Alan Bennett

„The Madness of George III“ 1991
&
„The Madness of King George“ 1994
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Alan Bennett

- Born in Leeds 1934
- Leeds Modern School
- National Service (Joint Services Language Course in Russian at Cambridge)
- Student and junior lecturer in Modern History at Exeter College, Oxford
- Member of the revue “Beyond the Fringe” 1962-64
- Living in Yorkshire and London
- “England’s best loved playwright”
Works

- **Ten stage plays**
  e.g. Forty Years On, The Old Country, Enjoy, The Madness of George III
- **Three screen plays**
  A Private Function, Prick up your ears, The Madness of King George
- **Eight television documentaries**
  e.g. Dinner at Noon, The Abbey
- **Over thirty plays for television**
  e.g. Me, I’m afraid of Virginia Woolf; Talking Heads (2)
The topic of George III

- „The Royal Malady“ by Charles Trench
- “George III and the Mad Business” by Richard Hunter and Ida Macalpine

It’s dramatic potential:
- Self-contained, taking place over a relatively short timescale
- His illness and recovery were sudden
- Political crisis

First performance:
28 November 1991 – Royal National Theatre

Film release: 1994 (four Academy Award nominations)
The plot

- The play starts with the royal family assembled and waiting to leave for the opening of Parliament in 1788. King George III assumes a different demeanour of loving father of his family to the father of the nation while dressing. He and the queen discuss the bad physical condition of the Prince of Wales several times. On his return King George is unsuccessfully attacked by the petitioner Mrs Nicholson. The King is presented on the one hand as down-to-earth “Farmer George” but also as someone strongly sticking to the court conventions, not allowing a pregnant woman to sit down. His run into a state of confusion and madness starts with a belly ache and rises to incontinence in speech and behind. The Prince of Wales, eager for power, separates him from his wife. Several doctors start to take care for him in their ways. Dr. Baker is counting his pulse, Dr. Warren blisters him and Dr. Pepys is very interested in his faeces. Dr. Willis, a Lincolnshire pastor-physician, finally is in charge of him and tries to make him control himself with means of a straightjacket and a fastening chair. His illness brings all state matters to a halt for six months and the Prime minister under pressure to make the Prince of Wales Regent by Bill of Regency. Both political parties strive to gain or keep power even by jumping on to the successful train as Thurlow. Just in time the king recovers to “seeming” the king when reading Shakespeare’s “King Lear”. The play finishes as it has started, a royal family standing united and pretending to be all happy - a restoration of the status quo.
Screen Play – The Structure

- 136 scenes
  - 1-7: a family man and King, opening of Parliament
  - 8-21: the attack, “Farmer George”, state and court business, belly pain
  - 22-28: in the park (cricket), Fitzroy reporting, Prince of Wales eager for power
  - 29-39: the early rising, kissing Lady Pembroke, blue piss
  - 40-43: the interrupted concert, Dr. Warren in charge of the King
  - 44-50: London flooding, flight to the roof, separation from the Queen
  - 51-54: the amputation, the blistering
  - 55-57: language disorders, first vote on appointing the Prince Regent
  - 58-81: Dr. Willis in charge of the King (straightjacket and fastening chair), the King incontinent in speech and behind
Screen Play – The Structure

- 82-99: summer palace Kew, gagging, the Prince’s illegal marriage
- 100-108: second voting lost, Thurlow changing sides, Bill of Regency to be introduced
- 109-114: calming by one look, reading of Shakespeare’s “Lear” (IV,7)
- 115-129: last-minute arrival at the House
- 130-135: all attendants, but Colonel Fitzroy, sacked
- 136: in front of St Paul’s, happy family

- 1788 – time span of 6 months
- Setting: Westminster, Kew, House of Commons, Carlton House
Characters – King George III

- * 4 June 1738 - † 29 January 1820
- Reign: 25 October 1760
- Suffered from recurrent and eventually permanent mental illness (porphyria)
- Final relapse in 1811
- Nicknamed “Farmer George” for his plain, homely and thrifty manners of taste
- Smitten with Lady Sarah Lennox but married Princess Sophia Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz
Characters – Queen Charlotte

- *19 May 1744 - †17 November 1820*
- Married: 8 September 1761
- A homely woman, with great interest in Arts, education and gardening
- Together they had 15 children
- After the onset of George’s illness, he was placed in her supportive care
Characters – Prince Regent

- * 12 August 1762 - † 26 June 1830
- Regency marked by a victory in the Napoleonic Wars
- A stubborn monarch often interfering in politics
- A poor relationship with both his father and his wife Caroline of Brunswick
- Charles William Pitt and Charles James Fox disagreed over the basis of a regency, when the king wasn’t able to deliver his Speech from the Throne in November 1788
Characters – Charles William Pitt the Younger

- * 28 May 1759 - † 23 January 1806
- Great Britain’s youngest Prime Minister: 1783-1801 and 1804-1806
- Often referred to as a Tory but always considered himself to be an “independent Whig”
- Sought to eliminate the national debt by imposing new taxes
- Argued that it was for Parliament to nominate a regent
- Saved by the King’s recovery in February 1789, just after a Regency Bill had been introduced and passed in the House of Commons
Characters – Charles James Fox

- * 24 January 1749
  † 13 September 1806
- Prominent Whig politician
- Anti-slavery campaigner
- Formed an alliance of convenience with Lord North, known as the Fox-North Coalition, to regain power
- Ambitions blunted by the effective efforts of George III and they angered him further with their open support of the Prince Regent
Characters – Screenplay

King George III ∞ Queen Charlotte + Lady Pembroke

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>George, Prince of Wales</th>
<th>Fred, Duke of York</th>
<th>12 others</th>
<th>Amelia</th>
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<td>+ Mrs Fitzherbert</td>
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Opposition

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<th>Richard Sheridan</th>
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Government

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Physicians: Sir George Baker, Dr. Richard Warren, Sir Lucas Pepys, Dr. Willis

Equerries: Captain/Colonel Fitzroy, Captain Greville

Pages: Arthur Papandiek, Fortnum, Braun

Black Rod, Speaker, Lady Adam, Amputee, Footmen, Mrs Cordwell, Clergyman, MPs

Margaret Nicholson
Characters – Stage play

King George III \( \infty \) Queen Charlotte + Lady Pembroke

George, Prince of Wales Fred, Duke of York
+ Mrs Fitzherbert

12 others Amelia

Government

William Pitt, Prime Minister
Henry Dundas
Edward Thurlow, Lord Chancellor
Sir Selby Markham

Opposition

Charles Fox Richard Sheridan
+ Mrs. Armistead Edmund Burke
Sir Boothby Skymshir / Ramsden Skymshir

Physicians: Sir George Baker, Dr. Richard Warren, Sir Lucas Pepys, Dr. Willis
Dr. Ida Macalpine

Equerries: Captain/Colonel Fitzroy, Captain Greville

Pages: Arthur Papandiek, Fortnum, Braun
Black Rod, Speaker, Lady Adam, Amputee, Footmen, Mrs Cordwell, Clergyman, MPs
Margaret Nicholson, Hoppner
Comparison Stage/Screenplay

- **Characters:**
  - Charles Fox temporarily on a trip to Europe with Mrs. Armistead
  - Mrs. Fitzherbert is missing
  - MPs: Boothby Skymshir for Berkshire (his nephew Ramsden), Selby Markham for Worcester
  - More emphasis on political sphere
  - Dr. Ida Macalpine: 20th century physician telling the pages about the king’s disease, called porphyria, after his recovery
   (only mentioned in a final caption in the film)

- **Setting:**
  - Limited to the stage
  - One central flight of stairs
  - Variation with curtains and spotlights
Comparison Stage/Screenplay

- Content:
  - Sets in with the attack of Margaret Nicholson
  - No farm trip
  - Signs of becoming mad more in speech (no cricket, or trip to the roof)
  - No interaction between Greville and Lady Pembroke
  - No scene of Greville in Lincolnshire
  - No Maria Fitzherbert – no illegal marriage
  - The King doesn’t come to parliament in person
  - Ends with the “The King is himself again”
  - Political sphere much more in dialogue

- Speech: More pointed and shorter dialogues in the movie
- Structure: 2 Acts – 27 Scenes (climax scene 16)
“Thurlow: Your Majesty seems more yourself.
   King: Do I? Yes, I do. I have always been myself even when
   I was ill. Only now I seem myself. That’s the important
   thing. I have remembered how to seem. What, what?”

- Part of the King’s illness consists in his growing inability to sustain performance, because Monarchy is performance
- What seems odd, like the “what, what”, is a sign of normality
- In 1788 the monarch was still the engine of the nation, because “an ailing king means an ailing government” (21)
- The king as arch pretender
The art of “seeming”

- Erving Goffman: “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” 1959

- “All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify”

- Core truth of Bennett’s work: His belief in the essentially performative nature of human behaviour
“Have you read King Lear? Tragic story. Of course, if that fool of a messenger had just got that little bit more of a move on, Cordelia wouldn’t have been hanged, Lear wouldn’t have died, and it would all have ended happily…which I think would have made a much better ending. Because as it is, it’s so damned tragic…”

Comedy gives its audience permission to relish characters who behave as most of us would not dare to. In them we can enjoy the behaviour of characters who we would perhaps prefer or avoid in real life, and we can ignore the distress they might cause.

George III does not allow us to relax judgement and feeling. For the audience there is no enjoying the outrageousness.

The result is another of Bennett’s characteristic tragicomedies.
Comedy or Tragedy

…I think in terms of the edge of tragedy and the edge of comedy (…) that’s the best place to be”

“I like something that can just tip over from comedy to tragedy or comedy to sadness”

Q: Is George III comic or tragic?
B: It’s neither really
A political dimension?

Fox: I see the King did not write his own speech, Mr. Pitt.

Pitt: The King will do as he’s told, Mr. Fox.

King: (…) There is much to do, there is government…

Papandiek: Government hasn’t begun yet, sir. Government is still in bed.

Braun: Government is lucky.

Queen: … In England always the Prince hates the King.

Queen: George, smile you lazy hound. It’s what you’re paid for. Smile and wave. Come on, everybody, smile and wave.

Queen: Can we never be solitary?

Willis: Yes. Do you know, Mr Greville, the state of monarchy and the state of lunacy share a frontier.

Prince of Wales: But Pa, I want something to do.

King: (…) Let them see we are happy! That’s why we are here.
A political dimension?

“Any account of politics whatever the period must throw up contemporary parallels. I think if I had deliberately made more of these it would have satisfied or pandered to some critics who felt that was what the play should have been more about. But it is about the madness of George III.”
A History Play

- Historic subject
- The author’s preoccupation for history
- “Like Brecht, he uses historical drama to ask where we are, how we got there, and what we should do next”
- By changing history, Bennett can clarify the social and moral offshoots of George’s madness
- Both his timing and his judgement in his handling of the historical record can be flawless.