

**Wendy C. Nielsen, *Women Warriors in Romantic Drama*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2012. Pp. 195. \$80. ISBN 9781611494303.**

Wendy C. Nielsen's well-documented study brings a comparative lens to the rich subject of fighting women by focusing on drama in England, Germany, and France from 1789 to 1815. Less a comprehensive exploration of warrior women on the Romantic stage, as the title might suggest, than a collection of four discrete case studies, what unites the volume is Nielsen's interest in the figure of the female warrior as an allegory representing 'fantasies of empowerment and issues of social justice' (xiii). With particular emphasis on women playwrights and actresses, and the national political context of each play, Nielsen looks for patterns in the historical and dramatic portrayal of female soldiers, terrorists, Amazons, and sailors, asking questions about the political messages sent when women are shown occupying men's spaces and dressing in men's clothing, as well as the erotic and generic implications of images linking women and violence. The introduction covers a lot of ground, providing useful background on theatre, politics, and gender relations in France, Germany, and England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a time when these nations were at war and when censorship shaped the stage. Nielsen distinguishes the woman warrior from the *femme fatale* and 'just warrior' of Biblical, classical, and medieval traditions (xiii). The difference with plays from 1789 to 1815, she argues, is that 'they suggest that women *as a whole* (not just extraordinary individuals) can accomplish great deeds' (xiv) and thus present a case for extending citizenship to all women.

The book is structured in two parts. The first, 'Female Fighters of the French Revolution', focuses on the familiar historical figures of Charlotte Corday and Olympe de Gouges. Chapter 1 ranges over various French plays that alternately depict Corday as monster or maiden (*femme fatale* or just warrior) depending on the politics of the writer. However, Nielsen's main focus is on the champions of Corday abroad: in Britain through Edmund Eyre's *The Maid of Normandy*, and in Germany through Christine Westphalen's *Charlotte Corday: Eine Tragödie*. Nielsen shows how the playwrights alter history to appeal to local audiences: Eyre by turning to romance to 'domesticate Corday's political act' into a narrative of British Liberty, and Westphalen by turning to bourgeois tragedy to 'fashion Corday for German nationalism' (30). Though conservative and progressive respectively, both plays emphasize Corday's passive, feminine qualities rather than masculine or seductive ones, and ultimately concern the plight of women more than politics. Chapter 2 focuses on Gouges's theatrical career and her play *L'Entrée de Dumouriez* which features female soldiers (based on the real-life Fernig sisters). Nielsen places the play in the context of Gouges's feminism in order to establish the relationship between the fight for universal rights and the woman warrior, arguing that Gouges herself is a warrior – of the pen rather than sword. Gouges's revival of the notion of 'La Femme Forte' from the *querelle des femmes* to indicate a strong or heroic woman allows Nielsen to extend the notion of warrior to include non-martial women as well.

Part II, 'Staging Civic Empowerment', explores the morality of war. Chapter 3 compares two German plays about mythological female warriors, Friedrich Schiller's *Penthiselea* (1808) about the Amazonian Queen and Karoline von Günderrode's *Hildgund* (1805) about a Germanic princess. As in her discussion of Corday, Nielsen demonstrates that for male writers, the woman warrior commits violence out of an excess of feeling whereas for female writers she fights to protect others and sacrifices herself for political ideals. The fourth chapter turns to England and the actresses Dorothy Jordan and Mary Darby Robinson, known for playing breeches parts. Nielsen narrows in on plays about female sailors which reflect class and political tensions in

Britain at the end of the eighteenth century to argue that the actresses used these parts to refashion civic virtue into more democratic forms (98). Women were thus able to intervene in public affairs, making actresses like warriors: transgressive of social and gender norms by appearing in public, donning male forms and modes, sexualized or desexed as unnatural monsters, and battling for equal citizenship and rights.

An epilogue on ‘Liberty and Marianne’ considers the woman warrior as national and universal icon in the nineteenth century, and three appendices offer a chronology, bibliography of plays, and English translation of Karoline von Günderrode’s *Hildgund* respectively.

Overall, Nielsen is less interested in the women warriors of the plays than the writers, actresses, and artists who employ them to forward (or counter) arguments about equal rights for women. At times, the definition of warrior seems too inclusive (as does the label Romantic, which Nielsen extends to include Gouges); however, Nielsen’s comparative approach and narrow focus bring a fresh perspective to the diverse material. Directed at an English-speaking audience with little or no knowledge of French or German, the book will be of interest to anyone working on women and theatre of the Romantic era and women and war.

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