgian theatre-goers, accustomed to and enthralled by the rhetoric of the press, also contributed to the specific implications of the naumachias and other liquid theatrical bodies for the collectivity. Audiences inevitably associated the attractions and the spectacularity onstage to the compelling narratives and enticing headlines collected by journalists. Such connections allowed the audience to contextualise their own place within the narrative: the press’s emphasis on the notion of contemporariness nurtured the spectators’ identification with the dramatized global tragedy, to which they could more easily relate, partly thanks to the force of journalism and its distinctive language. The wreck of the *Birkenhead* in 1852 on the South African coast, for instance, quickly acquired a mythical status in the popular imagination. Out of the tragedy of the vessel’s crew, most of whom perished, a quasi-epic narrative of imperial heroism was carved “as a supreme example of self-sacrifice” (Sprawson 31). Moreover, newspaper drawings and engravings set the tone and helped define what the audience expected to witness onstage. It was the spectacle of a collective trauma, one where visual language played a key role. The press was therefore a determining agent and contributed to the realism of the performance, to the extent that the wide circulation of nautical reports on sea disasters and naval combats connected the theatrical illusion to its factual counterpart. The success of the modern naumachia did not originate in its capacity to illuminate the past but from the role it played in assisting the audience to understand its most immediate present.
- 25 Just as much as the press liked to relate naval disasters, the role of painting during the early 19th century in England endorsed such visual background that was transposed on the stage. The Romantics were “abnormally sensitive to the slightest trace of water in painting” (Sprawson 32) and the theme of maritime disaster was indulged upon by such sea-painters as Turner, Joseph Farington, John Thomas Serres and John Constable. Nicholas Tracy has recently scrutinised the role of naval victory in British art as a means to consolidate a national identity. He declares that “wars are fought by nations, by communities of people who can only respond collectively to national concerns if they can arrive at consensus about common values”; and he continues to argue that “image makers are important in harnessing the national energy, especially when the events of importance occur out of sight of all but a very small proportion of the community” (5). Due to its short-lived and exemplary nature, the role of the war artist, just as much as that of the journalist, was to record and amplify a specific and ephemeral moment in history which needed to be retained in the collective memory so as to shape the viewers’ lives. Pictorial records of warfare went hand in hand with newspaper stories and other accounts. As the average Briton was unlikely to witness the battle fleets of the Royal Navy, “the artists who portrayed the ‘wooden world’ of the navy played a central role in its history by the effect they had on public opinion” in a

nation “that had come to view its navy as a central icon of its self-consciousness” (Tracy 5, 10).

***Naumachia*, chastisement and the construction of the modern societal body**

- 26 In Roman times and in modern Britain, the aquatic display was thought to be both an instrument of social and moral reform as well as a form of political control. Penalties of degradation entailed a public spectacle of punishment, and just like the *damnatio ad bestiae*, naumachias became the spectacularisation of social consensus through public discipline. The punishment of criminals in a formal public arena involved a role-play set in a dramatic context, or what Coleman defines as “fatal charades” (1990). Morality merged with a modern sense of marketing strategies in the same way that exemplarity went hand in hand with entertainment.
- 27 In this sense, it would be possible to conclude that British naumachias were also a ritualised spectacle of chastisement that revalidated societal norms, at least in three different ways. Firstly due to the fact that in Britain, public school swimming was regarded as a baptism of sorts to purge morbid fancies out of youthful heads. The activity was conceived as a materialisation of the classic Juvenal’s axiom *mens sana in corpore sano*, as shown by the old Etonians who annexed water-related activities to the act of inflicting or suffering pain. For many of them, flagellation, caning, birching and swimming were closely linked to each other. Scarce are the paradoxical accounts of famous Etonians such as Swinburne who revealed that, far from experiencing physical distress, this form of punishment provoked in him an intense feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction. As Sprawson notes, for the poet “water and torture seemed inextricably related” (95). His masochistic narratives are extremely illuminating of the atoning ease he experienced through whipping and swimming, and which allowed him to escape the apathy of mundane routine.
- 28 Secondly, naumachias served as a revival of the British fleet’s corrective over the French enemy, and although the deaths were solely the product of make-believe, they did connect with warfare realities which had occurred just a few years earlier. Punishment of the French enemy attested to and celebrated the moral superiority of the British Empire and also reinforced the collective identity underlying this moral consensus. Through the exhibition of punishment, participants experienced a spontaneous, immediate togetherness, a social bonding based upon the victory of right over wrong through sea-fare potency: “the naumachia’s *communitas* acts as a social intensification that bonds participants through reinforcement of a national identity forged through naval warfare with European rivals. This indicates that the naumachia is no idle whimsy of an elite social function, or of a populist seaside entertainment. Rather, it is a serious ideological engagement” (Eyres, 175).
- 29 Thirdly, at a more symbolic level, the mixture of fear and fascination caused by the gladiator can also be seen in the strangeness of the nautical hero, whose performance articulated aqua-dramas and nautical plays. The stage “tar” was a figure of remarkable physical strength, prone to a sudden violence that placed him on the periphery of civilisation. His distinctive idiolect signified upon his inarticulateness and his cultural strangeness, what Jane Moody poetically christened as “the muteness of the wild man”

(97). As we have previously seen with the example of the Birkenhead, ships' crews were often glorified for their heroism and nobleness. Nonetheless, sailors were also stereotypically conceived as brutish entities in the line of the primitive, wild man, whose loyalty to his country was uncertain. A dislocated outcast, the sailor was often an individualist guided by instincts of self-preservation. After all, of what use was patriotic allegiance to a nation when aboard a vessel so far away from land? Of what use was patriotic loyalty within a male-dominated ship where dangers such as drowning or starvation were so imminent? British pride could do little to secure the survival of the sailor once aboard. The naval mutinies of 1897 at the Nore and the Spithead, in which sailors demanded increased wages and better conditions, exemplified both the individualist stance and the collective interest of crew members as men were thus united by extreme conditions and not by nationalistic sentiment. As Gillian Russel argues, these insurrections strengthened the stereotype of the sailor as a bewildering menace to civilized society, dangerously occupying the margins of British cultural norm. The transposing of such forms of criminality on to the stage should, therefore, be interpreted as a likely means through which the drama attempted to make sense of the savagery of men moulded in the wilderness of the sea. The sailor was the object of terror, but he was also alluring, and his bravery attracted Romantic admiration. By presenting before audiences the plausibility of the prototype's double-sidedness, the Georgian antinomy between the cultivated and the monstrous was both crystallized and questioned in nautical dramas in the wake of mass post-war demobilisation. Unsurprisingly, the melodrama's stereotype of the Jolly Jack Tar, the quintessential sailor whose duty is owed to the imperial triumvirate of his ship, his country and his king, became the archetype of virtue to which all sailors had to aspire. The Jolly Jack Tar therefore fortified imperialistic endeavours to domesticate the wild and to tame the uncivilised (Russell 98-99).

- 30 The modern naumachia therefore needs to be revisited in the light of the classical sources it stemmed from, but not merely as a token of the nation's grandeur through war, but also as a sample of the symbolic and theatrical attributes bestowed upon water. If Georgian Britain and its classic forerunners were to be rallied due to their common use of the theatrical naval display it is because both civilisations, although separated by centuries, bestowed and condoned the mythical properties inherent in the use and control of the liquid body. Either for entertainment or for societal aims, water represented a bizarre allegory of wealth, leisure, power, progress, mystery and danger. In this sense, more than the update of a theatrical genre inherited from Roman times with which the modern playgoer was not necessarily acquainted, the liquid theatrical bodies that were found in Britain at the turn of the 18th century were an effective instrument for Georgian society's self-representation, mainly fuelled by its capacity to condense and respond to current concerns. It fleshed out present anxieties and it acted as a marketing strategy reinforced by the overwhelming literature and arts dealing with the sea. For the playgoer, the illusion was authenticated by the reference it made to a number of battles and naval disasters that had actually taken place and were revived by the stage in a sort of cognitive interaction between the written word, image and performance.

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NOTES

1. In fact, as Kate Felus states, one of them was immediately cancelled when a blank round accidentally injured one of the captains in Sir Francis Dashwood's aquatic performance in West Wycombe (30).

ABSTRACTS

Theatre historians regard modern naumachias as the theatrical expression of British patriotism, naval supremacy and wealth through sea trade. However, the mechanisms for the creation of a national identity through the enactment of water battles have rarely been explored in the light of the connection between Roman naval displays and the myriad of popular dramatic forms staged in Britain in the 19th century. The aim of this paper is to analyse the persistent revival of Roman naumachias during the Georgian era in relation to its connections with modern popular entertainments. This will expose how the classic world was resurrected, filtered and shaped into multifarious forms by way of its association with contemporary genres such as nautical drama, painting and the press. The British naumachia will be conceived as a sort of “liquid theatrical body”—a representational and performative space defined by its incorporation of real water—whose signification was to be filled by further textual, visual and iconographic aspects of British popular culture that helped refine and update its classic connotations.

Les historiens du théâtre considèrent les naumachies modernes comme l'expression théâtrale du patriotisme, de la suprématie navale et du pouvoir du commerce maritime britannique. Cependant, les mécanismes de création d'une identité nationale par le biais de la mise en scène de batailles navales n'ont pas été analysés à la lumière du rapport existant entre les exhibitions aquatiques romaines et le nombre de genres populaires théâtraux en vogue au cours du 19^{ème} siècle en Grande Bretagne. Le but de cet article est d'analyser le renouveau des naumachies romaines pendant l'ère Georgienne tout en montrant leur rapport avec les divertissements populaires modernes. Cela nous permettra d'étudier comment le monde classique fut ressuscité, filtré et façonné à travers son association avec d'autres genres contemporains comme le drame nautique, la peinture ou la presse. La naumachie britannique moderne émerge ainsi comme un « corps liquide théâtral »—un espace représentationnel et performatif défini par l'usage d'eau réelle—dont le sens est complété par d'autres éléments textuels, visuels et iconographiques parallèles appartenant à la culture populaire britannique qui contribuent à polir et mettre à jour ses connotations classiques.

INDEX

Keywords: naumachia, naval conflict, popular theatre, nautical melodrama, national identity

Mots-clés: naumachie, bataille navale, théâtre populaire, mélodrame nautique, identité nationale

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