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Lenard R. Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001. xiv + 300 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-674-00596-1.

Anne Martin-Fugier, *Comédienne: De Mlle Mars à Sarah Bernhardt*. 416 pp. Paris: Seuil, 2001. Notes, chronology, bibliography, and index. 21.04 € (pb). ISBN 2-02-039904-0.

Review by Charles Sowerwine, University of Melbourne.

The two books under review are, despite their similarity of subject, entirely different books about entirely different issues. Berlanstein analyses the treatment of actresses [*sic*: 1] in French culture and its significance for the evolution of gender in that culture. Martin-Fugier has written a wonderfully expansive history of women in the theater: how they became actors, how they performed, how they succeeded or failed, how they lived, how they loved. One study is a major contribution to gender history, the other a fine contribution to theater and cultural history.

Berlanstein's book is not a history of women in the theater. It is a history of representations of theater women extended to analyze French gender order and its evolution. It is a superb example of a cultural approach to gender history. Berlanstein works from the many recent advances in gender history to understand the world of the theater. He then moves back to illuminate the culture's broad gender order in a powerful but always readable macro-analysis. He substantiates, nuances, and occasionally revises the broad gender history which has emerged in the past decade. At both levels, he is erudite and sure-footed, with a marvelous grasp of the big picture and an eye for the telling detail.

This study, Berlanstein explains at the outset, "is much more about loves and lusts of Frenchmen for female players than about the quotidian practices of theatrical life. I treat actresses as cultural sites where social, class, political, and gendered forces intersected in such a way as to produce meanings that helped explain social organization" (p. 1). He achieves his aim in a wonderfully relaxed way, so free of jargon (the quoted passage is the closest the book comes to jargon) that the book can serve as an initiation into the gender history of nineteenth-century France.

The assumption underpinning the book—one which Berlanstein justifies amply—is that the perceived position of leading actresses in the economy of sexual desire and practice offers us a large window on the general culture of desire and the broad gender structure. The ways that men treat actresses and the ways that the culture represents them show us how the culture understood and represented love, desire, and sex.

Berlanstein sees five distinct periods in the evolution of this understanding. The eighteenth century, he argues, endorsed “libertinage” as appropriate conduct for aristocrats. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes sought to instill Rousseauist virtue in society. The Restoration and July Monarchy hankered after a vision of eighteenth-century elegance. The Second Empire and the early Third Republic demonstrated Republican repugnance for unmanly ways (harking back to Rousseau’s thoughts on gender and theater), which Berlanstein calls “the politics of gender panic” (p. 149 ff). And from 1880—this is Berlanstein’s most unexpected finding—the later Third Republic accepted actresses as artists, now represented as thoroughly respectable and domestic, not to say domesticated.

Berlanstein’s argument about eighteenth-century aristocratic sexual mores and the Revolutionary challenge to this gender order corresponds broadly to recent work on the period. He acknowledges the influence of Thomas Laqueur, Carole Pateman, Leora Auslander, Geneviève Fraisse, Joan Landes, and Joan Scott, as well as, perhaps unsurprisingly, Michel Foucault (pp. 4–5, 8, 243–45n). Berlanstein was previously distinguished as a social historian. (Curiously, Harvard University Press did not choose to list his previous books.[2]) He moves quickly to “reassure” those “who are skeptical about social constructionist explanations” that “I did not come to the material with any particular predisposition for this model. . . . Yet the coincidence of changes in political order and representations of actresses, on the one hand, and the extraordinary degree of intracyclical consistency, on the other hand, inevitably pushed me” to this position (p. 4).

Berlanstein’s argument about the eighteenth century is consistent with the work of Lynn Hunt, Roger Chartier, Sarah Maza, and others. For him, the fear of Rousseau, Mercier, Rétif de la Bretonne, and others, a fear of “unruly women corrupting male reason,” (p. 64) was inherent in the cast of mind that underpinned the Revolution, which in turn defined “the new gender order” on this basis (pp. 59 ff.). What he adds is an argument for the centrality of actresses in the culture of libertinism and its breakdown, which, drawing on Laqueur, he defines as a new “construction . . . of women’s subordinate position,” emphasizing “the complementarity of the sexes rather than women’s lesser status” (p. 61). By focusing on actresses, he sees signs of the impending breakdown of the old gender order and of implementation of the new order well before the Revolution and, most interestingly, intrinsically linked to the Revolution. In a typically fascinating study of one incident, he shows how male actors of the Comédie-française—all future revolutionaries—met to write its *cahier de doléances* and instead initiated a novel effort to exclude women because “they are excluded by law from all virile functions” (p. 75).

This and other similar evidence leads him to side with Joan Landes against Dominique Godineau. The exclusion of women was, as Landes argues, inherent in the new order. Berlanstein states, “It was not the case that the revolutionaries opened political possibilities for women only to reverse themselves later because groups of females proved to be too potent a political force” (p. 76).[3] Interestingly, the beginnings of a counter-case to Landes’ argument may be emerging now, too late for Berlanstein’s study: several recent writers, led by Carla Hesse, have found examples of female success in print, in opera, and in the salon during the very period when the current orthodoxy would see women’s being restricted.[4] Yet Berlanstein may have the basis of a response. “By giving adult men . . . full citizenship” and beginning the realization of separate spheres, “restoring” men and women to their rightful places,” he argues, the Revolution “offered hope that unruly women could not easily pervert male reason” (p. 80). Have Hesse and others found holes through which women were allowed to sneak because they were no longer a threat, or have they indeed found a fundamental weakness in the new orthodoxy?

Berlanstein’s argument on the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century is unlikely to arouse as much debate. He is convincing in showing that post-Napoleonic culture sought a return to old regime sexual mores and sharp in demonstrating how that return was nevertheless inflected by the fundamental shift which, in his terms, defined “the Modern Gender Order,” as one chapter is entitled, between 1760 and 1815. He is fun on the erotics of the mid-century, when stage performers seem really to have offered the

height of eroticism, on- and off-stage. And he is insightful on the Republican reaction to this culture, a horror of the debilitating effects of lascivious women, particularly those of the stage.

Berlanstein's most original insight and the one which may excite disagreement, concerns the *fin-de-siècle*. For him the evidence is clear: just as the Revolution's success in establishing visibly male as well as popular sovereignty calmed fears that women would undermine male reason and virtue, so the Third Republic's success led not only to the abatement of "antipornocratic discourse" (p. 158) but indeed to a redefinition of the actress; she became, finally, an artist worthy of public respect.[5] He is certainly right on the specifics. His evidence is colorful but solid and wide-ranging. And he is certainly right that the Third Republic established a masculine polity, the most masculine of the five republics.

Is he right, however, to infer from this redefinition a challenge to the now widely accepted view that the *fin-de-siècle* witnessed a crisis of male sexual anxiety (expressed as fear of decadence) and an attack on independent women (pp. 180-81)? To read the period as exclusively antifeminist would be a grave error. But one cannot dismiss the accumulation of hostile representations of women, any more than one can dismiss the positive ones Berlanstein has found, the development of feminism and the construction of the archetypal new woman. Siân Reynolds reminds us that Proust's Albertine wheeled her bicycle along with her "gang" of female friends. They were not the modest, sedate young women of "times past." [6] Did not the deployment of both negative and positive images of women result from their increasing visibility? Overall, however, one cannot praise Berlanstein's work too highly.

Martin-Fugier's radically different approach to the same empirical core also deserves praise, although it is less theoretically grounded and less innovative. Martin-Fugier has pioneered the history of women with *La Place des bonnes* (1979) and her chapter on this in the classic collection, *Misérable et glorieuse: la femme du XIXe siècle* (1980), *La Bourgeoise, femme au temps de Paul Bourget* (1983), and a superb chapter in Volume IV of the celebrated *History of Private Life* (French ed., 1987; English ed., 1991). Now she turns to women in the theater, beginning with the débuts of Mlle Mars (1779-1847) during the Revolution, though she does hark back to eighteenth-century theater, and ending with the funeral of Sarah Bernhardt in 1923. She brings to this new subject the same exquisite prose, the same attention to detail, the same incisive thematic treatment. While she does address gender issues, though with little analysis, her aim is to give us a thick description of the lived experience of female actors as well as a study of the evolution of the nature and place of theater in Parisian culture.

Martin-Fugier begins with accounts of two contrasting funerals. First, Sarah Bernhardt, the world-famous actress—possibly the most well-known and certainly the highest paid of her day as well as the most travelled; she was a virtual ambassador for French culture. Martin-Fugier describes Bernhardt's grandiose public (though not state) funeral in 1923: over two days, at least 30,000 people came and knelt by the famous coffin she had kept all her life and in which she had sometimes slept, before a huge procession headed by the Minister of Public Instruction and the Director of Beaux-Arts led her to the Père-Lachaise Cemetery. Second, Adrienne Lecouvreur, the greatest actress of the Comédie française and friend of Voltaire. Martin-Fugier describes her pathetic funeral in 1730: the Abbé of Saint-Sulpice accepted the 1,000 livres she left his parish but refused to open the doors to the procession, much less to bless her body, and refused her the right to be buried anywhere in the cemetery, even among the children who had died without baptism, so that she was buried instead at a crossroads near what is today the quai d'Orsay.

Martin-Fugier divides her subject into eight thematic chapters, following broadly the course of a woman's acting career. She thus begins with entry into the profession. Often women chose acting to escape a proletarian destiny (pp. 21 ff.), a point which Berlanstein also makes but more systematically (pp. 22 ff.). They began roles through personal connections, like Mlle Mars, whose career began in 1792, at the age of 12, when her mother arranged with her "compagnon" for her daughter to play cross-dressing roles. They trained by apprenticeship, though once Napoleon established an "Ecole de

déclamation” in the Conservatoire de musique it played an increasing role in training actors, becoming preeminent under the Second Empire, when Sarah Bernhardt attended it (pp. 28-29).

Success was not guaranteed and depended on the *débutante’s* first night. That in turn depended on the beauty as well as the talent of the actress, on paying the claque, and on winning over critics, not only by performance but also by dinners, indirect bribes, and other personal attentions (pp. 38-39). Costumes too played a major role (pp. 73-76). All these expenses were borne by the actors, although the Comédie-française furnished costumes from 1881 (p. 74).^[7]

The expenses involved in becoming an actor and indeed in remaining one if one failed to achieve star status were beyond most women embarking on theatrical careers. Costumes alone cost a fortune. In just one act of Offenbach’s *Le Château à toto* (1868), Blanche d’Antigny—one of the models for Zola’s Nana—wore a dress that cost 16,000 francs, in another act one that cost 6,000 francs. The latter sum would enable a family to live in modest petit-bourgeois manner for a year.^[8] In 1831 Mlle Mars refused to perform Dumas’ *Antony* until a new chandelier was installed, giving more light to show off her costume (p. 115). Berlanstein points out that theater women’s costumes on stage and dress off stage had a profound influence on fashion from the eighteenth century on (p. 55).

Martin-Fugier seems to accept the prevailing view that the costs of an acting career, especially costumes, forced women to take a “protector” (pp. 24-25). If we look beyond the economic situation to see why such pressures were maintained, we are, I think, led to accept Berlanstein’s argument that “the social imagination figured theater women as mistresses of powerful men,” that actresses’ participation was key to the sexual economy of the old and new regimes, though in very different ways (p. 26). This argument, however, is central to Berlanstein’s project and not to Martin-Fugier’s. She makes the point inadvertently, quoting Edmond de Goncourt: “L’actrice du Théâtre-Français [Comédie-française] est la maîtresse commandée, imposée à tout homme arrivé en politique” (p. 84).

Martin-Fugier takes us not into gender analysis but into the profession itself. In a chapter that will fascinate theater buffs, she shows how intense the actor’s life was in nineteenth-century Paris. An evening at the theater started as early as 6:00 p.m. since it included more than one play: the Comédie-française, for example, gave a five-act tragedy first, then a five-act comedy; only a great success would be performed on its own (pp. 53, 116). Actors had to accommodate this pressure by playing three or even four roles in the same week, which made prompters essential (p. 55).

Martin-Fugier also evokes how women performed their roles, off and on stage. She tells us in detail about the great role creations: Marie Dorval in Dumas père’s *Antony* (1831), Eugénie Doche in Dumas fils’ *La Dame aux camélias* (1852), Sarah Bernhardt in Rostand’s *L’Aiglon* (1900). She tells us how actresses toured—Adelina Patti took her own billiard table with her and played after each performance (p. 171)—how they loved and found or avoided their protectors, lovers, and husbands. In a fascinating chapter, “Sociabilité,” she tells us about their strained but close relations to women of good society.

Martin-Fugier closes on a broad theme which parallels Berlanstein’s: the progress toward greater acceptance and integration of the acting profession. On this, she notes the diminution of the Catholic church’s authority, which facilitated integration, and the rise of a bourgeois model of domesticity, which hampered it. Here, Berlanstein’s use of theoretical work gives his work much sharper focus. Martin-Fugier does not follow the ways in which the nineteenth-century gender order affected actresses’ lives and work and certainly does not seek to move from this microcosm to the broad gender order.

Martin-Fugier touches too on the evolution of theater away from old regime sociability toward modern notions of attentive reception, which was ensured by darkening theaters during performances from the late nineteenth century (p. 84). Earlier in the century, lights stayed on through the show, people chatted

or strolled about, and some theaters, such as that of Rouen, maintained the practice of cheap tickets for an open pit, which did not gain seats in the stalls or orchestra until late in the century (pp. 119, 156). Martin-Fugier does not follow her research into performance and performance practice with analysis of the way that the culture operated, as, say, James Johnson did in his superb *Listening in Paris*.^[9] Martin-Fugier's method works against her analyzing or even describing systematically these sorts of cultural evolutions, which call for greater theoretical grounding.

Her method is thick description by the accumulation of thematically linked detail. Some may view this detail as excessive. Despite the mastery with which Martin-Fugier deploys her examples and threads her way with ease and elegance through so much detail, the effect is of accumulation of masses of specifics. In some chapters, I did find this overwhelming, with regrettable effects on the promptness of this review. The chapter entitled *A la ville*, which deals with actresses' sex lives--both ends of the spectrum but more of the spicy than the domestic--accumulated so many examples and names that I did flag occasionally at the profusion of lovers and *ménages à trois* (or more). Most of the time, however, I found the book enjoyable as well as informative. In wonderfully sure-footed fashion, Martin-Fugier tells us everything we ever wanted to know about women in the theater. If there is anything else to know, I can't imagine what it might be.

Both books are handsomely produced. What a pity neither publisher gave us any images! Berlanstein suffers from Harvard's inexplicable failure to do a full index; it is an index of proper names, almost as restricted as the traditional French index of persons, which is all we find in Martin-Fugier's book. A full table of contents, with subheads and sub-subheads compensates slightly. Neither publisher managed a bibliography. Seuil has at least made the effort to indicate the pages covered by endnotes, as of course Harvard has done.

These two books fit together admirably. Berlanstein explains the significance of theater culture while Martin-Fugier takes us into its world. With Berlanstein one yearns occasionally to know more of the theater itself, and Martin-Fugier tells us that. With her, one yearns to know more of the significance of what she tells us. Berlanstein does some of this, in focusing on sex and gender issues in the broader society, but neither analyses the culture of performance, the ways the theater actually worked with its audiences.

There is thus a case here for some hybridization or at least a bit more theory from the French side and perhaps another book on the theater itself from the American side. But I may be asking too much. They are both exciting and significant books, and they are both great reads. Read them.

NOTES

[1] Berlanstein explains his use of "actresses" thus: "actors' would have been too confusing, since my study demands attention to gender specificity" (p. 2).

[2] Lenard R. Berlanstein, *The Working People of Paris, 1871-1914* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); ed., *The Industrial Revolution and Work in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Rewriting Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); ed., *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

[3] Cf. Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and their French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Joan B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in*

Eighteenth-Century France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) and *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

[4] Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and “The Cultural Contradictions of Feminism in the French Revolution,” in Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman, eds., *The Age of Cultural Revolutions: Britain and France, 1750-1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Hesse’s argument is reinforced by Jacqueline Letzter and Robert Adelson, *Women Writing Opera: Creativity and Controversy in the Age of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and by Steven D. Kale, “Women, Salons, and the State in the Aftermath of the French Revolution,” *Journal of Women’s History* 13 (2002): 54-80.

[5] Berlanstein uses the term, as other scholars have done, from the French word *pornocratie*, coined as he explains (p. 142) by Proudhon. Cf. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *La pornocratie, ou les femmes dans les temps modernes* ([published posthumously] Paris: 1875)

[6] Siân Reynolds, “Albertine’s Bicycle, or: Women and French Identity during the *Belle Epoque*,” *Literature and History* 10 (Spring 2001): 37; cf. Marcel Proust, *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* (Paris, 1954) I, p. 788. See also Christopher Thompson, “Un troisième sexe? Les bourgeoises et la bicyclette dans la France fin de siècle,” *Le Mouvement Social* 192 (July-September 2000): 288-38, and Marc Angenot, “La fin d’un sexe: le discours sur les femmes en 1889,” *Romantisme* 63 (1989): 13.

[7] Martin-Fugier uses the formal term, Théâtre-français; I have maintained Comédie-française for the sake of consistency.

[8] The income comparison is mine; see Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 8. The income levels listed there date from 1894-95 but would have risen only slightly in the intervening twenty-six years.

[9] James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Charles Sowerwine
University of Melbourne
c.sowerwine@unimelb.edu.au

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