

Enacting History: Romantic Theatre and the Woman Writer

Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity. Ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. 292 pp.

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<1> In what is arguably one of the first comprehensive critical studies of British theatre, aptly titled *The British Theatre* (1808), Elizabeth Inchbald claims, “It is said that modern dramas are the worst that ever appeared on the English stage — yet it is well known, that English theatres never flourished as they do at present ...” (qtd. in Kucich 24). Inchbald’s rather pointed observation gestures to the paradox that critics today still encounter: the apparent invisibility of theatre in scholarship of Romanticism versus the actual outpour of theatrical texts and performance occurring in the period. Even more problematic is the fact that the few studies of British Romantic theatre are often primarily concerned with canonical male poets, like Byron or Shelley. In *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama*, Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam build on the work of pathbreaking scholars in the field of women writers and Romantic theatre (such as Ellen Donkin, Catherine Burroughs, Jane Moody, and Judith Pascoe) in a collection that seeks to give voice to an otherwise silenced history of female dramatic production.

<2> Arguing that women’s Romantic drama is “by no means a ‘blank,’” Crisafulli and Elam claim in their introduction that the essays collectively explore the possibilities of female agency “both in the drama (as protagonists) and through the drama (as active participants) in social transformation” (16). Divided into three parts, this collection underscores the vibrant theatrical community of the Romantic period — a community in which women writers often played leading and innovative roles. Whether they are performing on the stage, writing and managing for it, or taking part in dramatic criticism, British women’s participation in the drama of the Romantic era reveals, as this collection relentlessly argues, multiple strategies for how women could engage in public discourse and help to shape its tumultuous cultural and political atmosphere.

<3> Mirroring the book’s collective project of rewriting Romantic women’s history, the first section, “Historical Drama and Romantic Historiography,” is ideally placed as it specifically addresses the resurfacing popularity of historical drama in the Romantic era and, reciprocally, the Romantic preoccupation with revising history. As Gary Kelly’s essay suggests, women’s composing historical drama — history being traditionally deemed a “masculine” realm — led to

a feminization of history and, ultimately, the formation and extension of Romantic liberalism (85). In that vein, Greg Kucich's "Baillie, Mitford, and the 'Different Track' of Women's Historical Drama on the Romantic Stage" functions as an excellent introduction to the crux of this section: mainly, that women playwrights used historical plays to enact a historical revisionism that proved to be a "significant political outle[t]" (27). Kucich expands this claim by examining the ways women playwrights transformed otherwise violent, politically charged histories into a form of proto-feminist historiography that explored the "affective possibilities" of history (30). Indeed, the most convincing moments of Kucich's piece are when he links the heroines of Baillie's and Mitford's historical drama to their performative function as forces that inspire "communal sympathy," which "foster[s] new 'lessons' for the school of the theatre, illustrating reformed models of gender and social relations for the state of the nation" (37).

<4> Kucich's notion of how women writers invoked an explicitly politicized sympathy in their dramatic revisions of history is yet another common thread among the authors who follow him. Kelly terms this sympathy "pathetic romance — or verse narrative in which a prominent narrator explicitly sympathizes with the victims of masculine history" (87). Crisafulli also argues in her chapter that women's history plays "enact the origin of their subjection to authoritarian rule," ultimately articulating the "anxiety that this subjection has produced" (52-53). She underscores how women writers, by staging women in history and reenacting their subjection, "display the quality of their experience and ... give evidence of their ideas and actions" (55). Like Kucich and Kelly, Crisafulli sees women's historical drama as producing affect, engaging the audience in sympathizing with the anxiety of women's subjection at the same time that they are asked, as spectators, to witness how these women formulate subjectivity in the public arena.

<5> Cecilia Pietropoli and Serena Baiesi extend Crisafulli's claims regarding women dramatists and their portrayal of historical woman's experience in their chapters, which explore how women's historical drama collapsed what appeared to be a contrastive relationship between what Pietropoli calls a "political concern and private desire" (62). Pietropoli argues that the revolutionary climate of the Romantic era inspired writers, even women dramatists, with a nostalgic desire for a more ideal (albeit fictionalized) golden age. This explains, in part, why the Anglo-Saxon history plays of Hannah More and Ann Yearsley domesticate "masculine" spheres, offering a "private and therefore marginalized and liminal vision of history" in which individual subjectivity, "and thus the construction of a new social formation," emerges (63). Baiesi, too, sees the numerous appearances of "siege" plays by women as enabling individual and sympathetic characterizations of the "other" in history, emphasizing "the difference of what was accepted by society and what was excluded, placing women in a dialectical position between these two situations" (75). To Baiesi, women's historical siege plays challenged the "separate spheres ideology," collapsing the distinction between public, social interaction and private, individual experience, by staging history and gender relations "from the point of view of the vanquished and socially emarginated members of society" (84).

<6> Transitioning from the challenges posed and licenses offered to women writers by history plays, the next section, "Dramaturgical and Cultural Processes," refocuses the book's project of giving voice to women's dramatic history by illuminating the approaches they took and the discourses in which they participated during the process of composing. Catherine Burroughs, a

veteran critic of women's Romantic drama, delivers a tour-de-force essay in "The Erotics of Home: Staging Sexual Fantasy in British Women's Drama" to open the section. She begins by drawing connections between Restoration drama by women, eighteenth-century British erotica, and their influence on female playwriting, especially in the Romantic era. Pointing out that plays "composed between the Restoration and Romantic eras reveal an increasing priggishness about staging sexual conduct," she nevertheless underscores the ways in which women's drama often depicts "celebrations of female sexual fulfillment" that are "countered by restrictions on female desire" (104-5). More interesting, however, is her discussion of the recurring motif of virginity in eighteenth-century British "proto-pornography" and how masculine cultural fantasies of initiating women into sexual maturity were highly eroticized in exogamous terms: indeed, the eighteenth century certainly reinforced and reinvented the vocabulary of defloration as one of the highest forms of erotic titillation. Burroughs then gestures to the popularity of incest in women's Romantic drama, but argues that the circulating discourses surrounding virginity — virginity lost to one outside of the family — suggests that women's drama, especially Joanna Baillie's *The Bride* (1828) and Frances Anne Kemble's *An English Tragedy* (comp. 1833-1843), deals with "the topic of heterosexual intercourse through an approach that is both feminist and conservative" (106). Rather than reading the representations of incest in these pieces as reflecting "actual desires," Burroughs sees the narratives of incest as "fantasizing about how to fortify one's self against losing access to the privileges of the child-parent relationship" (107). While Baillie's and Kemble's plays are "conservative" in that they "desire to stay within familiar regimens of behavior," they are feminist in the sense that incestuous desire represents, in many ways, the desire to be in control of one's own sexual initiation (120-121). The only question left to the reader of Burroughs' chapter concerns whether or not female characters in Romantic dramas penned by women are not also subject to the sexual assaults and "initiation" rites of family members.

<7> Turning from a reading of cultural discourses and play texts, Diego Saglia provides an extensive compilation of letters and memoirs of Mary Russell Mitford, Joanna Baillie, Lady Dacre, and friends in an effort to map out the ways in which these women playwrights created a social network for dramaturgical composition. Struggling with what was still a male-dominated arena, these women, according to Saglia, established a network of sociability that enabled them to exchange ideas, influence, encouragement, and support for what was becoming an emergent female dramatic community (144). Complementing Saglia's focus on female community, Franca Dellarosa and Vita M. Mastrosilvestri each work with Elizabeth Inchbald's extensive literary, critical, and dramatic career in the two essays that follow. While Dellarosa is interested in the ways that "the role of acting" serves as a "mode of mediation between dramatic text and audience" in Inchbald's conception of reading and watching drama (155), Mastrosilvestri sees Inchbald herself as a mediator through the act of translating and rewriting *Lover's Vows* (1798). Furthermore, Mastrosilvestri convincingly argues that theatrical translation is yet another way that women dramatists can access agency over the construction of ideal femininity: "the act of translating becomes a mask behind which the woman writer, while remaining faithful to the models suggested by dominant ideology, is able to express her own vision of social and sexual identities" (168).

<8> One of the most important and innovative chapters in the entire collection is Gioia Angeletti's "Negotiating Voices in Romantic Theatre: Scottish Women Playwrights, Gender and

Performativity.” Putting Joanna Baillie aside for the moment, Angeletti does the “recovery” work upon which this collection bases itself by focusing on the truly understudied side of women playwrights. Bringing in the plays of Jean Marshall (or Marisshall), Eglantine Wallace, Christian Carstairs (or Carstaires), Maria Diana Dods, and Frances Wright, Angeletti argues that female Scottish playwrights had to confront a “double marginalization effect” as women writers *and* as members of a marginalized geo-political community (171). One might even wish to add this effect could be tripled if we consider the added struggles of the woman writer as dramatist. Angeletti covers a great deal of new textual terrain, stressing how these Scottish women responded to intensified gender and national discrimination from male theatre managers, while also underscoring how they tied together “(self-)performativity and gender, combined with the issue of Scottishness” (185). Angeletti provocatively challenges critics to revisit the extensive geography of Romantic theatre and, more specifically, women’s participation in composing for it.

<9> An eagerly anticipated essay by another veteran of this thread of scholarship, Jane Moody, with its impressive focus on Inchbald and Thomas Holcroft’s struggles with censorship, opens the final part of the book, “Women Staging, Women Staged.” In reality it is in more direct conversation with the process of composing that characterizes the essays in the second section. However, barring the slightly misplaced location, Moody delivers by providing the reader with numerous examples of where Inchbald, in particular, edited her own work before submitting it to the Lord Chancellor for review. Establishing Inchbald’s process of self-censorship, particularly regarding “a calculated suppression of ‘nations’ and ‘constitutions,’” Moody then argues that we must rethink how we understand the process of censorship in the Romantic era. Rather than seeing it as located in one specific institution established by the Licensing Act of 1737, she redefines censorship as “a series of practices and judgments, taking place both in private and in public, involving spectators, critics, theatre managers, and performers” (211). In reframing censorship as both a politically controlled and privately conscious practice, Moody concludes by offering “new appreciation” of Inchbald’s agency and subtlety over the “art of political calculation” (211).

<10> Claudia Corti’s “Poses and Pauses: Sarah Siddons and the Romantic Theatrical Portrait” is perhaps the only essay in the collection that really pays attention to methods of actual performance in Romantic theatre. While focusing primarily on theatre’s relationship to visual arts, it is still necessary for Corti to locate the rise of “pausing” as a method of acting on a framed stage to the “all-too-obvious iconicism of the perceived image” of “poses” in theatrical portraiture (230). Arguing that “it was now the body more than the voice that caught the attention of the audience,” Corti draws extensively on the conversations surrounding “pictorial” categories of the visual arts and the popularity of Sarah Siddons as both actress and subject of portraits (230).

<11> The collection closes with Stefania Magnoni’s discussion of Elizabeth Vestris and the theatrical life of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In keeping with the section’s theme of “Women Staging, Women Staged,” Magnoni illuminates the Romantic debate over *A Midsummer Night’s* “stageability,” with Hazlitt leading the side that viewed it as unsuitable for the stage. Vestris, Magnoni asserts, generally avoided the eighteenth-century practices of “transformations, manipulations, rewritings, and adaptations,” opting instead to return as closely

as possible to the stage text (253). An ideal conclusion to the book, Magnoni's essay not only focuses on the latest women's drama covered in the collection (Vestris writing in 1840), but also invites us to anticipate how Vestris's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would become "the cornerstone of later nineteenth- and even twentieth-century performances of the play" (260).

<12> Readers interested in women's Romantic theatre and drama may, as I hinted above, be disappointed if they expect to find detailed discussions of how women in the Romantic era performed — their methods and approaches, critical reception, and literary and cultural afterlife. Although many of the authors make reference to the performance of a given dramatic text, the focus is primarily on women writers and their dramaturgical performances. Then again, this collection can be said to offer one of the most comprehensive studies of women dramatists and their participation in theatrical life of the Romantic era. While there are a few minor errors (Burney's epistolary novel, *Evelina*, for example, is referred to as a play that she originally published anonymously in 1778), this book delivers on its promise to reanimate critical focus on and engagement with the flourishing theatrical community of the Romantic period, and women's central and influential participation in that community. After reading this collection, scholars will most likely sympathize with Corti's view that in the Romantic era "the theatre certainly changed, but did not decline; quite the opposite" (230).