

NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Alison Jeffers

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Lisa Plummer Crafton

Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft

Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. 162 p. £50.00.

ISBN: 978-1-4094-7905-5.

Although Mary Wollstonecraft is a familiar figure in Romantic studies, few have considered her work in terms of theatricality. Drawing attention to this gap, Crafton's study problematizes the idea of Wollstonecraft as anti-theatrical and offers a nuanced examination of the competing ideas of theatricality within her work, highlighting how she appropriates and interrogates the connections between theatre, culture, and self-representation.

Throughout, Crafton gives equal attention to Wollstonecraft's works and their theatrical contexts and influences. Chapters Two and Four examine *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), considering the respective influences of Nicholas Rowe's 1703 she-tragedy *The Fair Penitent*, and late-century trial discourses, including that of Marie Antoinette. The French Revolution is also the focus of Chapter Five which focuses on Wollstonecraft's immersion in revolutionary political discourse to show how theatricality unifies the unwieldy text, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794).

Chapter Three however takes a different focus, examining how questions about the moral utility of public spectacle shape *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Letters Written During a Short Residence* (1796). Chapter Six concludes the study with a discussion of transgressive potential in Sarah Siddons's performative self-fashioning, a discussion which, while interesting to theatre historians, only loosely connects to Wollstonecraft.

In the five running themes which Crafton outlines in Chapter One (essentially an extended introduction) – Romantic theatricality; the politicization of theatre/theatricalization of politics; masquerade; mimicry; and the theatre–performance divide – Crafton's debt to Romantic, theatrical, and feminist scholarship is evident. However this range of theoretical perspectives and her detailed attention to the scholarly field within each chapter limits the extent to which her own argument can be developed.

The book certainly makes an important claim for Wollstonecraft's place within explorations of Romantic theatricality, yet in covering such an extensive range of works, contexts, and theories

it privileges breadth over depth, and so fails to articulate its argument as forcefully as it might. The absence of citations for a number of secondary source references can also be frustrating. Despite these drawbacks, Crafton's reconsideration of Wollstonecraft's contribution to and the influence of ideas about theatricality will make this a useful resource for scholars of both subjects, and her central argument about theatricality's potential to be both coercive and liberating deserves further attention.

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David Margolies

Shakespeare's Irrational Endings: the Problem Plays

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 192 p.

£50.00.

ISBN: 978-023-027761-8.

In *Shakespeare's Irrational Endings* David Margolies makes the case for Shakespeare's problem plays. His is not the kind of retrospective reclassification made by such writers as Edward Dowden and F. S. Boas in the late nineteenth century, seizing on genres such as 'romance' to help explain away the interpretive challenges of the so-called 'problem' plays. Rather, Margolies argues that Shakespeare deliberately experiments with genre over more than a decade, and that while certain plays of this period conform to the expectations of genre in a strictly formal way, they elicit emotional responses from audiences and readers in conflict with their comic or tragic conclusions. Such 'irrational endings' produce their own pleasure, 'qualitatively different' from that produced by more conventional plays.

Margolies develops his argument through a reading of six plays, including three of the four identified by Boas in 1896 – *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida* – and three less likely to strike many as generically challenged – *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and, most surprisingly, *Othello*. Although Margolies argues that Shakespeare improves his craft in the problem genre over time, the order of discussion does not reflect the chronology of Shakespeare's authorship, but rather begins with those plays that most obviously exemplify the 'problem'. As a result, the first three chapters, on *All's Well*, *Much Ado*, and *Measure*, contain the most persuasive arguments.