

Jean I. Marsden 2006: *Fatal Desire. Women, Sexuality, and the English Stage, 1660-1720*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP. viii + 216 pp. ISBN 9780801444470

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Jean Marsden's *Fatal Desire* is a thorough analysis of Restoration drama which comes to fill a conspicuous gap in literary studies. It is probably one of the most ambitious books in scope since Derek Hughes's influential *English Drama* (1996), and it certainly supplements the canonical view of Rothstein (1967) and Brown (1981), as well as the more recent works by specialists such as Owen (1996) or Canfield (2000), who primarily centred on the political dimension of the plays. This minute analysis goes from the appearance of the first English actresses after the accession of Charles II to the first decades of the eighteenth century, and focuses on the representation of female characters in both comedy and tragedy. Its aim is to complement other monographs on the lives and social consideration of actresses on the English stage (Howe's *The First English Actresses* [1992] remains an unbeatable reference) or the listing of productions, performances and their reception. Marsden does this by centering her research on the resemblances between the apparently dissimilar fields of Restoration practice and contemporary film theory. The reification of women in cinema and the importance of the image as object of the desiring gaze prompt a series of parallelisms with the reaction of seventeenth and early eighteenth-century audiences to the spectacle of women on stage. According to this theory, Restoration plays were based on the concept of *scopic pleasure*, which is the inherently masculine visual enjoyment of a passive object. Consequently, the victimization of the female heroine in contemporary plays responds to "the financially profitable arousal of passion stimulated by the presence of the actress" (3). Even though the scholar might not find many surprises in this approach, Marsden's analysis finally systematizes a scattered body of work on Restoration drama. It therefore merits appropriate recognition.

The book interprets the developments in the history of drama as a series of changes in the pursuit of scopic pleasure, from the moral dilemmas posed by comedy to the highly sexualized pathos of she-tragedy, ending with the didactic domestic drama of the early eighteenth century. Audience response to suggestive images, according to Marsden's theory of gaze, is deeply ingrained in gender difference: for men, scopic pleasure is sparked by titillating scenes of threatened virtue; women, on the other hand, identify with the characters and sympathize with their misfortunes. Here is where we find the only significant flaw in her argument: male scopic pleasure is provoked by the visual consumption of the heroine, especially when she is unaware of that visual enjoyment. However, Marsden herself humbly points to the lack of a convincing explanation for the success of this kind of play among the female public, who in fact were the most enthusiastic recipients and the explicit target of many of these works. Even though the critic acknowledges the identification of women in the audience with

the characters on stage (for instance, on page 25 she talks about the danger of high-class women identifying with the characters, although not with the actresses), she fails to explain the origin of this rapport. Marsden also points to the interrelation between the political and the domestic sphere: in Whig plays, plots of abusive parents or husbands symbolized the tyranny of the king; conversely, scenes of rape or incest encapsulated the disruption of social order that Tories feared. Had she expanded on the ideological reading of the plays, Marsden might have found an answer to the problem of women as spectators. Presenting her book as an alternative to recent criticism by Owen and other scholars interested in the interconnection of politics and gender partially explains her decision to avoid the subject; nevertheless, the reader feels that this very important side of Restoration drama is rather too succinctly covered.

The book begins with a discussion of the impact of women actresses on the audience. Chapter 1, 'Female Spectatorship, Jeremy Collier, and the Antitheatrical Debate' (17-38), focuses on contemporary ideas about the effect of plays on women and the way lewd plots could encourage them to disrupt social order. The defences of and the attacks against the stage which dominated the turn of the century are analyzed in terms of scopic pleasure and its threat to social stability. After 1695, the monarchs supported the Whig preoccupation with decency and the reformation of manners advocated by "those very merchants and citizens who had been the object of ridicule in much Restoration comedy" (20). Their belief in a direct correlation between sight and sin explains the concern of polemicists like Collier about sexual scenes in plays sparking the audience's illicit fantasies. Desire in a higher-class woman unsettles patriarchal society, since it blurs the distinction between the woman of quality and the whore (25). While the male gaze is "virtually ignored" (26), the emphasis lies on the possibility of women imitating the censurable behaviour of female characters in the plays.

Subsequent defences of the theatre refuted Collier's view by defending the didactic function of drama and avoiding references to women altogether. For Marsden, supporters of the stage "construct a gendered theory of the gaze": in men, lust provoked by visual representations of desire helps prevent homoerotic impulses (36-37); for women, these scenes are educational since they show a model of conduct to be avoided, or else they simply have no effect because of the inherent modesty of Englishwomen (37). Marsden sharply suggests that the actual effect of Restoration drama on female audiences is almost impossible to know: since there are no first-hand written records of female playgoers, "we find ourselves confronted with a theorized spectator, a woman constructed through the writings of men" (19).¹ The rest of the book is devoted to the special nature of these suggestive images in Restoration plays, their elements of repetition and cliché, and the evolution of their staging and symbolism throughout time.

¹ Even notorious female theatregoers like Mary Evelyn and Elizabeth Pepys did not leave any written records of their theatrical experiences. We have to rely on the fragmentary information provided by their husbands in their diaries (see Roberts 1986: 49-65, 89).

Chapter 2, 'Women Watching' (39-59), explores female spectatorship in comedy. Marsden discusses Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676), where women's desire is the main catalyst of the plot. The character of Olivia is active in the pursuit of her own desires; in the end, she is ridiculed as whorish. On the other hand, Fidelia is passive, representing the ideal of femininity. Thus, Wycherley destabilizes and then reaffirms the dichotomy active/ passive, masculine/feminine at the core of the patriarchal system. Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Wife* (1697) was even more polemical since it presents a sympathetic character trapped in the moral dilemma of being loyal to a loathsome husband or surrendering to her infatuation with her suitor Constant. For Vanbrugh's *Lady Brute*, women's modesty is a conscious construction by means of which they present themselves as appropriate objects of the masculine gaze (55). In the playhouse, women have to feign that they do not understand innuendos and must remain self-consciously silent among men: "[f]emale spectatorship [...] is simply another occasion for the commodification of women" (56). *Lady Brute* offers a dangerous example for women in the audience, as Collier and his followers feared, for her hesitation is justified. Her right to oppose an abusive husband destabilizes social and political hierarchy: as Marsden rightly contends, proto-feminists like Mary Astell would later take advantage of this correlation (58).

These same issues would have a different treatment in serious drama, to which the rest of the book is dedicated. Chapter 3, 'Falling Women: She-Tragedy and Sexual Spectacle' (60-99), explores she-tragedy, a genre that would dramatically change the course of drama and the depiction of female characters. Marsden claims that "[t]he shift from the masculine drama of the Restoration proper, when Charles was king and rakes ruled the comedies, to woman-centered tragedy is one of the most remarkable in English theater and one of the most unremarked" (99). In the aftermath of the Exclusion Crisis, old expressions of honour and duty lost their validity in favour of a new dramatic model. Playwrights turned to the sentimental conflicts of female protagonists in order to enact the Corneillian dichotomy of love and honour, most of the times having in mind a certain political agenda. Antitheatrical writers did not find anything objectionable in serious drama, because comedies outnumbered tragedies and because female heroes met horrible punishments for offences they never intended to commit, making identification a painful issue (63).

Nonetheless, when Marsden claims that "[s]he-tragedy reiterates gender as stable series of binary oppositions: male/female, subject/object and actor/ acted upon, oppositions that supported rather than threatened existing social structures" (63), she does not consider the main objection to the genre, voiced by Rothstein (1967) and Brown (1981) among others, regarding the blurred distinction between male and female. Rothstein, for instance, complained about the effacement of gender roles "which is at the heart of the heroic play" (96). Indeed, the she-tragedy is innovative in that it confers on women the moral stature of men, sometimes even transforming heroines into icons of English virtue, as Marsden herself points out.

Another complication of she-tragedy is that heroines are typically “innocent and corrupt” at the same time (73): plots of incest and rape, often with political implications, are recurrent at this time. For Marsden, the passivity of the protagonist is a requisite of visual pleasure and, therefore, scenes where the woman is inadvertently spied are manifold. Rape, the ultimate expression of feminine defencelessness, becomes an effective political tool to signify the perils of abusive power or the breaking of social and patriarchal order.

Marsden delineates the evolution of the she-tragedy from pioneers Otway and Banks to Southerne, Congreve and the eclectic she-tragedies of the 1690s. She points to Otway as the playwright who established the pattern of the new trend, reassessing his pivotal influence as a reference for his contemporaries, who sought a model of economic success and literary novelty: “it was *The Orphan* that became the prototype for the she-tragedy as well as the play by which the pathos or ‘distress’ of other plays was calibrated” (79). *The Orphan* anticipates the innocent yet sexually soiled heroine, making sexual thrill an essential component of emotional catharsis. She also acknowledges the importance of a convincing performance to move the audience: the outstanding talent of the pair Barry-Bracegirdle would enhance any plot (85). To be sure, excessive dependence on performance might partly explain present day neglect of Restoration drama, aside from our obvious detachment from seventeenth-century political and ideological concerns.

Chapter Four, ‘Women Writing Women’ (101-31), deals with female authors of she-tragedy. Marsden examines the way in which Pix, Trotter and Manley among others come to terms with the “inherently misogynist conventions” of the genre (100). Mary Pix creates a writing persona that shares her protagonists’ helplessness and need of male protection, thus downplaying the potential threat of a female pen (107). In plays like *Ibrahim* (1696), she embraces the typically masculine voyeuristic reification of the female heroine in scenes of rape, pathos and masochistic suffering. In *The Conquest of Spain* (1707), however, the hero is still willing to marry the ravished heroine, a subtle yet meaningful departure from previous misogynist practice (111). Conversely, Catherine Trotter’s *Agnes de Castro* (1688) lacks all sexual titillation, turning instead to the depiction of a ‘romantic’ friendship between women portrayed in political terms (113-14). Delarivier Manley presents women actively pursuing her desires (*The Royal Mischief*, 1696) or defending their moral equality to men (*Almyna; or, The Arabian Vow*, 1706), but in any case displacing them from object to subject of the gaze, in control of their own sexuality. Marsden rightly discusses these women writers within the broader context of Restoration playwrights: they have in common their awareness of writing in a masculine arena, but they are also linked to a broader literary framework of which they were a part.

In Chapter Five (132-67), Marsden tackles the second generation of she-tragedy led by Nicholas Rowe, already in the eighteenth century. The “growth of a pro-Whig mercantile class that defined itself as pious and ethical” (133), and the accession of Queen Anne in 1702, increased the emphasis on virtue, propriety and female domesticity. There is a change in the way female sexuality is represented, focusing instead on the tragic potential of female agency (135). Overt sexual desire and sensationalism are downplayed and, with this, the number of new she-tragedies

decreases (139). In Rowe, loss of honour and its moral implications are rendered in effective plays which were frequently staged well into the nineteenth century, giving the eroticized spectacle of fallen women a didactic dimension: “By emphasizing the horrors that await the fallen women, the stage can be a ‘school’ of virtue” (166). Passivity is thus replaced by a concept of agency which results in equally sexist denouements.

The last section of the book (Chapter 6, 168-91) discusses the figure of Lady Jane Grey in the context of the Hanoverian Succession. After Queen Anne’s death in 1714, there was a general turmoil that ended in the 1715 Jacobite rebellion. Whig writers used the threat of Catholic absolutism, however improbable, in support of George I. While Jacobite propaganda tended to focus on male figures, Whig writers portrayed women as political symbols (169). Jane Grey, a recurrent icon of Protestantism in English literary tradition, acquired a new relevance in this period. Rowe’s *The Tragedy of Lady Jane Gray* (1714) portrays a character who has more of the zealous Protestant martyr than of the actual young girl in love and alien to political concerns. The ideological symbol eclipses the woman: Rowe “presents a new heroine, as political propaganda requires the erasure of female desire and overt sexuality—although not the woman’s role as object of desire – qualities that until then had been hallmarks of she-tragedy” (184). Jane becomes a “visual icon” of English virtue (189), channelling scopical pleasure through ideological grounds.

The logical development of this dramatic tendency is that pure pathos, unqualified by gender or social status, becomes central in plays of the early eighteenth century: the sufferings of men and women alike, regardless of gender, are exploited for dramatic purposes. Moreover, “the performance of pathos becomes increasingly moral” (193), and the anxiety over women watching women on stage subsides.

Fatal Desire is interesting, well written and ambitious. The scholar will be able to find in the line of argument obscure or minor plays which have been traditionally overlooked or which deserved only scattered attention in manuals as isolated or marginal phenomena. Its comprehensive bibliography covers the most relevant primary and secondary works, even if sometimes a more detailed discussion of some of them would have been desirable. The sense of unity and coherence that permeates the book is undoubtedly its greatest strength, and the thoroughness of Marsden’s approach is a welcome addition to existing criticism which makes her work an indispensable reference for future studies.

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