

H-France Review Vol. 7 (February 2007), No. 11

Cecilia Beach, *Staging Politics and Gender: French Women's Drama, 1880-1923*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 186 pp. \$69.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN-10 140-3965-854.

Review by Jennifer Birkett, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom.

This important and useful study brings extensive and original archive-based research to illuminate an area of French theatre that has been doubly neglected: the anarchist and socialist people's drama of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in particular, the contribution made to it by feminist dramatists. The main weight of the book is in its five studies of individual writers: the Commune Louise Michel, whose plays stirred Parisian audiences in the 1880s after her return from New Caledonia, and who continued to write dramas in exile in London in the early 1890s, to the dismay of the English authorities; Nelly Roussel, who turned neo-Malthusianism into a feminist cause; the Tolstoyan revolutionary Véra Starkoff, from Paris's huge Russian émigré community; Madeleine Pelletier, the one writer of working-class origin; and Marie Lenéru, moralist and playwright rather than political activist, patronised, somewhat surprisingly, by the celebrated but not entirely reputable novelist and critic Catulle Mendès.

Each study draws out the writer's individual contribution to raising popular awareness of the feminist issues of the day, from the debates on contraception that flared up at the beginning of the Third Republic to the controversy over the anti-abortion law of 1920, women's education, the dilemmas of the professional woman, women's changing role in the family, marriage, motherhood and divorce. In each case, the feminist commitment, scrupulously characterised to bring out differences in degree and kind, is shown operating in relation to the contemporary movements of social protest that gave this period its particular flavour and energy: the education and emancipation of women and workers advance in parallel. This is, of course, the double origin of the fear of the feminine that appears in the high culture of the *fin de siècle*, and in that respect Beach's study also provides valuable new contextual information for scholars in that area.

The relation between politics and theatrical performance is explored in the Introduction, with a lively account of the history of the people's theatre movement, bringing together the most radical representatives of art and politics. Louis Lumet's Théâtre Civique, for example, staged work by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam alongside readings by Octave Mirbeau, Jules Vallès and Clemenceau (p. 15). A short but cogent account of the role of the Universités Populaires in encouraging popular participation in productions is followed by a summary of Romain Rolland's articles on the appropriate repertory for people's theatre. The preference must be for works where the soul of the poet and the soul of the nation join to express "collective passion"; disconcertingly, after such a lofty note, Rolland's list of genres that fulfil the criterion begins with melodrama, and ends with the circus. Throughout her text, Beach returns to the issue of how, in this context, to address questions of dramatic and aesthetic value. The chapter on Nelly Roussel ("Feminism and the Freethinkers Movement") includes a useful short discussion of the aesthetic principles of agitprop theatre, together with the recognition that for these plays, such considerations are of limited value. This was not, Beach argues, work written to endure, but to secure its own irrelevance by abolishing the problems that were its subject matter. Summaries of these forgotten plays, and details of their reception, a wide-ranging bibliography, and a useful index, add to the value of a text that should be in all libraries concerned with late nineteenth-century cultural history.

Jennifer Birkett University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. J.BIRKETT@bham.ac.uk

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (February 2007), No. 11

ISSN 1553-9172