

## BOOK REVIEW

Penny Farfan. *Women, Modernism & Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

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Until recently, the modernist canon has been dominated primarily by white men. In fact it was not until the 1990s that feminist scholars, such as Bonnie Kime Scott, Tracy Davis, Bridget Elliot, and Jo-Ann Wallace, truly made headway in establishing a modernist feminist discourse by working female authors into the male-centric canon. Despite their efforts, modernism is still mostly considered a masculine form and when the feminine is examined the focus remains, for the most part, in one of two areas: 1) on female characters in male-authored plays, or 2) on female playwrights/authors. Little has been written about modernist female performers or performance, which is why Penny Farfan's book, *Women, Modernism & Performance*, is an essential study for contemporary modernist scholars.

The goal of Farfan's work is to balance the scales of feminist study in relation to modernism by transferring the focus from the role of "female characters in male-authored plays" to "the efforts of women artists to develop alternatives both to mainstream theatre practice and to the patriarchal avant garde" (2). In order to do this she focuses on both "actresses" (Elizabeth Robins and Ellen Terry) and female artists heavily influenced by the theater (Virginia Woolf and Isadora Duncan). Hence, Farfan's study is interdisciplinary in nature, concentrating on literature, dance, pageantry, and the suffrage movement in addition to theater and dramatic literature. Such an approach is especially effective because she examines the performative methods used by each of her subjects regardless of their varied disciplines.

Farfan begins her exploration by arguing that suffragists and feminists are not one and the same. This distinction is vital to her

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argument because Ellen Terry, Isadora Duncan, and Virginia Woolf were “less interested in votes for women than in less directly political modes of social and cultural transformation [;]” whereas, Elizabeth Robins and Edith Craig were known for their suffragist and/or political efforts (4). Since Farfan’s argument depends upon the reader buying into this idea, in the chapters devoted to Terry, Duncan, and Woolf, Farfan aptly situates her subject as a feminist before discussing performance.

Ironically, yet appropriately, Farfan’s first chapter focuses on Elizabeth Robins’s response to Henrik Ibsen’s “women’s plays.” According to Farfan, Robins’s career can be broken up into two major time periods—that before her portrayal, which Robins marked as an “epoch-making event,” of Hedda Gabler and that after (12). It was not until after reading Ibsen’s final play, *When We Dead Awaken*, that Robins realized Ibsen was not the “champion of feminism” she believed him to be and in response to his “failings,” she authored her own suffragist play, *Votes For Women* (12). Although Robins’s work does address many of Ibsen’s “failings,” Farfan argues that it does so by subjugating women once again to patriarchy. Robins’s main character, Vida Levering is “ultimately a melodramatically conventional victim” described in the stage directions as “attractive,” “feminine,” and graceful; hence, though Robins succeeds in highlighting the feminist point of view she relies on the convention of the “womanly woman” in order to accomplish her goal (26). Still, Farfan maintains the importance of Robins’s play because, although it provides no answers, it does identify a “crucial problem for feminist artists;” how is one to portray theatrically challenging characters without participating in the “objectification of women” already present in the mainstream theatre? (7).

In chapters two and three, Farfan turns her focus to Ellen Terry and Virginia Woolf’s critique of Terry’s acting. Steeped in a Victorian world view and a “transcendent utopian idealism,” Ellen Terry held much appreciation for Shakespeare’s idealist women and little appreciation for the gritty women of Ibsen. Upon this basis, Farfan insightfully proposes that Terry “embodied the contradiction between old and new that has been theorized as definitive of modern drama” (7). This “contradiction,” contends Farfan, intrigued writer Virginia Woolf whose 1935 play, *Freshwater*, uses Ellen Terry as protagonist. Furthermore, Farfan suggests that Terry clarified for Woolf her “sense of the historical

entrapment of women in restrictive, male-determined roles" (50). Although the chapters devoted to Ellen Terry are an engrossing read, it seems at times that Farfan is reporting on the history rather than allowing her own voice to contribute to the discourse.

In chapter four, "Staging the Ob/scene," Farfan first addresses Djuna Barnes's play *The Dove* and its exploration of lesbian sexuality. She draws an interesting parallel between Barnes's play and Woolf's writings on Ellen Terry, suggesting that Woolf implied a "relationship between representation and lived experience" that is further evident in *The Dove's* "exploration of how the hegemonic representational tradition has rendered autonomous female sexuality unthinkable and invisible," or "ob/scene" referring to both the sexual connotation and the literal (8). The use of this terminology aids Farfan's discussion of the play's climax, which she argues represents Barnes's call for destruction of the patriarchal system and in doing so redefines "the obscene from a feminist perspective" (72). Farfan's analysis of Barnes provides the groundwork for continued discussion of the ob/scene, but because her treatment is so compact it appears as if she is attempting to include an entire book's worth of material in a single chapter. After offering a condensed reading of obscenity in *Hedda Gabler*, Farfan turns to an examination of Rosa Bonheur as portrayed by Edith Craig in the suffrage drama *A Pageant of Great Women*. Farfan seems to be quite intrigued at the possibility of linking performer and character and although she makes a strong case in favor of this linkage, in doing so she assumes that the women's (Craig, Terry, Robins) goals included more than the purely artistic wish to portray interesting, fully developed characters.

In chapter five Farfan returns once again to Virginia Woolf, examining her use of performance in *Between the Acts* to "demonstrate how the performative acts of feminist artists like herself might contribute to the transformation of gender norms" (91). Farfan supports the above assertion with a detailed treatment of the play-within-the-novel relying on passages from the novel as well as Woolf's own dramaturgical ideas. Farfan's handling of writing as performative is reminiscent of Peggy Phelan's "Introduction" to *Mourning Sex* (1997) in which she discusses the performative aspects of her own writing. Like Phelan, Farfan argues that Woolf theorizes the "connection of writing to material existence and to body" (9).

This "connection" is key in chapter six, "Feminism, Tragedy, History: The Fate of Isadora Duncan," because Farfan suggests that

Duncan embodies what Woolf could only theorize. Fittingly, I found this final chapter to be the most eloquently written, as well as the most captivating. Although Duncan is oft remembered as a tragic figure, Farfan argues that “tragedy has functioned as a conservative master-narrative, underwritten by a desire to deny female subjectivity”; furthermore Duncan is co-opted “into a narrative that negates what she set out to accomplish as a woman artist” (103). The popular image of Duncan as “a doomed woman” negates her contribution to feminism. Farfan contends that instead we should remember Duncan more properly “not only in the continuing practice of the art of the dance . . . but in the common female body that ‘bears the consequences’ of her on-stage art and off-stage life in ‘[preaching] freedom of the mind through freedom of the body’” (114).

Although *Women, Modernism & Performance* is organized in a loose chronological order, Farfan more accurately references it as “kaleidoscopic,” a “multi-faceted image that shifts continually over the course of its circuitous route before returning in the end to its starting point” (119). Her book begins with Elizabeth Robins’s morphing reaction to the work of Ibsen and it ends with the suggestion that the “‘fate’ of Duncan . . . reinforces the radical nature of Ibsen’s dramaturgy” even as it allowed for experimentation and further feminist critique (10). Throughout her work, Farfan consistently draws parallels between her subjects and highlights existing interrelationships. The interdisciplinary nature of *Women, Modernism & Performance* is evident not only in Farfan’s choice of subject matter but also in her vastly varied source materials. She combines the work of feminist scholars (Judith Butler, Sue-Ellen Case) and modernist scholars (Michael Levenson, Christopher Innes) with that of Joan Templeton, George Bernard Shaw, Cocteau, and many others. Farfan juggles the many scholars cited with ease and for the most part, her citations are valuable. At times, however, she becomes overly dependent on other scholars’ quotations thus restraining her own voice.

Even so, the strengths of *Women, Modernism & Performance* significantly outweigh perceived weaknesses. As women and their contribution to modernist performance have often been overlooked in favor of either the male canon or a treatment of female authors, Farfan’s book begins to fill a hole in modernist discourse. She accomplishes her goal of illuminating female performers and initiates the effort to add their names to the “modernist” canon.

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