

**Nancy Copeland: *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre: Women's Comedy and the Theatre*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004**

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1 During the last decades, women writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century have almost made it into the canon: particularly thanks to second-wave feminist influences in academia and promoted by the rise of gender studies within literary and cultural studies, authors such as Margaret Cavendish, Aphra Behn, Susanna Centlivre, or Mary Pix have been rediscovered, reread and revalued. Critics have long passed the stage when the dialogue in Margaret Cavendish's play *Bell in Campo* (1662) represented general opinion: "Why may not a lady write a good play? - No, for a woman's wit is too weak and too conceited to write a play."<sup>1</sup> Plays by women dramatists are read in seminars and discussed in term papers and at conferences. However, most approaches still focus only on the texts themselves when they pose the question of feminist, anti-feminist or conservative attitudes towards gender roles and thus we still only *read* the play and the numerous studies on how such a play can be read. Nancy Copeland, however, goes beyond the dramatic texts themselves and in *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre* explores issues of intertextuality and intertheatricality in comedies by Behn and Centlivre: by tracing the adaptations made possible by a vast web of recurrent dramatic motifs, and by dealing with the performance history of each of the plays, the study illuminates what is lost by neglecting the *performance* aspect of a play. The various productions, alterations, adaptations shed light on changing cultural contexts and especially the plays' engagement with shifting ideas of gender roles and appropriate behaviour for men and women. By focusing 'only' on four plays - Behn's *The Rover* (1677) and *The Luckey Chance* (1686), Centlivre's *The Busie Body* (1709) and *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714) - and of course on their many precursors and subsequent adaptations, this book seeks to offer detailed analyses and thus provides the reader with a wealth of information concerning the theatrical history of each play - a history that most readers will not be aware of.

2 The author's decision to focus on Behn and Centlivre is not only intended as a tribute to the success of these dramatists during their lifetime, but is also motivated by the dichotomy that has been established between Behn and Centlivre in recent years: Behn as the first woman writer to earn her living by her pen and to take on what was perceived as a feminist

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<sup>1</sup> Cavendish, Margaret. *Bell in Campo & The Sociable Companions*. Ed. Alexandra G. Bennett. Peterborough: Broadview, 2002. 29.

point of view has been contrasted with the allegedly conservative Centlivre, who very early understood the changing taste (both in drama and in gender roles) of the eighteenth century.

3 The first chapter of *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, entitled "Gender and 'Intertheatricality'", provides the reader with a very basic introduction to changing gender/sex models. In accord with the title of her study, Copeland's analysis proceeds along the lines of gender. The diachronic approach to theatrical productions and the changing gender roles conveyed by them certainly constitutes the greatest asset of the study, because "[the comedies] were first staged during a time of dramatically changing gender roles and their lengthy production histories subsequently placed them in dialogue with radically different ideas of appropriate and permissible behaviour for both women and men" (1). In order to validate these claims, Copeland resorts to expected sources, such as Laqueur's *Making Sex*, which centres on the gradual replacement of the one-sex model by the two-sex model in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth century, and to Barker-Benfield's *The Culture of Sensibility*, a work that reveals the competing forms of masculinity during the same time period. Thus, Copeland makes clear that "[of] particular relevance to this study are the redefinition of concepts of masculine and feminine behaviour and the concomitant production of homosexuality as a distinct category" (2).

4 After thematising the problematic stances of self-gendering of the two women playwrights in epilogues and dedications, the study reads the specific plays by Behn and Centlivre in their theatrical contexts. Although I am not sure if the term "intertheatricality" (10) proves to be as useful in this context as Copeland claims, what the study intends - and clearly achieves - by utilising this term is to complement the close reading of the plays with an analysis of the "implied production" (10) inscribed in the texts, comprising the use of theatrical resources, such as the cast of the actors, the architecture of the stage, of properties and costume, and also the use of genre. As to the latter, the conventions of Spanish comedy (foreign setting, episodic structure and an emphasis on action, the honour code as central motif, night scenes with mistaken identities) are explored in detail, because they serve as a backbone of most of the comedies under discussion.

5 While Chapter Two interprets Aphra Behn's *The Rover* compared to its source-play - namely, Thomas Killigrew's *Thomaso*, which is mentioned in almost every edition of *The Rover*, but rarely referred to in more detail - and also deals with *The Second Part of The Rover* (1681) and its 'Fantastick Wit', Chapter Three traces the transformation of the characters, particularly in regard to gender roles, as well as of the plot in later times. The play's popularity can thus not only be recognised by the great number of performances, but

also for example by its inspiration to Delarivière Manley's *The Lost Lover*, which is partially indebted to Behn's play for the two central characters. The gender ideology promulgated by Addison and Steele after the turn of the century becomes evident by comparing Manley's passive - and in the play successful - female characters to Behn's active and self-confident women characters. Moreover, Copeland analyses the casting history of *The Rover*, which gives information about the focus of different performances - the performance of the prostitute Angellica by the famous and in 1709 already 'mature' actress Elizabeth Barry, for example, indicates a focus on Angellica's serious and tragic role, while the performance of Blunt by a comic star shifts the attention to the farcical subplot of *The Rover*.

6 Chapter Four revolves around the production history of Behn's *The Luckey Chance*. Whereas the play was not very successful in its time, it nevertheless enjoyed an eighteenth-century afterlife in adaptations by two later women playwrights: in Eliza Heywood's *A Wife to Be Lett* (1723) and in Hannah Cowley's *A School For Greybeards* (1786). Copeland convincingly shows how "[they] each took different components of Behn's play as their raw materials and reworked them into plots that eliminated consummated adultery" (67). Again, the adaptations contain and convey the gender ideology of the eighteenth century that assigns fundamental differences to women and men.

7 Susanna Centlivre's *The Busie Body* is analysed in Chapter Five. Its great success made it a stock play until the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The character of the "busie body" Marplot of course takes on a central status. He is, however, not only the driving force of the action through his misguided attempts to assist the lovers, which actually repeatedly mar their intrigues and plans, but he is also a gender misfit. His complete disinterest in women, his female-connotated gossiping and his "effeminate" cowardice are evidence for his deviation from "normative genteel masculinity" (109). The study very comprehensively analyses the long theatrical history of this comedy, as well as of the second part *Mar-plot* (1710).

8 Chapter Six deals with Centlivre's *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* and places it into a larger theatrical context by comparing it to two antecedents, Centlivre's own *The Perplex'd Lovers* and Ravenscroft's *The Wrangling Lovers*, and then works out *The Wonder's* place in the repertoire. Again, the cast of actors produced varying foci and interpretations of the play, starting with Garrick as Felix, which very much influenced subsequent productions. Tracing the staging history of the play also reveals a growing conformity to fixed gender roles. Whereas *The Wonder* challenges assumptions about gendered behaviour with a heroine who has been understood as proto-feminist up to the early nineteenth century, it "ended its

mainstream performance career as an emphatic staging of polarized gender roles" (155).

9 The study, although continuously stimulating, keeps the best for last: the final chapter extends the intertheatricality of the plays, which has already been analysed in the form of sequels, adaptations, acting editions, and reviews, into the twentieth century by focusing on productions staged mainly between 1984 and 1994. The influence of the by then established "Aphra-myth" (Behn as democratic, feminist and timeless) on the productions of Behn's plays is revealed, as well as the importance of the concept of the "Restoration style" that prevailed among critics and in the theatre in the last two decades of the twentieth century. This made productions of Centlivre's comedies very problematic, since they did not correspond to the expectations of "sexy, romping 'fun'" (164).

10 In her conclusion, Copeland positions her results within theories of citation expounded by Derrida and Butler. Especially Butler's development of the concept of citation in *Gender Trouble* can be applied to production history:

It illuminates the process by which characters are constituted through performance, often, as we have seen, with different outcomes than those suggested in the 'implied productions' in the original texts. At the same time, it helps to articulate the process by which gender performances onstage contribute to the constitution of gender roles within the broader culture. (184)

With its differentiated synchronic and diachronic analyses, *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre* thus present a welcome and stimulating contribution that finally takes seriously the performance aspect of both gender and drama.