

Ill-fated Women, Femmes Fatales, and Feminism

[*Acts of Desire: Women and Sex on Stage 1800-1930*](#). Sos Eltis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 266 pp.

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<1>Sos Eltis's *Acts of Desire: Women and Sex on Stage 1800-1930* joins a rich body of scholarship exploring the representation of female sexuality on stage in Britain's long nineteenth-century. Most previous research on this topic has focused on women's work as actors, playwrights, and managers in the theatres of the period; audience reception to specific performers or performances; or theoretical analyses of the relationship between the representation of female sexuality on stage and social norms and expectations. Eltis's book, however, focuses on text more than performance, as she analyzes and categorizes the portrayal of female sexuality on the nineteenth-century British stage through her careful readings of over 250 plays. Seeing her work as a process of what Jackie Bratton has termed "intertheatrical reading" (2), Eltis traces how the critical tropes and theatrical conventions repeated in plays and entertainments of the period created a shared language of representation comprehensible to both playwrights and audiences. She also notes that these reflections of women's sexuality on stage were not singular but social: "...not only about women's sexual choices, they were also about gendered notions of deference, duty, and ownership; about women's civil, legal, political and employment rights; about education, emancipation, the future of the nation, and the health of the race" (3).

<2>Eltis begins her study with tropes around "Seduced Maidens and Resourceful Maids" in early nineteenth-century melodrama. In addition to tracing the clear-cut moral lessons implied by these plays, she reads the use of the dramatic tableau — and its ability to open the possibility for alternative narratives for the spectator's imagination — as a site that could simultaneously affirm such contradictory feelings as a sense of sexual propriety, sensual titillation, and even critical social engagement. Chapter Two, "Bigamy and Sensation," describes how portraying female protagonists caught in intentional or accidental bigamy allowed for allusions to adultery that would have been too racy for the nineteenth-century British stage, although such stories were readily enjoyed in sensation novels like *East Lynne* (1860-61)

and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Taking their cue from the popularity of such sensation fiction and the rise of the "sensation scene" in plays like Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), sensation dramas, Eltis argues, added to the interpretive possibilities of the melodramatic tableau "the crucial ingredients of a contemporary setting and a spectacular scene which exploited the very latest in dazzling stage effects" (65). The sensation drama made spectacularly visible illicit desires that could not be written into the dialogue of the play, potentially undermining the rigid sexual codes British theatres were expected to uphold.

<3>As this study moves toward the second half of the nineteenth century, Eltis begins to trace a body of plays that engage directly with public discourse about prostitution, adultery and divorce. The threatened maidens and accidental bigamists that dominated earlier dramatic representations of women's sexuality were supplanted by the glamorous prostitute of the demi-monde who realizes too late that her luxurious lifestyle is inferior to true love and traditional marriage as she receives her poetic comeuppance through dying of consumption or committing suicide. In her third chapter, "English Decency and French Immorality," Eltis traces a range of creative compromises among censors, playwrights, and theatre managers that reveal the government's anxiety about representing women and sex on stage and the arbitrary judgments of a censor trying to hold back a wave of new ideas. The most influential of these fallen woman plays was Alexander Dumas's *La Dame Aux Camélias* (1852) based upon his 1848 novel of the same name. It is in this chapter that Eltis moves furthest from text analysis, as she describes how performance styles of particular actresses worked against a moralistic reading of Dumas's internationally famous drama. Eltis provides a range of examples here, including Maria Piccolomini's drawn out death scene in her 1875 performance of Verdi's opera based on *La Dame aux Camélias*, *La Traviata* (1853); Helena Modjeska's modest underplaying of the heroine's career and her terminal illness in the 1880 performance of Mortimer's adaptation of the play, *Heartsease* (1875); and the French-language performance of Dumas's original script by the international celebrity Sara Bernhardt in England in 1881. In each case, Eltis notes, the actress's body served to break down the barrier between the poetic justice served to the consumptive heroine of Dumas's original novel and play and the fetishized spectacle of "the desired and desiring woman" (113), portrayed on stage by the sexually compelling body of a celebrated female performer.

<4>In "Sex Problems and Nature's Law," Eltis continues to consider the fallen woman and the world of the demi-monde, but through the lens of changing ideas about women's rights within Britain. New laws like the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 gave women "a recognized independent legal identity separate from their husbands" (115) and plays began to reflect this new social status. Melodramas responded to audience demands by dealing more directly with adultery than they had earlier in the century. At the same time, Eltis argues, the problem plays

of Ibsen and Pinero, for instance, turned the theatre into a forum for more direct portrayals of tensions between desire and duty, personal freedom and social integration, and made explicit the double standard of moral expectations for men and women.

<5>Chapter Five, “Workers and Wages,” explores how such “new woman” concerns as socialism and suffrage created female protagonists embracing full and unapologetic control of their sexuality and reproduction. Using Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893) as an early, famous example, Eltis points out at the beginning of the chapter the ways that dramatists at the turn of the twentieth century undermined the sensual and sentimental images of prostitution made popular by Dumas, and replaced them with more frank critiques of gender discrimination and economic disparity. She then illustrates through a wide range of examples how other feminist and avant-garde playwrights pushed the argument for sexual and economic equality further than Shaw’s play. Playwrights like Elizabeth Robins, H.M. Harwood and Inez Bensusan created immediate and compelling representations of the economic realities of prostitution, but also represented or made overt calls to feminist activism. While many of the plays described in this chapter were performed either in avant-garde theatre clubs like the Independent Theatre Society, or political arts groups like the Actresses’ Franchise League or Edith Craig’s Pioneer Players, Eltis also relates changing images of the working woman on mainstream stages, such as Walter and Frederick Melville’s extremely popular “bad-girl melodramas.” Despite moralistic titles like *That Wretch of a Woman* (1901) or *The Bad Girl of the Family* (1907), Eltis argues that these popular dramas “melded the seduced maiden and the resourceful maid of early Victorian melodrama to produce a modern heroine, financially self-supporting, quick-witted and strong-armed” (198). Representations of sexually or economically independent women had found their way onto both the avant-garde and popular stage.

<6>By the early twentieth century, Eltis claims, growing understandings of “female sexuality as spontaneous and natural, governed by the individual’s will and self-restraint” (203) made Victorian drama’s notions of female sexuality and virtue passé. But Victorian stagings of female sexuality remained in the popular memory, and informed the aesthetics of plays to come. In her sixth chapter, “Rewriting the Past,” Eltis traces how playwrights of the 1910s and 1920s referred to such older tropes as the seduction plot, with its assumptions that a “fallen woman” could only be raised up through marriage, to highlight sexual double standards and the economic and moral constructs that benefited from the perpetuation of those standards. The chapter ends with several detailed examples of Somerset Maugham’s and Noël Coward’s wry rewrites of Victorian stage morality in their plays’ discussions of gender and sexuality in post-war Britain. Plays she describes include Maugham’s *Home and Beauty* (1919) and *East of Suez* (1922), Coward’s *Easy Virtue* (1925) and *Private Lives* (1930). In her conclusion, she traces how the revision of nineteenth-century representations of sex and gender continues to flourish in contemporary queer and camp theatre.

<7>*Acts of Desire* provides new and important readings about the nineteenth-century theatre's portrayal of women's sexuality and refines our assumptions about the tropes that emerged from those plays which continue to inform playwriting and performance today. Etis makes her arguments through a wealth of famous and forgotten play texts, censors' reports, theatre reviews, legal documents, novels, and sociological writings of the period under study. The first two chapters even engage with particular dramas that were in dialogue with popular visual arts. Those less familiar with nineteenth-century drama will want more background on the broad range of theatres and audiences during this period in theatre history than Etis provides, or more theorization of the tropes she analyzes, but such material is richly available in other texts. Instead, *Acts of Desire* offers the student and scholar an exquisitely thorough and detailed knowledge of the broad repertoire of plays established during the long nineteenth century that continues directly and indirectly to inform the way we portray women and sex on stage.