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Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft

Lisa Plummer Crafton

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LISA PLUMMER CRAFTON
University of West Georgia, USA

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Introduction

While no one will mistake the moody, intelligent face of Bette Davis for Mary Wollstonecraft, the character of Margo Channing (whom Davis portrays in this book's cover illustration) in Joseph Mankiewicz's 1950 film *All About Eve* is, in fact, a good double for the Wollstonecraft that this study seeks to convey. Although it might not surprise anyone that Bette Davis adorns a book cover of a study about theatricality and transgression—nor even a book about Romanticism since recent scholarship has convincingly argued that the Romantic era witnessed the emergence of a recognizably modern celebrity culture—Wollstonecraft has rarely been featured as a central figure in critical debates about Romanticism and (anti)theatricality. The invisible mediating figure between Bette Davis and Wollstonecraft is the famous eighteenth-century actress Sarah Siddons, who features significantly in Mankiewicz's film. At least a *representation* of her appears in the film: the opening scene occurs at an awards ceremony where the Siddons Award (an equivalent of the Oscar) is being given out, and Sir Joshua Reynolds's famous painting of *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (Fig. I.1) looms visually over the final scene. Seven years after the film, Bette Davis participated in the Laguna Beach Festival of the Arts featuring a tableau-vivant of Reynolds's painting, thus figuring Sarah Siddons literally. It is Siddons then whose celebrity is indubitably tied to that of Davis through the lasting visual impression of Reynolds's painting. Siddons had an incredible theatrical afterlife, her performances tending to stay in the memories of audiences and affecting each new interpretation, as McPherson and others have argued.[1] In Chapter 5 I argue that Siddons's performance style, theories, and stage preparations offer a compelling new lens through which to view Wollstonecraft and theatricality, and, as played by Bette Davis, Margo Channing's explorations of the blurred lines between performed and personal identity enrich that discussion.

Godwin's Advertisement to *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* labels it a "performance," and Wollstonecraft, in that novel's Preface, juxtaposes her fiction to "what may justly be termed '*stage-effect*.'" No substantive critical studies have explored theatricality—as both a key historical and figurative site—in her works, which consistently interrogate the connected network of theater, culture, and self-representation. While feminist criticism, including my own, has overwhelmingly focused on Wollstonecraft's exposure and critique of the theatrical construction of gender roles, my argument is that a conscious appropriation of theater (in its literal,

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[1] Heather McPherson, "Siddons Rediviva: Death, Memory, and Theatrical Afterlife," in Mole, *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture*, 120–40. See Tom Mole's edited collection *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture*, *1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and Martin Postle's *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity Culture* (London: Tate, 2005).

Fig. I.1 *The Tragic Muse*, 1783–1784, Joshua Reynolds. Courtesy of the Huntington Art Collections, San Marino, California.

cultural, and figurative dimensions) figures prominently in all of Wollstonecraft's work.[2] Contributing to recent work on Romanticism and theater—especially Pascoe, Backscheider, Burroughs, Hadley, Bolton, and Carlson—I explore Wollstonecraft's appropriation of, immersion in, and contributions to debates about theatricality. Considering all of Wollstonecraft's many permutations of "self"—reviewer, translator, novelist, polemicist, correspondent, moral philosopher, lover, wife, and mother (a trajectory of roles that Barbara Taylor labels a "prissy moralist," a "bluntspoken philosophic radical," a "lyrical romantic," a "satirist, teacher, melancholy solitaire")—allows us to see competing notions of "theatrical."[3] Ultimately, I argue that Wollstonecraft's persistent use of the trope reveals theatricality's transgressive potential for self-invention, instead of simply its negative connotations with regard to gender roles and the display of state power, thus representing both the limitations of and inherent potential in "stage-effect." My study engages the contexts of five intersecting theoretical prisms which I discuss in Chapter 1—Romantic theatricality, the politicization of theater and the theatricalization of politics, theories of masquerade, theories of mimicry, and the divide between theater and performance critics.

Initially following the Oxford English Dictionary's three definitions of "theatrical," as does Judith Pascoe in *Romantic Theatricality*, I situate my interest in Wollstonecraft's texts as they intersect with the three dimensions of the term: 1) pertaining to the stage/theater; 2) representing in the manner of an actor; and 3) calculated for display, spectacular. Of the first denotation, "pertaining to the stage/theater," I argue the function of Wollstonecraft's explicit references to Shakespearean and contemporary plays (especially Rowe's *The Fair Penitent,* treated in Chapter 1), theaters, and actresses in the works. I focus specifically on Sarah Siddons, whom Hazlitt called "tragedy personified" and whom Backscheider astutely calls a "Foucauldian site for the representation of warring sexualities and powers."

Of the second meaning of "theatricality"—"representing in the manner of an actor"—I consider how the trope of theatricality functions in cultural commentary and in fictional frameworks to represent the performative nature of self-representation and subjectivity. I situate, in Chapter 1, my position on the polymorphously variable term "performative" by using Jonathon Culler on the distinction between Austin's and Butler's discussion of performative utterances, Catherine Burrough's helpful, succinct distinction between performances (on both theater and social stages) and performativity as a metaphor that interrogates the "ways that identities are

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[2] My earlier discussion of Wollstonecraft's attack on the hypocrisy of modesty in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* does not use the trope of theatricality but clearly foregrounds her exposure of gender roles as constructed and artificial; see "'Insipid Decency': Modesty and Female Sexuality in Wollstonecraft," *European Romantic Review* 31.1 (2000): 55–88.

[3] Barbara Taylor, *Wollstonecraft and the Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 31.

constructed iteratively through complex citational processes" (17),[4] and Jill Dolan's thorough discussion of and disagreement with the legacy of Butler's theories in terms of their emphasis on the constraints on (as opposed to the potential for) human agency as a consequence of citational gender identity.

While Wollstonecraft does use the contextual/theoretical framework of the theater to indict what she calls, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the "insipid decency" of her culture, whose definitions of sexual deviance are markedly gendered, my study exposes her exploration of the inherently subversive potential of theatricality, especially for women. As Litvak's study of theatricality in the nineteenth-century novel neatly articulates, critics have to be aware of the functionally ambiguous boundary line between "theatricality-as-conventionality" and "theatricality-as-subversion" (42). Extending this concern to the broader context of feminist performance theory and its appropriation of linguistic and philosophical theories of performativity, I argue that Wollstonecraft's appropriation of acting theory (deduced from notes, correspondence, and performances of Sarah Siddons) can be understood in terms of Luce Irigaray's philosophical model of female mimicry. Drawing attention to the theatricality of all systems, Irigaray, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, urges consideration of "*the conditions under which systematicity is possible*" (75, original italics). Applying this premise to women's finding a place within philosophical disciplines, Irigaray suggests that mimicry may be the only option, but, significantly, that mimicry can be subversively affirmative: "One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it" (76). I argue that Wollstonecraft's persistent reflections on and manipulations of theatricality expose a similar thwarting of conventional sexual, social, and generic systems. A final scholarly context for discussion of this second definition of "theatrical" is current critical studies of masquerade, including the arguments of Terry Castle on masquerade's subversive potential, Craft-Fairchild on the inevitable objectification of woman as spectacle, and Hoeveler on the gothic heroine's deliberate masquerade of femininity as both subverting and reifying postures of complacency.

Of the third definition of the term, "calculated for display, showy," I focus on how Wollstonecraft engages the question of the moral utility of theater/spectacle, theater tropes used in French Revolutionary political discourse, theatricality in juridical discourses, and acting/theater theory as constructed in Siddons's notes and articles, contemporary reviews, and women playwright's "theater theory," to use Burroughs's phrase. Overall, the cohesive guiding question is whether theatricality *enables* or *subverts* various cultural mechanisms of power.

While no critic has offered a reading of Wollstonecraft and theatricality, Burroughs, whose work significantly offers a new domain for and redefinition of "theater theory," suggests briefly but persuasively that critical attention should

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[4] *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women Writers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

be paid to Wollstonecraft, who she asserts must have drawn upon "theater history and her knowledge of late eighteenth-century stage for metaphors with which she could formulate her critical readings of women's cultural position" (19). Using Burroughs' broadening of theater theory to include "a variety of theoretical moments that occur in a wide range of texts and performance situations" (2), we see that for Wollstonecraft, theatricality is not simply a trope with which to represent "women's cultural position," but also the performative nature of all human self-representation as well as national and cultural identity formation.

While Chapter 1 offers the theoretical foundation for the intersecting premises outlined here, Chapter 2 examines both the intertextual relationship between Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* and Nicolas Rowe's play *The Fair Penitent* and how the theater trope functions in the novel, suggesting ways in which notions of performativity direct individual, national, and cultural identity formation. Chapter 3 situates Wollstonecraft within two philosophical debates circulating in the late eighteenth century: the issue of the moral utility of public spectacle (including state pageantry, public executions, and public addresses) and the effects of sympathy, exploring Wollstonecraft's divided, often ambiguous conclusions on this issue as found in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *Letters Written During A Short Residence*.

Chapter 4 uses the juridical contexts of both treason and divorce trials, the transcripts of which became wildly popular in the 1780s and 1790s as both amusement for spectators and as dramatic roles for attorneys and which mirror the culture's ambivalence toward theatricality. I consider the influence on Wollstonecraft of the treason trials, using Pascoe's analysis of them as a foundation, and then explore the influence of the published transcripts of the very popular civil divorce trials for adultery. Wollstonecraft's methodical representation of Maria's arrest by George, indictment for adultery with Darnford, and plea before a judge (in *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*) was, I argue, influenced by these transcripts. I further interrogate how Wollstonecraft's portrait of the suffering mother Maria intersects with the cultural legacy of Marie Antoinette's 1793 trial, particular her deployment of a maternal identity to bring a hostile crowd over to her side, thus creatively manipulating the most "authentic" of female roles. Further theorizing Wollstonecraft's manipulation of juridical discourse, I consider her representations of authoritative speech (judicial, legal, theological, and royal pronouncements) as binding performatives to be resisted and rewritten. Chapter 5 explores Wollstonecraft's immersion in French Revolutionary political discourse from her defense of Richard Price and rebuttal to Burke in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) to her little-known text *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794) in which she analyzes the false theatricality (both in drama and in the workings of the *ancien regime*), of the French king and queen (whom Wollstonecraft branded as having a "criminal insincerity"), and of the "profane theater" of the National Assembly. I specifically treat her critique of Burke's famous, eroticized, melodramatic staging of Marie Antoinette in his

Reflections on the French Revolution. As she rebukes, in *VRM*,[5] Burke's aristocratic defense of the "decent drapery of life," Wollstonecraft exposes his theatricality—how his famous paean to the drapery, the curtain behind which any "lovely" country ought to hide its degradations, occurs in the *Reflections* immediately after his staged rendition of the October Days episode in which the queen is taken from her palace and marched to Paris by an angry mob. While she challenges his axiom that the "pleasing illusion" of drapery allows "vice itself [to lose] half its evil by losing all its grossness," her later analysis of that same mob scene suggests a rethinking of the politics of performance and begs us to consider how her own representations attempt a portrait of authenticity and sincerity that is itself a performative act. Finally, Chapter 6 considers the relationship between Wollstonecraft and Sarah Siddons, including the nature of the spectacle of the female actress and her body on stage, specifically the potential for theatricality as transgressive mechanism. I explore the paradox—so typified by Sarah Siddons—of women on stage being objects of allure, of the gaze, and yet disrupting codes of female behavior at the same time. Perhaps the most original and exciting proposition here is that Siddons, in her acting theory which we surmise through notes and letters, and in performance (as documented in reviews), offers an enabling model for Wollstonecraft's manipulation of the theater trope.

Wollstonecraft's texts as a whole—from earliest literary reviews, translations, through histories and correspondence, nonfiction, and the two fictional novels—display a trajectory of Wollstonecraft's seemingly ambiguous thinking on these issues. My study consistently argues that Wollstonecraft works out in fiction the connections she had argued in political discourse between theatricality, politics, and social practice and suggests an important new direction for understanding Wollstonecraft's works, for current reconsiderations of assumed Romantic anti-theatricality, for historicist revisions of performance and theory of Sarah Siddons, and for theories of spectacle and gender.

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[5] Throughout this study I use *VRM* to refer to *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*; *VRW* to refer to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; and *HMV* to refer to *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*.