

**Helen E. M. Brooks, *Actresses, Gender and the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Playing Women*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. x + 201. £58. ISBN 9780230298330.**

Helen Brooks contributes to the thriving critical debate on eighteenth-century theatre with *Actresses, Gender and the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Playing Women*, in which she argues that successful eighteenth-century actresses carefully negotiated gender in their on- and offstage performances. Brooks resists the conception of actresses as marginalised social figures operating outside of accepted gender norms, and instead suggests we need a more nuanced analysis of femininity. For Brooks the stage was a space in which ‘female identity could be examined, tested, and reflected back to wider society’ (7), with actresses as active players in shaping gender during a period in which gender identity was in flux.

Although the main actresses featured in this study (Anne Oldfield, Peg Woffington, Sarah Siddons and Dora Jordan) will be familiar to many, this book provides a new focus through a study of how these actresses negotiated and displayed contemporary concepts of gender in order to create themselves as profitable and marketable commodities. Brooks thus enables us to ‘consider the distinctive meaning on offer through the female performing body’ (8), providing an alternative performance style trajectory to the male-centred Betterton-Kemble model. The thesis hinges upon the shifting cultural conceptions of gender from the one-sex body to the two-sex body, as argued by Thomas Laqueur. Brooks complicates this simple chronological shift by exposing the competing ideologies, approaches and images of femininity presented to audiences throughout the period, with each chapter exploring the negotiations of gender within a shifting, but not yet shifted, paradigm.

Chapter 1, ‘Playing for Money’, argues that actresses were businesswomen and economic agents who had the potential to earn ‘a fortune’ (41). Brooks details the salaries of actresses throughout the period, revealing that low- and middle-tier actresses earned favourably compared to other women (although not fellow actors) in other professions. Top actresses, however, were ‘transforming their gender from a liability to an asset’ (41), resulting in pay that equalled or surpassed not only their male counterparts but also, as in the case of Dora Jordan, men of other professions too. The argument is compelling, although the sheer amount of facts and figures in this chapter, reflecting extensive research, is dense: a table or chart to complement would have been welcome.

Chapters 2 to 5 focus attention on the different manifestations of gender on the eighteenth-century stage. Chapter 2, ‘Playing the Passions’ reminds us to pay attention to the play in performance and not text alone: the text of Rowe’s *Jane Shore* (1714) adheres to stereotypes of the weakness of women and their susceptibility to the passions. Yet, as Brooks argues, the rhetorical skills required by actresses to produce a performance necessitate ‘masculine’ skills, which ‘challenged the model of weak and irrational femininity’ (50). Conceptions of masculinity and femininity are further explored in Chapter 3, ‘Playing Men’, in which travesty performances and breeches parts from Woffington to Jordan complicate gender boundaries. Particularly interesting is the idea that these performances addressed women in the audience (rather than the conventional idea that they simply titillated men).

Chapter 4, ‘Playing Themselves’, explores the increasing alignment between onstage and offstage identity (thus complicating the cross-dressing explored in the previous chapter). Brooks considers the increasing importance of role choice; whereas Woffington was renowned for both tragic and comic parts, Siddons and Jordan were cast as particular types given the growing ‘perception that their performances were expressions’ (97) of themselves. Brooks’s useful term ‘techniques of sincerity’ (102) describes the methods used to mask the artifice of public ‘authentic selves’. Chapter 5, ‘Playing Mothers’ considers the role of motherhood as performed onstage and as a lived experience by Jordan and Siddons. The

development of maternity as central to bourgeois feminine ideals both complicated and legitimised actress-mothers. Rather than accept that their ‘working bodies’ (126) negated bourgeois ideals, actresses’ economic impetus was repackaged as fulfilling the role of motherhood by providing for their children. The lack of formal conclusion is welcome as it reflects Brooks’s intention for this study to be an invitation for further scholarship into other actresses and other displays of gender.

Brooks manoeuvres through different disciplines, engaging with a wide range of source material; and draws together two distinct methodologies of theatre studies, showing how they inform each other – theatre economics and literary/cultural analysis. Brooks offers an impressive contribution to the study of eighteenth-century actresses, appealing to scholars of theatrical history, eighteenth-century drama and women’s history, to sit alongside work by Laura Engel, Felicity Nussbaum, and Kristina Straub. The triumph of *Playing Women* is the exploration and expansion of concepts not just of how actresses played women but also shaped ‘what it meant to be a woman’ (6) in the eighteenth century.

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