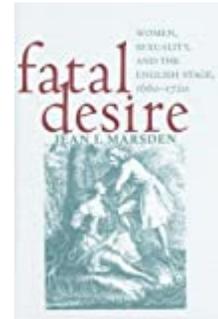




Jean I. Marsden. *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality, and the English Stage, 1660-1720.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006. viii + 216 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4447-0.



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Women and the English Stage

Following the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660, Charles II made it legal for British actresses to perform on stage in public theaters. Focusing on plays produced between 1660 and 1720, Jean I. Marsden examines the significance this development had for the generic evolution of dramatic texts and their performance. Emphasizing the participation of women not only as performers but also as spectators and writers of drama, she explores their contribution to the development of female-centered productions, specifically the she-tragedies, which had subsequently emerged as vehicles for popular actresses. Marsden considers these plays within their immediate historical context and discusses their role in reflecting and shaping broader social and political concerns, particularly those surrounding masculine authority and the stability of the nation. The female actress and the characters she portrayed functioned as symbols of domestic and, by analogy, political propriety and as such were a source of anxiety for contemporary commentators. Drawing parallels between the published accounts of these commentators and modern film theory, Marsden considers the dynamic between the performance of female sexuality upon the stage and the gaze of

the theater audience. She then assesses the significance of this process for the construction of changing models of social power structures.

Marsden's choice of texts enables her to cross the conventional historical boundary of 1700 and to trace the development of late-seventeenth-century drama into the first two decades of the eighteenth century. She provides a detailed generic and historical study of a collection of plays generally overlooked and often dismissed by modern scholars. Surveying the conventions of she-tragedy, Marsden then explores the role played by the performance and spectatorship of female desire in shaping these conventions. Her emphasis on genre proves particularly valuable for her assessment of plays by women whose writing is often considered within the context of an exclusively female canon. She balances a gendered reading of each text's authorship with a consideration of both the generic demands and the commercial pressures affecting all those with aspirations of becoming a professional playwright.

As with many other areas of historical research into women's tastes and habits, a major obstacle in conduct-

ing studies of women's viewing practices is the basic lack of evidence. To address this problem Marsden uses modern film theory as a framework for considering the role of the female spectator. To demonstrate the relevance of applying film theory to the post-Restoration stage, her first two chapters draw convincing parallels between modern theories of the gaze and early modern ideas about the role of sight, specifically the capacity of the visual to have a direct emotional and, on occasion, physical influence on the viewer. But as Marsden herself acknowledges, this approach proves especially problematic with regards to women, particularly considering the difficulties inherent in conceptualizing a distinctively female gaze. Using contemporary pamphlet debates concerned with the effect these plays were having on the audience, Marsden examines the female spectator as she was constructed through the texts of the (male) playwrights and critics surrounding her. While providing little insight into the experience of actual women attending the theater, this approach proves a useful way of exploring the role conventionally ascribed to women as members of the viewing public and of exploring the effect this then had on writers tailoring their work to meet their needs.

Marsden expands her exploration of the interplay between performance and audience beyond the confines of the theater to consider each play's significance for wider social and political issues. In order to do this, she examines the similarities between the sexualized female icon of the cinema screen and the performance of women's sexual desire and agency on the Restoration stage. As a figure with the potential to emotionally move the audience, the female character could be used to convey powerful messages concerning gender and political ideology. In combining a theoretical and a broadly historical approach, Marsden states that she is "willing to transcend detail," allowing her to provide a general narrative of the interplay between she-tragedy and its social context as it developed across six decades (p. 13). One of the

strengths of the book is that through the consideration of she-tragedy Marsden is able to survey the shifting nature of gendered power structures and their relation to the wider political struggles of the nation.

There are, however, certain points in Marsden's text when connections made between the plays and political events are a little too cursory. The conclusion to the second section of chapter 2, for example, draws a very broad analogy between a shift in dramatic representations of gendered power relations and the ascension of William III. Basing her analysis on contract theories of state and marriage, Marsden states that the shift from a hereditary monarch to one essentially selected by the ruling classes had implications for marriage, which could no longer be considered an indivisible bond (pp.51-52). Here and elsewhere in the book, Marsden implies a political trajectory beginning in 1660. It can be argued that for many the paradigm of hereditary monarchy was decisively destroyed with the execution of Charles I 1649, an event still fresh in the national consciousness in 1688. The debates that led to this definitive event had begun much earlier in the century and, largely because it provided a useful analogy, marriage was implicated from the start. Similarly, Marsden often implies an over-generalized division between the attitudes, premised on their political affiliations, of Whig and Tory playwrights to gender relations.

In her concluding chapter, however, Marsden engages in a subtle and historically nuanced discussion of Nicholas Rowe's popular play *Lady Jane Grey* (1715). She builds on her earlier, more general, account of the generic and historical attributes of she-tragedy to provide a detailed analysis of Rowe's particular use of these attributes within the specific context of the Hanoverian succession. As a whole, the book provides an accessible and useful introduction to a body of dramatic texts often overlooked by modern criticism.

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