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"Antitheatrical Theatricalism" on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage

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Character's Theatre: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage by Lisa A. Freeman. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. Pp. 298. $47.50 cloth.

Character's Theatre situates the eighteenth-century stage as the locus and model for the fashioning of individual identity, arguing that it was theatre more so than the novel where the construction of the modern subject took place. According to Lisa Freeman, eighteenth-century playwrights overcame prevailing theatrical artificiality and insincerity by deploying a strategy she terms "antitheatrical theatricalism" to establish authority and legitimacy against a tide of cultural criticism about the respectability of theatre. Playwrights eschewed representations of subjectivities and instead scripted representations of identities or characters. What we find in the period's staged drama, Freeman contends, is a "dynamic paradigm for representing identity that derives its force from the concept of 'character' as it was elaborated and understood in an eighteenth-century context" (7). As *Character's Theatre* demonstrates, identity is an effect of character, an insight that the period's playwrights exploited onstage, and drama was the genre best suited for the manipulation of audiences' epistemological frames for various pedagogical purposes, including identity construction. In support of this argument, Freeman's study delineates eighteenth-century character theory, acting styles, and audience interaction in its analysis of plays originally written and staged for eighteenth-century audiences.

Character's Theatre asserts the pervasive nature of theatricality in eighteenth-century British society, its ubiquitous role onstage and offstage, and its pedagogical potential. Theatricality, therefore, became a popular subject of drama, and plays about plays literally stage the strategy of "antitheatrical theatricalism," distancing character through metadramatics and the performance of theatricality as everyday occurrences. For example, Henry Fielding's *The Author's Farce* (1729–37) demonstrates the strategy of antitheatrical

theatricalism in its portrayal of the theatre as a place no more artificial than other eighteenth-century cultural sites. Consequently, character representations are authorized within this framework, though provisional and temporary, mimetic and self-reflectively performative. John Gay's 1715 *What D'Ye Call It? A Tragi-Comi-Pastoral Farce* dramatizes tensions between representational characters and performers so to acknowledge competing bodies and to illustrate how "character" is an unstable position of staged contests and surfaces that require interpretation. Dramatic characters thus facilitate critical assessments about how knowledge of identity is produced. For women playwrights, this assessment was particularly significant as it created conceptual space for the possibility of women authorized to resist their normative socioeconomic roles. Perceptively, women playwrights assumed the voice of nationalism and patriotism, thereby aligning themselves with the regulatory masculine voices that repudiated the infusion of foreign drama on the British stage. Freeman's analyses of Fielding's *The Author's Farce* and George Colman the Younger's *The Female Dramatist* (1781–82) thoroughly demonstrate comic and serious applications of "antitheatrical theatricalism," the ways in which eighteenth-century plays about plays stage bodies as characters and representations as identities that challenge gender boundaries while authorizing playwrights as critical spectators of culture who could teach audiences how to read the illusions of character.

Tragedy that staged the nation in crisis and patriotic characters who would come to its rescue constitute the next set of plays that Freeman's study considers. Tragedy fulfilled an important patriotic and moral pedagogy for the emerging middle class in need of character building and the inculcation of masculine, English cultural values. The period's tragic hero emerged as the common man, domestic and individualized, the exemplar of new masculine and English ideologies. Tragedy thus had the potential to expunge the nation of foreign entertainments with their irrational, feminine passions, their morally degenerate spectacles, and their threatening influences. Joseph Addison's *Cato* (1746) illustrates how eighteenth-century tragedy represented this new masculine hero in the context of a domestic setting in which women could not distract him or deform tragedy. In George Lillo's *The London Merchant; or, The History of George Barnwell* (1730–31), myths of empire are displaced onto the category of gender. Barnwell experiences a tragic fall because he betrays mercantilism, but it is upon Millwood's female body that English discomforts with empiric ideology are given form. In both plays, female characters are ideologically marginal, neither the embodiment of ideals important to the nation's character nor the representations of concepts serving the imperial imagination. Nicholas Rowe's "she-tragedies" *The Fair Penitent* (1702–3) and *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* (1713–14) similarly depict women as inherently dangerous to patriarchal order and national stability, the narrative authorities

to which they should submit. The she-tragedies stage contradictions between the spectacle of women performers in emotionally compelling roles and the dramatic plots' efforts at disciplining the female characters they portrayed, such as dangerous daughters and faithless wives, so to privilege the ethos of masculine virtue and to inculcate the pathos of proper marriage.

While the period's tragedy staged issues of the public sphere, eighteenth-century comedy focused on the private, domestic world that made the English nation possible. Its pedagogical project was to make the audience "fitter" members of society and reveal that character was, in fact, performative, parodic of historically specific identities. *Character's Theatre* illustrates that comedy exposed spectators' complicity in maintaining the integrity of representation and in recognizing the constitutional parody of identity that marks character. Freeman's readings of Susanna Centlivre's *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* (1717–18), Hannah Cowley's *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* (1782–83) and *The Belle's Stratagem* (1779–80), George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1706–7), and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1774–75) expose the ways that laughing comedies conflate mimesis and parody to unmask the performative nature of identities, onstage and offstage, as well as the making and unmaking of dramatic meaning. In these representative laughing comedies, masculine authority is unveiled as shadow with no substance; conversely, passive womanhood is revealed as masquerade to which the male gaze can be directed. In other words, these plays of intrigue unmask the performative nature of identity and the inherent instability of categories. Freeman points out that at a metacritical level, laughing comedies stage conventional relations of the private sphere only to question the public status of the terms under which those relations were produced. Proper gender and class hierarchies are, however, only temporarily suspended in the play's world and restored in the genre's conventionally happy endings that reify English culture as patriarchal and imperial.

Sentimental comedies, on the other hand, perform the pedagogical function of importing "good breeding," an important aspect of character, to their mercantile and middle-class audiences. More explicitly than laughing comedies, sentimental comedies stage codes of conduct and morality intent on maintaining social regulation and control. The world of the sentimental comedy is one governed by property relations and financial negotiations, reconciled interests and generational conflicts. Sentimental comedies functioned as exemplars of the conditions necessary for entrance to the public sphere—the restoration of the father's patriarchal authority. Receiving extended discussions, Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722–23), Edward Moore's *The Foundling* (1747–48), and Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1770–71) portray these values of benevolent patriarchy and mercantile paternity. Whether their conflicts involve familiar, social, or colonial matters, they

enforce a behavioral normativity which ensures that a noble masculine character receives value and validation as it promotes a submissive feminine character as material property. The period's critical defamation of sentimental comedy, Freeman argues, can be seen as a form of resistance to the formation of middle-class consciousness and self-disciplined behaviors that shaped identity and that the plays promoted for the new eighteenth-century gentry.

Character's Theatre is an engaging and compelling study that successfully illustrates how powerfully eighteenth-century theatre functioned in English culture. It was, as Freeman argues, the most important pedagogical site for the formation of character and identity at a time when the culture that gives meaning to those concepts and embodiments was undergoing unsettling changes. Eighteenth-century theatre provided the stage on which character and identity could be represented and rehearsed, performed and parodied in public and across class and gender boundaries. It was the genre in which character could be shown as public property, as the product of social exchange, not necessarily fashioned exclusively by individual volition. Furthermore, the stage functioned as the dynamic paradigm for representing identity, the site of resistance to character/identity being shaped by pressures of ideological conformity. *Character's Theatre* demonstrates that scholars of the long eighteenth century are seeing the centrality of the stage and drama in British culture—their pedagogical and nation-or empire-building functions, their negotiations with political and social controversies, their reframings of displaced anxieties and ideologies, and their reworkings of new discourses through conventional tropes—what many of us who work on Romantic drama have been arguing for some time now. *Character's Theatre* thus contributes importantly to our reassessment of how the eighteenth-century theatre "set the stage" for what would come in Romantic drama as well as to our understanding of the several continuities between Enlightenment and Romantic drama, particularly in the representation of individuation and identity and in the pedagogical and metatheatrical functions of drama. "Antitheatrical theatricalism" aptly describes the ways in which playwrights utilized the very terms and concepts of eighteenth-century culture in order to question and subvert those terms and concepts—a strategy that evolved and flourished in Romantic theatre as well—and *Character's Theatre* convincingly illustrates its operations in representative plays of various kinds staged throughout the eighteenth century.

Freeman's study excels in its portrayal of the obstacles and challenges of women playwrights in the eighteenth century and how they created authority as writers for the public stage. Freeman's readings of Susanna Centlivre's and Hannah Cowley's comedies, for example, feature insightful observations about how women characters within their plays perform female desire and express female sexuality while simultaneously destabilizing the authority of male sexuality. The careful discussion of laughing and sentimental comedies

clarifies why women playwrights seeking to challenge prevailing and emergent cultural norms would find laughing comedies the more compatible genre for their ideological agendas than the conservative sentimental comedies. *Character's Theatre* gives us a new lens through which we can read eighteenth-century drama, and it enriches not only cultural and literary British studies of the long eighteenth century but drama/theatre studies in general. Scholars and students interested in the formation and evolution of modern identity, the sociology in which it was staged, will also find *Character's Theatre* a valuable study as it constructs the historical and social contexts in which eighteenth-century dramatic character contributed to identity formation.

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