

Angela Escott, *'The Celebrated Hannah Cowley': Experiments in Dramatic Genre, 1776-1794*. Gender and Genre 7. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012. Pp. xiii + 299. £60. ISBN 9781848930803.

In the late eighteenth-century resurgence of women playwrights, Hannah Cowley was celebrated for her witty comedies, a reputation that Angela Escott's *The Celebrated Hannah Cowley: Experiments in Dramatic Genre, 1776-1794* seeks to enlarge. In this first full-length, scholarly assessment of Cowley's dramatic oeuvre, Escott argues that, together with the comedies, Cowley's experiments with tragedy, farce, interlude, pantomime, and 'mixed drama' or melodrama, long tagged as conservative and reactionary, criticize political and social inequities. A refreshing reconsideration of Cowley's contributions to Romantic drama, the book examines three of Cowley's works existing only in manuscript, including a newly identified pantomime scene, alongside newly-discovered letters. By collating manuscripts with printed versions of the plays and locating the works in their historical context, Escott shows that the 'most successful female comic dramatist of the 1770s and 1780s' (212) was also a radical in her gender politics, even as she sought to perform within the bounds of eighteenth-century norms for femininity.

Arranged primarily by literary mode and partly by chronology, the book is framed by chapters on Cowley's comedies: the first discusses Cowley's innovative borrowing from male and female playwrights of the Restoration for her early plays, and the last examines *The Town Before You* as the culmination of Cowley's artistic self-fashioning prior to her retirement from the theatre. Throughout, Escott asserts that Cowley uses comic conventions 'to articulate issues of women's role in marriage and in society,' and, by giving her female characters 'a central position in the structures of the plays', mocks *bon ton* society and the political system (66). Against complaints of jingoism, Escott contends that Cowley feminizes conventional patriotism by linking love between her characters to love of country (62).

The second and third chapters treat the tragedies, *Albina* and *The Fate of Sparta*. Escott associates *Albina*, titled a tragedy and written in 1777, with the nascent Gothic drama influenced by theories of the sublime and the quest for identity in a British national myth. In contrast to Hannah More's *Percy* and Frances Burney's *Edwy and Elgiva*, *Albina* 'advocates a benevolent form of patriarchy' while exploring themes of civic virtue and transgressive passions (72-3). Given the play's short run in the offseason of 1779, Escott perhaps overstates the play's influence on the Gothic novel of the 1790s. Civic virtue represented in the heroine Chelonice is at the heart of Cowley's second tragedy, *The Fate of Sparta*, which criticizes 'despotic abuse of power in royal courts, law courts and churches' (124) and advocates the importance of feminine qualities such as sensibility to the body politic.

Focusing critical attention on Cowley's farce, interlude, and pantomime in Chapter 4, Escott contributes significantly to our understanding of the cultural importance of these ephemeral forms. The biting satire that they permitted enabled Cowley to expose more stridently (than in her full-length plays) such themes as inequities in women's education, the abuse of language, and the excesses of the elite.

Escott reads Cowley's most elaborate experiment, the mixed drama or melodrama *A Day in Turkey; or, the Russian Slaves* (first performed in 1791), as an engagement with the imperial project that both veils political satire through comedy and 'disturbs simple binaries through the use of parody, distancing . . . and the juxtaposition of sentimental and comic' (179). Her brief treatment of the play's use of racial stereotypes reveals the need for more debate on this topic

(152). In contrast to Escott's defense of *Turkey* as a revolutionary work, Cowley retreated from this position in the milder version published in the 1813 *Works*.

Although Escott argues Cowley was a 'workman-like dramatist' (28) with no trajectory to her career, the arrangement of chapters nevertheless suggests that Cowley's preference for wit over gesture and spectacle began and ended her dramatic writing (208). Having found her voice through experimentation with a variety of dramatic modes, Cowley also discovered it to be out of fashion by 1794-5. Although not the focus of her book, Escott's acceptance of Cowley's explanation that she left the theatre when taste declined after the enlargement of the theatres and the consequent broadening of the play-going public contradicts the argument sustaining the rest of the book. Nevertheless, the final chapter shows persuasively that Cowley's self-identification as a serious artist, like the female sculptor of her final play, propelled her into writing poetry – an aspect of Cowley's career deserving further attention.

The inconsistent use of Frances Burney's and Dorothea Celesia's names and murky reproductions of some of the illustrations mar an otherwise fine book. A noteworthy and compelling contribution to Pickering and Chatto's series on gender and genre, this book will appeal to scholars of the literary history of drama and writing by women of the late eighteenth century.

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