

about women of colour' means that it cannot be considered (nor is it intended to be) a "representative" anthology' (xxi). No one collection can cover everything, of course, and the way in which this book came about (as the product of a like-minded socialist-feminist study group that met, mostly in Toronto, throughout the 1980s) has shaped the book in certain ways. Such a process is both the source of its strengths and its limitations. What isn't acknowledged, though, is the collection's coverage of a particular period from the 1880s to the 1960s; it has been

the chronological 'framework of choice' for the majority of Canadian women's and gender historians and is thus by no means a new one. However, I hope that the collection's many insights into Canadian labour, political, religious, immigration and business history will not be overlooked by those who work in those fields, that the methodological and conceptual shifts proposed in *Gender Conflicts* will indeed help end the relegation of 'women's topics' to a separate corner of Canadian history.

Cecilia Morgan

The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660–1700

Elizabeth Howe

Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1992, ISBN 0 521 38444 3 £35.00 Hbk; ISBN 0 521 42210 8 £12.95 Pbk

Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture

Tracy C. Davis

Routledge, Chapman & Hall Ltd: London 1991, ISBN 0 415 05652 7 £37.50 Hbk; ISBN 0 415 06353 1 £9.99 Pbk

The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850–1914

Edited by Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford

Harvester Wheatsheaf: Hemel Hempstead 1992, ISBN 0 7108 1379 1 £42.50 Hbk; ISBN 0 7108 180 5 £12.50 Pbk

The recovery of women's involvement in the development of English drama has been slow to come to fruition. Apart from the usual theatrical memoirs and biographies, only a few scattered books over the last century have charted the social

and cultural significance of the actress. Books like Rosamond Gilder's *Enter the Actress* (1931), John Harold Wilson's *All the King's Men* (1958) and Richard Findlater's *The Player Queens* (1976) have provided useful introductions to a fascinating subject but, as this rush of newly published books show, it is only recent developments within the area of women's studies which have allowed theatrical history to be re-examined in the light of feminist theory. How women have been perceived as performers has obviously changed according to the prevailing cultural ideology but, from the Restoration period through the Victorian age and beyond, their presence in the public institution of the theatre can be seen as both a symptom of and a panacea for their position within a society divided along class and gender lines.

Elizabeth Howe's book begins at the beginning of the story, or at least in 1660, when women appeared for the first time on the English stage as professional actresses. By examining the underlying political and theatrical reasons for this remarkable overturning of tradition – the influence of the Continental theatrical scene on exiled Cavaliers, the lack of suitably trained boy-actresses, the ascendancy of royal patronage and the Court – Howe positions women

centrally within this symbiotic relationship between the theatre and the state. Surprisingly, though, only brief mention is made of the importance of the seventeenth-century discourse which questioned and challenged traditional expectations of male-female gender roles. Because this sexual debate is not placed within any kind of social and cultural context, there is often only a superficial reading of events and so, for example, although Howe states that women's sexuality was relished during the Restoration, she does not mention that this was also the period when home-grown pornography emerged for the first time and women were increasingly attacked for daring to speak out at all.

Where the book's strength lies is in its awareness of the dichotomy involved in the emergence of women into a male-dominated sphere. Their appearance is simultaneously 'radical', in that they have a voice and a presence for the first time, and 'conservative' because they were viewed as the sexual playthings of a small coterie of privileged people. Obviously, actresses raised the erotic temperature of the theatre and this was reflected in both their working conditions, where members of the audience were free to watch them (un)dress backstage, and in the drama itself, with an increase in voyeuristic displays of sexual violence, teasing bedroom scenes and breeches roles designed to show off the female body.

Howe puts forward a persuasive argument for the profound influence actresses had on the development of Restoration drama, and focuses particularly on the careers of women like Elizabeth Barry, Anne Bracegirdle and Nell Gwyn. Yet this concentration on actresses as 'public' beings automatically leads to speculation about their lives offstage, and I found myself asking how one impinged on the other, how these women's lives as actresses were affected by their lives as wives and mothers, especially as

they had to leave the stage at frequent intervals to produce, often illegitimate, children.

Although entitled *Actresses as Working Women*, Davis's book refuses to allow that any separation can be made between an actress's personal and professional life. Conceived of as 'a social history of women's employment in the Victorian theatre', Davis provides a sound socio-economic basis to her study through the employment of Marxist and feminist theory and the ideas of New Historicism. By using different methodological approaches, roughly corresponding to the chapter divisions, a complete picture of the Victorian actress as a member of a group rather than an individual begins to appear. In this way, the view of the acting profession as being upwardly mobile during the Victorian period and of providing fame and fortune for women such as Ellen Terry and Lillie Langtry, is put into perspective. Indeed, the majority of female performers worked in the socially less respectable (and therefore less well paid) forms of theatre such as burlesque, extravaganza, ballet, pantomime and music hall. Unlike the Restoration period, when many actresses worked as prostitutes to augment their wages, Davis shows that there is very little statistical evidence to prove the Victorian equation of actress = prostitute and that this idea stemmed from a deep mistrust of women who performed in public for money, thus threatening the structure of the family, the balance of economic power and traditional expectations about the role of women in society.

As in *The First English Actresses*, Davis is interested in the relationship between female acting and male voyeurism. Indeed, our present-day 'peep-show' has its genesis in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *tableaux vivants*, where theatre managers, by borrowing from the respectability of paintings by Royal Academicians (in

itself yet another form of voyeurism), were able to present women on stage in classical semi-naked poses. Theatrical costume as well as gesture, Davis claims, were used to reveal and draw attention to what is only partially concealed. In this way, the diaphanous dresses of ballerinas, the underclothing of cancan dancers, and especially the nude-like pink tights ubiquitous to all female performers, act as erotic signifiers to the audience, aware of their fetishistic nature through pornography readily available in shops close to the theatre houses. Yet the tendency to read 'audience' as male and middle class presupposes that *all* men read pornography in the same way while excluding the responses of women, particularly those of the working class, who may not have been as ignorant of pornography as Davis seems to suggest. In many ways, the pursuit of this argument leads the reader to think of the Victorian actress as a victim, exploited by her employers, the men who came to watch her, and society at large.

Davis only makes passing reference to the appearance of that strong and, indeed, political figure of the late nineteenth century, the 'New Woman'. Gardner and Rutherford, on the other hand, have amassed a splendid collection of essays in which the actress or, more specifically, the female performer, is seen as less a passive recipient of the male gaze than a manipulator of her own image.

From her inception in the 1890s, the New Woman became synonymous with the feminist and suffragist movements of that period and part of the thrust towards the modern age. In popular iconography, she was shown as rejecting accepted notions of femininity and assuming a masculine role. In reality, she was financially independent and sought freedom from, and equality with, men.

Although the New Woman label arose out of a historically specific

moment and was used inevitably to describe the female characters in the New Drama of writers like Ibsen, Shaw and Pinero, these essays widen the concept to examine the ways in which women have used the stage to challenge and subvert both the prevailing images of womanhood and the institution of the theatre itself. Thus, the carefully organized chapters steer us through a diverse range of topics, from Yvette Guilbert's *La Femme Moderne* to 'the female Blondin', from 'Princess Hamlet' to the Pioneer Players.

There are many interesting comparisons to be made with *Actresses as Working Women*. For example, J. S. Bratton shows that female performers in male attire can often, when read as a metaphor for the New Woman, be used as a means to *empower* women rather than a merely titillatory device for attracting the male audience. Similarly, Jill Edmonds looks at how the distinguished actresses who took on the role of Hamlet were able to use this, albeit atypical 'breeches' role as a sign of their equality with men, and Susan Rutherford, in her essay on prima donnas, analyses how traditional male readings of the female voice, where the male is led to his destruction by the dangerous sexuality of the 'siren', came to be replaced by positive images of women in control of their voices, their bodies and their sexuality.

With the founding of the Actresses' Franchise League in 1908 to support the suffragist movement, women brought a sharp new political focus to the stage. As Christine Dymkowski shows in her essay on Edy Craig and the Pioneer Players, women were beginning to take up positions of power previously denied to them. Yet the dismissive reaction of the male establishment to their opening presentation in 1911, a one-act play celebrating the history, ambitions and successes of the actress from the first pioneers onwards, shows how women can so easily be

redefined and thus written out of history altogether. As well as charting the progress of the actress through three formative periods, therefore, these well-researched and entertaining books can be seen as part of the necessary recovery of the

whole of women's history which will continue to redress the balance by providing a solid foundation on which to build for the future.

Rebecca D'Monté

The Feminist Companion to Mythology

Edited by Carolyne Larrington

Pandora Press: London 1992,
ISBN 0 04 4408501 £12.99 Pbk

Where do stories come from? The abundance of stories in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* bedazzles and delights. The power of the story to shape the characters of its listeners, and the power of the listeners to reshape the story in the retelling, is at the hub of it. Women, in this case, are the characters and re-tellers, and the myths they examine are from the Near East, Europe, Asia, Oceania, America. Myth is defined by the anthology's editor, Carolyne Larrington, as the stock of stories that feature the divine, but since contributors survey folk-tale and ceremony featuring symbolism as real to the story-tellers as their own voices – in addition to legend and texts known to be historical – she concludes that myth's definition has to stretch. Myth is, rather, a continuum, a collection 'of a web of meanings'.

This is not a book that seeks to constellate the many into one – it is not looking to mould together all the various aspects of female mythic figures into a single 'great goddess'.

Although Emily Kearns' writing on Indian Hindu myths does look in detail at this phenomenon, since, in the words of one villager, the 'worship of a goddess is considered to be worship of *the* goddess'. Female divinities powerful in their own right did not emerge in the Vedic texts until about the eighth century, and now, in contrast to the literally millions of local deities, there are three supreme divinities of pan-

Indian Hinduism, one of whom is the Goddess. Paradoxically, she is understood to be both lower in the hierarchy than the other two male gods and, on another, theological level, to be the highest of all, the 'ultimate reality'. Kearns shows that many of the goddesses are fierce and aggressive and portray values that are traditionally seen as masculine, assertive and active, including the Goddess herself. Without her, the great god Śiva would be 'inert'. It is only because of the Goddess, who embodies the abstract value of *sakti*, or 'power of action, of differentiation', that Śiva, the male god who represents 'undifferentiated, inactive, Existence', is empowered to give shape to the world. Yet the result, our actual, manifold, particularized world, the world of many things, is also yet another manifestation of the Goddess, in one of her incarnations, this time as illusion or *maya*. Kearns unfolds these intricacies carefully and clearly, laying out the mysteries of a mythology that to me, anyway, were previously locked away.

Contributors do not follow a single analytical framework – impossible, apparently, with their diverse material and theoretical backgrounds – but do focus on letting us know what feminist scholars can say now about the female figures that appear in the myths of many countries, and what was and is the relationship of those figures to the societies that produced the myths. From this interchange, a suggestive range of questions emerges.

Among these is the question of whether Western gender-inscribed categories can be applied *carte*