

H-France Review Vol. 19 (July 2019), No. 136

Susannah Crowder, *Performing Women: Gender, Self, and Representation in Late Medieval Metz*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. xiv + 263 pp. Map, charts, plates, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-5261-0640-7.

Review by Noah D. Guynn, University of California, Davis.

It is a well-established fact that male crossdressing was a regular feature of medieval theatrical performance both in Britain and on the Continent. As with many facts, however, this one has taken on a life of its own, developing into a full-blown myth of the principled, systematic exclusion of women from early theater. Until recently, it was not unusual to read that on the medieval stage, “male actors almost without exception [played] all roles”;[1] that “les régisseurs” were unlikely to “solliciter les femmes” even though “les enfants sont admis”;[2] and that female characters in both serious and comic genres were nearly always perceived “par le regard des hommes, lui-même modelé par l’antiféminisme ecclésiastique.”[3] A much-cited study of fifteenth-century farce goes so far as to assert that “les auteurs-acteurs sont des hommes”; that “leur jeu...s’adresse surtout à des hommes”; and that common women were unlikely even to attend performances: “Il faut croire que dans la vie quotidienne les femmes, bourgeoises ou servantes, ont trop à faire à la maison pour assister en grand nombre aux spectacles.”[4]

Happily, recent scholarship has sought to reassess, complicate, or debunk these claims and to recover evidence of women’s involvement in a highly visible, supposedly single-sex mode of cultural expression. For Gabriella Parussa and Darwin Smith, “le mythe de l’absence des femmes” can be attributed to two factors: first, the longstanding belief that medieval theater originated in ecclesiastical rituals that men alone could perform; and second, conflation with the model of London’s public theaters under Elizabeth I.[5] The ongoing revision of theatrical origin claims, for instance in Jody Enders’s influential work on rhetoric and law,[6] suggest the weaknesses of the former argument. And the REED Project (Records of Early English Drama), which attests to women’s “major, indeed co-equal,” contributions to pre- and post-Reformation theater, especially outside London,[7] suggests that all-male troupes were by no means the “modèle archétypique” for early theater.[8]

For scholars of France, however, the most important work on women and performance must focus on municipal and monastic archives, which have not been extensively excavated since the nineteenth century but are sure to contain immense riches. In a recent state of the field essay, Parussa asserts that even from our currently limited perspective, it is possible to document a “théâtre des femmes au Moyen Âge”: women and girls are known to have taken the public stage, starting with a nativity play in 1333 in Toulon; there is evidence that *ménestrelles*, *jongleresses*, and

folles were performing at aristocratic and royal courts in the same period; we have records from the fifteenth century of one woman who signed a contract as an actor and others who served as costume designers, props masters, copyists, and confraternity members; and household account books reveal that elite women were sometimes responsible for funding performances.[9] We can add to this a thriving tradition of liturgical drama in French convents. As Kate Matthews has shown, records from Origny-Sainte-Benoîte “give a strong indication of the theatrical sophistication of many Brides of Christ” and “suggest that a specific female dramatic convention [existed and spread] between French convents in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.”[10] Indeed, a reference to a nun who played the part of God in a *Visitatio Sepulchri* production before uttering the collect suggests not only that the nuns played male parts but also that they did so to signal “a certain independence from clerical intervention.”[11] For both Matthews and Parussa, that independence likely extended to the authorship of plays. If we consider the possibility that the Dames Blanches d’Huy may have composed some of the morality and nativity plays they are known to have copied for performance in the mid-fifteenth century, we may be able to claim a female French playwright decades before Marguerite de Navarre.[12]

Taken as a whole, this evidence seems to justify Parussa’s hypothesis that medieval French women were not subject to a formal interdiction where theater was concerned but rather to a customary exclusion, and that the custom was nowhere near as binding as we have been told.[13] To support the hypothesis, however, we need both a deeper examination of theater archives in their local and temporal specificities and a more capacious notion of what constituted performance in medieval settings. That is precisely what we get in Susannah Crowder’s brilliant and utterly readable new book, *Performing Women*. The focus is on the republican city of Metz in and around the year 1468, when Catherine Baudoche, a member of the Messine patriciate, sponsored a staging of a *Jeu de sainte Katherine de Sienne* in the courtyard of a Dominican monastery. Although the script does not survive, the performance is well known thanks to two sources, chronicles by Jacomin Husson and Philippe de Vigneulles that postdate the event by more than thirty years but describe it in some detail. Both chroniclers afford particular attention to the common woman who triumphed in the play’s title role. Praising her emotive acting and capacious memory, they note that a male audience member (a gentleman by Vigneulles’s account) was so beguiled by the actor that he married her and elevated her to his superior rank.

Theater scholars have long known the anecdote. Some have taken it at face value, viewing it, with Lynette Muir, as “the earliest example of an actress marrying into the aristocracy in post-classical times.”[14] Others would agree with Jody Enders that it is so obviously embellished and internally inconsistent as to suggest a “medieval urban legend,” one of many that sought to mystify the power of the stage to shape realities beyond it.[15] While acknowledging the validity of Enders’s reading, Crowder, as a historian, takes a somewhat different approach. Contextualizing the chronicle reports within local history, she sets out to explore the ways in which performances of various kinds (theatrical, devotional, legal, financial, and documentary) offered women of various ranks access to cultural expression, social distinction, and collective memory. In the process, she makes remarkable discoveries (including a third narrative source, Jehan Aubrion’s *Journal*, which is contemporary with the events it describes) and makes a convincing case that the *Sainte Katherine* production is not “unique” in offering roles to women but is instead “exemplary”: “the tip of the proverbial iceberg for women’s performance in the later Middle Ages” (p. 9).

Chapter one begins with a critique of medieval chronicles as sources for the writing of history. Although it is well established that chronicles largely exclude “women’s voices and agency” (p. 24), they are often accepted as reliable witnesses to the past. The result is that “scholarship on women and the theater has been unable to assimilate the ‘isolated’ Messine material,” interpreting “records of performances in which women take part...as inescapable proof of the exceptional nature of female actors” (p. 25). In an effort to write women back into history, Crowder offers a careful rereading of her sources, placing them in dialogue with other, neglected materials, including archival, manuscript, and visual ones. By attending to continuities and discrepancies among the three chronicles, she shows how narrative transmission led to a “loss of vital detail” (p. 24) about the lead actor. While Husson and Vigneulles sought to romanticize the story of her marriage, Aubrion tells a rather different story: she did not marry a local gentleman, rather a mercenary and outsider; and her marriage was not the direct result of her performance but occurred five years later. There are nonetheless revealing details in all three chronicles about how women used performance to claim a place within Metz’s social and religious life. We learn from Aubrion that the actor became known in the wake of the production by the name of the character she had portrayed: “Ste Katerine de Sene” (p. 52, n. 26). She thus acquired the status of “a living representative” (p. 24) of a saint who had only recently been canonized, whose cult was in the ascendant, and who was known for expanding the boundaries of women’s religious and political expression. Vigneulles likewise reveals how the play’s patron used a variety of media, including stage design, built environments, and public memorials to solidify her institutional and political alliances. Moving beyond the chronicles to previously unstudied documents, Crowder further shows how Baudoche used theatrical and devotional culture to claim forms of status and agency that might otherwise have been denied her. Indeed, with the *Sainte Katherine* production, she almost literally carved out space for herself in a patriarchal world, specifically “the masculine, mendicant, sermonising place of the Dominican courtyard” (p. 45).

We learn in chapter two that the two Catherines, actor and patron, were hardly the only Messine woman to offer distinctive public performances of self. On the contrary, both Baudoche and her stepmother, Catherine Gronnaix, were able to bolster their social position and assert their economic autonomy through ritual and documentary practices that made them “visible, audible, and tangibly present within...urban spaces” (p. 63). Baudoche did so largely through family alliances, household ceremonies and entertainments, and legal and financial transactions, all of which signaled her position and dignity. She “does not appear to have been an active manager of her finances,” however, “or to have represented herself in legal situations” (p. 64). For a more complete form of female public selfhood, we must turn to her stepmother, who was orphaned at a young age, became “a conspicuous and essential participant in the ensuing economic record,” and retained her autonomy in marriage, functioning “as a co-equal with her two husbands” (p. 75). She chose her first spouse herself, received control of her inheritance before her wedding, and never relinquished it thereafter. When she was widowed for a second time (at the death of Baudoche’s father), she pursued personal patronage in the manner of elite women of her era, many of whom offered “largess in their own name with an eye towards posterity” (p. 76). She also engaged actively in the performative practices that were used to structure economic and social relations in medieval Metz: documents that embodied her presence when she could not travel; scripts that allowed male representatives to serve her interests and speak on her behalf; and seals that recorded her participation in ceremonial production.

Catherine Gronnaix is very much the protagonist of the next two chapters, in which Crowder extends her perspective to the uses of performance in urban religious institutions. Chapter three

shows how Gronnaix was able to assert her presence in the community through religious foundations at her parish church, St-Martin's, and a nearby Celestine priory; through endowments for liturgical performance; and through memorial processions that asserted her identity while allowing her to intervene in "transactions of power, authority, and legitimacy" (p. 101). Through a careful study of the St-Martin's building and its artistic adornment, Crowder shows that the church today "not only preserves spaces in which [Gronnaix's] spiritual performances once unfolded; it also contains contemporary objects and imagery that are associated with the performances and groups with which she was affiliated" (p. 121). Sculptures, stained glass, and a mural, all of which are associated with the Virgin Mary, "encourage the viewer to perform her devotions physically and in imitation of what she sees around her" (p. 124). On the one hand, these decorations would have allowed "the individual to explore a constructed experience of motherhood that placed maternity at the heart of the Christian mystery" (p. 124); on the other, they would have elicited practices of "self-positioning" that enabled women in particular to claim roles for themselves in male-dominated spaces (p. 126).

In chapter four, Crowder considers the ways in which Gronnaix sought to mark her presence in and influence on Metz's male monasteries. There were both "opportunities and limitations" here (p. 175). An institution like the Celestine priory afforded regular access to both sexes, and Gronnaix used endowments to "enrich the performance life of the monastery" (p. 152) and to claim direct influence over the constitution of the order. By contrast, women had largely lost the standing they once held at the monastery of St-Arnoul. Despite a legacy of Carolingian noblewomen who used financial endowments to promote histories and rituals rooted in female sanctity, women had largely "disappeared from this particular monastic stage" (p. 170). Although Gronnaix was able to endow commemorative practices there, St-Arnoul presented "a comparatively diminished role for [her sex]" (p. 170)—a loss that may have prompted women to seek out "richer and more engaging performance environments" (p. 175), including at the Celestines and St-Martin's.

The book's final chapter returns us to the figure of the female actor, in this instance a woman named Claude d'Armoises who inaugurated the *fausses pucelles* movement by presenting herself as Joan of Arc to the citizens of Metz in 1436 and claiming that stories of her execution by burning in Rouen were mere rumor. Unlike previous scholars, Crowder avoids the language of fraud in describing Claude, arguing that she was not an imposter but a performer who assumed a role that was meant to be taken as both mimetic and real. On the one hand, she asked to be called Claude, eventually married a local nobleman, and clearly signaled the "expressive, bodily practice" (p. 198) that allowed her to revive the Maid of Orleans as a theatrical part. On the other hand, not only did she claim to be Joan herself, accepting gifts "that symbolised the Pucelle identity" and producing "signs and prophetic utterances" (p. 193), but she also had that claim upheld by Joan's own brothers and the Messine republic, which formally recognized her as "Jehanne, la Pucelle de France" (p. 190). In this sense, she resembles the actor who would play "Ste Katerine de Sene" thirty years later and who would continue to embody the saint thereafter. Together, Catherine and Claude allow us "to access the performance histories of non-elite women and to position them within late medieval culture" (p. 193). In the past, both women have been considered largely in relation to elite men. Thus, scholars have found proof of the Catherine actor's achievement in her exceptional marriage and have explained the *fausses pucelles* movement by attributing it to male sponsors, who "used [female actors] in service of their own goals" (p. 197). By contrast, Crowder focuses on how "late medieval women [sought to] perform another self as an act of cultural expression and agency" (p. 203). In this sense, the choice of Joan of Arc

is hardly a surprising one: “The role [has] a distinct core: a commanding woman who is authorised to fight for the king” (p. 206).

By reading the three Catherines and Claude together, Crowder paints a remarkable picture of medieval performing women, who were able to write themselves into community and memory through “the cultivation of material and embodied practice” (p. 221). Since chronicles efface the parts women played in cultural production, and since theater historians have not always attended to forms of evidence that would give us a more detailed picture, we are left with histories that elide the reality of female performance in the period. Crowder’s achievement in this inspiring and pioneering book is to have placed women back in the spotlight, showing how they “contributed to their worlds in critical ways that often go unseen” (p. 229). Moving forward, scholars of medieval theater will be obliged to consider the claim that the *Sainte Katherine* production was not unique but exemplary. With any luck, the results will include a definitive refutation of “le mythe de l’absence des femmes,” a renewed interest in the kind of archival excavation that Crowder so expertly performs, and a broad-based effort to recover the silenced voices of now-forgotten women who in their lifetimes were determined to be heard and remembered.

NOTES

[1] Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler, “Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama,” *New Literary History* 28.2 (Spring 1997): 319.

[2] Armand Strubel, *Le théâtre au Moyen Âge: Naissance d’une littérature dramatique* (Rosny: Bréal, 2003), p. 20.

[3] Charles Mazouer, *Le théâtre français du Moyen Âge* (Paris: SEDES, 1998), p. 352.

[4] Konrad Schoell, *La farce du quinzième siècle* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1992), p. 84.

[5] Gabriella Parussa and Darwin Smith, *Le théâtre français du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance: Histoire, textes choisis, mises en scène* (Paris: L’avant-scène théâtre, 2014), p. 54.

[6] Jody Enders, *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[7] James Stokes, “Women and Performance: Evidences of Universal Cultural Suffrage in Medieval and Early Modern Lincolnshire,” in *Women Players in England, 1500-1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, ed. Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 25.

[8] Parussa and Smith, *Le théâtre français*, p. 54.

[9] Parussa, “Le théâtre des femmes au Moyen Âge: Écriture, performance et mécénat,” in *Théâtre et Révélation: Donner à voir et à entendre au Moyen Âge: Hommage à Jean-Pierre Bordier*, ed. Catherine Croizy-Naquet, Stéphanie Le Briz-Orgeur, and Jean-René Valette, 303-21 (Paris: Champion, 2017).

[10] Kate Matthews, “Textual Spaces/Playing Places: An Exploration of Convent Drama in the Abbey of Origny-Sainte-Benoîte,” *European Medieval Drama* 7 (2003): 69, 71.

[11] Matthews, "Textual Spaces/Playing Places," 80.

[12] Parussa, "Le théâtre des femmes," pp. 319-20.

[13] Parussa, "Le théâtre des femmes," p. 304.

[14] Lynette R. Muir, "Women on the Medieval Stage: The Evidence from France," *Medieval English Theatre* 7 (1985), 114.

[15] Jody Enders, *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 29-42.

Noah D. Guynn
University of California, Davis
ndguynn@ucdavis.edu

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172