

Jack DeRochi and Daniel J. Ennis, eds., *Richard Brinsley Sheridan: The Impresario in Political and Cultural Context*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2013. Pp. 307. \$90. ISBN 9781611484809.

The editors of this essay collection open with a disarming question: is their project ‘worthwhile’? They quote Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s ‘Puff Direct’ from his play, *The Critic*, which even now sounds disturbingly like a straight-faced recipe for an academic review (‘strongly drawn – highly colored – funds of genuine insight – mines of invention – neat arguments’ [1]). DeRochi and Ennis hope that their collection fully situates Sheridan in ‘that rich intersection of language, gender, power, politics, and performance that was Georgian Britain’ (4). Given the explosion in Georgian/Regency theatre studies over the past twenty years, it is a timely aim. The collection is broadly historicist, with its twelve essays working as discrete research articles rather than systematic analyses of Sheridan in particular contexts. As such this functions less as a comprehensive critical companion than as a snapshot of where studies of the author are and where they might go. Starting off with DeRochi’s survey of biographical accounts of Sheridan sheds some light on the author’s complicated status within the canon. Sheridan remained a mercurial figure for his biographers, scion of a gifted Irish theatrical family, a politician who wrote plays, or possibly ‘simply a drunk profligate who possessed a large measure of wit’ (19). DeRochi finds a common thread through nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts of Sheridan centring around Sheridan as a performer, an enigmatic figure who played a variety of roles with such élan that it feels impossible to recover a sincere individual from underneath the masks.

Here and elsewhere it might have been possible for the editors and authors to consider in more depth Sheridan’s Irishness: it was certainly a major consideration for Thomas Moore, whose sense of the constant performance needed by the Irish émigré to England coloured how he dealt with his compatriot’s life. John Vance’s essay on ‘Sheridan in the Age of Wilde and Shaw’ might seem to promise something along these lines, but instead provides an account of *The School for Scandal*’s popular place in the late-Victorian/Edwardian theatrical repertoire. Some of the essays follow suit: meticulously researched from a historical point of view, they seem reticent to make deeper critical judgements or theoretical connections, but there are others which will appeal to the literary critic.

Daniel O’Quinn’s essay on *Pizarro* manages to transcend cultural history to reveal the important political and literary dimension of Sheridan’s writing, taking the aforementioned indecipherability of Sheridan the man to suggest ‘that political and aesthetic inconsistency are the point of Sheridan’s complex intervention’ (215). Robert W. Jones’ essay on Sheridan’s early style considers the ‘intrusive style’ (42) of Sheridan’s poetry pre-*The Rivals*, relating it not only to the young writer’s often assertive and aggressive posturing but to the wider ‘critical vacuum’ (43) in theorising what ‘early style’ might look like. The citation of Derrida’s simile of style to ‘a stiletto of a rapier’ (42) draws attention to Sheridan’s rhetorical strategies, something that becomes even more evident in Glynis Ridley’s account of the impeachment of Warren Hastings and the trial of the *Bounty* mutineers. The former may be the most well-known moment of eighteenth-century oratorical grandstanding, with Sheridan’s Speech on the Begums of Oudh (1790) placed in the context of both an earlier dry run in the House of Commons (in 1787) and Edmund Burke’s marathon four day performance at the Impeachment. Sheridan’s speech became a public sensation, suitably for a playwright ‘collapsing the cultural distance between England and India in a sentimental tableau’ (183). It might have been useful to the reader to have some sense of the wider Sheridan family’s role in the elocution movement of the 1780s to tease out the connections between the orator-playwright and his rhetorician father. Two essays, by Steven Gores (on the connections between the Sheridans and the theatrical family of the Lees) and Marianna D’Ezio (on

Sheridan and women), sketch in the wider social, familial, and sexual networks that Sheridan negotiated in his career. The collection ends with David Francis Taylor's account of how Sheridan was caricatured throughout his career. As Taylor notes 'caricatures of Sheridan coalesce and collide the registers of drama and politics' (263), adding to the book's, and our, difficulty in locating a Sheridan behind the postures.

In fact, ending the book with an essay on caricature might be a brilliantly ironic move by the editors to admit that any project that attempts to cover the full breadth of Sheridan runs up against 'theatrical politics' (281), and underneath a suspect subject who dazzles but remains unknowable. Sheridan is a fascinating figure, and hopefully this book will encourage more critics and teachers to incorporate him into their accounts of the period. In answer to the question of whether a new book on him is worthwhile, the evidence of this one suggests a resounding 'Yes'.

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