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Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage (review)

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CYNTHIA LOWENTHAL. *Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage*.
 Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.
 272 + x pages. \$40.00.

Reviewed by **Jessica Munns**

Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage seeks to identify and characterize the effects of colonialism, an increasingly capitalist economy, and the attenuation of traditional concepts and markers of status on the broad culture and particular cultural artifacts—drama and theatre—of the Restoration and early eighteenth century. Cynthia Lowenthal’s primary interest is in how far these forces of change created a new sense of the self—of identity—that, without entirely abandoning notions of essentiality, placed an increasing emphasis on the bodily *performance* of self, or indeed, selves. Such performances, achieved through dress, gesture, speech, and situation, both further undermined ideas of single and fixed identity (in terms of gender, status, nation, and race) as well as, almost paradoxically, creating new boundaries, definitions, and limitations of self. Her emphasis on the ways in which performing and observing are intertwined, the theatre whose very nature depends on this conjunction of activities, provides Lowenthal with the ideal working laboratory in which to test out cultural shifts and anxieties relating to identity.

In the introductory chapter, Lowenthal posits that, along with the changing political and material conditions, involvement in war and in trade provided players both onstage and offstage with a “plethora of identity signals” that they could “self-consciously manipulate” (28). In her subsequent chapters, Lowenthal examines ways in which this increased range and fluidity of “identity signals” were articulated on stage to express ideas of autonomy and liberation and also to regulate the boundaries of national and personal identity. The investigation is carried out in relation to “four sites of analysis” that represent topoi often dramatized on the Restoration stage. These are “Imperial Identities,” “National Identities,” “Discursive Identities,” and “Monstrous Identities,” and they make up the four major chapters of the book.

“Imperial Identities” concentrates on Dryden’s *Indian Emperour* (1665), while referring also to Lope de Vega’s *Discovery of the New World* (c. 1590), and Aphra Behn’s *The Widdow Ranter* (performed 1689). The inclusion of Lope de Vega’s play in the discussion of colonial encounter and settlement texts is welcome and, in discussing plays prior to Dryden, the author might have considered including John Fletcher’s *The Island Princess* (c. 1619). Lowenthal’s discussion draws attention to the crucial role of “native” women in all three texts. With regard to *The Indian Emperour*, she points out that the

love conflict between Montezuma's sons over Alibech provides grounds for the internal conflict that justifies conquest, while Cydaria's love for Cortés offers a model for peaceful submission and the romance of conquest. In contrast, Lowenthal argues that once conquest has given way to settlement, as in Behn's play, "the Indian Queen cannot participate in the 'romance' of conquest" but is "unassimilable," and slaughtered in error by her English lover, "she dies on a land no longer her own" (75). The colonial enterprise inevitably raises questions not merely about the identity of the "other" but about the identity of the colonizing nation, now moving so fluidly beyond its own borders, even as its own traditions, and new presences and forces undermine and alter habits.

This leads to the third chapter's examination of the ways in which national identities were negotiated on the Restoration stage. William Wycherley's *Gentleman Dancing Master* (1673), Behn's *The Dutch Lover* (1673) and Mary Pix's *Adventures in Madrid* (1706) provide the focus for discussion of the interweaving of ideas of nation, status, and gender under pressure from a rising mercantile class. Lowenthal sees both Wycherley and Behn as demonstrating the dangers of crossing boundaries of nation and status. The contrast with Pix's *Adventures*, similar to the contrast with Behn's *Widow Ranter* in the previous chapter, enables Lowenthal to point to the changed commercial and cultural climate of the early eighteenth century. Where gentlemanliness versus mercantile vulgarity are issues for Behn and Wycherley, Pix, despite, or rather because of, a dizzying series of cross-dressing and national disguises, has a firm sense of English identity and superiority. Her energetic English imperialists reject the styles and manners of an effete Spanish nobility and carry away their women and their wealth.

Throughout, Lowenthal has stressed issues of specularly allied to issues of race, status, and gender, and in her fourth chapter she examines the discourses that emerged around that significant new figure on the Restoration stage—the actress. The intense interest aroused by the sexualized and profoundly observed body of the actress is related to a growing concern over the existence of authentic "self" beneath dress and performance, heightened by a correspondence between the idea of the actress and the prostitute. Lowenthal draws on Catherine Gallagher and perhaps exaggerates these connections, which both Deborah Payne Fisk and Derek Hughes have queried, to argue that objectifying and sexualizing actresses was a means of containing their dangerous ability to mimic—in dress and manner—the aristocratic women they portrayed on stage. The discussion continues in the

final chapter, moving from efforts to objectify the actress to a discussion of those occasions when the female roles demanded the production of an extreme subjectivity.

Lowenthal frames her discussion in terms of tropes of excess and monstrosity, arguing that the “monster marks the *limits* of a culture’s self-definition and the consequences of transgression” (144). Lowenthal concentrates on rape as a monstrous act of sexual excess that transforms both perpetrator and victim into monsters. Interestingly, rape is characterized in terms of the pursuit of “novelty” linked to consumerism, rather than power, or a voyeuristic delight in observing disheveled actresses. Throughout, one of the pleasures of Lowenthal’s book is her discussion of lesser known texts, such as Nicholas Brady’s *Rape* (1692), discussed here in contrast to Mary Pix’s *Ibrahim, the Thirteenth Emperour* (1696) and Delariviere Manley’s *Almyna: or, the Arabian Vow* (1707). Pix and Manley, Lowenthal argues, provide radical texts of women who defy defilement, react, fight, and reject the “passive and private virtues of women” to become “monsters of virtue” (178) in their transgression of the conventional conclusions for violated women. As Lowenthal concludes in her Epilogue, the period offers many examples of the “exploration of the expanding and newly various opportunities for performing identities” (209), identities that both liberated and disturbed, as well as offering new boundaries. Undoubtedly, Lowenthal’s analyses throughout *Performing Identities* confirm the vitality of the Restoration stage.

Lowenthal has written an interesting book, valuable not merely for its particular analyses, although these are always valid and lucid, but above all for an *approach* that draws into one (mobile and complex) venue the tectonic shifts a nation transforming itself into a major commercial and colonial power experiences. For those of us engaged in cultural criticism, the major challenge is to unite knowledge of specific alterations in the material and political economy with more elusive but palpable alterations in subjectivities, and the ways, means, and manners of living—and thinking about living. Lowenthal’s concentration on issues of identity, as written and performed on stage, offers a model for the syntheses of what might be termed “data” with interpretation and analysis. This will be a useful and, I think, a much used and cited work: it is clearly written and uses theories to explain not to mystify.

There are a few places where more careful copy-editing might have been exercised. Although the Act of Succession in 1701 established George the Elector of Hanover as the next king, it is a little early to describe one of the “Brit-

ish” aims in the war with France and Spain in 1700 as safeguarding “their own Hanoverian kings” (10) when Queen Anne was alive if not very lively. It is also a little early to write of “Britain” as a political entity. However, who can complain in a work so deeply concerned with the fragility and indeterminacy of identity if Louis Montrose becomes Louise on page 16?

