

Lisa Plummer Crafton, *Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. 152. £50. ISBN 9870754667889.

Lisa Plummer Crafton's monograph *Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft* has a vast scope that will most appeal to those interested in exploring the literary trope of theatricality, or the political/legalistic culture of the 1790s.

Chapter 1 offers an excellent introduction to the debates surrounding anti-theatricality in the Romantic period and provides an overview of current scholarship. Crafton presents the tendency that Romanticism Studies has to reinforce 'the traditional idea of a Romantic, constructed (Wordsworthian) self that is sincere and spontaneous, and thus, overtly anti-theatrical' (7). However, her references to Judith Butler, Lacan and Irigaray are used to make the point that grounds the book: 'In a broad sense, it is vital to see the interconnectedness of theatricality, politics, and social practices and to keep clearly in mind that metaphors of theater would be very polyvalent in a Revolutionary culture' (9).

The following longer chapter begins this approach by offering a complex reading of *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*. According to Crafton, this novel at once suggests that 'the cloak of decency' can be used to endorse national and state power (19), but it also demonstrates that 'playing a part does not always make one complicit in such hypocritical concealment, but can offer, through a kind of functional mimicry, a potent path for independent self-staging' (19). Crafton is particularly interested to demonstrate the influence of Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* on Wollstonecraft's feminist message, and she gives detailed analyses of both texts.

The concise Chapter 3, 'Becoming a "sign-post": Ethics and Theater', situates Wollstonecraft within eighteenth-century debates about the moral utility of theatre; in particular, the chapter highlights society's exposure and reaction to public executions and the French Revolution. Like the previous chapters, Crafton presents both 'sides' of Wollstonecraft's thought, so 'While Wollstonecraft critiques hollow forms of "theater" throughout the text, her chapter "On Theater" offers an argument for the potential ethical function of theater and alerts us to read the text as a whole more carefully' (48).

The next chapter offers new insights into Wollstonecraft's *Maria* in light of her 'firsthand' knowledge of the popular divorce and adultery trial transcripts that were generating so much public interest. Chapter 5 takes a broader perspective and focuses on Wollstonecraft's use of the trope of the theatre/spectacle to make political comment; Crafton moves quickly through a variety of themes including Wollstonecraft's rebuttal of Burke's *Reflections*, her *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, her treatment of Marie Antoinette and the French Court, and her theatrical presentation of the October Days.

The final chapter is by far the most engaging. 'Reality Self-Invention: Siddons, Wollstonecraft, and Theatricality' explores the friendship between Siddons and Wollstonecraft. The former is described 'an essential subject' to any study of Wollstonecraft 'as a person – a friend, a colleague, an ex-friend – and as a cultural phenomenon and aesthetic artefact' (110). Crafton notices the 'unintended satiric reality' in 1796, when Wollstonecraft was known as Mary Imlay despite acknowledging she was not officially married, and then watching Sarah Siddons performing the role of the penitent Calista. Significant to Crafton's argument about theatricality, is that Wollstonecraft was drafting her own novel at the same time, which included the repressed heroine similarly going to the theatre to watch Siddons perform. Such thoughtful analysis is characteristic of this chapter's more personal account of Wollstonecraft's situation, and Crafton draws out the various similarities and resonances between the two women's lives and experiences. The sadness Wollstonecraft felt about Siddons' later rejection is dwelt upon as a means to explore the

hypocritical nature of a culture that refused Wollstonecraft only when she married Godwin. The second half of the chapter is more focused on how Siddons responded to the theatricality of her own life and gives relevant anecdotes of the woman's theatrical experiences. The actress is presented as one fully aware of theatre's oppressive force, but also recognising the 'potentially subversive moments of acting, or mimicry, both offstage and on' (123). It is precisely this dual nature of the theatre that sustains Crafton's interest, especially because of its ability to be a powerful literary trope and tool to comment on society.

In a book that often pauses to situate itself in relation to other scholars' work or modern theory, the extensive range of views can be distracting. However, the rich detail will prove to be very useful for those researching the theatrical climate of the 1790s. Wollstonecraft emerges as a theatrical writer herself who is constantly reacting to the culture of spectacle she inhabited; in this way, her multiple and varying ideas are related by Crafton to society's own complex and conflicting attitudes towards theatricality.

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