

Bailar on Berlanstein (2001)

Berlanstein, Lenard R. *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. Pp. 300. ISBN 0-674-00596-1

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Lenard R. Berlanstein approaches the evolution of the societal roles and influence of actresses during the eighteenth and long nineteenth centuries in France from a fresh, politically-based perspective. His panorama of the treatment of actresses in literature, illustrations, and journalistic commentary shows how these varying portrayals of performing women fit into broader historical trends and changing outlooks on class and gender. Berlanstein also investigates how major events, such as France's many revolutions and the Dreyfus Affair, affected the rights and status of theatrical women in French society, and he carefully demonstrates how representations of actresses were tied to the current political climate. This approach helps him explain the ever-shifting social functions of actresses in France, from loci of erotic fantasy through exemplars of a third gender to successful career women, self-sacrificing altruists, and paradigms of domestic contentment.

Offering an impressive survey of multiple genres of writing about actresses, including novels, biographies, theatrical dictionaries, private correspondence, society columns, and magazine articles, as well as photographs and cartoons, Berlanstein provides a broad perspective in which to situate specific works. He demonstrates, for example, how the outflow of sympathetic portrayals of actresses and their self-sacrificial instincts between 1815 and 1848 was made possible by the confidence in male bourgeois self-governance, since exceptional women in the public sphere were no longer threats to the newly established social order. By contrast, depictions of actresses as dangerous, even contagious, self-serving prostitutes, which were preponderant after the Revolution of 1848 (as exemplified in Émile Zola's *Nana*), were a result of the replacement of an enlightened bourgeoisie with a wealthier and hedonistic elite and the uneasiness with which the public viewed symbols of the superficial Second Empire, such as bejeweled stage women. Berlanstein traces a later abrupt switch in women's magazines toward an emphasis on the ordinariness of performers' everyday lives and journalists' efforts to relegate theatrical work to a secondary role in their female identities. The ways in which such articles deliberately altered or omitted facts about actresses' lives to force them into the newly preferred model for domestically-stable working women indicate the symbiotic relationship between these women and the culture of commodity that exploited their images commercially.

Texts about actresses, like the women themselves, are not always easily contained within discrete categories, which sometimes disrupts the historical-political frameworks into which Berlanstein attempts to situate them. Certainly, the vast material he addresses is fundamental to revealing how patterns in representations resulted from changes in political climate, and closer readings of specific texts and images would be required to examine breaks from established trends. For anyone interested in French gender dynamics, the Parisian theater industry, or the rise of celebrity culture, Berlanstein's work provides a solid grounding for further studies.

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