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Review of: Nora Nachumi, *Acting Like a Lady: British Women Novelists and the Eighteenth-Century Theater*

Abstract

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the Scottish Boswell, not the English Johnson, who functions most effectively as ambassador and as embodiment of a true Britishness. Aside from a tendency to want to rescue Johnson from his richly deserved reputation for bigotry about the Scots, Gottlieb's handling of Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1786) side by side with Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) is sensitive and witty. Other moments that stand out include Gottlieb's discussion, in chapter 2, of epistolarity as emblematic of national communication and community in Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771), and the conclusion, in chapter 5, that Scott, in his Waverley novels, gradually recognized that "the discourse of sympathy may be deployed in the service of difference as well as sameness" (206).

Gottlieb focuses on exploring the ways in which the Highlands function in British identity. Initially framed by Smollett as "something like an internal colony" because of their resistance to assimilation, the Highlands come to be "the potential site of the rebirth of a romanticized British identity" (98) by the early nineteenth century. Scott's novels and poetry are a particularly fertile ground in which to find this romanticized British origin, and in chapter 4, "Harp of the North': Romantic Poetry and the Sympathetic Uses of Scotland," and chapter 5, "'To be at once another and the same': Scott's Waverley Novels and the End(s) of Sympathetic Britishness," Gottlieb reads Scott, Wordsworth, and Collins in their writing the Highlands as central to, or even perhaps the most authentic, originary British identity.

Gottlieb has produced a valuable contribution to the history of nationalist sentiment in Britain that will help us understand both the mutability and the intransigence of our attachments to places and peoples, and to narratives of national identity.

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Nora Nachumi. *Acting Like a Lady: British Women Novelists and the Eighteenth-Century Theater*. Brooklyn: AMS Press, 2008. xxvi+347pp. US\$94.50. ISBN 978-0-404-64850-3.

Readers purchasing Nora Nachumi's *Acting Like a Lady* who expect a long and meaty read about the influence of the theatre on eighteenth-century women novelists may be disappointed. Nearly half of the book's length is devoted to an appendix listing alphabetically "382 female novelists who published novels between 1660 and 1818," roughly one-third of whom "were playwrights, performers, or otherwise associated with the eighteenth-century stage" (181). So why are

the other 247 writers included in a book that purports to examine “the impact of the theater and ideas about the theater on the novels’ representations of the feminine ideal” (xvii)? The dust jacket of the volume insists: “Especially valuable to scholars is the appendix” and “*Acting Like a Lady* envisions these women [novelists] as participants in a critical conversation about female nature and performance that continues today.” Yet, because of the exhaustive appendix, *Acting Like a Lady* has room to examine only three of the 135 women novelists with theatrical backgrounds: Elizabeth Inchbald, Frances Burney, and Jane Austen. While many of Nachumi’s observations about these three are compelling, the small size of her sample does not allow her to do what she proposes in her prologue, which is to identify and investigate “a source of female literary agency that has not been thoroughly explored, either by theater historians or by literary scholars working on the representation of gender in novels” (xvii–xviii). Nachumi is correct in her assertion that most studies of early women writers compartmentalize and treat either the theatre or the novel without fully considering the impact of the former on the latter. Her slim 177 pages on the topic is only a start to remedying this difficulty.

Part 1 (which includes chapter 1, “The Theatrical Woman and the Feminine Ideal,” and chapter 2, “The Lady and the Novelist: Paragon and Performer”) draws on eighteenth-century conduct literature to argue that female performers and playwrights, due both to their public personas and acting/dissembling, necessarily threatened a feminine ideal that focused on modesty, privacy, and transparency. When such performers and playwrights tried their hand at the novel, the dissonance between their two roles had itself to be reconciled by theatricality. Since, by mid-century, “most women novelists were aligning their work with that of conduct-book writers” in order to attain respectable “didactic authority,” the “prefaces by British women novelists influenced by the stage appear to be a kind of theatrical performance, one that invested their authors with the authority to define what a ‘real’ lady should be” (xix). Although she makes a valuable point here, Nachumi spends too much time in part 1 retracing the steps of earlier scholars. She proves that “acting in a theatrical sense” could not be reconciled to “acting like a lady” (7), a point sufficiently established by critics such as Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984); Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects* (1992); Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica* (1989); and Ruth Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty* (1984). Few would contest Nachumi’s point that “throughout the century” actresses “embodied different and more complex pictures of female nature than that represented by conduct material ... In short, the possibility that ladies were no different from actresses threatened an ideological system that equated the lady’s appearance with her quality of mind” (11–12). Nachumi painstakingly traces the ways in which “the female dramatist ... had to find ways to balance the assertive behavior

necessary to a playwright with the modest conduct of the middle-class lady" (34) and the ways in which "the self-representations of many women novelists" became "a kind of theatrical performance, one that naturalizes the writer's apparent resemblance to contemporary images of the feminine ideal" (47). The mid-century demand for increasing female decorum in women's writing was documented as early as 1986 by Jane Spencer in *The Rise of the Woman Novelist*. In part 1, Nachumi offers little that is new, a fact signalled by her heavy reliance on these critical works of the 1980s and 90s.

Bracketed by the overly long introduction and immense appendix, Nachumi's 98 pages devoted to the study of Inchbald, Burney, and Austen offer some valuable contributions. Yet these three central chapters seem more like stand-alone articles than a coherent, progressive argument—versions of two of these chapters appeared previously as journal articles. In chapter 3, "Those Simple Signs: Elizabeth Inchbald and the Performance of Emotion," Nachumi reveals the many ways in which "Inchbald's novels owe much to her experience as both an actress and playwright" (89). In particular, Nachumi offers an innovative reading of *A Simple Story* that details how Inchbald "draws on her own knowledge of theatrical gesture" (100) in order to dramatize key scenes and sequences between her characters. As Nachumi moves to chapter 4, "'Not as Juliet She Followed': Frances Burney and the Performance of Femininity," she focuses on the Burney family friendship with actor and Drury Lane Theatre manager David Garrick and how this influenced Burney's writing, particularly her focus, in *Evelina*, on "the theatrical nature of female experience in everyday life" (129) and, in *The Wanderer*, on her culture's inability to "reconcile its notions of feminine modesty with the spectacle of a woman performing in public" (140). Nachumi does not explain, however, the connections or distinctions between a woman writer such as Inchbald—an actress and a successful, performed playwright—with one such as Burney, the friend of an actor and herself an avid theatre-goer, yet essentially a closet dramatist ("of her seven completed plays, only *Edwy and Elgiva* was mounted during her lifetime. The play, which opened at Drury Lane on March 21, 1795, was an unmitigated disaster, lasting only one night" [131]). By the time readers reach chapter 5, "Seeing Double: Jane Austen and the Perception of Performance," which "focuses on Austen's experience as an audience member" (147–48), we realize the complete heterogeneity of the types of theatrical experience that Nachumi is treating. While Nachumi capably examines how "Austen's use of *Lovers' Vows* in *Mansfield Park* reflects her engagement in contemporary debates about the effect of the drama on the emotions of theatergoers" (148), there is little connection between this chapter and the two that preceded it. Nachumi insists, in the brief epilogue that concludes her volume, that "the central contention of *Acting Like a Lady* is that many

British women novelists influenced by the theater knew that to act like a lady was, in a sense, to perform a role; consequently they incorporated theatrical images and practices into their fiction and, in doing so, called into question the ideals of femininity that their novels seem to support. Some novelists, like Inchbald, use theatrical practices to dramatize the abuses of masculine forms of authority; others, like Burney, call attention to the performative aspects of female experience and, in doing so denaturalize conduct-book equations between the countenance and character of the feminine ideal; some resemble Austen and Edgeworth; in different ways, both remind their readers that novels, like plays, are pieces of fiction and are thus to be experienced with a considerable degree of critical detachment” (174–75). Even as she attempts synthesis, however, Nachumi highlights the very different relationships to the theatre of each of the authors she cites and their highly varied agendas. Greater length devoted to argument and a much greater number of novelists examined in each category would be required in order truly to explore the influence of the theatre on the period’s novels by women.

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Alexander J. Nemeth. *Voltaire’s Tormented Soul: A Psychobiographic Inquiry*. Cranbury: Associated University Presses; Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2008. US\$80. 360pp. ISBN 978-0-934223-92-8.

François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire, has had more than his fair share of biographies. Twice he attempted short, rather unsatisfactory memoirs of his life. His voluminous works plus thousands of letters, written over a period of more than 80 years, have furnished biographers, critics, and professors in several different disciplines with ample material for these works. Voltaire’s secrecy, evasions, contradictions, and downright lies have confounded biographers and led to different conclusions. He seemed to delight in mystifying his contemporaries and hence posterity. Was he born in November 1694, as his baptismal certificate indicates, or in February as he often claimed? Was his father the lawyer-notary François Arouet or was he the illegitimate son of the librettist Guérin de Rochebrune, as he liked to claim? These are two significant contradictions among many that his biographers face. Now Alexander J. Nemeth, a professional psychoanalyst with a life-long interest in Voltaire’s period, has attempted through his discipline to give a coherent, unified account of Voltaire’s life. His approach is one that his predecessors were not equipped to employ or would not have