

Book/video reviews

Women, Modernism and Performance. Penny Farfan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; illustrations, xi + 173 pages; ISBN 0-521-83780-4; \$75.00US (cloth).

Penny Farfan's *Women, Modernism and Performance* is an engaging exploration of the lives and careers of a variety of female literary and performing artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose work both informed and was informed by modernism. Employing a broad definition of performance, Farfan bolsters her analysis of literary, critical, and performance texts with evidence from sources such as courtroom trials, public lectures and "the performance of gender in the practice of everyday life" (3) as she constructs her arguments about these artists' contributions to "the transformation of the representation of gender in both art and life" (119). The six chapters, skillfully woven together, combine to create a vivid portrait of feminist discourse in modern theatre that is a welcome contribution to the fields of gender studies, performance studies, and theatre history.

The chapters dovetail with one another on various levels, creating a multifaceted narrative that explores the complex relationship between "representation and lived experience" (8). Farfan begins by establishing Henrik Ibsen's tragic heroine Hedda Gabler as a complicated icon for late nineteenth and early twentieth century women, putting Hedda, and Ibsen's other heroines, at the center of her discussion of two actresses, Elizabeth Robins and Ellen Terry. Farfan's juxtaposition of the actresses' different reactions to Ibsen's work raises interesting questions about interpretations and applications of feminist thought. One of the strengths of Farfan's consideration of Robins and

Terry is that she views their theatrical work in relation to their work as theorists and public intellectuals, throwing their artistic endeavors into relief against the cultural sphere out of which they emerged. In chapter three Farfan deftly segues into a discussion of the ways in which several of Virginia Woolf's works idealize "the stage as potential site for expansive and liberating self-expression" (50). Chapter four's examination of obscenity and the intersection of culture at large and stage representations is a tour-de-force of the interdisciplinary approach that Farfan outlines in her introduction, as she draws connections between the ways in which literary, visual, and performing arts reflect and challenge cultural attitudes about gender. In the final two chapters, Farfan explores Woolf's "interest in performance as a site of subversive potential" (90-91), and picks apart the myth of the "cultural icon of the tragic female artist" (102) by looking at the posthumous reputation of American dancer Isadora Duncan. These two chapters raise compelling questions about the "transformative potential of art for social actors" (118), though the arguments contained therein are not as finely or persuasively wrought as those of the previous chapters.

In *Women, Modernism and Performance*, Penny Farfan offers a counter-narrative to the "narratives of modern theatre history that...do not address the efforts of women artists to develop alternatives to both mainstream theatre practice and to the patriarchal avant garde" (2). Although it may be somewhat daunting for readers who are not already familiar with the period and the people that Farfan discusses, the text provides a fascinating and fresh look

at modern theatre history and serves as a provocative model for historical research.

Margaret F. Savilonis
independent scholar - California

Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Postwar Popular Culture. Rebecca Sullivan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005; illustrations; xi + 255 pages; ISBN 0-8020-3776-3; \$29.95 (paper).

At least fifteen films featuring nuns were released in America in the 1950s and 60s; a remarkable nine were under production in 1966 alone. How is it that a time known best for its social turbulence and flouting of conventional sexual and religious mores apparently also had a fascination with the lives of celibate, cloistered, and presumably conservative women? Rebecca Sullivan's superb, groundbreaking volume explores this question in detail. Sullivan persuasively argues that nuns provided a site for exploration and negotiation of the tensions arising out of postwar culture's shift of emphasis towards individualism, coupled with a gender regime of mandatory domesticity for women. Nuns offered a "third way" between the sexually liberated "swinging single" and the "domestic goddess," in an ironic admixture of independence (from men) and submission (in the institution). As Sullivan puts it, "nuns were a third option that fired up dreams of feminine independence while smothering any possibility that the flames might spread out of control" (12). Throughout her discussion of how nuns figured in popular culture sites such as film, folk music and television, Sullivan also offers a sustained critique of both feminist analyses that dismiss religion as irrelevant and/or impose an unexamined view of "liberated" sexuality as a self-evident appropriate cultural norm. Her subtle, complex, brilliant and original text sets a new standard for the analysis of "discourses and doctrines of

femininity and how they are applied not just to women but to places, practices and objects" (216). Eminently readable, and highly recommended.

Randi Warne
Mount Saint Vincent University

Literary Sisterhoods: Imagining Women Artists. Deborah Heller. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005; illustrations; xiii + 182 pages; ISBN 0-7735-2909-8; \$27.95 (paper).

In *Literary Sisterhoods: Imagining Women Artists*, Deborah Heller casts her eye over five authors writing across Europe and North America, from the start of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth: Germaine de Staël, George Eliot, Anna Banti, Alice Munro, and Grace Paley. By juxtaposing their fiction, Heller aims to chart a feminist "genealogy of the figure of the woman artist" (3). Combining close readings with biographical and cultural analyses, she explores the affinities and contrasts between her authors, the authors and their fictional artists, and the artist figures and other characters in the texts.

As Heller suggests, these relationships are striking, worthy of critical pursuit. She highlights the dialogues her central authors took up with each other and with authors whose works figure more tacitly in the study. Heller opens the chapter on Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* with Eliot's assessment of Staël as "a woman of great intellectual power" and references to Staël's *Corinne* in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*; she notes Staël's influence on George Sand and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who were in turn "enormously admired" by Eliot (37). Heller effectively turns our attention to the rich and diverse ways her authors develop their characters, and how their characters engage with each other: she considers, for example, Banti's mix of fiction, biography, and history in