

Sarah Burdett, *The Arms-Bearing Woman and British Theatre in the Age of Revolution, 1789-1815*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Pp. 293. £109.99. ISBN 9783031154737.

Sarah Burdett's monograph, *The Arms-Bearing Woman and British Theatre in the Age of Revolution, 1789-1815*, begins by introducing readers to the symbolic propensities of the violence-prone heroine of the title: 'She embodies, in striking form, the revolutionary chaos witnessed across the channel, which threatens to infect British culture' (1). In fact, as the book makes clear, she does much more than this. Burdett's work contributes to Romantic adaptations studies in its broadest sense. Many of the plays critiqued are themselves adaptations. For example, the two works by Elizabeth Inchbald (*Next Door Neighbours*, 1791; *The Massacre*, 1792) that form the focus of Burdett's second chapter are adapted from French sources: '*Next Door Neighbours* is adapted from Philippe Destouches' *Le Dissipateur* (1736) and Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'indigent* (1772), while *The Massacre* is based on Mercier's *Jean Hennuyer: évêque de Lizieux* (1772)' (41). 'Thomas Francklin's historical tragedy *The Earl of Warwick*', whose 1797 revival at the Haymarket Theatre is examined in Chapter Three, is 'an adaptation of French dramatist Jean-François de la Harpe's *Le Compte de Warwick* (1763)' (108). Burdett's fifth chapter looks at adaptations of German source texts by Schiller and Kotzebue (208, 212). Several other adaptations are considered over the course of the book.

This remains, however, a book about 'British Theatre', as the title indicates. The real story of adaptation belongs to the 'Arms-Bearing Woman' herself and the departures she had to make from her European iterations to fit with what audiences, the press, and the censors in Britain regarded as acceptable at particular moments in the revolutionary decades. In the 1790s, she could not resemble 'the stereotype of the armed and grotesque French woman' (11) of the type appearing in British satirical prints (such as *A Republican Belle* by Isaac Cruikshank, which adorns the cover of Burdett's book). In the early 1800s, there was a particular anxiety about German heroines, regarded as 'unnaturally masculine' (211) on the grounds that they 'both look and think like military heroes, dexterously handling cumbersome battlefield weapons with zeal and self-assurance' (214). To bear arms on the British stage without attracting opprobrium, the martial woman often needed to be given a marital excuse. One heroine is justified in setting off a cannon because 'it avenges her husband's murder!' (258). But even this sort of vindication was contingent on the zeitgeist. Burdett argues that 'heroines' varying activations of cannons, guns and explosives' (266) were allowable on the British stage in 1815, 'with French attempts to dominate Europe having seemingly ended in failure' (266), in a way that they would not have been in earlier years.

Censorship effected by the Lord Chamberlain's Office meant that theatre occupied a uniquely embattled place in British culture from 1737 to 1968. Burdett does not have space to review the whole history of theatrical censorship, or to compare the regulatory circumstances of the stage in the era of her study to the situation in the late seventeenth century or earlier eighteenth century. But this lack of wider literary-historical scaffolding risks obscuring noteworthy continuities; at some moments throughout the book, this omission impacts Burdett's argument. For example, Burdett gives little indication of how far the critical sensitivity to theatrical representations (particularly of women) in the years of the French Revolutionary wars was peculiar to that period, or how far it extended much earlier Puritanical attacks on the theatre. Chapter Five of *The Arms-Bearing Woman* addresses contemporaneous commentary on 'the great latitude of morals' (192) of German-derived plays, their tendency 'to corrupt the mind and mislead the feelings by seducing our pity for vices' (198). This language recalls Jeremy Collier's comments from a century earlier about how the 'Licentious Discourse' in *The Country Wife* threatens to 'Weaken the Defences of Virtue'. Burdett's identification of the currency of 'Europhobic discourse' (201) at the turn of the nineteenth

century as the key determiner of negative criticism towards ‘aggressive Anglo-German heroines’ (200) is well justified. Nevertheless, the book would have benefited from some allusion to the protracted historical fear about the relationship between women and the stage and its antecedents in the Restoration period. A stronger case might then have been made for the distinctiveness of the ‘Arms-Bearing Woman [...] in the Age of Revolution’ as a new spin on an old phobia.

The insight developed throughout Burdett’s book is that theatrical performances are always adaptations of more than simply their source texts. Attention to the multiplicity of factors impacting a play’s reception—including how particular actresses’ reputations might haunt their ‘embodiment’ (119) of roles, as well as the possibility that ‘an outspoken audience’ might ‘expose the playwright to public and instant shame’ and ‘dictate the play’s lifespan’ (17)—ensures the success of this message.

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