

Ben P. Robertson, *Elizabeth Inchbald's Reputation: A Publishing and Reception History*. London: Pickering & Chatto. Pp. 265. £60. ISBN 9781851961597.

Elizabeth Inchbald is one of the most important playwrights and novelists in English literature, but mention her in a conversation with scholars working outside of our period and you are often met with blank stares. Perhaps that is why I found so much satisfaction in seeing Ben P. Robertson demonstrate just how widely known and popular Inchbald was in her own day. 'Mrs. Inchbald' was a household name in Britain, and her reputation soon spread to America and Europe, and then to Asia, Africa, and Oceania, 'so that she became, even in her own lifetime, a truly transnational figure' (7). *Elizabeth Inchbald's Reputation* amasses an impressive number of reviews, newspaper articles, library records, and other materials (supplemented by evidence from Inchbald's own diaries, where available) to develop an account of how that reputation grew and spread, publication by publication.

Robertson brings this reception history down to the present day, although he gives more attention to earlier reviews and editions than to more recent ones. Space limitations also compel him to confine his study to popular rather than academic evaluations of Inchbald's work. The book is divided into four chapters, each covering a different aspect of her professional identity (actress, playwright, novelist, and critic). The latter three chapters contain accounts of the development, reception, and publication history of all of Inchbald's works. Each work is treated separately, which allows for ease of reference, but which also means that information pertaining to multiple works often gets repeated (such as the publication details of novel series containing both of Inchbald's novels).

The first chapter will appeal to scholars interested in eighteenth-century celebrity culture. It charts Inchbald's success in building a career as a beautiful yet (critics seemed to have agreed on this point) mediocre actress. Inchbald's fame came with a price; several of Inchbald's diary entries mention men following her while she is out walking, apparent cases of celebrity-stalking. This chapter also details Robertson's search for Inchbald's grave and presents his theories about the meaning of code-like notations that appear in her diaries. While it is a bit of stretch for these materials to be included in a study of authorial reputation, Inchbald scholars will appreciate Robertson's detective work.

The second chapter, on Inchbald's career as a playwright, is by far the longest. Discussion of each play is paired with a list of all of its performances in London prior to 1800, and a list of its identified performances in the United States through much of the nineteenth century. Robertson paints Inchbald as a writer highly attentive to her audience's tastes, who closely followed published criticism of her work and frequently attended performances of her own plays. This engagement is exemplified by Inchbald's decision to immediately withdraw two of her plays when they performed dismally on their opening night. Accepting the audience's judgment against these plays 'seems to have enhanced Inchbald's reputation because it showed the audience how responsive she was to their desires' (77).

Chapter 3 turns to Inchbald's novels, *A Simple Story* and *Nature and Art*. Robertson shows that Inchbald remained a benchmark for novelistic talent well into the nineteenth century. Her novels had international renown; they were published throughout the English-speaking world, and appeared in translations in Europe. Readers interested in Inchbald's relationship with Catholicism will be intrigued to learn that the Vatican City library holds an 1835 edition of *A Simple Story*.

The final chapter examines the period of Inchbald's career that has received the least attention from modern scholars, yet which may have been the most important for her lasting reputation: her work as a literary critic. The labour Inchbald put into *The British Theatre* series (which came to 125 plays) was extraordinary, and the series' longevity (it was in print

as late as 1948) kept Inchbald's name alive in theatre history long after her plays had ceased to be acted. As Robertson asserts, '[n]o other project of Inchbald's brought quite the same level of prestige as did the criticism she wrote for *The British Theatre*' (174). The chapter also discusses Inchbald's involvement with the supplements to *The British Theatre* and with *The Artist* periodical.

Elizabeth Inchbald's Reputation is primarily an evidentiary account of that reputation. While it brings to light much material that will be new to scholars, it does not advance any major new arguments about Inchbald. Nor does it provide much information about her life outside of her professional roles. Even aspects of her life that strongly shape her reputation today, such as her association with the Godwin circle, are mentioned only in passing. For such biographical information, readers should turn to Annibel Jenkins' biography of Inchbald, *I'll Tell You What*. But Robertson's book stands as a valuable supplement to Jenkins's biography, extending and, occasionally, correcting that earlier work's portrayal of an extraordinary literary career.

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