

Virginia Scott. *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France, 1540–1750.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp x, 325.

We know both less and more than we think we do about French actresses from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, according to this densely informative revisionist study. We know, don't we, that they rose from nowhere to become stars of the Parisian stage, leading dissolute and licentious lives that attracted envy and scorn before succumbing to poverty or disease, the just reward for their flamboyant flouting of convention? Well, no. We don't, *Women on the Stage* argues, unless we foolishly believe the rumour-mongering and gossip that too often pass for historical information about the lives of early modern actresses. If, however, we know where to look and how, we can discover where French actresses came from, how they began their stage careers, what sorts of daily lives they led, how they came to play the roles they did, and what degree of success and prosperity — as well as what hardships — they enjoyed. All of this and more is packed into this heavily researched and vigorously argued revisionary history.

Virginia Scott starts her book with an attack that makes clear her no-holds-barred yet even-handed method, taking on the received opinion that has presented a false impression of actresses while discouraging the search for more accurate information. The trouble, she claims, starts with *la*, the dishonorable title often applied to actors and actresses, and one that expressed popular contempt for women on the stage. Used to degrade women and to indicate someone who was an outsider to the system of social gradations in the ancien régime, the term nonetheless, Scott admits, points to the celebrity that actresses acquired, a celebrity that allowed them to live outside the conventions of society and that could work to their advantage. In Scott's view, actresses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 'had allure. They had "it"' (9). Scott traces that 'it' in a lively and carefully reasoned style, even as she does so by testing stereotypes and eschewing sensationalism, an approach that leads her away from the anecdote and towards other forms of documentary evidence.

Making clear the methodology she will *not* follow, Scott begins in the first chapter by taking on the anecdote as a source of information, examining its allure as well as its dangers. Aptly enough for the chronological scope of this book, the eighteenth century saw the first efforts 'to define the anecdote and examine its evidentiary value' (12). With an etymology that extends back to the Greek word meaning 'thing not published', the anecdote was a

species of secret history, kin to rumour and gossip, and thus recognized as suspect. Still, Scott is not ready to throw it out entirely. Not only is history without anecdote prone to dullness but in the case of early modern French actresses the anecdote often forms the bulk of the historical evidence available to scholars. Scott's solution is to use anecdotes judiciously, examining the motives behind them and balancing them against other sources of information such as birth and baptismal records, legal documents, wills, letters, memoirs, and theatrical writings, whose veracity she also weighs while using them to build composite portraits of the lives and careers of the women who performed in the major Parisian theatres of the period. Her goal in so doing is to replace stereotypes of the early modern actress with a more accurate view of their real qualities and conditions of life.

After a chapter that charts anti-theatricalism as it applies to women from the ancient Greeks on, the book settles into a chronological order. Chapter three assesses the scanty evidence about actresses in France before 1630. Although the assumption has long been that early professional theatre in France was a male enterprise, Scott contends that the known presence of women in acting troupes — such as Marie Ferré, who was contracted to the troupe of Antoine de L'Esperonnière in Bourges in 1545 to perform histories, moralities, farces, and acrobatics for the sum of twelve *livres tournois* per year, a fact recognized since 1888 but not given much attention — urges a reconsideration of that assumption and an inquiry into how women were employed as performers during the sixteenth century. While acknowledging that it is sometimes difficult to say from surviving records whether a part was played by a woman or a boy/man, Scott suggests that France may have been an exception to the well-established pattern in England in which female roles were played by cross-dressed boys or men. As is the case in all of the chapters, Scott surveys a wide range of evidence across various genres of plays and evaluates its accuracy as she builds her case.

Chapter four focuses on the establishment of the commercial theatre in Paris in 1630–40, a period influenced by the 'rehabilitation' project of Cardinal de Richelieu, who was a fan of the theatre and co-opted it for his cultural policy. Under Richelieu's support playwrights flourished, including Corneille, who introduced a new kind of comedy of manners that, Scott argues, was shaped by the presence of skilled actresses. She demonstrates this point through an analysis of three characters from Corneille's plays: Doris in *La Veuve*, Amarante in *La Suivante*, and Phylis in *La Place Royale*. Although in these and other cases we do not often know which actresses played which

roles or much about their personal lives, there is little evidence to suggest that the actresses who were ‘powerful attractions on the French stage in the 1630s were sexually incontinent off the stage’ (140). Yet, despite the quality of their roles or the probity of their offstage behavior, the first actresses had to fight against ‘the same old perceptions of their sexual availability and their marginal position in society’ (141).

Those perceptions held sway throughout the century, as the fifth chapter shows in its analysis of the ‘stars’ born in the years after 1640. Scott examines the lives of several of them, celebrities of the stage in the era of Molière and Racine, with an eye to considering how their fame influenced the development of drama in the period. Although acting tended to be a family business, most of the women who became stars were not born into the profession but chose it. That choice tended to lead to actresses being tarred with the brush of scandal and sexual intrigue, yet also allowed some of them to be accepted — as in the case of Mlle Champmeslé — into the reigning literary coteries, an acceptance Scott points to as a sign of the star’s impact on theatre and literature.

What it was exactly that so struck audiences about the performances of star actresses is the subject of the sixth chapter, which examines acting techniques at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries. Noting that treatises on acting and rhetorical theory, though frequently used to describe how actors performed, are unreliable as evidence of what actually took place on stage, Scott turns instead to contemporary accounts by those who went to plays and occasionally by actors themselves. She also examines casting decisions and the *emplois* or types of roles specific actresses were assigned in order to see what natural qualities and acting styles — expressivity, physical appearance, sonority of voice — audiences valued. While the sheer volume of information Scott presents can be dizzying enough at times to overwhelm the narrative, its cumulative effect underscores the validity of her claims.

A final chapter covers the lives and afterlives of early modern actresses, noting their importance to the survival of the theatre during the changes of the eighteenth century. Those changes included the growing control of the *pouvoir*, the royal administration, over the management of troupes along with the rise of producers and directors, all of which brought about the decline of the actor as the central force in the theatre. Yet the period also gave actresses a voice that can be heard today in letters and memoirs, documents Scott puts front and centre to counter modern representations in popular books and

films that perpetuate myths and stereotypes about the early modern actress. Scott ends, fittingly enough, by quoting at length from Mlle Clairon, who in her old age wrote about her life and stage career and who, in a passage Scott quotes, describes the power of actresses 'to appear to be whatever they want to be' (288).

In allowing her subjects to have the last word, Scott is true to the aim of this capacious and forcefully presented study: to set the record straight by exhuming actual practice and experience from the sediment of prejudiced and uncritically accepted accounts, including especially anecdotes, that have been the conduit for received opinion on the early modern actress. This book is a bracing reassessment, a call to arms for smart historical research, and a loving rehabilitation of the role of actresses in early French theatre. Written with verve and wit, it is a must-read for anyone interested in the intertwined histories of French theatre and female performers.

CLAIRE SPONSLER

Brian Walsh. *Shakespeare, the Queen's Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp vi, 239.

Shakespeare, the Queen's Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History explores the 'production of historical narratives as driven by a sense of longing for contact with the past' (1). Brian Walsh offers a compelling overview of how anachronistic performances of history shape popular concepts of the past. Umberto Eco helps Walsh establish his critical view of history: 'When originals no longer exist, the last copy is the original' (6). This book demonstrates how the anonymous histories associated with the Queen's Men influenced popular lines, characterizations, and narrative elements in Shakespeare's history plays. These theatrical spectres from productions past allow Elizabethan history plays to 'enact historicity as a sense of discontinuity and all the while reflect on the strategies through which historical representation, particularly *corporeal* representation, addresses that discontinuity' (20, Walsh's emphasis).